Precariousness, Sport Participation and Hope Among Young People After Rejections in the Swedish Asylum Process

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the complex role of hope in relation to sport in the constrained lives of boys and young men who have experienced the Swedish asylum process. The data derives from an ethnographical longitudinal project on the social dimensions of hope in the asylum process. The project is situated in the context of escalating austerity politics and restrictions on asylum law and policy following the increased numbers of people seeking asylum in Sweden and other European countries in 2015. Through ethnographic cases, we expose how political decisions on national and supranational levels, amplified by economic structures, have put research participants in extremely precarious positions, affecting every aspect of their daily lives, including their sports life and ability to hope. Our analysis focuses on how sports may provide moments of *realisation* that generate distraction and an optimistic future orientation. Sports can also become everyday acts of resistance and manifestations of *radical hope*, opposing structural constraints. However, our research suggests that long-term, uncertain waiting coupled with neo-liberal labour exploitation creates situations where time and energy are taken over by external control, leading to an inability to maintain hope and experience sports as meaningful.

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INTRODUCTION

> If you run, you feel motivated and active. Then it helps, also, so that you get hope. You feel healthier, you know. (Safar)

Safar is a young man who fled from Afghanistan to Europe in 2015. He first sought asylum in Sweden, where his application was rejected, then in Portugal, and finally in France, where he received a 10-year residence permit with refugee status in early 2022. By then, he had been waiting for seven years, living in protracted uncertainty. Sports make Safar experience hope. Running distracts him from battling extreme uncertainty and makes him feel healthy and able to meet difficulties. Like for many others, sporting activities have become a way to navigate and resist depression and inactivity and to remain hopeful during prolonged uncertain waiting for a 'normal life' to start. This article addresses hope in relation to sporting activities among boys and young men with experiences from the Swedish asylum process.

It is often argued that sporting activities improve individual health and well-being and the ability to deal with social problems, loneliness, and, broadly, feelings of social or societal exclusion (Levitas et al. 2007; Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes 2014; Stone 2018). This perspective might be particularly accurate concerning people seeking asylum, who are bound to the decision-making of the migration authorities while commonly being denied access to the regular labour market and influence over where to live. In these marginalised contexts, people can temporarily get a respite from harsh life predicaments and feel meaningfulness, hope, and well-being through participation in sports (Waardenburg et al. 2019).

In an article on sporting activities at an asylum reception centre in the Netherlands, Waardenburg et al. (2019) conclude that asylum seekers can use sporting activities to overcome boredom, distract away from daily struggles (such as worries about the asylum process, fear of deportation and concern for family members), meet with others and experience an 'increasing feeling of belonging' (Ibid.: 938). Similarly, Stone (2018) links potential feelings of belonging with utopian communities, arguing that team sports, routinised and stretched out over time, may provide people in precariousness with 'distraction' and 'moments of realisation' where ideas about a desired future of belonging become manifested in collective action. Practising sports can help individuals experience 'small hopes' (Ibid.: 177) in everyday life during 'moments of realisation' (Ibid.: 178), permeated by the belief that life is orderly and may develop in a more positive direction. Such a position gets support from Kallio, Meier and Häkli's (2021) argument that even seemingly apolitical everyday activities during asylum waiting can express political resistance while creating meaning during suffering.

Though the progressive and positive aspects of sports have been emphasised in research (Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes 2014), such understandings have often focused on individualised and micro-level possibilities and gains. However, sports have also been problematised for their sedating qualities and masking effects on structural injustices. Kelly (2010: 126) argues that 'sports-based interventions risk legitimating a reductive analysis of these complex processes, highlighting individual deficits and de-emphasising structural inequalities'. Further, Stone (2018: 179) acknowledges that while regular sport participation may provide a sense of 'belonging' and a continuum between the past, present and future, it 'does not challenge key political decisions, provide legal rights associated with citizenship or overcome financial hardship'.

We approach the intersection and connection between structures (of inequality) and individual sports participation through the concept of hope (e.g. Stone 2018; Waardenburg et al. 2019). Many hope scholars agree that apart from being informed by both emotion (feeling) and cognition (reflection), some key elements are also needed for hope to exist (e.g. Bloch 1995; Stockdale 2021; Webb 2007). Firstly, hope involves a desire for an uncertain future outcome. Secondly, this outcome must be considered tangible, even if it may be extremely hard to achieve. Finally, hope involves an understanding that the hoper's personal agency is not enough to gain what is hoped for (Stockdale 2021: 19). Hopers realise that they cannot fix matters by themselves here and now. Transferred to the precariousness of the asylum context, a person seeking asylum cannot enter through the Migration Agency's door and demand the immediate issue of a residency permit. For this hoped-for outcome to happen, several actors and agencies are involved: legal representatives, case officers, the Migration Agency, the court system and sometimes non-governmental actors advocating for asylum rights and legal justice.

Our point of departure is that hope is susceptible to attempts towards control through practical action (e.g. Bloch 1995; Stockdale 2021; Stone 2018; Webb 2007). Sporting activities may be used more or less consciously to that effect. Thus, as Safar's comment initiating this article clarifies, individuals can engage in activities, such as sports, as an intended path towards hope management through bodily health and well-being. Meanwhile, engaging in sports may produce hope for an anticipated future without this being the primary cognitive intention. As this article exemplifies, both elements of hope can be studied by listening to individuals' reflections about their activities. Further, we argue that hope has a central and distinctive position in the tedious waiting within the asylum context (e.g. Svašek 2010). Hope, under a temporally extended submission such as the asylum process, may become highly fragile or worn out since people have become disappointed so often.

By addressing the connection between sports and hope among young people in precariousness, this article adds to the existing theory on participation in sports as a positive sanctuary and meaningful preoccupation (Stone 2018; Waardenburg et al. 2019) that can provide hope during prolonged uncertainty. Further, we problematise such an analytical perspective by relating the young people's sporting activities to structural processes and political decisions on a national and supranational level. Their production of extremely long waiting times and excessive uncertainty has consequences for people's mental states, making it nearly impossible to gain hope through sports.

We thereby argue that asylum policy and political decisions condition and restrict young people's resources, such as time, energy, and economy, for sports activities that otherwise could have improved their well-being and positively affected their balancing act between hope and despair. Thus, we analyse the complex role of hope in relation to sports in the constrained lives of young asylum-seeking men who have participated in interviews and observations during a longitudinal ethnographic study of their experiences in the Swedish asylum context. By examining how they use sports for pleasure and preoccupation to avoid despair and maintain hope or are hindered from doing so, an interconnection appears between individual sporting activities and the restraining conditions within national and EU migration political and socioeconomic contexts.

Our arguments are based on research carried out in the context of increased austerity politics and restrictions to asylum law and policy following the increase of asylum applications during 'the long summer of migration' in 2015. The Swedish restrictions have led to exceptionally long waiting times for decisions on asylum applications, the elimination of permanent residency upon receiving protection status and severely restricted possibilities for family reunification. They have also caused a systematic re-ageing of thousands of minors, making them 'adults', 'rejectable' and 'deportable', and asylum investigations that lack many of the components of legal certainty, clarity and predictability that can be expected in a country adhering to the rule of law (e.g. Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Elsrud 2020; Elsrud et al. 2021; Herz, Lalander & Elsrud 2022). These changes have increased precariousness among many people seeking asylum in Sweden, forcing some groups into a nearly total loss of legal and social rights (Elsrud 2020). One severely affected group, constituting a majority of the research participants', are young people from Afghanistan who appear to have been subjected to extreme stigmatisation and a position as 'second-class asylum seekers' and 'bogus refugees', despite the hazardous situation in their country of origin (Skodo 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our theoretical concepts have been chosen in an analytical and dialectic interplay between our empirical material and different social psychological, and sociological theories. A central argument is that the possibility to practise sports is based on resources such as accessible time, energy and economy. These resources are closely related to individuals' legal status, such as their residence permit, citizenship or access to legal documents. The legal status of migrants is a resource of significant importance for their sports participation – a point which we later turn to.

We are influenced by theories that connect *hope*, *time, energy* and *economy* in developing theoretical arguments on the social inequality of sport. Being an asylum seeker generally means living under oppressive conditions and, according to Elena Fontanari (2020) and Shahram Khosravi (2019), not being in control of your own autonomous time (see also Mulinari & Nordling 2022). People are put on hold and forced into waiting. Time represents a technology of governmentality where the 'refugees and asylum seekers' lives have been placed within spaces of waiting, continual uncertainty and limbo' (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021: 4006). Khosravi (2018) argues that waiting: 'is a manipulation of others' time … and produces the subjective effects of dependency and subordination'. He further describes that asylum seekers may experience their time as stolen. Stolen time is evident among people who have had their applications rejected after a long time in a specific country. After years of investments in education, language and social networks in a particular country, they must start from the beginning, waiting and living precarious lives in another country (Khosravi 2019).

Meanwhile, forcing people to wait significantly impacts how they experience hope. Bourdieu (2000: 228) argues that forced waiting is a way of controlling people's 'rate of fulfilment of expectations' that can be seen as 'an art of "turning down" without "turning off", of keeping people motivated without driving them to despair'. As we have argued elsewhere, such a turning down can result in a fragile hope that becomes fragmented but not completely shattered (Herz, Lalander & Elsrud 2022). Delaying and forcing people into prolonged waiting can become ways to keep people hoping

just a little while not expecting too much (see also Bourdieu 2000). If individuals experience a high degree of uncertainty regarding the future, some hope is needed to believe and feel that the present situation will improve. This fragility of hope in the asylum context can easily turn into 'fearful hope', a state of mind and emotion that is 'tainted by fear' (Stockdale 2021: 25). Fearful hope is not a pleasant hope anticipating a happy and hoped-for future but a hope directed towards avoiding something frightening, such as deportation or loss of life.

Meanwhile, focusing on hope from the perspective of individual actors reveals the complex character of hope in the precarious asylum context. Stone (2018: 180) directs attention to hope's potential within team sports that give rise to experiences of belonging and meaningfulness while retaining 'a better vision for their [actors] future'. Meanwhile, he acknowledges the risk of hope locking people into complacency and poverty within neo-liberal systems. A similar complex approach to hope applied to sports comes from Kallio, Meier and Häkli (2021), who approach subtle, everyday, seemingly non-political activities in the asylum contexts as manifestations of 'radical hope' and acts of resistance. Drawing on Lear (2008), they describe radical hope 'as the ability to maintain a meaningful existence when a person's life is at the brink of losing all meaning' (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021: 4008). Radical hope develops in desperate situations and is an engagement in the present that follows the realisation that the anticipated future is unrealistic and that the best way to go on is to do your own thing on a day-by-day basis. Meanwhile, radical hope disrupts linear time. It rejects the anticipated goal-oriented, seemingly destitute future for an open-ended future, 'a horizon of hope for a life out there, even if not a clearly foreseeable one' (Ibid.: 4011).

Related to a theoretical discussion about hope as both potentially exploitable by authorities and usable by asylum-seeking people to resist authorities is the significance of other issues, such as protracted waiting, delays and stolen time. These issues put many asylum-seeking people in social and economic precariousness. Precarious conditions affect several areas of their lives: housing, school, work and leisure time. Vulnerable situations can also spread from one sector to another (e.g. Allison 2013). The labour market is one sector where many people are affected, and people seeking asylum are commonly a cheap labour force for capitalist businesses. From a Marxist perspective, these jobs mean that people sell – and sometimes give away – their time and energy. To survive and make a living, they must work for low pay under uncertain conditions without aid from trade unions and social insurance systems (see Standing 2011). Karl Marx (1867/1990) argued that the relationship between workers and the capitalist system has vast consequences for people since it reduces their time and energy to recover from work by participating in other activities, such as sleeping, resting and practising social activities, such as sports. We will analyse how the resources economy, time, energy and hope are essential when discussing opportunities and constraints regarding a person's involvement in sports activities.

METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The arguments are based on fieldwork conducted within a longitudinal ethnographic research project in which we have spent four years researching experiences of precarious conditions among people seeking asylum. The project has focused on how issues of hope, trust, and uncertainty have been experienced in relation to social interaction within the framework of the Swedish asylum context. The participants

have been of different ages and backgrounds: 42 men and 18 women, aged between 15 and 53 at the first interviews, although most were young (aged 16–25).

In this article, we focus on the perspectives of 20 young male participants active in sports who received rejections on their asylum applications in Sweden and became dependent on civil society for food and shelter – commonly in all-male environments. Of these, 15 young men fled to other European nations such as Italy, France and Portugal to seek asylum again, making our ethnographic project transnational and 'multi-sited' as we followed them to their new destinations. The young men in our study, who arrived as unaccompanied minors, belong to a category of young male asylum seekers who became particularly affected by the 2015/2016 restrictions to migration law and praxis (Elsrud et al. 2021; Skodo 2020). This circumstance reflects the project's unbalanced selection regarding age and gender. For reasons of access and the general pattern of a disproportionately large group of males among the young people who received rejections and became cared for by civil society, this article's sole focus on boys and young men is a limitation.

Though the project has not primarily focused on sport, questions about sport participation were raised repeatedly during observations and by the young participants in the all-male environments. The project builds upon a rather inductive approach to data. By engaging in recurrent participatory observations, informal conversations and conducting recurrent interviews with participants, we have aimed to participate in the daily lives of people with asylum experiences, first in Sweden and later in other countries. We hung out with them and their friends, played games, engaged in sports activities and joined for meetings with officials. Interviews, stretching from 45 minutes to several hours, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We are aware that our positions as researchers may influence the type of information participants are prepared to share. However, our long-term interactive participation in the project contributed to trustful relationships in which conversations and joint activities took place less restrictedly.

As fieldwork was conducted over a prolonged period, the meanings of sport in the participants' lives and their relationship to hope varied. Some of the participants have temporary residence permits in Sweden or other European nations today, while others are still waiting for decisions from the authorities after eight years. Participants' narratives and our observations have been situated in context and analysed as such. We have continuously reflected on the content in participants' stories in relation to the situations they have been in, including how they have been embedded in political and social structures. Meanwhile, interviews and observation notes have been analysed, thematised, and related to theoretical concepts and relevant research. Due to the vulnerable context, we have worked with so-called verbal 'iterative consent'. This means engaging in continuous dialogue and conversations with the participants about several different research ethics, including their feelings about the project and their right to withdraw at any time (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). These talks have also provided the project with continuous feedback, new research questions and validation of our findings.[1]

1 Formal ethical approval was secured from the Regional Ethical Review Board (Ref. No. 2018/239-31). Participants have been pseudonymised in this text as in all other research output.

MEANING MAKING AND HOPE THROUGH SPORTING ACTIVITIES

Observations and interviews confirm that sporting activities can provide young people living uncertain lives with a sense of meaning and possibilities to experience hope on a short- or long-term basis (e.g. Stone 2018; Waardenburg et al. 2019). Many participants had practised sport – commonly football – before leaving their home countries to seek asylum. While entering into their long wait for decisions on their asylum applications, they usually continued their sporting activities as a way of experiencing a sense of meaningful continuity between past and present and gaining hope for the (uncertain) future (Stone 2018).

Saleh, who now lives in Italy following his final rejection from the Swedish migration authorities in 2019, says during an interview in Rome shortly after his arrival there: 'I love playing football; it's a major part of my life.' He tells us that he played football as a child in a small town in Afghanistan. In 2015, he was forced to escape his home country due to the risk of being recruited by the Taliban. After applying for asylum in Sweden, he lived in a small township. Besides studying and working at a restaurant, he played football with asylum-seeking friends and 'Swedes' in a local football team in a lower division. He appreciated this way of living and felt that other team members liked him. He was popular, had a place in the team, and was considered a skilled offensive player. He trained or played matches several times a week. Playing football gave his life a sense of direction, continuity and belonging that provided him with meaning, energy and some hope for the future, a hope that he would finally have a residence permit in Sweden (e.g. Stone 2018). We return to Saleh later in the text.

Like Saleh, many other participants brought their interest in football and other sports with them. Besides, they have often declared they were interested in famous football teams such as Barcelona and Arsenal. Football is akin to a male-dominated global language (e.g. Messner 2002; Waalkes 2017) that includes the game, rules, and knowledge about famous players and teams. For example, several research participants knew who the renowned Swedish football player Zlatan Ibrahimovic was before they came to Sweden. In that sense, football has meaning both as embodied experiences, knowledge, and something familiar and related to positive values ('I love playing football').

A crucial meaning ascribed to general sports participation by the participants is that it can help them relax from the pressure and problems of everyday life in asylum contexts (Stone 2018; Waardenburg et al. 2019). Some participants waiting for asylum decisions on their appeals lived in hostel-like accommodation provided by Swedish civil society activists. The building had many rooms, including a vast open space for playing table tennis and keeping a big sofa and a large TV screen that almost always showed football games or music videos.

> Some are playing table tennis, and it is hard not to become a bit 'hypnotised' by the ball and follow it instead of talking. Quite nice to do this for a while. The conversation moves over to sports. I tell them I am not a sports person and have never been interested in football. The guys who are present say they love football, or most say so. Football is important not just because it is fun to watch and play but because watching it works as a diversion.

- It is the only time I don't feel bad. I feel bad almost all the time, but when I watch football, I don't think, and then I feel better, one of the guys says.
- Table tennis is a bit similar. You play and play and think about the ball, not the Migration Agency or Afghanistan, says one guy who is quite talented with the racket.

(Observation note, 17 February 2018).

Thus, watching a ballgame or playing yourself appears to have become a means to create 'moments of realisation', creating both a sense of community and a distraction from the reality of uncertain waiting and even despair (see Stone 2018; Waardenburg et al. 2019). Several participants had many reasons to worry. Some had lost their families, and many were re-aged and made into adults by the Swedish authorities and subsequently had their asylum applications rejected. They had lost their financial support and accommodation from the social services, and some had also lost their daily allowance of 61 SEK (4,64 Euro, exchange rate 22/11/2022) from the Migration Agency. They were trying to master economic deficiencies and legal uncertainties while waiting for appeals or a change in politics and praxis. Sports had become a distracting manoeuvre away from a precarious present and a perilous future.

In addition, sports engagement can be a deliberate way of inducing hope and (open-ended) futurity into the asylum process. Some research participants mentioned the term hope in connection with sport activities, not just team sports but also individual sports. Safar, who introduced this article, told us during an interview in his new home in a French township: 'It is good that you make some distance from what is happening. If you think about it the whole time, I don't think it will go well. You need, you know, some hope'. Safar has needed various techniques to reduce prolonged waiting, stress, and uncertainty. He waited four years for an asylum rejection in Sweden and two years in Portugal before receiving a 10-year residency with refugee status in France. To keep hope alive, he tried to control his thinking and practised distraction by watching films and series and practising physical activities. He explained:

> You know that when I was in Portugal, too, I started running. It makes me much happier, you know. Yes, much more motivated. (...) And then, if you sit and think about bad things, you lose hope too. Cause you should do something that creates hope also. For example, if you run, you feel motivated and active. Then it helps, also, that you get hope. You feel healthier, you know.

Safar points to the strong connection between hope and distracting activities that can help you focus on other things than the present uncertain life situation.

As we have described above, participation in sports can carve out spaces for meaning-making and belonging that provide participants with experiences of hope and distraction from a painful reality of uncertainty, depression and feelings of being stuck in waiting. Nevertheless, as Kallio, Meier and Häkli (2021) point out, distractions are not only distractions. They can be interpreted as small political acts of resistance – as manifestations of radical hope whereby engagement in small everyday activities means a refusal to become completely victimised under the structural oppression that characterises asylum waiting and the uncertain future. By taking charge of their body – and their thoughts – they refuse to let the authorities' control permeate their

entire existence. This manoeuvre does not just change the present but also defies the threat of a dire future, allowing a more open-ended futurity to take its place.

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONING OF CONTINUOUS SPORT PRACTICE

In this section, a longitudinal approach clarifies how social structures of inequality and political decisions, amplified by socioeconomic structures, can impact participants' possibilities and resources (time, energy and economy) to regularly practise sport as a source of hope.

Yar had his asylum application rejected in Sweden but got a second chance to stay on the so-called 'upper secondary education act' (law 2016: 752, 16f §, 16i §, 17§ on temporary restrictions on the conditions for obtaining a residence permit in Sweden). The act opened a three-month window where rejected 'unaccompanied minors' who had waited long for decisions could apply to stay on a specific type of student visa. If they meet all criteria, they receive a temporary permit to stay and complete an upper secondary education programme. After finishing school, they have six months to find a permanent job. If they fail, the old rejection of their asylum case is resumed, and they must self-deport or be deported by force. Thus, finding a permanent position became decisive for participants, who saw no other way to safety. For Yar, this meant that while he studied full-time to become an assistant nurse, he worked nearly all evenings and weekends in two different municipalities, hoping one of these would eventually lead to a permanent residence permit. By accepting all job offers, he fed his hope for final safety. However, his seven-days-a-week work led to sacrifices. His sporting activities diminished during stressful periods. He reflected:

> [A]nd you must have leisure too, for example, but it's the job, school, job, school. It is those two things, really. We all [with conditioned temporary visa] become like this. If you don't work, you think about the future and that you can't make it, but if you work, they will know me, and maybe they will give me a permanent job. It is not 100 per cent sure. Maybe they will give me a permanent job. I have worked many days. [...] I wanted to train, and I have a gym card, so I thought I would train at the gym. Sometimes I go maybe two days per week, but sometimes I don't have time. Even if it is important that you work out .... train, swim, train, anything.[...] But I don't have time. If I train, they call – 'come to work'. So, then, I must stop training and go to work. You can't plan. [...] You can't decide. They will call – 'we need staff now'. If you say 'no thank you' once, twice, three times, they will not phone you. They will say, 'well, you were not interested, will not work, you don't want to work here for real'. So you go there.

Yar has repeatedly talked about his wish to keep his body in shape. While he used to play some football primarily for fun when he first arrived in Sweden, his focus became more strategically placed on the gym for health reasons. The job required heavy lifting and long days and nights of standing and walking. It had become increasingly difficult for Yar to plan and control his time. The constant but uncertain work schedule had stopped him from training and preparing his body for all the hard work. A political decision conditioned Yar's possibility, time, and energy for exercise, and he ended up in a catch-22 situation. While he needed sport to perform well at a job that fed his

hope of a realistic chance of a future in Sweden, the same position prevented him from sports activities.

Participants who left Sweden have also ended up with limited opportunities to engage in a meaningful sport that fuels small and radical hopes. Amir, who had eventually received asylum in Italy, told us during a research trip to Rome in the autumn of 2019 that he prioritised training as it helped him stay motivated and hopeful regarding his studies and future. But, when we met him there again in both March and November 2022, his time and energy only lasted for studying and working. He had been forced to remove sports from his weekly schedule. In 2019, he was partly financed by a Christian Church, so he did not have to work that much. Amir was now fighting hard to make it economically since he no longer had the church to support him. Neither could he receive a study grant or borrow money from the state, which has been an option for those who could stay in Sweden. He said, 'If I don't work, how can I pay the rent? How can I eat?' His everyday time puzzle, need for money, ambition, and hope to one day enter university made sport a rare ingredient, even though he knew it was valuable for his health and to one day receive permanent residency.

We now return to Saleh. After three years in Sweden, studying hard and learning to speak fluent Swedish, and having a 'new Swedish family' of civil society activists and many friends (including mates from the football team), Saleh received a final rejection. It entirely changed his life, as he lost the right to live in Sweden and the limited welfare support he had before. After hiding from the authorities for some months, he fled to Italy to seek asylum in early 2019. However, he became registered as a 'Dublin case', implying that he must return to Sweden, the first EU country where he sought asylum.

The basic principle of the Dublin Regulation is that asylum seekers who come to the EU have the right to have their application examined only in one country. They should not be able to have their application reviewed in a second EU country. This principle makes it hard for people like Saleh, who are rejected in one country, to get asylum in another. It limits the possibilities for movement in Europe among non-EU citizens. For Saleh and other participants, the Dublin regulation was applied upon their arrival in the second European country. They were subsequently denied applying in the new country until the order that they should be sent back to Sweden was removed, commonly through a court decision that overrules the Dublin requirement. At the time of writing, in the autumn of 2023, Saleh has been 'stuck' waiting for a decision for more than four years on whether his Dublin status can be removed, if he will be sent back to Sweden and risk deportation to Afghanistan, or if he can file a regular asylum application in Italy.

When we met Saleh one late evening in March 2022 in downtown Rome, he was tired from living for seven years in uncertainty. With a broken voice, he said he felt 'hopeless'. But his fatigue was also created by his work situation. He worked six days and 50 hours a week at a restaurant. However, his contract said 20 hours. Subsequently, he only got paid for 20 hours. The other 30 hours can be considered stolen from him by the restaurant owner, who did not see Saleh's time as valuable (e.g. Marx 1867/1990; Mulinari & Nordling 2022). According to his boss, the job would be given to another person in Saleh's situation if he complained. Saleh could have used those 30 hours for sports, studies, rest, and to create more energy. His hard work, standing up for 10 hours daily, made his body feel worn.

He told us that he still loved football but only had the time, energy and money to play once a week. Unlike where he lived in Sweden, he was unable to find any free, fully equipped football pitches in Rome. It costs fifty euros to rent a pitch for an hour of football in his area. He got together with nine other men (with migrant backgrounds), and they paid five euros each. This example shows how capitalism reduces the possibilities for people living precarious lives to practise sports activities.

In the capitalist, labour-exploiting European migration reality, Saleh, who loves his football, had managed to carve out one hour of time and five Euros of wage each week for his own pleasure, a brief moment of distraction and 'small hope' (Stone 2018) or a glimmer of radical hope resistance when he could turn his back on external pressures (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021). The rest of his time and labour belonged to structures that controlled him, such as the Italian migration authorities and the unregulated labour market, which exploited his lack of alternatives.

The stories of Saleh, Yar and Amir reveal how political decisions in the interplay with socioeconomic structures in Sweden and other European states have created time-spaces of exploitable precariousness, affecting every aspect of the young men's daily and emotional lives. They also affect the availability of sports as a means towards pleasure, distraction, better health and resistance. Subsequently, they interfere with the hopefulness that comes with doing what you want here and now while discounting the uncertain, often threatening future that the asylum system produces. Thus, we cannot understand their sport opportunities and possibilities for hope management without understanding the significant impact of border regimes and their interplay with socioeconomic (capitalist) structures that consume (and steal) people's time, energy and money.

WHEN UNCERTAIN TIME WEARS OUT HOPE AND SPORT

There are other ways that structures of oppression and inequality in the asylum context can inflict on hope, as well as the meaningfulness and hope-generating qualities of sports, reducing everyday sporting opportunities for 'small hope' (Stone 2018) or radical hope (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021). As explained earlier, hope in the asylum context is fragile and often permeated by fear (e.g. Stockdale 2021). Asylum hope(s) can fade or wear down if people live in precariousness for too long, receiving repetitive negative decisions regarding their rights to a safe life. In this section, we turn to hopelessness and lack of motivation to carry out sports activities caused by a highly uncertain and prolonged waiting for significant decisions.

Previous interest in sports and the prospect of using sports as a meaningful distraction and a way to generate hope can fade away for some when they begin to distrust the chance of a future in Sweden or another European country and lose the ability to plan. When time passes for years on end without solutions, the future never arrives. Engaging in hope-generating sports activities may become meaningless when there is no future to hope for. Hope loses its attraction and becomes increasingly fragile as it erodes and fades away. In an interview with Sadat and Yar, at a time when they received rejections and were waiting on appeals, they worried that the tedious waiting would exhaust some of their friends who would eventually be unable to stay in Sweden:

> Sadat: I know a lot of guys, buddies; when they came to Sweden, they had plans. They thought, 'we can plan for the future; we can grow and that'. They had trained so well in football and other stuff. But now they are not like when they came to Sweden. They use hashish, or they smoke cigarettes, use alcohol. They don't think like the first day they came to Sweden. (...)
>
> Yar: We liked going to the gym and having something to make you ... that is good for your health. But when we go there to train, one day, two days ... and then when you train in the gym, you think about a residency permit, what will happen with your residency permit. There are many times for us, for many, when they will feel hopeless. They feel that it is boring when you, for example, go to gym training every day, and then after some days, you get a rejection and become deported. And then you become so tired. You can't cope with anything. It affects a lot ... because you can't decide 100 per cent that you can stay until you die in Sweden. Like ... you can't plan what to do with life, what to do with the future.

Sporting activities become indicators of hope and hopelessness. For Yar and Sadat, participating in sports such as football or going to the gym was a sign of having a lingering urge to plan for the future, keeping vulnerable hope alive, and even a slight belief that their situation would improve. The opposite happens when you lose hope and the urge to plan. When you lose the belief that, in the end, you will have *any* future in Sweden, the meaningfulness of sport and keeping your body healthy fades away, even to the extent that sport becomes boring. With no hope for an anticipated or open-ended future, why should you keep your body fit and enjoy what you do without experiencing it as a waste of time? Yar's statement reveals how the seriousness of their current predicaments also invades the training that should be both pleasurable in the present and forward-looking. When thoughts of the unlikeliness of receiving a residency permit invade the gym workout – a time-space that commonly connotes health and (body) building for the future – the pleasure of training may disappear along with hope.

Samir was a skilled boxer in Sweden. He described his strong motivation to train and participate in matches. Boxing made him feel that he was very good at something. During an interview in a French city, he told us: 'After the first rejection, I still had the energy to study and train because I was hoping that I would receive a residence permit next time. But I got another rejection, and after that, I quit everything.' During this challenging time, he competed in a match. He told us how he was thinking: 'I was so very disappointed, and I thought that if I win the match, what can I do with it [the victory]? I have no residence permit, and I had a rejection ... and because of that, I lost the match ... I didn't have the energy to win the match.' He directly related his thoughts to hope and said to us: 'I had won quite a few matches, but in the end, I had lost hope, and nothing was important to me anymore.'

Yar, Sadat and Samir have described a complex process when vulnerable hope can go two ways. It can become a 'fearful hope' when someone hopes to avoid a dire future of continued rejections and final deportation (e.g. Stockdale 2021). It can also switch to what they frame as 'hopelessness', an emotional state that has caused several participants, like both Sadat and Samir, to leave Sweden. With 'fearful hope' and hopelessness, sport becomes meaningless. Within this process, sports activities lose their capacity to generate hope or create 'moments of realisation' (Stone 2018: 78) and everyday political resistance (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021).

FINAL DISCUSSION

Our ethnographic article has focused on the intersection between individual agency and structural inequalities. We have analysed how young men with experiences of structural constraints within the asylum process use sport to generate positive feelings and meaningfulness that make it easier to live with temporally stretched-out oppression and the despair it involves. Several research participants speak about sports as meaningful activities that connect their past with their present situation in Europe. Practising sports provides them with *moments* of *respite* and *realisation* that, in turn, can generate small hopes of belonging (Stone 2018). In line with Stone (2018), we also see sport as activities that can spawn cohesion, solidarity and a sense of predictability and order that is otherwise scarce during very vulnerable and uncertain asylum waiting circumstances. Due to these potential, seemingly positive, consequences of sports activities, it is reasonable to argue that people living under stretched-out oppression may engage in sports to balance the emotional relationship between hope and despair. Sports become a tool to remain with a hope that still carries a belief in a better future as long as you keep active and preoccupied while waiting.

Like in the study by Kallio, Meier and Häkli (2021), we can also identify resistance through sport as self-chosen expressions of radical hope that refuse preoccupation with a potentially despondent future. From this perspective, sport becomes both a distraction from and resistance towards the structural constraints that permeate the asylum context. Practising sports becomes a conscious or unconscious way to rebel against state governmentality and control that permeates many asylum seekers' everyday lives and long waits. It is possible to regard the increasingly restrictive asylum laws and practices that have met people in Sweden as deterrents to keep undesired people away. In other words, 'your sojourn is temporary, so don't grow too comfortable' (Goldberg 2006: 347, cited in Eliassi 2013: 60). Through engaging in self-chosen activities such as sport and having a self-caring and good time in the asylum-waiting present, the young participants challenge those structures who seek to control them. In addition, sporting in the present becomes a breakout from the notion of a linear asylum process that begins with an escape, passes the long wait and concludes with a decision that has become increasingly ominous from a Swedish perspective. When engaging in the radical hope of the sporting present, the future may appear less fearsome and more open-ended. While such moments of realisation may be expressions of a hard-to-reach utopian hope that all will be well in the future, they provide actors with both resistance and temporary relief.

Nevertheless, we have also exposed how political decisions on national and supranational levels, together with economic structures and labour exploitation of the young people's vulnerable situation, have placed them in an extremely precarious position. It has affected every inch of their daily and emotional life, including their sporting life and their ability to hope. When their time and energy have been taken away (stolen) from them by state and capitalist power structures, these structural inequalities have resulted in poverty, restrictions to their legal status, and homelessness, to name the most common consequences. A shortage of resources has reduced their self-control and opportunities to practise a sport regularly. In such longitudinal processes, sport participation becomes restricted and unequally distributed and cannot be used to generate hope for a better future life anymore. There appears to be little space left to maintain radical hope through everyday sporting activities.

Similarly, the extreme duration of living under temporally stretched-out oppressive structures makes hope extremely fragile or worn due to people having lived with desperation for a long time while coping with repeated disappointments and a lack of prospects to move forward. For several participants, continuous, long-term, uncertain waiting, interspersed with small hopes, eventually reaches a tipping point when they can no longer engage in a radical open-ended type of hope or an optimistic future-oriented hope for a desired outcome. The control of the state and labour exploitation appear to have invaded and colonised their minds and bodies to a point where linear time logics, fear and uncertainty become all-encompassing. At this stage, after eight years of rejections and waiting, some young people are left with only glimmers of 'fearful hope' (Stockdale 2021), in which they hope to avoid the fear of deportation and threats of the past but have very little hope for any desired future. This fearful hope can switch to hopelessness and make sports feel meaningless. A consolation in this context is that people, even in extreme distress, may again be able to re-orient themselves and 'move from destituent passivity to radically hopeful activity' (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2021: 4016).

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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