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A Sporting Nation: Creating Sámi Identity through Sport

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ABSTRACT

Sport and identity are closely interrelated; sport creates identity and identity creates sport. This is also the case in the development of Sámi sport, as the Indigenous Sámi population in the north of Finland, Sweden and Norway has used sport to contribute to (re) building Sámi identity for over 40 years. This sporting identity has been based on an essentialized past, portraying Sámi culture and identity as being indistinguishably linked to Sámi reindeer husbandry culture. By deploying sports such as reindeer racing, lasso throwing and cross-country skiing, the Sámi sport association has painted a picture of Sáminess as a unique identity distinctly different from Norwegian culture and identity. Gayatri Spivak uses the term strategic essentialism to explain how Indigenous people and minority groups can create and use specific historical traits and traditions in their political struggle for recognition and self-respect. Sámi sport is an example of Spivak's theory – the Sámi sports movement has been deployed to create greater self-esteem amongst the Sámi and to promote greater political rights. The Sámi sport movement has developed a Sámi sporting identity across (at least) three intertwined dimensions: an ethnic identity dimension, a national identity dimension and an indigenous identity dimension.

KEYWORDS

Sámi;
identity;
indigenous sport;
Norway;
football

Sámi sport is an important political, cultural and social factor partly because of its capacity to create identities by promoting common group denominators and by creating distinctions between groups.¹ Sámi sport therefore influences how Sámi communities and 'Sáminess' are constructed, maintained and strengthened. Thus, identity formation has, from the beginning, been at the forefront of the Sámi sports movement's political aims. 'Sámi sports are necessary instruments in building and maintaining the self-esteem (self-image) of the Sámi population, which in turn strengthens Sámi society.'² These words by Niilas Somby of the Sámi Art Council (Samisk kunstnerråd) at a meeting between Sámiid Valáštállan Lihttu –Norga (the Sámi Sports Association, Norway, SVL-N) and Finnmark District Sports Association (Finnmark Idrettskrets) in 1996 epitomize the meaning of sport to Sámi identity building and vice versa.

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In principle, sport can function as a component in all kinds of identity work, whether oriented towards place, gender, ethnicity or nationality. Typically, sport provides arenas where identities can be staged in revealing ways; the overriding aim of most competitive sport activities – winning – indicates a confrontation between ‘us’ and ‘the others’, and thus underscores communal identities.³ These identity-making aspects of sport have also made it an important tool as a creator and marker of indigenous identities.⁴ One example of these aspects is how the indigenous game lacrosse became an important means of resistance and revitalizing of indigenous identities in Canada after a long history of being a colonial assimilation tool. Allan Downey has shown how the indigenous sport lacrosse was appropriated by Canada in the colonial era, made a national sport and rebranded as a symbol of white masculinity and civilization.⁵ The sport was also used as a tool to assimilate indigenous children in the residential school system. Later, the political purpose of lacrosse changed as the Haudenosaunee took back control of its sporting heritage by creating the Iroquois Nationals in 1983. Downey interprets this as an act of sovereign independence from Canada and the United States.⁶ Looking to the northernmost part of Europe, the indigenous Sámi people have, in comparable ways, used sport to regain control over its sovereignty by constructing and displaying a distinct Sámi identity, the idea of a unified and sovereign Sámi nation and the Sámi as an indigenous people.⁷ Even though Sámi sport has struggled to build its organization, provide activities and increase its membership, understanding the history of Sámi sport and its cultural meaning is important as it displays essential aspects of Sámi cultural and ethno-political revitalization in the last 40 years.⁸

When researching Sámi sports history and identity, which is intimately bound up with the concept of ethnicity and to an essentialized cultural past, (at least) three identity dimensions can be identified: an ethnic dimension, a nation-building dimension, and an indigeneity dimension. These three dimensions are closely intertwined and have all found expression in the aims, organization and activities of SVL-N. To explore these dimensions of a Sámi sporting identity, Gayatri Spivak’s theory of strategic essentialism is a valuable framework, as Spivak’s theory epitomizes how indigenous people can take control over their history and traditions and utilize them strategically for political purposes in their struggle for self-determination and empowerment. In the case of the Sámi, sport is used as a means for cultural recognition and for political rights as an indigenous people.

However, it can be challenging to define what Sámi sport is. One definition is that it is a range of specific sports practiced by Sámi athletes in a certain way. However, such a definition is flawed, first, because most athletes of Sámi heritage in Norway practice their sport in what one may label a ‘Norwegian sporting context’, i.e. in sport organized by the Norwegian Confederation of Sport (Norges Idrettsforbund).⁹ Second, both Sámi identity and the identity of Sámi sportsmen and women are difficult to define as the ethnic and cultural boundaries in Sápmi – the Sámi’s historical settlement areas which transcend the borders of the northern parts of Sweden, Finland and Norway and the Cola peninsula of Russia – are blurred, porous and dynamic. Third, most Sámi athletes practice international sports such as football, cross-country skiing and floorball in entirely conventional ways.¹⁰ Therefore, the only viable way of defining Sámi sport is with reference to its forms of organization, i.e. that Sámi sport is sport

organized by and practiced within the Sámi sport associations: the SVL-N and the FA Sápmi. This definition is, however, admittedly not without its problems, since both organizations define themselves through ethnicity and particular sports derived from traditional Sámi reindeer herding culture.

The Indigenous Sámi Population

As mentioned, Sámi sport is closely attached to both the cultural and physical landscapes of Sápmi. This attachment is evident in SVL-N's activities, its stated aims and its organization. Over half of the Sámi population live on the Norwegian side of Sápmi. The livelihood of the Sámi has traditionally been based on utilizing natural resources both on the Finnmark plateau and on the coast. Fishing, hunting, foraging, agriculture and nomadic reindeer husbandry have constituted the fundament of Sámi livelihood and culture.¹¹ Estimates of the size of the Sámi population are uncertain. Today, there is no official demographic registration of ethnicity in Norway. The 1970 census was the last census to register ethnicity. According to Vilhelm Aubert,¹² a rough estimate based on this census is that there were 40,000 Sámi in Norway. Depending on the criteria, the estimates of the size of the Sámi population currently varies. The number of registered reindeer herding Sámi amounts to around 3,000 individuals.¹³ If the calculation is based on registration in the Norwegian Sámi electoral roll, the number of Sámi in 2019 was 18,103.¹⁴ The Sámi population in Norway is, however, considerably larger than both these calculations, as only a small minority of the Sámi are occupied in reindeer herding and far from all Sámi are registered in the electoral roll. In 2008, Statistics Norway estimated the Sámi population to be 38,470 people, an estimate based on the total population in the municipalities that are entitled to grants from the Norwegian Sámi Parliament's economic development funds.¹⁵ This estimate is probably too high, as a large percentage of the population in these municipalities do not consider themselves as Sámi, but as Norwegians and Kvens. At the same time, many Sámi live in municipalities in other parts of Norway and are therefore not included in Statistics Norway's estimate. The Norwegian Sámi Parliament estimates the Sámi population to be just over 100,000 people in Norway.¹⁶ The total population in Norway is 5.39 million.¹⁷ These varieties in estimates reflect both the diffuse and dynamic boundaries between the ethnic groups in Northern Norway, which in turn is bound to the close relationship and interconnection between these groups.¹⁸ The various estimates also reflect the problem of determining ethnicity in general.

One reason for these diffuse and dynamic borders is the longstanding co-existence of the Sámi, the Norwegian and the Kven population¹⁹ as well as the historical assimilation, or Norwegianization process towards the Sámi and Kven minorities, and the general modernization of North Norwegian society in the post-war period.²⁰ The Norwegianization process is understood as the Norwegian state's officially planned assimilation strategy towards the minorities in Norway, which lasted from the 1880s until the early post-war era.²¹ The goal of this assimilation policy was to make the Sámi 'good Norwegians' by promoting Norwegian language and culture at the expense of Sámi language and culture. This policy led to the demise of the Sámi language and culture in the coastal and fjord areas of northern Norway, while

the language and culture survived in the inland where the majority of the population was, and still is, Sámi.²² The state's strategy of Norwegianization was dispersed during the 1950s and 1960s and gradually replaced by a minority policy that stressed integration of the Sámi population and later also emphasized increased Sámi self-determination within the limits of the Norwegian state. This change was partly driven by a dawning Sámi cultural and ethno-political awareness pushed on by the Alta conflict in the 1970s. The industry's need for more electrical power saw the Norwegian state planning the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta-Kautokeino River, which led to a major conflict between the state on one side and environmentalists and Sámi activists on the other. Even though the power plant was built and completed in 1987, the attention to Sámi culture and Sámi indigenous rights created by the demonstrations led to a stark shift in the state's Sámi policy. The cultural and ethno-political mobilization of the Alta conflict was a necessary building block in the construction of a unified Sámi identity and was a key factor in the development of the ethno-political Sámi movement. This movement put forward demands for both equal political and social rights for the Sámi population as Norwegian citizens and for greater ethnopolitical and cultural rights as an indigenous people.²³ The main goal of the movement's demands was that the Norwegian state recognized the Sámi as an indigenous people with rights in accordance with Article 169 of the ILO Convention (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention). Norway ratified the ILO convention in 1990 to pave the way for the preservation and development of Sámi culture. Another direct result of the Alta conflict was the establishment of the Sámi parliament of Norway in 1990, which was built in Karasjok, a predominantly Sámi town on the Finnmark Plateau.²⁴ The Parliament has become the heart of Sámi politics, and the most prominent symbol of self-determination and of the Sámi's special status as an indigenous people. Building cultural and political institutions in Sápmi was central to this cultural and political revitalization of Sáminess,²⁵ and organized sport was an integral part of the process.²⁶ Despite this political development over the last 50 to 60 years, Sámi identity, language and culture has continued to be marginalized in the aftermath of the far-reaching, tough assimilation policy.²⁷ This marginalization, apparent in language and cultural policy, in racist slur and negativity in public debate towards Sámi culture and the Sámi political rights movement, and in tensions between majority society and traditional Sámi livelihoods has continued, many would argue, until today.

This troublesome past influences the understanding of the concepts of identity and ethnicity, concepts closely tied both to people's feelings and to fundamental and urgent political issues. In Norway's northernmost part of the country, the county of Troms and Finnmark,²⁸ identity and ethnicity are bound up with disputes over political rights that play out every single day in the region's politics and media.²⁹ Thus, both concepts are not only a concern for the social sciences but part of public discourse and popularly held ideas of momentous political significance. By the same token, the academic discussion about these terms holds political implications; historical research on the ethnic relations in North Norway has been important for advancing the long Sámi struggle for land and water rights in Finnmark³⁰ and has contributed to changes in the state's minority policies brought by the ratification of the ILO Convention 169 and the establishment of a Sámi Parliament. This in turn

has had a significant effect on the organization of Sámi government, for example, in terms of voting rights and the Sámi Parliament's political status.³¹

The Organizing of Sámi Sport and the Rebuilding of an Identity

As shown by Downey, sport such as lacrosse has been used by colonial powers and majority communities to cement their hegemonic power.³² This is also backed by John Bale and Mike Cronin.³³ At the same time, sport has provided an arena for colonized and underprivileged peoples to become able to regain hegemony.³⁴ This dichotomy of sport is an important contextual backdrop for understanding Sámi sport and its meaning to Sámi identity formation.

Sámi sport on the Norwegian side of Sápmi was initiated by the founding of the Sámiid Valastallan Lihttu (SVL) in 1979, whose goal was to unite Sámi sport across the borders of Sweden, Norway and Finland.³⁵ Sámi sport has longer roots on the Swedish side of Sápmi. According to historian Isak Lidström, the Swedish Sámi Ski Championships date back to 1948.³⁶ Lidström shows how these ski championships became an important arena for creating Sámi identity. Mainly through the use of markers and symbols that are perceived as distinctly Sámi, built on cultural traits from Sámi reindeer husbandry culture, but also partly built through exclusion. His findings correspond with Avril Bell's notion that '[a]ny assertion of identity inevitably excludes'.³⁷ In the post-war era, the championships were reserved for the Sámi reindeer husbandry population in Sweden, while Sámi skiers from Norway and Finland were excluded from participation alongside Sámi without ties to reindeer husbandry in Sweden.³⁸

Ideologically, the original organizational boundaries of the SVL corresponded with the idea of Sápmi as a trans-border region.³⁹ In 1990, however, the association reorganized and split into three district associations under a common pan-Sápmi umbrella where the district associations were defined by the nation-state borders, with one district association covering Sápmi on the Norwegian side, one covering Sápmi on the Swedish side and one covering Sápmi on the Finnish side. In 2003, football was finally given its own association, the Sámi Spábbaciekkan Lihttu (the Sámi Football Association, SSL), which aimed to organize all Sámi football across state boundaries.⁴⁰ The SSL was dissolved in 2013 and replaced by a new football association, FA Sápmi, in 2014. The transnational organization of Sámi sport turned out to be difficult and in many ways undesirable for economic, political and practical reasons.⁴¹ Differences in political organization, economic and financial structure, historical and cultural differences and different political priorities in the three Sámi parliaments made a seamless borderless cross-country association difficult to operate.⁴² In this way, the effect of state borders was real and influenced the Sámi sport communities on each side of the borders. This split of the SVL in accordance with the state borders may seem paradoxical given the ideological, rhetorical and symbolic investment by Sámi sport in precisely the idea of a boundary-defying community.

SVL-N has three subsections: one for reindeer racing; one for competence, development and culture; and one for winter and summer sport. In 2010, SVL-N organized

27 clubs, of which 19 were located in Finnmark, five in Troms, two in the county of Nordland, and one in southern Norway.⁴³ According to SVL-N's own estimates in 2003, the clubs had 3,860 registered members.⁴⁴ The number of registered members has remained stable, although with a slight downturn to 23 member clubs and 3,785 individual members in 2018.⁴⁵ These figures, however, present an exaggerated picture of the association's real size and activities, as the number of individual members that actively participated in one or more of the association's activities was, according to the association, only around 500 in 2003. The vast majority of the nearly 4,000 individual members in 2003 were members of sports clubs with dual memberships in both the SVL-N and the Norwegian Confederation of Sport. The vast majority of members were first and foremost active within sport organized by the Norwegian Confederation of Sport but were counted as members of the Sámi association on account of being paying members of both organizations.⁴⁶

A Modern Nation Raising on the Football Pitch

Sámi sport has constructed and promoted the idea of the Sámi as an ethnic group, a nation in its own right and as an indigenous people on what they have viewed as essential common traits, history and culture. In doing so, they have appealed to the past – to the idea of a common culture and common territory. This essentialized past has been a cornerstone of SVL-N's organization, aims and sports activities. Football, which has no historical ties to an essentialist Sámi past, is nonetheless the major Sámi sport, not in terms of its symbolic historical value, but in terms of activity and active athletes and in terms of promoting Sáminess as a modern fluid identity. In other words, football does not fit into SVL-N's essentialist understanding of Sámi sport.

Football has, however, been included for other reasons, which can be tied to football's global appeal and to its strong position in Sápmi over the past 40 to 50 years. The philosophy of Leif A. Nilut, the Sámi Football Association's first president, was that sport in general, and football in particular, is about feelings and identity, making it a natural arena for developing a common Sámi identity.⁴⁷ Today, football might be one of the most important ways of creating and mobilizing identities. International matches with national symbolism, such as national team shirts, national anthems and flags, are often experienced, especially by men, as one of the most important arenas of national pride.⁴⁸ At an international match nationalism and patriotism are entirely legitimate, even if only for 90 minutes.⁴⁹ In this light, the establishment of a Sámi Football Association and national teams are entirely natural consequences of the desire to imagine Sámi culture in terms of a unified ethnic and national community. Most nations, regardless of culture, history and tradition, play football.

Through football, Sámi sport has demonstrated that Sámi culture and identity were not only connected to traditional reindeer husbandry and the Finnmark plateau, but were also an expression of the emerging, modern Sámi nation. This notion was reflected in the football association's own understanding of Sámi identity. From applying a rather narrow categorization of Sáminess in the 1980s, when Sámi identity was almost solely tied to reindeer husbandry culture and the Finnmark plateau, the criteria widened after 2000 both in geographic and cultural scope.⁵⁰ As well as a wish to broaden the scoop and quality of available players, this widening must be

seen as a result of the larger ethno-political work towards including the coastal and fiord Sámi of North Norway, the urban Sámi population and the South Sámi population as part of a common Sámi identity.⁵¹ In 1985, all the players from the Norwegian side of Sápmi in the first Sámi national men's football squad were from the Finnmark plateau, whereas in the NF-Board Viva World Cup in Monaco in 2006, only five players in the 18-man squad had this geographic background.⁵² The rest of the squad consisted of players from coastal and fiord areas of Northern Norway and from cities such as Tromsø and Bodø. This change reflects a wider notion of Sáminess, which included players that lacked the conspicuous, often stereotypical and narrow cultural markers of Sáminess tied to language, a certain family background, place of residence and links to reindeer husbandry.⁵³ This widening conception and categorization of Sámi identity was manifested at the NF Board's congress in London in 2005, when delegates discussed the criteria for participation in the different teams. Gibraltar applied a residence requirement, while Monaco required that players have lived within a radius of 20 km from the principality for a certain amount of time.⁵⁴ Amid a long debate and serious dissent, Leif Isak Nilut stood up and performed a joik – a traditional Sámi song/chant – and then explained that 'We play for the Sápmi team because that is who we are. We are not a state, we live in four different countries, but it is about where you belong.'⁵⁵ Nilut's view eventually won out, which implied that identity could also be given by self-ascription – thus, it was ultimately up to the individual player to decide whether they considered themselves Sámi.⁵⁶

The question of the extent to which the Sámi national football team has played a role as a national symbol does not have a clear answer. The team's public profile has been comparatively low since the mid-1980s, and it has often played in low-level tournaments. In 2006, the Sámi team won the Viva World Cup final in Monaco by 21 goals to 1.⁵⁷ In recent years, FA Sápmi has participated in the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA) World Football Cup without great results and has sent youth teams to participate in the Arctic Winter Games (AWG). The youth teams consist of girls and boys aged 16 from all over Sápmi. The men's football team has had a large impact on many of the participating players' understanding of their ethnic origins and has sparked a process of reflection, both within Sámi football and externally in North Norwegian football, on issues regarding identity, ethnicity and origin.⁵⁸ The fact that new categories of players have become eligible for the Sámi national team reflects novel ways of understanding Sámi identity, which over the last 20 years has come to include a wider range of groups and geographical areas. These contradictions point towards a dilemma for the Sámi sport associations, on the one side, trying to develop a unifying ethnic and national identity strategically built on a largely essentialist past and, on the other side, casting Sáminess as a modern and fluid identity through football.

Constructing Ethnic and National Identity

These two pillars, the essentialist past and the fluid present, on which Sámi sporting identity rests can be better understood using Gayatri Spivak's term strategic essentialism. Historian Einar Niemi has shown how academic interest in the concept of

identity grew in the 1960s and 1970s, in parallel with its expanding role in the mass media, in politics and among the public, and in lockstep with decolonization and the emergence of the international indigenous rights movement.⁵⁹ The concepts of identity and ethnicity are, however, understood differently, both in terms of differences between academic disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and history, and in disagreements between paradigms within the disciplines. The construction of an essentialist Sámi history and the use of football as a symbol of a modern Sámi identity both build on the notion that identity is created and can be shaped in accordance with political aims.

A collective identity is formed in the encounter with 'the others', through an agreement among community members that they possess something distinctive that sets them apart from the others.⁶⁰ One might call this a constructivist or dynamic approach, in the sense that it is an understanding of identities as constructed and subject to perpetual change. The notion that identities are constructed undercuts the assumption that ethnic groups must share culture, norms or anything at all; an ethnic group may be full of conflicts and cultural differences internally. Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth thus understood ethnicity as a relational phenomenon, the outcome of borders being drawn between groups.⁶¹ Barth argued that a group cannot possess an ethnic identity when it lives without any contact with other groups and is therefore unable to distinguish itself with respect to others. This means that it is the group's outer edges and not its internal contents that define its ethnic identity.⁶² Barth also emphasizes that ethnicity is dynamic and in perpetual flux; the boundaries between groups are subject to unceasing negotiations. This idea has been hegemonic in the social sciences' views on ethnicity since the 1970s. The opposite idea, of identity as an innate quality, core or essence proper to the group itself, might be called essentialism. Such an essence is often attached to traits such as a common history, language, culture and territory.⁶³

Sámi identity building can be seen as the strategic use of an essentialized past in line with Gayatri Spivak's term strategic essentialism. Spivak proposed the notion of a strategic essentialism which simultaneously recognizes the impossibility of any essentialism and the necessity of some kind of essentialism for the sake of political action.⁶⁴ The concept of strategic essentialism sprung out of postcolonial theory and activism as a means towards deconstructing the dominant Western narratives about the colonies and their 'others'. Spivak rejects essentialism as a theory and argues it might be understood in terms of a political strategy that enables minorities to attain political goals through essentializing and standardizing the image of themselves while emphasizing their internal ethnic community in the public sphere.⁶⁵ According to Spivak, strategic essentialism is a political tactic employed by a minority group acting on the basis of a shared identity in the public arena in the interests of unity during a struggle for equal rights.⁶⁶ The Indigenous Sámi's need to build a unifying ethnic and national identity can be seen in this light as an answer to its history of assimilation. Elisabeth Eide describes strategic essentialism as follows:

Entails that members of groups, while being highly differentiated internally, may engage in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their public image, thus

advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives.⁶⁷

Group identities are complex, changing and are constantly created and recreated with respect to the surrounding society. Even so, such constructions may often draw on a group's largely essentialist understanding of their history and culture and, in the case of Sámi sport, these constructions of common historical traits can be viewed as strategic and politically motivated in line with Spivak's understanding.

Along these lines, Richard Jenkins has argued that a belief in common origin and tradition will result from collective political action, rather than the other way around.⁶⁸ In his view, political struggle on behalf of a community will lead to the discovery of a common background and cultural foundation, common features that will then, in turn, serve as a vehicle for identity building. A group's cultural traits will be foregrounded as its distinctive markers, creating a sense of commonality based on history, cultural features, values and norms. According to this model, nation building creates the nation, not the other way around.⁶⁹ To summarize, ethnic identities are created, and ethnic groups and national communities construct identities partly by essentializing their past and partly by contrasting themselves to others.

The Three Identity Dimensions of Sámi Sport

The Sámi Sports Associations have used a form of strategic essentialism to construct a Sámi sporting identity where at least three dimensions can be identified: an ethnic identity dimension, a national identity dimension and an indigenous identity dimension. These three dimensions overlap, are interrelated and have to be understood as part of the same project: creating and cementing a common Sámi identity through sport. According to SVL-N, the overall objectives of Sámi sport has been 'to foment identity, build cultural community and enable individual development through sportive and cultural activities'⁷⁰ and the understanding that the Sámi had a right to practice 'Sámi sport on Sámi premises'.⁷¹ Analyzing these objectives dividing Sámi sporting identity into three dimensions can help shed light on identity formation in Sámi sport and on how it has been consciously built since 1979. The three dimensions shows how the Sámi sports associations strategically use sport in creating a modern Sámi identity built on traits from the past and on present sporting performances.

The ethnic dimension is evident in the aims and activities that transpire into SVL-N's political strategy. The association wishes to present Sámi identity in a particular way through its mode of organization, its activities and its stated aims. SVL-N regarded Sámi sport primarily as a means for building a distinct Sámi identity, while sporting goals were left in the background. This claim can be seen in the subordination of sports policy to identity politics: a report from SVL-N in 2007 asserts that the association should be 'a Sámi sport organization with its basis in the Sámi cultural heritage' and that the aim of Sámi sport should be to 'promote Sámi culture, tradition and identity'.⁷² Important elements of the broader aims of the Sámi sport associations has always been to 'strengthen Sámi identity and solidarity' and to 'contribute to contact across nation state boundaries'.⁷³ In 1996, the

association defined Sámi sport as 'sport activities in which Sámi participate and which naturally belong to the North Arctic areas'.⁷⁴ More specifically, 'Sámi sport is to be built on traditional Sámi culture and its activities should be rooted in traditional Sámi forms of livelihood, such as reindeer husbandry and nature use'.⁷⁵ This idea manifested itself in sport activities such as lasso throwing, cross-country skiing with lasso throwing, cross-country running with lasso throwing, and reindeer racing. Reindeer racing originated as a means of transport within Sámi reindeer herding culture, but it was also the main form of transport on the Finnmark plateau during the winter up until the Second World War.⁷⁶ Lasso throwing is still the main method of catching reindeer used by reindeer herders. In the post-war period, reindeer racing became an important spectacle at the yearly easter festival in the Sámi towns of Kautokeino and Karasjok. Later, reindeer racing went through a sportification process and became a sport practised according to a defined set of rules. At its annual general meeting in 1997, the SVL-N decided to establish its 'own championships, in particular sports, in which only Sámi can become champions'.⁷⁷ From 2005, the Norwegian Reindeer Racing Championship has been held annually in Tromsø, the largest town in North Norway.⁷⁸ According to Eivind Skille and Trygve Broch, this event in Tromsø 'can display Sápmi with much pride, even in the middle of an urban landscape',⁷⁹ as the reindeer in many ways epitomizes the core of the essentialist construction of Sámi culture and Sáminess that has been central to the Sámi sport organizations. In this way, the sport association reinforced an idea of Sáminess modelled mainly on reindeer-herding culture and its symbols while excluding symbols and practises from other parts of Sámi culture, as the coastal Sámi culture.⁸⁰ Reindeer racing and the other specific Sámi sports such as lasso throwing has also been viewed as particularly important by the Sámi Parliament as important symbols of Sáminess.⁸¹

The second dimension of a Sámi sporting identity that can be identified is the national identity dimension. SVL-N selected the above-mentioned activities as symbols of the essence of Sámi bodily practices. In accordance with Gayatri Spivak theory, the political construction of what has later become the core of Sámi sports can be understood as a result of strategic essentialism. A basic tenet of Sámi sport was the wish to bolster the idea of a Sámi nation. Niilas A. Somby said in 1996: 'What can better raise the self-esteem of the Sámi people than defeating the football team of another people, or even that of the majority community? Or when a Sámi skier or other athlete becomes world champion?'⁸² This statement underlined the aim of the Sámi ethno-political movement to transform Sámi identity from a merely personal ethnic identity to a fully-fledged ethnic and national imagined community.⁸³ Sámi football, with its symbols such as the Sámi national kit, the use of the Sámi national anthem and the Sámi flag, has been a crucial part of constructing the Sámi as one sporting nation. It has been important for the revitalization process of Sámi culture and pride to build institutions and deploy national symbols. Institutions such as the Sámi parliament, Sámi institutions for education and research, as well as political organizations and parties, Sámi media, Sámi business and culture organizations have been crucial motors and integral components in this nation building. Sámi sport became part of this institutionalizing of a unitary Sámi national community.⁸⁴

SVL-N can be understood as an institutional symbol of a common history and culture, along with institutions such as *Beaivváš* (the Sámi national theatre) and the Sámi Parliament. The sport association's nomenclature for its three regional associations – 'district associations' – express the same idea. Instead of tying the regional association's names to the nation states of Norway, Sweden and Finland, the sport association wished to communicate that the Sámi is one nation and that Sápmi transcend these state borders. The view of Sápmi as the land of the Sámi thus displaced the nation-state boundaries into a subordinate category. It also suggests a contrast to Norwegian sport and Norwegianness, as highlighted in a SVL-N report from 1991 that stated that the position of sport in the Sámi community was not dependent on the competitiveness that defined sport in general – i.e. Norwegian sport – but 'instead thrived on social bonding, the strengthening of self-confidence, the development of friendship and of course also promoting and caring for health'.⁸⁵ In 1997, in a report on the possibilities of collaboration with the Norwegian Confederation of Sport, SVL-N wrote:

The local communities who define themselves as Sámi, must also be willing to accept that Sámi sport will be equal to, and sometimes prioritized over, sport organized by the NIF [the Norwegian Confederation of Sport]. This requires an acknowledgment that Sámi culture and tradition will be better preserved and developed through offering Sámi sports rather than 'Norwegian' ones.⁸⁶

The same document argued that 'the size of today's administration/bureaucracy [in a volunteer-based sport organization i.e. Norwegian Sport] in many ways can be said to be 'non-Sámi', and further that 'the attitudes in the countryside and on the Finnmark Plateau (in Sápmi) [with respect to administration/bureaucracy] is also largely different from those held in larger (mainly Norwegian) towns and villages'.⁸⁷ It also asserted that Sámi sport should 'in many contexts, be understood as incompatible with today's modern sport activities [i.e. the Norwegian ones], in terms of organization, administration as well as practice'.⁸⁸ Thus, traditional Sámi culture and values were not compatible with 'Norwegian' or 'Western' competitive and bureaucratic sporting values and practices.

The eventual regard for sport as an important tool for nation-building was concretized in the increased funding of Sámi sport by the Norwegian Sámi Parliament. From 2002, an allocation to sport of 500,000 Norwegian kroner (Nkr) (\$64,000 US) became a fixed-budget post for the Sámi parliament. Before then, funding had been scant and irregular. In 2007, Sámi sport was granted 1.7 million Nkr (\$283,000 US) in total by the Sámi parliament; in 2008, 2 million Nkr (\$364,000 US); and in 2012, 2.7 million Nkr (\$450,000 US).⁸⁹ In 2021, the Sámi Parliament granted SVL-N 3.2 million Nkr (\$368,000 US).⁹⁰ Notably, this increase in funding did not result from an increase in sport activities or athletes, but reflected the increased clout of sports organizations as an ethno-political instrument and identity builder.⁹¹ At the same time the structuring of the funding, were the Norwegian Sámi parliament finance Sámi sport inside the Norwegian borders, underlines the problem of pairing the ideological goal of Sámi sport transcending borders with the economic and political reality that Sámi sport is restricted by the state's borders and the confines of each state's Sámi parliament.

After 2000, the construction of Sámi identity within sports acquired a third dimension, the international indigenous dimension. An important reason for the post-2000 increase in funding was SVL-N's engagement in international indigenous people's sport, participating in the AWG and the NF Board football federation.⁹² Since 2013, FA Sámi has shifted alliances from the NF Board to the CONIFA. In the 1990s, SVL-N aimed to become integrated into the large international sport family of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Skiing Federation (FIS), and the UEFA and FIFA international football associations.⁹³ SVL-N maintained its intention of becoming a member of these established international organizations until the beginning of the 2000s. In 2005, however, the president of the football association, Leif Isak Nilut, realized that UEFA membership was out of reach, since UEFA did not grant membership to stateless nations.⁹⁴ However, this decision did not put an end to the ambitions to make Sámi sport part of a broader international sporting community. Instead, the focus moved from large, well-established organizations to alternative international sport communities whose aim was to organize stateless people, Indigenous people, minorities and other marginalized groups. The SSL even contributed to the founding of the alternative football federation, the NF Board, in 2003. The NF Board was initially meant to be a form of waiting room for admission into FIFA and UEFA, and organized areas such as Sahara Occidental, Northern Cyprus, Tibet, Zanzibar, Somaliland, Greenland and Padania.⁹⁵ The NF Board later scrapped the waiting room idea and, according to themselves, differ from FIFA by being open for 'the people' as a meeting place for marginalized groups to which community and friendship through football was central.⁹⁶ After the SSL was dissolved and replaced by the FA Sápmi in 2014 the FA Sápmi participated in the CONIFA World Football Cup for the first time in Østersund in Sweden in 2014.

The Sámi links to the international indigenous community became even more evident through the annual Sámi participation from 2005 onwards in the indigenous AWG in North America. AWG participation was a way of showing the Sámi Parliament, Norwegian authorities and the global Indigenous community that the Sámi were an Indigenous people on an equal footing with other Circumpolar Indigenous peoples.⁹⁷ The AWG has been held annually in North America since 1970.⁹⁸ In 2002, Greenland was the first host of the games outside North America. Indigenous athletes from circumpolar North America, Greenland, Siberia and the Nordic countries take part in a range of both indigenous sports and international conventional sports. Michael Heine has shown the importance of these games for Aboriginal people across Canada.⁹⁹ The Sámi political parties saw the establishment of close ties between Indigenous people in the Arctic region through sport as a paramount part of building a Sámi indigenous identity by tying the Sámi population to the international indigenous community. The president of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament in 2005, Sven Roald Nystø, suggested that participating in the AWG would provide a new dimension to SVL-N's work through establishing forms of partnership with peoples that 'we feel related to and a sense of community with'.¹⁰⁰ In 2008, Nystø's successor as president, Egil Olli, argued that it was extremely important for Sámi youth to experience a sense of community with other Indigenous people; the participation in AWG was in this sense 'an event of great value for

Sámi society'.¹⁰¹ Olli further remarked that 'The AWG allow young Sámi culture workers and athletes to develop collaboration across nation state boundaries, and at the same time get to meet and experience a sense of community with other Indigenous youth from other Arctic regions'.¹⁰² The AWG has continued to be central to SVL-N's strategy strengthening international indigenous ties and by doing so strengthening the understanding of the Sámi as an indigenous people in Norway.

Sámi identity formation through sport has been shaped along these three dimensions in line with mainly ethnopolitical objectives that has developed over time. The ethnic identity dimension which tied Sámi sport to a certain history and to certain traditions was supplemented by a national identity dimension which emphasized the Sámi as one nation transcending the state borders in the north. Adding international sporting events to the Sámi sporting calendar became important, both for ethnopolitical and sporting reasons. The participation in the alternative football world cups and in the AWG underlined all these dimensions of a Sámi sporting identity by deploring ethnic and national symbols in an international indigenous sporting environment.

A Sporting Nation Built on the past for the Future

Since being organized in the late 1970s, Sámi sport on the Norwegian side of Sápmi has become a marker of a certain kind of Sáminess both internally in the Sámi communities and externally in Norway and in the alternative international sports world. Its activities have partly been built on an essentialized past and its political goals have been promoted by what Spivac has called strategic essentialism. Sport has been used as part of a broader ethno-political struggle to revitalize Sámi culture and lay the foundations for greater political independence for the Indigenous Sámi in Norway, much in the same way as in the case of Lacrosse in Canada. The strategic use of an essentialized past is both evident in how Sámi identity is understood within SVL-N, and in the way Sámi sport has contributed to the construction and expression of Sámi identities. Largely, the establishment of Sámi sport has contributed to the construction of Sámi identity by latching on to certain traditions and cultural traits from an essentialized past. Thus, it has seen Sámi ethnicity as indissolubly bound to Sámi history, culture and territory, with a strong focus on reindeer herding culture which is at the core of Sámi sport and of how Sámi identity has been promoted through sport. This focus has led to the creation of a distinct understanding of what Sámi ethnic identity, national identity and indigenous identity consists of. Reindeer racing, lasso throwing and cross-country skiing have established and promoted Sáminess as being inseparable from reindeer herding culture. In promoting these common group denominators, Sámi sport has promoted the idea of the Sámi as one nation with a common history and with common traditions. By doing so, it has also created distinctions between groups. First, it has strongly endorsed the idea that Sámi culture is distinctly different from Norwegian and 'Western' culture. Second, by tying Sáminess so closely to reindeer husbandry culture, it has inevitably created distinctions inside the Sámi communities. By essentializing the past Sámi sport has contributed to a narrow understanding of Sáminess, excluding traits, practices and symbols from both Coastal Sámi culture and

contemporary Sámi culture. On the other hand, and somewhat in contrast to this essentialist strategy, Sámi football has contributed to shaping a wider notion of Sáminess that includes more ways of being Sámi. Football as a global phenomenon and with its global appeal has extended the understanding of what Sámi sport is and who it is for. In this way, the Sámi sports movement has combined a strategic narrow and traditionalist understanding of Sáminess with a more progressive, open and dynamic understanding.

The Sámi Sports Association has wanted to use sport as a means to provide powerful symbols of ethnic, national and indigenous Sámi identity. This ambition has shaped SVL-N's aims, organization and activities. By looking to an essentialist past SVL-N has contributed to building this threefold identity. The Sámi sport movement has also succeeded in making the Sámi political institutions see the capacity of sport to providing an important 'glue' in the formation of Sámi identity, and sport has accordingly received greater funding and political recognition. In this way, sport has contributed to advancing the idea of the Sámi as a distinctive ethnic group, a transnational nation and an Indigenous people.

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Notes on Contributor

Helge Chr. Pedersen has researched sport and sport culture in the multi ethnic north of Norway for the past 15 years. He has written about Sámi participation in sport in Norway from the beginning of the twentieth century up until today. In this period, Norwegian state policy towards the indigenous Sámi population has changed drastically from a hard-hitting assimilation strategy to today's emphasis on integration and self-governance. This change is also reflected in the development and deployment of sport, both as a tool for Sámi cultural and political revitalization and as a tool for integration. Pedersen has also written about North Norwegian sport and regional identities.