

### The Role of Sport in Deradicalisation and Crime Diversion

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#### Abstract

In recent years the use of sport as an intervention to reduce crime in the community and prisons, and to reduce radicalisation of young adults, has become more common. Studies suggest that participating in sport may improve self-esteem, enhance social bonds and provide participants with a feeling of purpose. The introduction of an education element can improve outcomes following completion of the programme, providing participants with a pathway towards employment. Although it is recognised that sport may form only one aspect towards the reduction of orime and radicalisation, effectiveness, may be enhanced with a combination of other services such as religious re-education and assistance with housing. This article aims to appraise the literature on sports interventions in the UK, and worldwide, in order to highlight the positive and negative consequences of the approach, and identify limitations.

Article History

Received Oct 26, 2017 Accepted Nov 28, 2017 Published Dec 29, 2017

Keywords: Sport, Crime, Deradicalisation, Young People, Prison, Community

#### Introduction

Sport, put simply, is good for us. The scientific community has long evidenced the physical, and mental, wellbeing benefits; few would argue against the ability of sport to increase fitness, reduce the risk of disease, and make us healthier, happier and stronger (Beets & Pitetti, 2005). It instils resilience and discipline in those dedicated to improving skills; it can facilitate social bonds between teammates, coaches, and competitors (Mueller, Agamanolis, & Picard, 2003). However, more recently, the benefits of sport have taken on a new political salience: indeed, participation in sport has become a central tenet of many crime reduction and deradicalisation strategies (Hearne & Laiq, 2010).

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For individuals involved in crime, sport can act as a diversionary activity from violent and illicit activities (McMahon & Belur, 2013). In other words, sports interventions can, in an otherwise chaotic life, provide young people with structure and social support. With explicit rules and an emphasis on fairness and sportsmanship, sport provides the ideal framework for personal achievement, consolidating knowledge and skills, with potential recognition for hard work (Treagus, Cover, & Beasley, 2011).

Forming a link between sport as an intervention for crime and deradicalisation, Clarke and Newman (2006) state that *"terrorism is a crime in all essential respects"* and there exists crossover in the potential influencing factors that may contribute to an individual becoming radicalised, or engaging in crime. Chermak and Gruenewald (2015) examined data from the United States Extremist Crime Database to compare the individual and socio-demographic characteristics of far-left, far-right and jihadist extremists who had committed violent crimes. They noted that those on the far-right were less educated and more likely to be unemployed whereas jihadists struggled to integrate into their communities. Conversely, far-leftists appeared to be capable of integrating well into American society but viewed the "American Dream" as suspicious and destructive. Thus, if links exist between criminality and radicalisation, it may be that sport would be a useful tool to assist in decreasing both. Particularly if the intervention was able to promote integration within communities.

Criminologists are divided in regards to the role of motivation in criminality (Cullen, Wilcox, Sampson, & Dooley, 2015). For example, strain theorists believe that when aspirations of material gain or status are combined with limited possibilities of achieving them, within the boundaries of the law, this often results in a feeling of strain, to which crime may be a response (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Whereas proponents of learning theory suggest that varied motives are behind criminality, placing particular emphasis on social interactions, which may serve to reinforce criminal behaviour or intimidate an individual into participation in crime (Akers, 2011). Perry and Hasisi (2015) found that, in the context of Rational Choice Theory, there was little difference between jihadist suicide attackers and ordinary criminals. Whilst suicide attackers engage in behaviour that is self-destructive, they did not appear to be

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motivated by altruism but by the promise of future reward. Thence, it appears that both groups are motivated by personal gain of some sort. This highlights the sometimes overlapping circumstances of extremists and criminals and reinforces the importance of taking into consideration the contexts and communities in which the individual resides when considering approaches to reduce their criminality, in all its forms.

In the last decade, sports interventions have been identified as crucial in the rehabilitation of radicalised individuals, particularly those influenced by extremist Islamic rhetoric. Sport-based interventions are often used in conjunction with educational and vocational activities, aiding in the retention of participants. These programmes are often targeted at those who are searching for group belonging, and a sense of identity (Marsden, Knott, & Lewis, 2017). Moreover, the introduction of sports-based programmes can be a useful way of engaging with and educating, young people detached from their communities and the schooling system.

There are three proposed levels at which countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes can be targeted (Marsden, Knott, & Lewis, 2017). The primary level focuses on prevention, particularly in community settings, and the secondary level concentrates on those at risk of becoming radicalised. Tertiary level interventions provide services for those who have already engaged in violent extremism, principally in the form of deradicalisation, disengagement and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

This review of the literature will examine the current landscape regarding the use of sport in deradicalisation and crime prevention, identifying gaps, if any. For the purposes of this article, 'Deradicalisation' refers to the idea that a conversion to radical beliefs is reversible; that the ideology that predisposes the individual to commit violent or terrorist acts can be changed (Barkindo & Bryans, 2016). The majority of the literature focuses on those who have already been through the radicalisation process, as identifying those vulnerable to radicalisation is a difficult task. We focus on radicalisation in terms of *"a person harbouring a deep-felt desire for fundamental socio-political changes, and radicalization is understood as a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict* 

with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). In our discussions of radicalisation, we concentrate on religious extremism; however, accept that other forms exist such as far-right extremism.

### **Sport as a Deradicalisation Intervention**

Touted as a simple, cost-effective way of promoting positive social thinking and behaviour, sports-based interventions have become a popular component of deradicalisation strategies. El-Said and Harrigan (2013) produced a large and comprehensive portfolio of deradicalisation programmes in Muslim majority states and found the so-called "soft" measures were more effective than kinetic approaches. These "soft" approaches, which attempt to change the mind-set of individuals, had many benefits including a reduction in terrorist events and reoffending among released prisoners. Most of the emerging literature has come from prison-based studies, with associated evidence that criminals, especially incarcerated young adults, are a particularly vulnerable demographic to radicalisation (Mulcahy, Merrington, & Bell, 2013).

The Channel programme is a facet of the United Kingdom's (UK) counterterrorism strategy "PREVENT" and acts as a diversionary programme for individuals who are identified as being at-risk and provides assistance with employment, education, vocational training, housing and sports opportunities (Weeks, 2017). The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), the body responsible for coordinating the programme, reported in 2014 that, since 2007, Channel received over 2,000 referrals and 777 interventions were delivered (Weeks, 2017). Although widely supported by the security services and the Home Secretary, there remains a lack of transparency or publications demonstrating its effectiveness. Indeed, it is unclear how success is defined, which is a notable issue with deradicalisation programmes.

Other countries offer programmes aimed at deradicalisation. Barkindo and Bryans (2016) outline the Nigerian strategy, a product of the combined efforts from the Office of the

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National Security Advisor (ONSA) and the Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS). The programme implemented a wide range of approaches including motivational interviewing, vocational and cultural training, art therapy, religious interventions, sports and games. Following a period of eighteen months, the programme's testimonials from both prisoners and staff were largely positive. From the anecdotal evidence the authors posited that the sports activities had facilitated new channels of communication: staff could manage and engage with extremist prisoners in a different, more positive way. Notably, the group activities (organised sport and team games) provided the foundation for these new relationships, with subsequent group discussions able to highlight the inconsistencies in extremist beliefs. Through participation in sport, the prisoners were also able to gain vital physical and social skills, increasing their ability to reintegrate into mainstream society and pursue vocations. While the authors were not permitted to view confidential prisoner information to directly assess impact, risk assessments did show a significant improvement across various indicators, including the level of engagement with the interventions; the number of institutional incidents; and number of interventions completed.

A deradicalisation programme currently implemented in Saudi Arabia claims to be one of the most successful in the world. Measuring their success through past militants deemed to be reintegrated into society, more than 4,000 participants completed the programme between 2004 and 2010 (Stern, 2010). Features of the programme included counselling, vocational training, art therapy, sports, and religious re-education. Former inmates of Guantanamo Bay were given assistance with relationships, accommodation, and transport, whilst being extensively monitored through a post-release programme. Ambitious and costly, the methods employed in Saudi Arabia have been difficult to replicate and, moreover, many argue that the underlying philosophy of this Saudi programme is divisive in nature (Stern, 2010). Indeed, positioning jihadists as victims, as opposed to criminals, is likely to be an unpalatable thought in Western countries recovering from terror attacks, reducing chances of popular support for these programmes.

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A programme named "Not in God's Name (NIGN)" in Vienna was established in 2015 by political scientist Alexander Karakas and professional Thai boxer Karim Mabrouk. This programme, located in a martial arts training centre, targets young people largely made up of migrants, of Muslim faith. When it was clear that many young people in the sports community appeared to sympathise with radical or extremist rhetoric the programme was adapted to provide these youths with positive role models and statements against participation in violence and involvement with radical groups (Götsch, 2017). In 2016 more than 20 trainers and sportsman (from a combination of Muslim and Christian faiths) were involved in the programme. With some degree of insight, NIGN stated that adolescents may not listen to politicians, but would "obey to their sportive idols, every word" (Götsch, 2017).

A unique initiative in Somalia combines elements of a "second generation" disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme (McCandless, 2009), and a countering violent extremism (CVE) programme. The Youth-at-Risk/Youth for Change project targeted around 6,000 young people, including former members of Al-Shabaab (Schumicky-Logan, 2017). The programme was aimed at young people deemed to be 'at risk', and those of whom had committed a crime. However, during the programme the risk of increasing social stigma for these individuals was recognised, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of the youths involved becoming radicalised. Part of the Somalian reintegration initiative involved the establishment of Resource Centres for Peace, which had facilities with classrooms and congregation areas, such as eating and sports facilities, for teachers and students. Classroom activities involved anger and stress management, leadership and communication, peace building and teaching on gender issues. Teaching was also provided on literacy, numeracy and English. Activities were provided outside of the classroom involving well-respected religious leaders who provided information on Islamic values and morals. There were also opportunities to express their feelings through arts and drama. Sports for Peace facilitated healthy competition and cohesion amongst the groups. This programme was found to reduce aggression among participants (Schumicky-Logan, 2017). Aggression is a common finding in post-conflict communities, being both a cause and characteristic of

criminality and radicalisation. As aggression is often reactive, to the environment or situation, the multifaceted approach of this programme may have provided the necessary skills, and information, to empower participants to envision a more positive future for themselves, with the tools to enable them to achieve this.

A further deradicalisation programme in Sri Lanka was found to be comprehensive, incorporating seven different approaches: education, vocation, psychology, spirituality, recreation, culture/family, and community. Aims included the empowerment of participants, and facilitation of their reintegration back into society by teaching them new skills. The results of the analysis conducted by Webber et al. (2017) demonstrated that participants who completed the full programme reported lower extremism, measured using 18 items which assessed attitudes which support the ideological views of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the approval of violence to ascertain these goals, over one year than those who received minimal treatment. From the analysis, it appeared that the underlying mechanism behind this reduction was feelings of insignificance. By providing participants with other ways of feeling significant, such as teaching vocational skills, this may reduce their reliance on the extremist group. The positive results of this programme appear to be maintained following reintegration back into the community as former participants were found to be less extreme than matched community members (Webber et al., 2017). This validates the hypothesis of significance quest theory which suggests that the most successful deradicalisation programmes employ a multifaceted approach, empowering individuals and reconnecting them with conventional society (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

#### **Sports Interventions as an Offender Rehabilitation Tool**

For criminal, rather than terrorist offences, participation in sport is widely encouraged for offenders in the UK prison system. Andrews and Andrews (2003) investigated the use of sport in the rehabilitation of young people in a secure detention unit in southern England. Findings indicated that when this was tailored correctly to the individuals, i.e. with a reduced

emphasis on rules and winning, sport could be the core component of an effective rehabilitation strategy. It has been recognised, however, that sport can be an alienating experience for some young people (Andrews & Andrews, 2003), which emphasises the importance of the planning and suitability of chosen activities.

Meek (2012) conducted an evaluation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance Project Rugby and Football Academies at Portland Young Offenders Institution. Over a two-year period, 81 young male offenders (with an average age of 19 years) participated in this programme. Fifty participants had been released over a period of 18 months with a reconviction rate of 18%, considerably lower than the prison average of 48% after one year. Significant improvements were seen across a range of indicators including conflict resolution, aggression, impulsivity, and attitudes towards offending following participation. Interviews with prisoners demonstrated that the programme had a positive influence on behaviour in the prison, relationships between staff and prisoners, and transitions back into the community. Overall the programme had improved relationships within the prison and allowed prisoners to imagine a more positive life for themselves upon release. The 2nd Chance project was also run in Ashfield Young Offenders Institution, providing young people with coaching and qualifications in sports and youth work. Sport was found to be a useful way of attracting young people to these projects: an effective outlet diverting them away from violence and criminality (Nevill & Van Poortvliet, 2011). The added element of education allowed young people who were not engaged or motivated in mainstream schooling to gain recognised qualifications.

Parker, Meek, and Lewis (2014) investigated young male offenders' experiences of participating in a sports intervention. The authors interviewed 12 young men aged between 15 and 17 years old. Thematic analysis revealed that sport was particularly effective in engaging the younger and more vulnerable group members. Participating in sport benefitted these individuals physically, socially and psychologically. The authors argued that improved self-esteem and social skills could allow individuals to envision a more positive future upon release, ostensibly reducing re-offending rates. Nevertheless, despite assertions such as these, an issue with some sports interventions is a lack of adequate assessment of impact.

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Embedded evaluation measures are required to assess an intervention's effectiveness and its impact on recidivism. Currently, many of these programmes lack built-in evaluative components, which would be vital in substantiating claims of effectiveness.

### **Community-Based Sports Programmes**

The adoption of sanctioned midnight basketball programmes in US cities was assessed by Hartmann and Depro (2006). It was postulated that there might be a link between the adoption of these programmes and reduced crime against property; however, data were lacking to enable firm conclusions to be drawn. Additionally, it was recognised that there may have been other crime prevention strategies adopted in these cities, which were both influential and confounding. The authors concluded that community-led programmes could be effective in the reduction of crime levels, and wider dissemination, combined with improved evaluation, of these programmes was needed.

Johns, Grossman, and McDonald (2014) reviewed a youth-orientated sports scheme in Australia named 'More than a Game'. Developed by the Australian Football League as a counter-terrorism program, using team sports to develop a community-based resilience model, more specifically, resilience to ideological narratives promoting terrorism or violence. The programme hypothesised that improving an individual's sense of belonging was vital, and being embedded in a team, or community, would promote feelings of trust and reciprocity, and value contributions made. The authors link 'More than a Game' to previous research on 'pro-social' behaviours and participation in sports, which is believed to build self-confidence, communication and conflict-resolution skills in young people (Cale and Harris, 2004). The qualitative evidence from this programme suggested that the intensity of team sports, and its shared goals, facilitated cross-cultural engagement, breaking down the barriers of culture, ethnicity and religion in the process.

Some literature has examined the importance of inclusivity in sport. In Australian high schools, Alamri (2013) used interviews and narrative analysis to examine how Muslim

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students perceived physical education. From a sample of young females, this paper argued that Muslims often experience feelings of alienation due to different, less stringent, modesty requirements in Western schools. The author noted that, for Muslim females, participation in physical activity often presented cross-cultural difficulties and created discomfort for both students and staff. The authors argued that for integration to be successful more inter-cultural education was needed; particularly adjustments to meet the requirements of the Islamic Faith. Muslim visibility in sport facilitates a socially inclusive environment, as well as being beneficial for the individual's physical and mental well-being. A paper by Kuppinger (2015) concurred and argued a similar point, focusing on swimming sessions at a German sports club. The author posited that by making some adjustments for female Muslims of diverse age, class and educational backgrounds, it allowed them to form friendships and, together, become visible and valued members of the club.

In communities worldwide, there is much literature evidencing the effectiveness of sport included within social interventions. In Chicago U.S.A., youth in gang areas received Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and after-school programmes in non-traditional sports (archery, boxing, wrestling, weightlifting, handball, and martial arts), significantly reducing crime and school drop-out rates (Heller, Pollack, Ander, & Ludwig, 2013). The success of a program in Brazil made the similar assertion that boxing sessions allowed young people to vent their frustrations in a controlled and safe environment (Sampson & Villela, 2017). Finally, in the Balkan Region, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, the Cross Cultures Project Association used Open Fun Football Schools (OFFS) to facilitate friendships and collaboration amid community tensions (Gasser & Levinsen, 2004).

#### **The Importance of Sports**

More recently, sports interventions have received the endorsement of several international organisations and commissions. The most effusive praise came from the 2015 US National Security Strategy, which boldly stated that the long-term efforts of engaging

youths and marginalised groups in sports, arts and culture "will be more important than our capacity to remove terrorists from the battlefield" (White House, 2014). A recommendation from the European Commission to the European Parliament in 2014 similarly endorsed the inclusion of sports to increase resilience against extremism (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2014). Finally, a Hedayah report from 2015, detailing CVE strategies, postulated that sport underscored commonalities rather than differences between cultural groups (Zeiger & Aly, 2015).

The United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace argues that "sport can cut across barriers that divide societies, making it a powerful tool to support conflict resolution and peace-building efforts..." (UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport and Development for Peace, 2005). Engaging in sports, arts and cultural activities can provide an important discussion point for individuals with regards to diversity, as well as sharing common histories and experiences. In terms of counter-extremism efforts, the varieties of interventions available are important. Sports interventions are unlikely to replace traditional military responses but may be used effectively in conjunction as a preventative measure.

### **Implications of Sports Interventions**

Funding these sports interventions, as well as other strategies, has both financial and social implications. In the UK, over £80 million in government funding has been disseminated under the umbrella of 'Prevent': a group of programmes tackling extremism, run by third sector organisations and regional councils. Some examples include funding trust-building strategies between the police and the Muslim community, as well as DVD–based lessons, drama and sports initiatives targeting extremism in schools. Yet as Vidino and Brandon (2012) note this highly publicised, Muslim-focused funding has come under scrutiny from Sikh, Hindu and other minorities, who accuse the government of favouritism whilst other communities are ignored. Furthermore, the mismanagement of funds was highlighted as a fundamental issue in the scheme. The current UK Prime Minister (then Home Secretary),

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Theresa May, observed that public money was reaching extremist organisations, the most infamous case being a funded public debate on political participation, where jihadist speakers from Hizb ut-Tahrir could preach to a majority Muslim audience (Vidino & Brandon, 2012). From this, it appears clear that decentralised funds can be well-intentioned but problematic, and that Prevent staff must be fully trained in both the distribution and audit, of funding.

It is important to note that participation in sports, and other group activities, can be used as a recruitment tool by extremist groups. Jordan, Mañas, and Billerbeck (2007) state that the process of jihadist radicalisation is rarely a process that an individual experiences alone. Extremist groups can use group activities, such as football, martial arts or mountain climbing, to facilitate cohesion within the group and to evoke a longing for adventure. Bringing together a group of like-minded individuals (young men in particular) can result in peer contagion, where the interaction can lead to the positive reinforcement of their behaviour (Zane, Welsh, & Zimmerman, 2015). Moreover, referral to deradicalisation programmes and being labelled "at risk" may stigmatise participants, and there is a danger that they may embrace this label leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Braithwaite, 2009). Evidence from the UK Prevent strategy demonstrates that young Muslims have been referred to Channel (the deradicalisation element of Prevent) for behaviour such as verbalising terms like "Allahu Akbar" (translation: God is great), which can only lead to the further stigmatisation of these groups (Summerfield, 2016; Thomas, 2016). This apparent focus of the UK Government on radicalisation and extremism can create fear among Muslim communities. They may be wary of expressing their opinion on certain topics (such as getting emotional when discussing the war in Syria) in case they are flagged as "at risk" (Cherney & Murphy, 2016)

Radicalisation and crime prevention programmes can lead to positive outcomes, however, they may be lacking in long-term efficacy (Nichols, 2010). A lack of postprogramme follow-up may see effects diminish, especially if these individuals return to their environments, or peer groups, that reinforce their extremist ideals. It is also important to recognise that individuals may join extremists groups as an attempt to find a deeper meaning to life, which scholars refer to as significance quests (Kruglanski et al., 2014),. It is

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conceivable that deradicalisation or CVE programmes may not provide individuals with the motivation to seek this meaning elsewhere.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Practitioners**

There is no definitive profile of an individual vulnerable to extremist ideologies however practitioners should make use of guidance to aid in the identification of these individuals (Richardson, Berlouis, & Cameron, 2017). Cole, Alison, Cole, and Alison (2010) identified criteria for identifying individuals vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism, which included cultural and/or religious isolation, violent rhetoric, basic paramilitary training and an isolated peer group. The authors also identified "red category behaviours" which are indicators that individuals may be in the process of becoming radicalised, these include death rhetoric, contact with known recruiters/extremists, and overseas combat. Further research is needed to understand the optimal combination of interventions that may reduce these behaviours. In addition, there exists a danger of a lack of sustainability of the intervention effects, therefore a commitment must be made to ensure these programmes are organised well and sufficiently monitored to evaluate progress (Ekblom, 2010).

#### Limitations

This article has appraised the existing literature base that investigates the inclusion of sport in deradicalisation programmes. In regards to deradicalisation programmes, Horgan and Braddock (2010) state that "despite their popularity, data surrounding even the most basic factors about these programmes remains limited". Currently, the overwhelming consensus appears to be that sport is an advantageous addition to existing programmes. However, it is important to note that it is extremely difficult to determine the precise impact of the sport participation itself. In much of the reviewed literature, participant involvement in sporting activities is used in conjunction with other facets such as counselling and CBT (Heller, 41

Pollack, Ander, & Ludwig, 2013). Thus, it is difficult to disentangle the precise mechanisms underlying any meaningful behavioural changes in the reviewed papers. In many cases, it is unclear whether sport participation by itself would result in a positive outcome, independently of a programme's other components. Furthermore any deleterious effects resulting from the addition of sport to existing programmes have not been investigated. Thus, further research is needed to determine the role that sport can play in these deradicalisation programmes.

### Conclusion

Participating in sport represents a structured, positive form of social engagement, thereby promoting an investment in communities and wider society. The success of the deradicalisation programmes in countries like Saudi Arabia (Stern, 2010) provides a basis for similar programmes which could be developed in the United Kingdom. Although, it is important to recognise that strategies should be developed that are consistent with individual cultures, and laws of the country (El-Said, 2012). Supporting individuals through any requisite element of the deradicalisation process, from religious re-education to assistance with housing and employment, could ensure these individuals do not re-join their previously affiliated groups, as they become self-reliant. The introduction of sport into programmes of this nature represents a shift from the traditional punitive approach. Indeed, focusing on rehabilitation from a range of perspectives may aid the engagement and retention of individuals.

Similarly, introducing sports interventions into the prison system, particularly young offenders' institutions, can provide young people with a feeling of purpose, and a way of socialising with friends in a more positive way. Gaining qualifications through these programmes (Nevill & Van Poortvliet, 2011) can also reduce recidivism rates as these young people may be more likely to find employment upon release. Overall, participation in sports and physical activity appears to represent an outlet for individuals (particularly young people) to prevent them from engaging in illegal activity. Providing these individuals with a feeling of



Winter 2017/18 Nr. 13 ISSN: 2363-9849

purpose and community can pay dividends in terms of reducing crime, anti-social behaviour and school drop-out rates.



Winter 2017/18 Nr. 13 ISSN: 2363-9849

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Winter 2017/18 Nr. 13 ISSN: 2363-9849

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ISSN: 2363-9849

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