

**Telfer School of Management
University of Ottawa**

EXECUTIVE MASTERS IN SPORTS ORGANISATION MANAGEMENT



**MEMOS XXVII
2024-2025**

**PREPARATION PROGRAM FOR SLOVENIAN ATHLETES PARTICIPATING IN
YOG AND EYOF**

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List of abbreviations:

APC – The Red Bull Athlete Performance Centre

EOC – European Olympic Committee

EYOF – European Youth Olympic Festival

NFs – National Sports Federations

NOC – National Olympic Committees

NOC Slovenia – Olympic Committee of Slovenia

IOC – International Olympic Committee

METS – Ministry of Economy, Tourism and Sport

NOI – National Olympic Institute

OG – Olympic Games

ORSMC – Olympic reference sports medical centres

SF – The Foundation for Financing Sports Organisations in the Republic of Slovenia

SSKJ – Dictionary of Standard Slovene Language (Slo. Slovar Slovenskega Knjižnega Jezika)

YOC – Youth Olympic Camps

YOG – Youth Olympic Games

1 ABSTRACT

This project aims to create a valuable document for the Olympic Committee of Slovenia (NOC Slovenia), enabling it to successfully lead preparation programs for young athletes preparing for multi-sport youth competitions. NOC Slovenia receives financial support from the government to organise preparations and participation in multi-sport youth competitions. NOC Slovenia's responsibility is to utilise these funds as efficiently as possible while offering content tailored to youth age categories within the preparatory program.

In this project assignment, drawing from content in the preparatory programs for elite athletes, expanding existing youth preparatory programs (for example, Youth Olympic Camps (YOC)), and incorporating practical content, we have prepared a proposal to update the project documents and thereby improve the preparatory program. By participating in the preparatory program and taking part in increasingly recognised multi-sport competitions such as the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), which are more than just sports competitions, young athletes will acquire new technical, tactical, and physical skills, gain valuable knowledge and experiences, and become better athletes and people overall.

2 RÉSUMÉ

Ce projet vise à créer un document utile pour le CNO Slovénie, lui permettant de mener avec succès des programmes de préparation pour les jeunes athlètes se préparant à des compétitions multisports pour la jeunesse. Le CNO Slovénie reçoit un soutien financier du gouvernement pour organiser la préparation et la participation à ces compétitions. La responsabilité du CNO Slovénie est d'utiliser ces fonds de manière aussi économique que possible tout en proposant un contenu adapté aux catégories d'âge des jeunes au sein du programme de préparation.

Dans le cadre de cette mission de projet, en s'appuyant sur le contenu des programmes de préparation des athlètes d'élite, en élargissant les programmes de préparation existants pour la jeunesse (par exemple, le YOC) et en y intégrant du contenu pratique, nous avons élaboré une proposition visant à mettre à jour les documents de projet et ainsi améliorer le programme de préparation. En participant à ce programme et en prenant part à des compétitions multisports de plus en plus reconnues telles que les YOG et EYOF, qui sont plus que de simples compétitions sportives, les jeunes athlètes acquerront de nouvelles compétences techniques, tactiques et physiques, enrichiront leurs connaissances et leurs expériences, et deviendront ainsi de meilleurs athlètes et de meilleures personnes dans l'ensemble.

3 INTRODUCTION

High-performance sport today serves as a global stage where nations demonstrate not only the talent of their athletes but also the effectiveness of their athlete development systems. Within this context, youth competitive sport has become a strategic priority, as it is in these early stages that future elite athletes begin to take shape (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). Alongside the development of sporting potential, there is also a parallel process of supporting young individuals in their personal growth. In Slovenia, the Olympic Committee of Slovenia (NOC Slovenia) plays a vital role in this process by offering systemic support to young athletes, particularly those participating in international multi-sport events such as EYOF and the YOG.

EYOF and YOG are unique international events that extend beyond competition, providing a comprehensive educational and developmental experience for young athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2018). Preparing Slovenian athletes for these events is a strategic challenge, as participation goes far beyond athletic performance - it also introduces young competitors to the demands and complexity of high-level sport. Technical and tactical readiness is crucial, but so too are psychological stability, stress management, proper nutrition, and access to medical and rehabilitation support. All the factors that reflect a holistic approach to athlete development.

The NOC Slovenia is the central umbrella organisation for sport in Slovenia. It promotes Olympic values, supports national sports federations (NFs), and coordinates the participation of Slovenian athletes in major multi-sport events, including the Olympic Games (OG), Youth YOG, and EYOF. The role of NOC Slovenia is particularly critical given Slovenia's status as a small nation with limited resources and a relatively narrow talent pool, yet one that consistently performs successfully on the international stage (Škof, 2014). Over the past few decades, Slovenian athletes have achieved remarkable results across a wide range of sports. From winter sports, athletics, gymnastics, and cycling to team sports. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the national talent identification and development system. Notably, Slovenia is often able to produce top-level athletes even in disciplines typically dominated by much larger countries. NOC Slovenia serves as a vital link between state institutions, local communities, and professional support staff, with a growing emphasis on providing structured support to promising young athletes and their long-term development in elite sport.

Involving various professionals, such as coaches, strength and conditioning experts, sports psychologists, physiotherapists, and nutritionists, in the preparation process represents a clear shift from a traditionally narrow, performance-focused approach toward a more holistic and interdisciplinary model of support (Henriksen et al., 2010). The development of youth athletes requires collaboration among stakeholders and adaptation to the specific needs of each athlete during a highly formative stage of life. Adolescence is marked by major physical, cognitive, and social transitions, all of which impact an athlete's ability to cope with training demands (MacNamara et al., 2010). A successful transition from youth to senior-level sport, therefore, demands a well-structured programme that addresses not only athletic skills but also

personality and social development. In this sense, EYOF and YOG serve not only as goals, but also as important tests of both systemic readiness and individual preparation.

Professional support is a crucial part of preparation for major multi-sport events. Psychological preparation, nutritional strategies, and the use of performance analytics have become indispensable components of athlete development, contributing to greater stability, improved recovery, and more efficient training (Gould et al., 2002; Kajtna, 2019b; Burke, 2015; McCall et al., 2014). In Slovenia, these approaches are increasingly being integrated into youth development programmes, enabling a more comprehensive treatment of the athlete and facilitating a smoother transition into senior-level competition.

Preparation for EYOF and YOG is not merely about organising training sessions and participation; it requires a complex understanding of youth development and a collaborative system that supports the athlete from multiple angles. Slovenia, while limited in terms of population and financial resources, maintains a high level of organisation and a strong Olympic tradition. In this context, the development of robust preparation programmes is essential to providing young athletes with optimal support and ensuring the country's long-term competitiveness in the international arena.

The financing of Slovenian athletes participating in multi-sport international events, such as the OG, YOG, and EYOF, is supported by a combination of national and international sources. At the national level, NOC Slovenia plays a central role, working closely with the Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport (METS), the Foundation for Financing Sports Organisations in the Republic of Slovenia (SF), and national sport federations (NF). Together, they ensure funding for training camps, logistics, and professional support for national teams. Sponsorships and donations are also a part of the financial structure, particularly in supporting youth and elite sports in Slovenia.

On the international side, significant financial assistance is provided by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) through the Olympic Solidarity programme. This initiative supports smaller National Olympic Committees (NOCs) by offering scholarships, training grants, and subsidies for participation in YOG and OG. For the 2025–2028 period, the IOC has allocated 650 million \$ for this programme, with a significant portion designated for the development of young athletes (IOC, 2024). Likewise, the European Olympic Committee (EOC) provide organisational and partial financial support to EYOF participants and collaborates with the European Commission in promoting youth sport, Olympic values, and intercultural dialogue (EOC, 2023).

In this framework, the NOC Slovenia acts not only as an organiser but also as a facilitator between international funding programmes and domestic systems. This enables Slovenian youth athletes to prepare thoroughly and compete effectively at the highest levels of international multi-sport competition.

When creating an appropriate preparation model, it is necessary to evaluate the efficiency of 'inputs,' 'throughputs,' and 'outputs.' Inputs can be considered financial investments; throughputs represent the method (efficiency) of utilising available input resources or the optimal use of input resources to achieve an optimal output (De Bosscher et al., 2015). Our project will focus on the selection criteria for promising young athletes, funding their preparation programs, and developing or improving existing preparation programs for youth multi-sport events such as EYOF or YOG.

3.1 Purpose, objectives and the research question

The **purpose** of this project is to distribute dedicated resources as efficiently as possible, ensuring the highest level of preparation for young athletes through financial and professional support. This commitment to efficient resource allocation in sports is crucial for nurturing talent and promoting excellence. As outlined in the introduction, OKS already has an established program that provides comprehensive support for athletes. However, there is still significant room for improvement, particularly in terms of better adaptation for elite athletes. We aim to transfer best practices from high-performance athlete programs into youth development initiatives, while also considering the perspectives of various experts and, ultimately, the athletes themselves.

The **main objectives** are to develop a more systematic preparatory program, achieve better performance outcomes, and create a stronger foundation for the long-term development of elite-level athletes. By investing in structure and quality at earlier stages, we aim to increase the number of athletes with the potential to reach top international levels.

Therefore, my **research question** is: How and why can a preparation program for Slovenian athletes participating in youth multi-sport competitions be improved?

4 THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

4.1 Youth Athlete Identification and Selection

Athlete identification and selection involve systematically evaluating athletes based on their physical, technical, psychological, and social attributes, contributing to their long-term success potential. Vaeyens et al. (2008) emphasise the importance of aligning talent identification methods with the unique requirements of each sport. They also highlight that talent identification models often exclude many talents, particularly those experiencing late maturation, making the development of young athletes equally important. Therefore, they conclude that a continuous combination of talent identification and development programs for young athletes is essential.

Differences in biological development significantly impact the performance of young athletes during adolescence. In talent identification, it is crucial to recognise temporary physical advantages or disadvantages due to early or late maturation. Regularly monitoring growth patterns and potential is essential for successfully identifying and developing young athletes (Malina et al., 2004).

The identification and selection of athletes can be based on their past performance. In Germany, athletes are categorised into different levels through athlete support programs. Stages D, DC, and C represent squad levels for juniors, while stages B and A constitute the national senior squads. Specific selection criteria are established for each level (Guellich & Emrich, 2012). NOC Slovenia establishes Criteria for the Nomination of Athletes – Candidates to identify athletes and teams with the potential to compete at the OG, even when they have not yet met the IOC criteria. The criteria divide athletes into three different levels based on their previous results. This framework enables NFs to participate in the Olympic Project 2024, facilitating more effective preparation of activities by NFs and NOC Slovenia to select final participants for the OG (NOC Slovenia, 2024a).

Athlete identification and selection are crucial processes for achieving long-term success, necessitating a comprehensive evaluation of physical, technical, psychological, and social attributes. It is crucial to adapt methods to the specific needs of individual sports while considering the impact of biological maturity and psychological development. For young athletes, recognising that late maturation can affect performance is essential, and a thorough understanding of different age stages can be critical in identifying talents to include in development programs. Various models also exist that categorise talented athletes based on past results, enabling the identification of athletes in the short term who are suitable for selection in preparation programs for sports competitions within an annual cycle.

4.2 Financing of the preparation programs in Slovenia

In Slovenia, various sports providers fund their activities through different sources. Generally, sports funding can be categorised into public and private sources. Public funding includes resources from the state budget, specifically those allocated to the Ministry of Economy, Tourism and Sport (METS). These funds are distributed through public calls for applications as part of the Annual Sports Program. Public funding also includes resources from local government budgets (municipal budgets) and funds from the SF, which are generated from gambling taxes and allocated based on public tenders. Private funding includes resources from sponsors, donors, households, and other private sources (Šugman et al., 2006).

As part of the Annual Sports Program, which defines the programs and areas of sports co-financed by METS at the national level for each calendar year, as well as the public funds provided in the state budget, a portion of the funds is allocated to the areas specified in the Sports Act (ZŠPO-1), Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 29/2017, valid from June 23, 2017:

- **Sports education of children and youth is oriented towards quality and elite sports** (National sports schools, preparations, and performances of national teams of children and youth).

Elite sports (Preparations and performances of senior national teams, preparations and performances of teams at international multi-sport competitions) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024).

In addition to METS, the SF also prepares the Annual Sports Program. Based on public tenders, it allocates funds, among other purposes, to competitive sports programs in the same areas as METS (PISRS, 2024).

NOC Slovenia receives dedicated funds from METS for the preparations and performances of national teams at international multi-sport competitions, including preparations for youth multi-sport events such as EYOF and YOG. The SF allocates dedicated funds for the preparations and performances of national teams of children and youth for these events, which are organised under the umbrella of NOC Slovenia.

Eligible expenses that NOC Slovenia can report to the mentioned public funders are:

- **METS:**
 - **Costs directly related to preparations and participation** (transportation, fuel, accommodation, per diems, meals, physiotherapy expenses, medical services, registration fees, measurement costs, hall rentals, and sports clothing)
- **FS:**
 - **Professional staff** (costs of labor and services, travel expenses, education, and liability insurance).
 - **Material costs** (transportation, sports equipment, accommodation, meals, etc.).
 - **Sports facilities** (rental or usage costs).
 - **Partial operating costs of NOC Slovenia** (employee salaries and material costs, up to 15% of eligible funds).

In addition to the mentioned sources of income, the NOC Slovenia also generates revenue through its activities, including sponsorships, partnerships, and other initiatives. The IOC, the EOC, EU projects, and donations from legal entities and individuals provide additional funding. The NOC Slovenia initially utilises funds from the METS, the Sports Foundation, the IOC, and the EOC to finance athlete preparations and participation. If necessary, additional funds from other sources are used. One of the additional sources of funding is sports scholarships, which are not directly linked to multi-discipline competitions, but rather are awarded to athletes based on their achievements in top-level youth and senior competitions. (NOC Slovenia, 2024c).

The financing of sports in Slovenia aligns with the European sports model, which is based on four pillars: local funding, state funding, private funding, and household contributions (Andreff, 2009). The co-financing of preparations and participation in multi-sport competitions is managed by NOC Slovenia, which is also responsible for the accreditation process for these competitions. Regarding international youth competitions such as the EYOF and YOG, most of the funds contributed by NOC Slovenia are reported to the METS, the SF, the IOC, and the EOC. By the regulations of public funders, only specific, clearly prescribed expenses related to preparations and participation in competitions may be reported.

4.3 Athletes' development

De Bosscher et al. (2015) concluded, based on their research into the factors that most influence sporting success, that no universal model can be transferred from one context to another to ensure success. A comparison of 15 countries did not allow for the identification of the most important factors for success. The greatest challenge is balancing different factors while adapting to the national context and cultural characteristics of the country, alongside recognising the importance of best practices from successful models. The authors also emphasise that success is strongly linked to the level of funding for sports.

Athlete development for youth sports competitions, such as EYOF, YOG, or other sports events, requires a diverse approach that includes support from various professionals in sports (technical and tactical), health, psychology, and education. Preparation programs for athlete development play a crucial role in transitioning young athletes to the elite level, while promoting sustainable development in both sports and life.

4.4 Expert support

The humanistic concept of sports aims for every individual's psychophysical, psychosocial, and functional development of every individual. To achieve good sports results today, it is essential to consider all aspects of athlete preparation, including physical, technical, and tactical elements. The "fourth pillar"—psychological support—has recently become increasingly recognised (Drenovac, 2007). In the world of sports, athletes take centre stage, but it is essential to acknowledge that without the professionals working behind the scenes, sports would not exist (Merkač, 2008). In modern times, competitive sports demand working conditions of the highest standard and contemporary experts who work directly with athletes. (Savić et al., 2017). In sports organisations, individuals from various professional backgrounds collaborate. A clear division of labour among different profiles of sports professionals and the structure of their roles are essential. This enhances their efficiency and amplifies their positive impact on the outcome. (Retar, 2006). Remih (2025) found in his research that most of the work in the training and competitive processes of athletes is carried out by coaches. However, there is still significant untapped potential in Slovenian sports when it comes to involving sports psychologists and utilising sports analytics, both of which can improve time efficiency and thereby reduce costs.

Elite sport relies on a complex support system, with the coach playing a central role. According to the Dictionary of Standard Slovene Language, a coach is someone who works professionally in training athletes (Inštitut za slovenski jezik Frana Ramovša ZRC SAZU, n.d.). In smaller countries like Slovenia, where the athlete pool is limited and selection systems are less effective, the coach's role becomes even more crucial. Successful coaches combine experience and knowledge, directly shaping athletes' development, and are judged by their athletes' competition results (Retar, 2006). Their responsibilities include the athletes' technical, tactical, physical, and psychological preparation. Adaptability and individualisation are essential qualities, as top athletes differ significantly in many aspects (Tušak & Kajtna, 2007).

Physiotherapists are key members of an athlete's support team, contributing to injury prevention, movement optimisation, and overall health. They are especially vital during the preparatory and competitive phases, assisting with recovery and enabling a quicker return to training (Jaworski, 2019, pp. 784–785; Cabri & Baeyens, 2006). Effective rehabilitation shortens recovery time, allowing for more focused training.

Psychological preparation is now an indispensable component of elite sport. Sports psychologists utilise their expertise to assist athletes in achieving their goals and managing challenges such as injuries, stress, motivation, concentration, and team dynamics (Kajtna, 2019a; Tušak & Tušak, 2003). As an applied field, sports psychology applies general psychological knowledge to the sports context, enhancing individual and team performance.

Sports nutrition has also become a critical success factor. A well-designed nutritional strategy supports energy production, recovery, and physiological processes during training and competition. The goal is to ensure adequate intake of energy, macronutrients, and micronutrients tailored to different phases of training and performance (Negro et al., 2013, p. 3). Nutritionists work closely with coaches and other staff, and early interventions in young athletes' development can have long-term benefits (Gilbert, 2009).

Finally, sports analytics is one of the fastest-growing areas in elite sports. It enables data collection and analysis to optimise training, strategy, and recovery. Technological advances allow teams to uncover patterns and trends that analogue methods may overlook (Jevtić et al., 2011; Bogo et al., 2019). The effective use of analytics depends on the ability of coaches and athletes to gather, interpret, and apply high-quality data (Dmello, 2023).

4.5 Existing preparation programs in Slovenia and abroad

In collaboration with NFs, NOC Slovenia provides holistic support to athletes and coaches for their preparations and participation in the OG. This support includes co-financing preparations, qualification competitions, and providing professional, medical, and systemic assistance. Based on financial criteria, the allocated funding depends on the number and level of candidates (see the chapter Youth Athlete Identification and Selection, paragraph 4). Broadly, the programs are divided into:

- **NF Programs** (Enhanced and standard preparations, qualifications, expert support – co-financing preparations in collaboration with national federations),
- **Athlete Programs** (Enhanced insurance, Olympic Reference Sports Medical Centres (ORSMC), and reference experts).

The aim of the ORSMC is to provide athletes in the Republic of Slovenia with timely access to healthcare services by ensuring a high professional level of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures. The network includes centres that provide comprehensive care for athletes, from the initial diagnostic process to the completion of treatment (NOC Slovenia, 2025a).

Regarding the OG, the preparation program is funded two years prior to the start of the Games, and dedicated athletes (candidates) can access numerous resources for their development and preparation for the world's largest sports event. (NOC Slovenia, 2024a).

Regarding preparations for youth multi-sport competitions, NOC Slovenia co-finances preparations conducted as part of the NFs' training programs one year prior to the Games. Funds are allocated based on quotas approved by the Expert Council for Elite Sports for the preceding year, and the resources are evenly distributed among the athletes. In the year of the competition, three-day YOC are organised in addition to co-financing preparations for athletes and coaches. These camps familiarise athletes with project activities and other sports-related topics, emphasising education, respect for others, and teamwork. These camps are the only preparation program directly linked to preparations for youth multi-sport competitions (NOC Slovenia, 2024b).

The Be Gold program in Belgium is a strong example of how structured support can foster the development of young athletic talents. It offers a comprehensive framework that closely monitors training and competition schedules, while also creating a professional environment that supports long-term growth. Central to the program is its individualised approach through the “High Potential Program,” which helps guide athletes in a focused and strategic manner. The program sets a clear path toward elite performance by promoting ambitious but realistic goals, such as reaching the Top 8 at the OG or the Top 3 at World Championships. Strong results at major international youth competitions, including European and World Youth Championships, and multi-sport events like the EYOF and YOG have repeatedly confirmed its effectiveness.

The Be Gold project supports young, talented athletes who have shown strong national or international results and have the potential to reach the top eight at the OG or the top three at the Paralympic Games. Athletes are nominated by their national federations.

Funding is sourced from various sources and tailored to the athlete’s individual needs, goals, and existing support from national sports authorities. The support covers all aspects of athlete

development, including technical, physical, medical, nutritional, mental preparation, training, and international competition.

Athlete progress is reviewed annually. Continued support depends on achieving set milestones along the path to elite performance. Funding is typically discontinued if an athlete fails to meet their goals for two consecutive years.

From 2025, the program follows a 5- to 6-year development path, with support available for up to four years, contingent upon positive yearly evaluations. Be Gold provides a structured environment for developing future top-level athletes (Be Gold, n.d.).

The Red Bull Athlete Performance Centre (APC) in Thalgau, Austria, is a state-of-the-art facility designed to provide comprehensive support to elite athletes. The centre employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining expertise from sports medicine, physiotherapy, biomechanics, nutrition, and sports psychology to deliver highly individualised training and recovery programs (BeFit Training Physio, 2021).

Each athlete undergoes a series of detailed assessments, including measurements of aerobic capacity ($\text{VO}_2 \text{ max}$), muscular function, flexibility, balance, and neuromuscular performance. Based on these diagnostics, personalised training plans are created to support optimal physical conditioning and injury prevention.

Mental performance is also a key focus at APC. Athletes receive psychological support aimed at enhancing focus, managing competition-related stress, and strengthening mental resilience through visualisation and cognitive training techniques (Red Bull, n.d.). This holistic philosophy ensures that athletes are physically and mentally equipped to perform at their best. Access to the centre is limited to athletes affiliated with Red Bull, providing a highly tailored and confidential environment. With its advanced technology and evidence-based methodologies, APC is recognised internationally as one of the most sophisticated training environments available to professional athletes. It exemplifies how science and innovation can be integrated into high-performance sport to produce sustainable, long-term results.

5 RESEARCH

5.1 Research Structure and Data Collection

I conducted qualitative research, employing semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary methodological tool. The focus was on obtaining comprehensive insights from key stakeholders involved in the preparation and participation processes of the youth competitions. This approach will ensure a holistic understanding of the subject, capturing diverse perspectives and experiences across various roles.

- **Blaž Perko** – NOC Slovenia Sports Director, who has previously managed a multi-sport project.
- Various sports professionals with experience in youth sports, including:
 - **Gregor Brod** – Coach of a Youth Olympic athletes
 - **Jure Bornšek** – Youth Olympic Team Physiotherapist
 - **Lena Gabršček** – Sports Psychologist and Elite Para-athlete
- **Zarja Tavčar** – A young athlete exploring their perspectives.
- **Maja Mihalinec Zidar** – Elite Athlete, to gain insights into their experiences and best and worst practices.

Through the interviews, I heard information on past practices (both successful and unsuccessful), gained diverse perspectives from various experts, and collected suggestions for future improvements. Additionally, I sought to understand the opinions of young athletes and drew on the valuable experiences of an elite athlete whose insights significantly contributed to the study.

5.2 Data Analysis

The responses will undergo thematic analysis, employing the six-phase model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a prominent and frequently adopted method for qualitative data analysis. This approach offers a precise and repeatable framework that ensures transparency and research integrity. It supports deep analysis by focusing on meaning over frequency, revealing significant insights beyond surface-level data. Its suitability for interdisciplinary research makes it ideal for this study, as it bridges the fields of sport, psychology, health, and education, enabling a holistic view of stakeholder perspectives.

Analysis of research results

Within the framework of the analysis, after repeatedly reviewing the interviews and conducting a process known as coding, we identified seven common themes among all interviewees. We also prepared a summary within each theme.

5.2.1 Multi-Sport Competitions (EYOF and YOG) – More Than Just Sporting Events

B. Perko points out that the EYOF, in addition to its increasing significance within the competitive systems of NFs, is intended as a festival that should not become solely a competition. He emphasises the importance of ensuring that EYOF continues to evolve in alignment with the mechanisms of the EOC and remains faithful to its original concept: to offer young athletes something more than just results. As a member of the leadership of the NOC Slovenia, he emphasises the need to balance the competitive and social components, as well as the responsible development of the competition to preserve its identity and long-term value. He views EYOF as a tool to prepare young athletes for greater competitive challenges in the future, while also serving as an event that prioritises sporting values and fosters social interactions.

G. Brod reveals how EYOF and the YOG often captivate young athletes beyond the competitive dimension: socialising, making new acquaintances, watching other sports – these experiences can quickly “carry them away.” He acknowledges that sometimes results are the only thing that matter, but he would also like to provide young athletes with a positive overall experience. He highlights the paradox of EYOF and YOG: on the one hand, they are unique opportunities; on the other hand, due to unclear priorities (result vs. experience), there is a risk of prematurely achieving one’s goals. He realistically explains that young athletes often lose motivation after EYOF or YOG, having reached a milestone they set for themselves. He sees youth multi-sport competitions as important experiences, but they can also serve as a “finish line” for some young careers. He concludes that youth multi-sport competitions are undoubtedly positive experiences that athletes will remember for a lifetime. According to his experience, all young athletes would rather skip either European or World Championships than miss multi-sport competitions like EYOF and YOG. He says that in his experience, these are the competitions that young athletes think about with the mindset: “We have to be there.”

L. Gabršček highlights the psychological challenges that young athletes face for the first time at multi-sport competitions, including competitive pressure, the desire to prove oneself, and social adaptation (such as different cultures, food, and time zones). She points out that for many, this is their first encounter with international competition, which can amplify fear of failure and affect self-confidence. She stresses the importance of appropriate psychological preparation (which is often insufficiently systematic) and the social component of competitions – peer support, friendships, and sharing experiences can be extremely valuable for an athlete’s personal development. Such competitions and their preparation serve as an “introduction” to the world of major competitions, reducing uncertainty and improving psychological readiness for future top-level events.

As a former elite athlete and participant at EYOF, **M. Mihalinec Zidar** emphasises that youth multi-sport competitions, such as EYOF and YOG, make an important contribution to preparing athletes for the Olympic level, as they provide early exposure to a multicultural environment and the concept of multi-sport events. She highlights differences in organisation (e.g., the European Athletics Championships are held in one hotel, while the EYOF is held in an Olympic village), which provides young athletes with greater flexibility and valuable experience. She believes it is important that young athletes do not rush in their pursuit of results, as training levels, age, and biological development often vary in the younger age categories. She sees EYOF and YOG as opportunities to meet other athletes and as platforms for long-term sporting and personal experiences. She stresses that at this age, such experiences are probably more valuable than the sporting result itself.

Z. Tavčar emphasised that socialising and cheering for other athletes provided her with great motivation. She experienced EYOF as an opportunity for new friendships and experiences that go beyond results. She warns of the pitfalls of quick success: after EYOF, she lost some

motivation, which was followed by an injury that contributed to a slow end to her career. She compares EYOF to European Championships, where the environment is more monotonous and there are fewer distractions. She highlights the importance of “keeping your eyes open”—she advises athletes to seize every opportunity to meet other people and sports, as they are at the beginning of their sporting journey. Her experience is marked by a positive atmosphere, but also by reflection on how winning a medal at EYOF can have a demotivating effect on further career progression.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews confirms the findings of Mountjoy et al. (2018), which indicate that EYOF and YOG go beyond the competitive dimension—they socially enrich young athletes, but at the same time pose a challenge in balancing results and experience. All interviewees agree that maintaining the balance between the “festival” component and performance goals is crucial. EYOF simultaneously serves as a motivator and as a potential point of oversaturation or premature goal fulfilment. Therefore, the preparatory program should specifically address the psychological challenges and socialisation opportunities associated with these events, ensuring that EYOF remains an integral part of the athlete’s long-term developmental process rather than serving as their “finish line.”

5.2.2 First Steps: How to Identify and Select Promising Athletes

The interviews reveal that the identification and selection of promising athletes for participation in multi-sport competitions (EYOF, YOG) is a complex process that in Slovenia often relies on the categorisation of athletes within their respective sports federations. **B. Perko** emphasises that categorisation at least provides a basic assessment of the success of individual sports and gives athletes a sense of achievement and motivation. However, he points out that the current criteria are often not specific enough, especially for less developed sports disciplines where there is a lack of internal competition. Therefore, he suggests considering an extension of the preparation period (e.g., to three years) and the development of more detailed criteria for each sport. In his opinion, such an approach would provide young athletes with a clearer understanding of what they need to achieve to qualify for EYOF, while also boosting their motivation for long-term development.

G. Brod agrees that the selection system for EYOF in judo is appropriate, allowing for the broader participation of athletes who may not be at the very top at that moment but still receive a valuable opportunity to prove themselves. In contrast, at YOG, due to the strict quota (one male and one female per country), the selection is often random and less suitable for sports with smaller talent pools. Brod notes that in judo, the criteria can be determined relatively easily because the coach has a good insight into the athletes throughout the season. Nevertheless, he points out that collecting a wider pool of athletes promptly (e.g., already two years in advance) would allow sufficient time for monitoring and quality preparation and would prevent potential misjudgments.

Findings

Both interviewees agree that a more structured and long-term identification process, which goes beyond mere results and considers developmental potential, motivation, and other qualities discussed by Vaeyens et al. (2008) and Malina et al. (2004), would improve the fairness and effectiveness of the selection process. This is especially important for less competitive sports, where the lack of internal competition can make result-based identification misleading. Such an approach would likely ensure developmental continuity, allowing young athletes to gradually progress to a higher level through appropriate preparation and established criteria. In the future, it would be worthwhile to consider a more centralised selection model that would connect NOC Slovenia, the sports federations, and individual coaches, thus ensuring transparency and continuity in forming teams for EYOF and YOG. One important improvement would also be to identify suitable athletes at least two years in advance of the youth multi-sport competition, as the current program assembles the pool one year prior to the event (NOC Slovenia, 2024b).

5.2.3 The Role of Funding in the Development of Young Athletes

The analysis of the interviews highlights that adequate funding of the training programs for young athletes is a key component of their sporting development and long-term competitiveness. **B. Perko** highlights the challenges of securing financial resources, as youth sports often lack market appeal for private sponsors, especially since advertisers targeting this segment may not always align with the values of the sport (e.g., fast food or confectionery industries). This makes it challenging to find ethical and stable funding sources, while public funds are often too dispersed. He emphasises the importance of long-term funding, which, in his opinion, should be secured at least three years in advance of major competitions. This would allow for the systematic preparation of young athletes and likely increase the motivation of all stakeholders.

Based on her experience, **M. Mihalinec Zidar** explains how important scholarship support (e.g., NOC Slovenia sports scholarships) is for balancing training, preparation, and other expenses, especially crucial during the transition to higher competitive categories. Without such support, many young athletes struggle to meet the demands of elite sport.

Z. Tavčar notes that financial support provided her with stability and motivation, as her expenses were covered even during the season when she advanced to a higher age category. This support was critical because she was the first from her club to reach this level, and it gave her the impetus for further athletic development.

Findings

The interviews unanimously emphasise that without stable funding of youth athlete programs, it is not possible to build high-quality and competitive athletes in the long term. It appears that greater centralisation of public funds is needed, as well as the development of a strategy for diversifying revenue sources, as also discussed by Šugman et al. (2006), which would enable

the sustainable development of youth sports programs. Support for youth competitions still largely depends on public funding, as these events are less attractive to the media and sponsors. In addition to co-financing programs, it is also important to consider direct funding of athletes, which is currently provided through sports scholarships (NOC Slovenia, 2025b).

5.2.4 Psychological Pressures and Vulnerability of Young Athletes

B. Perko emphasises the importance of psychological preparation as an equally crucial component of professional support for young athletes, which, in practice, often remains neglected. He points out that each sport develops its approach to psychological preparation, resulting in a lack of uniform guidelines and systematic support. He emphasises that the psychological component is one of the so-called “success parameters” of an athlete and should be closely integrated with physical and technical training. He suggests that psychological training should be incorporated as a long-term component in the training process, rather than as a one-time workshop or motivational speech. This would help athletes manage stress, boost their confidence, and improve their responses to failure.

J. Bornšek acknowledges the importance of psychological preparation in athlete development but warns that in practice, fragmentation often occurs. Each sport emphasises its aspect of psychological preparation (e.g., motivation, confidence, focus), resulting in a confusing array of approaches that are difficult to integrate into a comprehensive program. He points out that there should be a national framework providing standard guidelines for psychological preparation for all athletes and coaches. He also emphasises that psychological preparation should not be merely an add-on to physical preparation, but rather an integral part of daily training. In this way, athletes would develop stress resilience early on and learn to manage pressure, which would be a great asset in transitioning to higher age categories and senior levels.

G. Brod extensively explains that psychological preparation is often still not recognised as a key component of success for young athletes. He highlights that young athletes and their parents often overlook the importance of psychological preparation, as they are still in the early stages of adapting to competitive sports. He emphasises the need to help young athletes build psychological resilience, mainly because they are young and should not be overly focused on visualising wins and successes. If a young athlete overidentifies with expectations and visualises victories, failure can significantly affect them and reduce their motivation. He believes that psychological preparation for young athletes should focus on managing stress, accepting failure as a part of sport, and maintaining focus despite challenges. He also points out that coaches and federations should integrate basic psychological preparation into the overall training program as early as the preparatory phase, thereby preparing young athletes for the real challenges and fluctuations of a sporting career.

L. Gabršček explains in detail that psychological preparation is crucial for the long-term success of young athletes, as they experience intense pressure and expectations for the first

time at major international competitions such as EYOF and YOG. She emphasises the importance of imagery (visualising competition conditions and performance) and relaxation and breathing exercises for stress management. In her opinion, psychological preparation should be integrated into the regular training process, as one-off workshops often lack sufficient impact. She also points out that young athletes' cognitive abilities to regulate emotions are not fully developed, making them even more vulnerable. She emphasises that self-confidence, positive self-talk, and the ability to accept failure are key elements that young athletes need to master. She specifically notes that athletes often seek psychological help only when problems arise, instead of systematically incorporating it from the beginning. She suggests that every NF should obligatorily include a sports psychologist in their preparatory programs.

M. Mihalinec Zidar emphasises the importance of psychological preparation but notes that it is often left to individual athletes and coaches. She only began using the professional support of a sports psychologist in the later stages of her career, when the pressures from the environment and the media became too great to handle on her own. She highlights the importance of trusting a qualified expert, as only then can the athlete truly receive help in maintaining motivation and overcoming crises such as dips in form or thoughts of ending their career. She stresses that psychological preparation is not just about breathing exercises and visualisation, but also about deep work on understanding oneself, one's expectations, and the ability to manage external factors. She believes that psychological training should be accessible already at the youth level, as that is when athletes are most receptive to developing self-confidence and mental toughness.

Z. Tavčar positively evaluates her experience with regular group workshops and learning techniques for managing psychological pressure. She states that for young athletes, it is essential to learn to reduce nervousness and mentally rehearse competition conditions, as this helps them manage stress during competitions. She emphasises that psychological preparation is one of the biggest challenges for young athletes because they often do not know how to react in difficult moments. She notes that many athletes lack access to such opportunities, making them particularly vulnerable to stress and failure. Her experience shows that psychological preparation enhances confidence, motivation, and perseverance, which are key for a long-term sporting career. She therefore believes that psychological preparation should become an integral part of daily training, not just an exceptional support in times of crisis.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews clearly shows that psychological preparation for young athletes remains insufficiently systematic and is often left to coaches or individuals, creating vulnerability in moments of pressure and failure. The interviewees agree that psychological preparation should be given equal importance to physical and technical preparation and should be included from the early stages of development. This view is supported by experts (e.g., Drenovac, 2007; Kajtna, 2019a; Tušak & Tušak, 2003), who emphasise that sports psychology is increasingly seen as an essential element of the training and competition process. EYOF and

YOG, as major competitions, further intensify psychological pressures, so support must be structured and accessible at all levels. Only in this way will young athletes be prepared for the real challenges of elite sport and develop the self-confidence that will accompany them throughout their careers.

5.2.5 The Weakness of Systematic Sports Analytics and Data Interpretation

B. Perko emphasises that the development of systematic data collection is essential for the advancement of sports analytics in Slovenia. He notes that currently, there is no established system that allows for longitudinal monitoring of athletes and comparison of results over time. At present, data often remain at the level of individual athletes or coaches, without broader application within NFs or the NOC Slovenia. He believes that the development of systematic data collection would enable the use of advanced tools such as artificial intelligence, which could link various parameters and help create effective training programs. He also highlights the need for data to be collected not only for video analysis but also for monitoring physiological, psychological, and other parameters important for the long-term development of athletes. In his view, this is an important step toward modernizing Slovenian sport and enhancing its international competitiveness.

J. Bornšek points out that, especially in team sports, analysis is often focused on the opponent, while analysis of the athlete's or team's own performance is often neglected. He believes more attention should be paid to analyzing an athlete's own weaknesses and areas for improvement. He cites swimming as an example of a sport where analytics functions very well and where records are constantly being broken. He notes that similar approaches should be transferred to other sports. He says that such analysis would allow for more targeted training and injury reduction. He believes that the current approach often does not include enough individual data, which reduces the possibility of adapting the program to each athlete. Bornšek thus calls for the development of a more comprehensive approach that would enable athletes to understand what they need to improve to achieve better results.

G. Brod believes that sports analytics exists in Slovenia but that each coach implements it in their own way and without standardized tools. He notes that while opponent analysis is present, analysis of one's own athletes is often missing. He points out that in Slovenia, coaches often lack access to modern tools that would enable systematic data collection and analysis. In his experience, it is crucial to establish a link between existing NF tests and sports analytics tools, as data often remain unconnected. He highlights the need to develop programs that would allow for long-term monitoring of young athletes, as this would make it possible to track their readiness, injury risk, and rehabilitation. He suggests that NFs should implement at least two years of athlete monitoring, which would enable better training planning and long-term development.

M. Mihalinec Zidar emphasises the importance of interpreting data obtained from tests and analyses, which, in her experience, often arrive too late or in a form that is not useful for the

athlete or their coach. She points out that measurements often arrive only after the end of the training cycle, when the athlete no longer needs them. She also notes the problem of inadequate or overly general interpretations that do not consider the individual needs of the athlete. In her opinion, data interpretation should be more personalised and in real-time, allowing for immediate adjustments to training. Maja also mentions that funding is often an issue, as tests and analyses are expensive, and athletes often cannot afford them. She highlights TMGs as a tool she uses regularly, while she has abandoned other methods because she found their results to be less valuable.

Z. Tavčar notes that in sports like judo, athletes rarely gain access to testing and analysis results. She believes it would be beneficial if they had insight into these results, as it would help them understand where they can still improve. She points out that comparisons between athletes who qualify for competitions and those who do not can be beneficial for individual training planning. She emphasises the need for data to be presented in a straightforward and user-friendly way, tailored to each sport. Zarja believes that benchmarks could serve as both motivation and an indicator of progress. She notes that such analyses should be conducted at the start of the season so that athletes receive feedback in time to adjust their training accordingly.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews clearly reveals a chronic lack of a structured system for data collection and analysis in Slovenian sport. According to Dmello (2023), the appropriate integration of sports analytics would enable athletes and coaches to monitor progress over the long term and adjust their training accordingly. As Remih (2025) points out, time-efficient methods would also reduce the costs associated with participation in sports. Data often remains at the level of individual coaches or athletes, with no connection to NFs or the NOC Slovenia. Referring to Jevtić et al. (2011) and Bogo et al. (2019), sports analytics is one of the fastest-growing elements of training in modern times, as it identifies characteristics that traditional analogue methods might overlook. Based on the interview data, key challenges in the Slovenian context appear to be data fragmentation, lack of standardisation, delayed interpretation, and insufficiently user-friendly analysis formats. The use of artificial intelligence seems to be the future, but without adequate baseline data and a systematic approach, its implementation will have little impact. All interviewees agree that a centralised, user-friendly, and individualised analytical system would contribute to better long-term athlete development and increased competitiveness of Slovenian sport.

5.2.6 Prevention and Holistic Athlete Support

B. Perko emphasises the importance of a strategic approach, which is being developed within the framework of the National Olympic Institute (NOI). Currently, there is an idea that NOI would oversee external partners providing professional support, such as the ORSMC, reference specialists, and other partner institutions, to deliver various services (sports medicine, psychology, nutrition, biomechanics, physiology, kinesiology). In his view, it is crucial that

professional support for young athletes is not implemented only at the level of individual NFs but is also developed nationally through coordinated efforts by the NOC Slovenia. This means that professional support is organised in two ways: on the one hand, it involves specialised training and preparations within individual sports (NFs), and on the other, it includes general support activities – such as psychological preparation, prevention, recovery, nutrition, and similar – which are intended for all young athletes, regardless of their sport, and are part of the NOI. Perko emphasises that it is crucial for this professional support to be developed systematically and over the long term, so that young athletes learn proper practices that will benefit them throughout their careers. This integrated approach enables better coordination among stakeholders and ensures comprehensive support for young athletes throughout their development. One of Perko's proposals is also to educate coaches and other professionals from NFs as part of the preparatory program for young athletes. This training would enhance their knowledge and prepare them for multi-sport competitions.

J. Bornšek emphasises that prevention is one of the keys, but is often neglected in the preparation of young athletes. The lack of systematic knowledge about prevention leads to a higher vulnerability to injuries, as adolescents often lack sufficient information or motivation to perform specific exercises for joints and muscles (e.g., shoulders, hips, knees). Bornšek emphasises the importance of exercises for muscle strengthening and injury prevention, while also highlighting the significance of stretching, relaxation, and mental well-being. Excessive training and an imbalance between workload and recovery can increase the risk of injury.

He also sees comprehensive care for athletes during injuries as a key challenge. According to him, injuries often remain unaddressed due to a lack of proper protocols—athletes have no one to turn to, and coaches often lack the knowledge or capacity for long-term rehabilitation. Athletes typically report injuries to their coach, who often cannot provide adequate advice. Bornšek identifies the lack of a clear system in Slovenia for injury management and “return to play” as one of the significant problems. He especially points out the absence of appropriate centres, such as ORSMC, that could provide young athletes with rapid and comprehensive care.

M. Mihalinec Zidar highlights the importance of injury prevention in young athletes, primarily through education that enables them to take care of themselves. She finds this especially important at smaller competitions, where physiotherapists are often unavailable, and athletes must be able to perform basic preventive exercises and techniques independently. She believes that young athletes are often unaware of the importance of recovery and that the body cannot be under constant strain, even though recovery is generally faster at younger ages. She also sees the role of collaboration with a kinesiologist as important, especially in team sports, where physical preparation is often neglected in favour of game and technical content. She argues that appropriate physical preparation, stabilisation of small muscle groups, and prevention of asymmetries in body development are essential to avoid injuries that could later seriously affect an athlete's career.

At the start of an athlete's journey, she believes the most important figures are the coach and the physiotherapist, as they are often the only ones guiding young athletes in prevention and initial recovery. Over time, M. Mihalinec Zidar expanded her professional team by including a nutritionist and psychologist, which she believes significantly complements the holistic support for the athlete. Based on her experience, the coach remains the most important figure, as they oversee the entire preparation, including conditioning. On the other hand, she believes that a holistic approach, which she has only experienced during her professional career, is key to long-term athletic development and reducing the risk of injury.

G. Brod states that the development of a comprehensive support system of professionals working in various fields (physiotherapy, psychology, nutrition, etc.) is crucial for the long-term development of young athletes. He emphasises that Slovenia should develop a national-level system that allows these professionals to gradually become involved in working with younger age categories. Ideally, a so-called "named team" of experts would be available to individual athletes according to their specific needs and available hours (e.g., the number of hours allocated for physiotherapy, psychology, etc.). Such a model already exists in Slovenia for senior national teams but is not yet implemented at the youth level. Both athletes and coaches must collaborate with these professionals early on, as only in this way can an effective support system be developed to help athletes not only during competitions but also in the preparation and rehabilitation phases following injury. According to him, this process should be developed gradually and systematically, ensuring quality, holistic care for young athletes and better preparing them for the challenges they will face in their sporting careers. He also highlights cooperation with other NFs as one of the key aspects, and among other things, he suggests organising quality seminars that would truly engage coaches with valuable content. In this way, coaches would attend such events out of a desire for knowledge and networking, rather than mere formality, which would foster collaboration between experts (coaches) and, consequently, between federations.

L. Gabršček states that psychological preparation for young athletes requires equal attention as physical preparation. She emphasises the need for the systematic inclusion of sports psychologists in the early stages of the training process, such as conditioning coaches or equipment specialists. This means that sports psychologists should become an integral part of sports teams, as their work goes beyond one-time lectures or quick interventions before competitions. Young athletes would also benefit from a mentoring program, where they could receive support and advice from experienced athletes who have already faced similar challenges.

Z. Tavčar believes that the support of coaches and other professionals, such as physiotherapists and psychologists, is crucial for even the youngest athletes. She had a positive experience with the support of her coaches – both her club and national team coaches provided her with reliable support, which is important for an athlete's confidence and preparation. The physiotherapy team she consulted at a multi-sport competition also helped her with competition preparation

and recovery, which increased her sense of safety and well-being. Psychological support was available to her only at the club level, which, in her opinion, highlights the limited access to psychological assistance within the broader context of the national team or national sports organisation. She also points out the challenges of coordinating individual and team programs, as each sport has its specifics, and each coach has their approach. This further complicates the implementation of a holistic approach that would provide young athletes with optimal psychological, physical, and preventive support. She highlights the need for better coordination among various stakeholders and systematic support that would enable young athletes to develop holistically.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews confirms the words of experts Henriksen et al. (2010) that prevention and holistic support for young athletes are important but seem underdeveloped in Slovenia. A key finding is that the system should more systematically involve experts from various fields (e.g., kinesiology, physiotherapy, sports psychology, nutrition, and sports analytics) from the early stages of athletic development. Similarly, Remih (2025) notes that in Slovenian sports, too much burden is currently placed on coaches, who perform several different functions (for which they may not be adequately trained or qualified). The importance of specific exercises for injury prevention and the need to educate young athletes on how to care for their bodies and manage recovery are also emphasised. There is a clear desire to reduce the risk of potential injuries.

Another key point is the need for better coordination among sports disciplines and experts in Slovenia, as well as the establishment of a network of experts within the NOI that would be available to all athletes, regardless of their sport. It would make sense for a newly established, systematic approach to include protocols for return-to-play after injuries and provide holistic support throughout an athlete's entire career. According to Kajtna (2019a) and Tušak & Tušak (2003), sports psychology is becoming an indispensable part of an athlete's journey. However, it is still often underestimated and treated as an add-on rather than an integral part of athletic preparation, as confirmed by our interviewees. Therefore, it would likely make sense to integrate sports psychology as a permanent part of the support team for young athletes. Such an integrated, holistic, and long-term approach, according to our projections, would significantly reduce the number of injuries, improve psychological readiness, and enhance the long-term sporting careers of young athletes.

5.2.7 Advantages and Challenges of the Current Preparatory Program

B. Perko highlights the establishment of support mechanisms within the NOC Slovenia as a key advantage of the current preparatory program. These mechanisms encourage participation in youth multi-sport competitions, thereby increasing the visibility and promotion of sporting events. However, he also points out challenges such as short timelines due to funding and the late involvement of the NOC Slovenia in preparations. He suggests that it would be sensible to expand the program to the stage of early identification of promising athletes and to plan it

across the entire Olympic cycle (i.e., in four-year periods), with a better distribution of responsibilities among NOC Slovenia, NFs, and expert teams. According to him, it would be essential to centralise the system so that NOC Slovenia would have oversight over the implementation, quality, and analytics of the program. He also emphasises the importance of YOC, which, he says, not only provides training for young athletes but also offers motivation, team building, the promotion of sporting values, and opportunities for psychological and social support. In his view, it would be sensible to place greater emphasis on camps, as they could significantly influence networking among all stakeholders and contribute to the positive energy that is one of the key success factors at such competitions (and in general) for young people. He also emphasises the importance of ensuring long-term, more centralised funding, a qualified professional staff, and effective communication between athletes and coaches.

G. Brod points out that current preparatory programs within NFs are often not tailored to the long-term development of young athletes and tend to be ad hoc, disconnected from YOC. He proposes a more systematic approach, in which preparations would be integrated with educational content, such as nutrition and psychological preparation, and that camps be extended, directly linked to NF preparations, and organised in sports centres with top-quality training conditions. He also highlights the need for better coordination among sports disciplines and centralised support from the NOC of Slovenia.

L. Gabršček also highlights the positive aspects of YOC, noting that she finds it very beneficial for young athletes to network and socialise with peers from other sports during the preparation phase. She emphasises that the social component is even more important for young people (adolescents) and that socialising with peers with similar interests can positively influence their confidence and motivation. She sees a challenge in finding opportunities or time slots where multiple sports disciplines can participate together in sports-educational events. She also emphasises the importance of systematic psychological preparation for such events, as she notes that sports-psychological support is only practical when implemented systematically – it is practically impossible to address problems based on one-off meetings with athletes.

M. Mihalinec Zidar states that one of the significant advantages of the camps is the transfer of knowledge that young athletes would not otherwise gain through their NFs or personal contacts, especially in areas like media training, physiotherapy, and similar topics. She identifies the rapid turnover of young athletes and the lack of direct communication between athletes and the NOC Slovenia as a challenge. She believes it is essential to provide more individualised communication with athletes and inform them directly about the benefits and services available to them, as she feels that the current indirect communication often results in a significant amount of information being lost or not reaching the athletes. Regarding the content presented at the Olympic camps, she notes that the theory itself is often too abstract, especially for those without prior experience, and thus difficult for athletes to understand and apply. She suggests including more practical work, which is essential as it allows them to immediately test the theory and learn through experience and concrete situations.

Z. Tavčar confirms that the camps had a positive impact on her and that she gained valuable information about nutrition and a sense of community there, although she notes that some athletes she met later did not compete at EYOF, even though they were included in the preparations. She also points out that the added value would be greater if athletes had more opportunities to compare themselves (e.g., testing) and if more emphasis were placed on the multi-sport dimension of the competition, which has its specifics.

J. Bornšek believes that the classic theoretical lectures, which are often part of YOC, are not practical, as participants can easily become overwhelmed by a mass of information that they do not apply in practice. He proposes that the theory be integrated directly into practical workshops, where participants can immediately connect the theory with specific tasks and challenges.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews reveals that the current preparatory program for young athletes in Slovenia encompasses several positive elements, particularly the establishment of support mechanisms by NOC Slovenia, which encourages the participation of young people in multi-sport competitions and contributes to the promotion of sport. The YOCs stand out as a strong element of preparation, serving as a powerful tool for connection, socialisation, and knowledge transfer, as they allow young athletes to network, develop team spirit, and learn important topics for their sporting careers (NOC Slovenia, 2024).

Despite these advantages, the interviews also reveal several challenges. In practice, there appears to be a lack of long-term and systematic structure, as preparations often occur in an ad hoc manner, with timelines limited by funding. Additionally, there is a need for improved coordination among NOC Slovenia, NFs, and expert teams, as responsibilities are often fragmented, which reduces the program's effectiveness.

Based on the interviews, there also seems to be a problem with the lack of direct communication between athletes and the NOC Slovenia, resulting in information about programs and services not always reaching all athletes. Furthermore, the lectures at camps are often too theoretical and therefore less valuable. It seems necessary to introduce a more practical system of education, within which young athletes can immediately test new knowledge and connect it with their everyday challenges.

Overall, based on our findings, improving the preparatory program should include the earlier identification of young talents, improved information flow, longer preparation cycles, and more substantial involvement of experts from various fields in daily work with young athletes.

6 FINAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Final findings

Multi-sport competitions (e.g., EYOF and YOG) are more than just sporting events – they represent key opportunities for socialisation, networking, knowledge transfer, and the development of team spirit among young athletes. The preparatory period and the competition itself can be a crucial phase for young athletes and for individuals overall.

Lack of Long-Term and Structured Talent Identification. Current approaches to identifying young athletes rely solely on current results, which can lead to incorrect selections, as they may not consider specific biological characteristics that indicate potential for the future. Additionally, the current system does not consider athletes' academic success, which can significantly impact their future within the dual career pathway (career after sport). Athletes (candidates) with the potential to compete at EYOF/YOG are identified only one year before the event, and there is no clear roster of athletes (candidates) compared to those identified for the OG.

Insufficiently Structured Financial Criteria and Content Eligible as Part of the Preparatory Program. Most funds are directed to NFs (for their internal programs), which report back to the NOC Slovenia on how they use these funds. However, it is challenging to verify whether the funds are genuinely used for EYOF/YOG preparation and whether the eligible athletes are included in the programs. Often, financial tracking is lost.

Lack of Integration and Campaign-Like Nature of Preparations. Preparatory programs for youth multi-sport competitions (e.g., EYOF, YOG) are often campaign-based, limited by time and finances, which reduces their long-term effectiveness. There is a need for better coordination among NOC Slovenia, NFs, coaches, and other professionals, as well as improved information flow and more extended preparation periods that would allow athletes to gradually adapt and integrate expert support.

Lack of Holistic Support. Holistic support for young athletes in Slovenia is underdeveloped, as it often relies primarily on coaches who take on roles such as psychological preparation, nutrition, injury prevention, and rehabilitation, instead of being systematically supported by experts from various fields (kinesiology, physiotherapy, sports psychology, nutrition, sports analytics).

Potential of YOCs as Opportunities for Socialisation and Knowledge Transfer. YOC programs stand out as a good example of supporting young athletes, as they enable networking, socialisation, and knowledge transfer. However, the lectures in these camps are often too theoretical and not practical enough; therefore, more practical workshops should be included, where athletes can immediately apply new knowledge. It would also be sensible to extend the duration of these short camps, as it is impossible to combine the quality delivery of information

and training at the highest level within such a short time. Moreover, athletes currently have too little time for socialising, which is a significant part of the competition experience itself.

6.2 Recommendations

Revise the sports project and criteria of the NOC Slovenia for the selection of the Slovenian team for EYOF/YOG, which will, among other things, include sports criteria for nominating athlete candidates (nomination period, nomination criteria, monitoring) and material and financial conditions for the support program (areas and content, financial criteria).

- **Develop structured and long-term criteria for identifying promising athletes (a broader list of candidates)**, which, in addition to sports results, also consider developmental potential, motivation, psychological readiness, and other qualitative factors (e.g., cooperation, dedication, stress resilience). The criteria should also include academic success, as it is important for the holistic development of young athletes. Each year, the appropriateness of the candidates on the talent list will be reviewed, and the list adjusted as needed (to remove or add athletes) to ensure fairness, continuity, and program effectiveness. The final selection will take place at the YOC, one year before the competition (shortlist of candidates).
- **Define the areas and content available for EYOF/YOG**, including:
 - YOC
 - NOI: ORSMC, reference experts
 - NF preparation programs
- **Create financial criteria**, which would:
 - Determine the amount of funds for specific areas and content (YOC 40 %, NOI 40 %, NF preparation programs 20 %)
 - Determine the amount allocated per athlete
 - As a rule, all funds are allocated to the NFs, which then sign a tripartite agreement with the NOC Slovenia and the athlete (NOC Slovenia, NF, athlete).

Establish a network of professional support under the auspices of the NOI that would be available to young athletes identified as EYOF/YOG candidates. Experts (e.g., physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritionists, sports analysts) would provide support to athletes in all phases of their development, both during the preparatory period and at competitions. This would ensure professional monitoring of young athletes and reduce the burden on coaches, enabling better psychophysical preparation, faster recovery from injuries, and long-term increased competitiveness of Slovenian sport.

Promote the NOI (ORSMC services, reference experts) through various communication channels to increase visibility and accessibility among young athletes and their coaches. Promotion would be carried out on social media, the NOC Slovenia website, and through presentations at the YOC, including links to stories of successful athletes. Additionally, it would be advisable to organise visits to the ORSMC and other reference institutions within internal

NF preparations, where services, experts, and support mechanisms available to athletes and coaches would be presented. This would increase the accessibility of professional services and, in the long term, contribute to better preparedness of young athletes.

Upgrade the YOC towards longer, more content-rich, and better-integrated (with NFs) camps. Camps should, in addition to networking and socialising, include more practical workshops (psychological preparation, nutrition, injury prevention, recovery). The YOC should be directly linked to NF preparations (before, during, or after). At the YOC, held one year or less before the competition, the shortlist of candidates is identified through various tests (under the auspices of the NOI) and collaboration with NF experts. Furthermore, it is advisable to include presentations of the NOI and ORSMC as well as the network of reference experts (institutions) available to young athletes, which would strengthen support for athletes in their transition to elite sport.

6.3 Action plan

Recommendation	Actions	Lead	Resources	Progress Benchmark	Completion Date	Evidence of Success
Revise the NOC Slovenia sports project and the criteria for participation in EYOF/YOG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct a thorough review of existing documents related to EYOF/YOG - Extract valuable content from more advanced OG projects - Upgrade existing content based on the OG model - Define timelines 	- Head of Elite Sport Department	- Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion with the Director of Sport, - Discussion with Elite Sport Expert Council - Reports to NOC Slovenia Executive Board 	- October 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of results after EYOF/YOG competition and comparison of results with previous years
Develop structured and long-term criteria for identifying promising athletes (Long list of candidates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set sports performance criteria - Define new selection measures (development potential, motivation, psychological readiness) - Create criteria for the school performance - Define the period for nomination and reassessment (selection) 	- Six-member working group (representative of Elite Sport, coach, psychologist, doctor, physiotherapist, pedagogue)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time - Travel costs - Suitable premises for meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion with the Director of Sport - Discussion with Medical Commission - Discussion with Elite Sport Expert Council 	- October 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comparison of candidates with actual participants - Review of sports results at EYOF/YOG

Recommendation	Actions	Lead	Resources	Progress Benchmark	Completion Date	Evidence of Success
Define areas and content available at EYOF/YOG	- Create a list of areas and content accessible to athletes (and coaches), and define the period of availability	- Head of Elite Sport Department - Head of NOI	- Time	- Discussion with the Director of Sport - Discussion with Medical Commission - Discussions with NF representatives	October 2025	- Analysis of the utilisation rate of content areas by athletes and coaches
Create financial criteria	- Define criteria for funding amounts - Specify who is entitled to funding (athletes funded indirectly through national federations)	- Head of Elite Sport Department - Head of Finance	-Time - Purchase of analytical tools	- Simulation of fund distribution based on projected revenues	October 2025	- Review of the financial report for the year before the event and in the months following the sports event
Establish a support network under NOI	- Clearly define external partners (ORSMC, reference experts, institutions) - Create a shortlist of suitable ones for young athletes	- Head of Elite Sport Department - Head of NOI	- Time - Travel costs	- Discussion with Elite Sport Expert Council - Discussions with ORSMC and reference experts	January 2026	- Satisfaction survey results from athletes and coaches using the support network - Feedback reports from external partners (ORSMC, reference experts)
Promote NOI (ORSMC services, reference experts) through various communication channels	- Promote NOI via digital networks - Create suitable content for the NOC Slovenia website - Integrate with the YOC program - Visit ORSMC and other reference institutions	- NOC PR Department - NF representatives	- Time - Travel costs - Costs related to digital equipment	- Analysis of website visits - Athlete survey on awareness of promoted content	July 2027	- Number of ORSMC visits - Number of clicks on promoted posts - Number of likes on promoted content
Upgrade YOC towards longer, more content-rich and better integrated (NF)	- Add practical content - Communicate with NF representatives to encourage direct involvement in YOC - Create a testing concept	- Head of Elite Sport Department - Head of NOI	- Time - Travel costs -Increased lecturer costs - Increased facility rental costs	- Discussion with NF representatives - Feedback from athletes and coaches (survey)	June 2026	- Analysis of results after EYOF/YOG competition and comparison of results with previous years

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

I confirm that I have used artificial intelligence for:

- Assistance in translating from Slovenian to English (and French).
- Correcting spelling mistakes.
- Assistance in finding literature.

8 APPENDIX 1

Interview: Lena Gabršček, PLY, MSc in Psychology

What psychological challenges do young athletes face at EYOF and YOG?

Like older athletes, young athletes face various psychological challenges during these competitions, including competitive pressure and the desire to prove themselves in front of peers, coaches, and family. This can be even more pronounced at multi-sport competitions like EYOF and YOG, as for many athletes, this is their first experience at an event of such a scale, which can lead to additional stress and pressure. Managing stress and adapting to an unfamiliar environment and new experiences are crucial. Social adaptation is also essential, as athletes interact with peers from other countries and must adjust to a multicultural setting. Time zone changes and different types of food can all disrupt an athlete's training process and competition rhythm, ultimately affecting their performance. Fear of failure and concerns about not meeting expectations can also undermine an athlete's confidence and motivation. In short, young athletes face many psychological challenges.

How necessary is preparation for competitive pressure, and how could it be incorporated into the preparation program?

Preparation for competitive pressure is crucial for an athlete's success and well-being. Visualisation, or mentally imagining the competition conditions before the event, is helpful. Engaging all senses and immersing oneself in the imaginary situation as much as possible is essential. This way, the athlete already has an 'experience' of the competition, which can help reduce stress. Relaxation and breathing exercises are also helpful in assisting athletes to regulate stress during competitions and should be incorporated into their training program.

However, it is essential to remember that, like physical training, mental training requires time and should be implemented systematically over an extended period. Therefore, regular individual or group psychological training sessions or workshops with qualified sports psychologists should be introduced. One-time meetings or workshops have little impact and mainly serve as “psychoeducation.”

Do you notice differences in psychological preparation between young and established elite athletes?

Yes, the differences are significant. Young athletes often focus more on external factors (expectations, judges, audience) than on internal stress control. Additionally, elite athletes or those competing at the senior level for an extended period have more experience handling pressure, better-developed mental strategies, and greater emotional stability. This is partly because young athletes' cognitive development is not yet fully completed, which affects

rational decision-making and emotional regulation, making it even more challenging in stressful situations. Young athletes still develop routines and mental skills, requiring more structured support.

How could psychological preparation become a more systematic part of the EYOF and YOG preparation programs?

Sports psychologists must be systematically integrated into the training process, even at younger age categories. Like strength and conditioning coaches, equipment managers, and other support staff, sports psychologists should be part of the team. As mentioned, organising regular sessions with young athletes before the competition is likely key.

From a psychological perspective, it would also be highly beneficial to introduce a mentoring program in which older, elite, and more experienced athletes mentor younger athletes. These mentors often serve as role models; their advice and shared experiences would be invaluable. Given that the younger generation is very digitally literate, it would also be sensible to incorporate digital tools, such as apps for mental training and monitoring psychological preparedness, as these tools are more familiar and accessible to young athletes.

How important is understanding the multicultural environment at such competitions?

It is essential, as many young athletes experience international competition and interactions with athletes from different cultures for the first time. This can be stressful. However, it can also be a very positive experience for the personal development of young athletes, as exposure to a multicultural environment helps foster tolerance, adaptability, and an understanding of different cultures and even sports approaches.

On one hand, multiculturalism can increase stress due to a greater number of unknowns in the environment. However, adapting to a new setting can also have a positive impact on athletes by diverting their focus away from the competition itself due to the many new experiences. Additionally, young athletes at these competitions become part of the Olympic community for the first time, which is essential for further developing their sports careers.

Do you think athletes should receive more training on self-confidence and mental resilience?

Yes, because self-confidence and mental resilience are key elements for long-term success. Psychological factors, including self-confidence, play a crucial role in the decision to (prematurely) end a career—something we certainly want to avoid with young athletes.

Young athletes must learn to track their progress and development, understanding that a single lousy competition does not necessarily mean poor overall performance. Therefore, self-confidence training should include working on (positive) self-talk, building a strong self-image, and developing intrinsic motivation.

Mental resilience, on the other hand, could be developed through stress management exercises and embracing failures as part of the learning process.

How would you assess the current psychological support available to young athletes in Slovenia?

Support does exist, but it remains unevenly accessible - some sports clubs have access to sports psychologists, while others do not. Athletes at some (sports) high schools also have access to sports psychologists, which I see as a great solution. Balancing the demands of a dual career (education and sports) is often an additional source of stress for young athletes.

Awareness of the importance of mental preparation is increasing, but more investment in systematic psychological preparation at the national level would be beneficial. Another issue is that athletes often seek psychological help only when they encounter problems, rather than being involved in mental preparation from the early stages of their development.

What are the current program's most significant advantages and challenges for preparing young Slovenian athletes for EYOF and YOG?

One key advantage of the current program is its comprehensive approach. Before competing at a high-level event, young athletes can gain insights from various fields. I believe that the support from the NFs is generally good, ensuring that most promising young athletes receive appropriate physical and tactical preparation, as well as expert guidance from coaches.

It is also incredible that young athletes can network and socialise with peers from different sports disciplines during the preparation phase. The social component is particularly crucial for adolescents, and interacting with like-minded peers can positively impact their self-confidence and motivation. Another significant benefit is the accumulation of experience—such competitions and the preparations leading up to them serve as an 'introduction' to substantial events, reducing uncertainty and improving psychological readiness for future top-level competitions.

As a psychologist, I would highlight the lack of systematic psychological preparation as a significant challenge. Things tend to be more effective when they are implemented systematically. One-time lectures often have little impact, especially with young athletes who may already struggle with focus. From the perspective of mental preparation, it seems essential to introduce more regular meetings during the preparation period.

How could the existing preparations for multi-sport competitions be improved based on your experience?

As mentioned, integrating sports psychologists into the entire preparation process would be a sensible step. Each sports team should have access to a sports psychologist who would work with athletes individually and in groups.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to simulate competitive situations and stress more frequently during training. This means incorporating training sessions that simulate high-pressure situations, such as presenting to an audience, refereeing, and time constraints. It is also crucial to help young athletes develop a positive mindset toward failure, recognising that failures are an inevitable part of sports. They should learn to see them as part of the learning process rather than as personal defeats.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise the influence of parents and coaches during this period. Therefore, it would be beneficial to introduce educational programs for parents and coaches, as it is essential that the athlete's support system understands the importance of psychological preparation and provides appropriate support.

How vital is psychological preparation for success at multi-sport competitions, and how can it be improved?

Extremely important! The pressure is even greater at multi-sport competitions because athletes compete in their discipline and represent their national team as part of #TeamSlovenia. Young athletes face media attention and increased expectations from coaches, parents, and the public for the first time.

How can it be improved? Psychological preparation should be as necessary as physical preparation, meaning mental training sessions should be systematic and integrated into daily routines. Individualised approaches are also critical, as each athlete faces unique challenges, and psychological programs should be tailored to their specific needs.

Setting realistic goals is also crucial, and coaches must be aware of this. Unrealistic goals create unrealistic expectations, which can negatively impact an athlete's self-confidence, particularly during adolescence, when self-esteem is more vulnerable. Through systematic psychological preparation, young athletes can enhance their sports performance and develop mental resilience, ultimately benefiting them throughout their careers and lives.