

TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF SPORT MANAGEMENT

Prof. Kristine Toohey, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, k.toohey@griffith.edu.au
Dr. Anthony Beaton, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia
Prof. Chris Auld, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

Aim

This research investigated macro, meso and micro level management factors influencing sport talent identification and development (TID) in Australia from the perspective of athletes, their families and club officials.

Literature review

TID aims to recognize and foster individuals with the greatest potential to excel in sport (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008). Seeking a competitive advantage through TID has stimulated considerable government and organizational investment in sport science research and application. Sport has long been important to Australia's culture, ethos and economy and the nation is critical of unsuccessful performances. Effective TID can minimize costly mistakes through dropout or failure. This presentation investigates another important but relatively overlooked (in research and practice) factor in successful TID: the role of sport management.

Yet, the TID processes responsible for Australia's international successes have relied narrowly on biophysical markers and have since been adopted and improved by other nations (Bloomfield, 2002). Biophysical selection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sport success: research demonstrates that other factors are also required (Abbott and Collins, 2004). Baker & Horton (2004) identified a range of both primary (e.g., relative age, genetics) and secondary factors (e.g., socio-cultural and contextual elements, such as management) relevant to sport talent development, suggesting the latter are often overlooked in terms of their influence.

According to Abbott and Collins (2004, p. 395) TID is important at the macro level as 'identifying individuals with the greatest potential to excel in sport presents a major and relevant challenge for national governing bodies, coaches and funding agencies alike. Similarly, TID is important at the meso level. As Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts (2008, 70) note, 'practitioners... should be aware of the numerous processes that influence and interact with proficiency... and the development of talent'. Côté (1999, 411). argues that at the micro level 'providing an account of the childhood and family conditions of elite athletes is a necessary step in the development of explanatory theories about the causes and origins of excellence in sport'. Yet, there has been no published research on examining a range of secondary TID determinants in the Australian context. This research addresses this gap using a grounded theory approach. It is accepted that in using grounded theory, researchers can be guided by existing theoretical concepts. This results in the formation of ideas to pursue, and sensitizes researchers to ask particular kinds of questions (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is increasingly used to study sports development because it allows: exploration of situational dynamics; focus on the interrelationships of conceptual components: and flexibility to permit the continual redirection of inquiry as new areas of theoretical importance emerge (Weissensteiner, Abernethy & Farrow, 2009) Grounded theory is also useful in this context, for, as Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts (2008) note, talent is a complex concept, hard to define and lacks a clear theoretical framework.

Methodology

Twelve focus groups of Cricket and Australian Rules elite athletes, their parents and club officials from regions in six Australian states were conducted to explore macro, meso and micro level factors in TID. Specifically, we sought to understand in regard to TID: who are the most influential people for athletes; enablers and constraints; and important organizational aspects. Participants also discussed positive and negative influences of the: officials; local clubs; national and state sport governing bodies; governments; institutes and academies of sport; other athletes; facilities; levels of competition; and money/sponsorship.

As this research draws on a qualitative approach it was suited to analysis using NVivo software. Each focus group transcript was accorded specific attributes. Memos were created to ensure fit, work, relevance, clarity and confidence in our analysis. Codes were created inductively and iteratively through readings of each transcript until theoretical saturation occurred.

Results, discussion & conclusion

While final results are not available, they will be presented at the conference. Preliminary Analysis has indicated influence at micro, meso and macro levels. Themes include:

Micro: Drive to win; Personal enjoyment; Values/character; Work ethic; Family influence; Role models; peers/friendships; 'push' from family.

Meso: coaches' influence ; Social aspects; Quality of competition; Impact of schools; Multisport involvement.

Macro: Facilities and resources; Influence of sport academies; Bias; quality of TID programs: Technical development; Opportunities.

The following constraints were also identified: Distractions; Emotional support; Injury; Disappointments.

These results are important as improving TID processes can improve elite sport outcomes without the infusion of significant additional funding. Given Australia's long and robust debate on whether government funding should be directed more towards recreational or elite sport, this research can provide an important contribution to sport policy.

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