

**Take aways Webinar Corona & Elite sport, organised by  
'Expertisecentrum Voortgezet Onderwijs & Topsport'  
Thursday April 8, 2021 – Arnhem, the Netherlands**

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During an inspiring webinar, host Basti Baroncini spoke with students, mentors and experts about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequences both for the elite sport talents as well as for their mentors and in relation to learnings from this pandemic for the future. Basti interviewed four Dutch experts during the webinar:

- . Irene Sloof, talent coach, TeamNL
- . Margriet de Schutter, form elite sporter and founder of [www.extopsporner.nl](http://www.extopsporner.nl)
- . Ivo Spanjersberg, sport psychologist
- . Steven Pont, development psychologist

Below you will find a short summary of the webinar and some practical tips.



### **1. How COVID-19 effects the elite sport talents**

“No competition”

“No goals to work towards”

“Very boring”

“No training with others”

“No training or adjusted training”

“Stagnation or falling behind schedule”

“Having online lessons is difficult”

“Continuously changing of the rules”

When asked how students experienced the past year with the corona pandemic, they gave the answers mentioned above. It shows they have had a rough time, without any perspective and with a lack of motivation. At the same time, some students have experienced that there is more to life than just sports and found that positive. Overall, this group of sports talents has an advantage to ‘regular’ students: they have just the qualities needed in times of crisis, such as resilience, flexibility, creativity and determination. The elite sport talents are trained to be resourceful and look at possibilities instead of impossibilities.

These qualities have to be tapped into now, to get on the right track and stay there. Luckily, these students also have the guts to take certain steps in their own development.

Being a teenager in this day and age and the functioning of the adolescent mind cannot be underestimated. Teenagers, more than adults, need specific goals while their capacity to self-reflect is still in progress. The last year, that unexpectedly fell out, has had an enormous impact on them and contact with peers is more than crucial in their development. But just that contact was very limited or very different then before.

The brain of teenagers, just like the brain of adults, needs something tangible to work towards, for instance an upcoming game. But most of all, they need a sense of connectedness, a sense of being competent in achieving goals and a sense of autonomy. Mentors and parents need to realise that elite sport talents derive their whole identity from sports. In the current situation without any form of sport competition, for them a part of their identity has vanished.

Expert Steven Pont explains the process of how you develop your identity. Your identity is connected to the family in which you are raised (first environment), your school and/or work environment (second environment) and the voluntary framework (third environment). This third environment is essential in developing competences. Everyone has an intrinsic need to feel competent, both by ourselves and by others. The intrinsic motivation of the elite sport talents is present in the third environment. After the age of twelve an important role in your upbringing lies with peers and just these peers are nowhere to be found in the corona crisis, or only on 'a distance'. The brain food that comes from your peers and helps in establishing your own identity, is now missing and can cause a feeling of bleakness. Just to make sure: please do not confuse these feelings of bleakness with a depression! This is a signal they need more contact with peers.

On being asked on improvements at the schools, students mention they would like to have more interaction with mentors. Just to speak with someone, to get confirmation on how bad the situation is and to discuss how things are going and how this is feeling.



## **2. How COVID-19 effects the mentors**

Mentors recognise and acknowledge the insecurity of their students. They experience a lack of structure (day / week) and find the online contact difficult. They see loneliness in nearly all students (not just elite sport talents) and experience a downfall in motivation. In their belief there is very little they can do for their students, in offering them more perspective.

However, the biggest challenge is motivating the students. The experts then gave a few tips. Try not to give advice, because that contradicts with the feeling of autonomy the students need. Rather try to have students develop new skills and in these skills experience (small) success. This could for instance be a new training method, like organising a joint online training (doing the same exercises at the same time), an online quiz or a homework assignment related to their sport (watching & analysing youtube videos from games, try to find ways to have pupils answer questions on tactics or competitors / elite sporters).

Mentors also need to be aware that some students (and this is more so for elite sport talents) find it difficult to ask for help or indicate that they do not deal with the situation very well. They consider this a sign of weakness instead of strength. Mentors have a role in discussing this with them and being proactive in addressing this.



### 3. Outcomes of COVID-19

Corona has proven to be a real life exercise in how to take command. It has offered us ownership and thought us a lot about ourselves. The biggest lesson however is that life is what happens when you are busy making other plans. A crisis like COVID-19 asks us to reinvent our own identity.

And reinventing is what happens in elite sport just the same: there are always things that you have not prepared for but still have to deal with. Everything the corona pandemic has learned us about adjusting and being flexible will help our talents, both as an elite sportsman and as a human being. Elite sportsman sometimes are far away from being 'real' people. Now that their whole identity, based on sports and competition, had fallen short they have to reinvent themselves. Therefore COVID-19 has been a good moment for elite sport talents to realise there is indeed more to life than sports. It has given them the opportunity to reflect, experience tranquility and try other things besides sports (music, singing, social contacts).



#### 4. Practical tips

During the webinar mentors and experts exchanged tips, that can directly be put into practice.

For mentors:

- . arrange any kind of structure;
- . arrange any kind of (online) contact;
- . facilitate students to meet one another online and thus stimulate and help each other;
- . listen, show understanding and acknowledge the impact of the situation;
- . stay connected and show empathy;
- . encourage students to think about possible solutions and things within their control;
- . ask students to list things they have experienced as positive (such as more peace of mind, different ways of training, room for other important things in life);
- . explain that if they can make it through this period of crisis they will have built enormous resistance.

Try asking your students the two following questions:

- . what kind of information does this situation bring me, what does it tell me?
- . what is positive about it?

Most likely they are unable to see this clearly in this moment. However, it is very powerful and useful to keep on thinking about what this situation will bring so they can find new perspectives.

Some students are particularly difficult to reach; they have literally hidden away behind their screen. How to get them involved? Mentors can set up small discussion groups, fi with 5 students. These groups discuss how things are going, not the content of certain lessons. Pedagogic instead of didactic. The most important thing is that the mentor shows self - exposure and shares thoughts on difficulties, insecurities etc. This way the mentor can try to get students to tell him and each other what is bothering them and what solutions there might be. Do not oblige them to take part in such a discussion group, but just offer it as an option and be happy if one or two students are there. An alternative for students who are withdrawing and are absent most of the time (online or offline), is to link such a student to an elderly student.

Also worth a try is asking students direct questions, to which they can answer via an e-mail (beforehand) or during an online session with a coloured object (yellow, red, green, blue etc). This is a very loose and easy way. Or ask them scale questions (on a scale from 1 to 10). And then keep asking, fi why they score a 3 instead of a 4.