
SPORT TALENT IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES IN UNDER AND OVER PERFORMING SPORT TALENT YIELD REGIONS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

Australia's sport talent identification (TID) strategies have been adopted and improved by other nations (Bloomfield, 2002) with a resultant perception in Australia, that this area requires innovation. Baker & Horton (2004) identified primary (e.g., relative age) and secondary factors (e.g., socio-cultural elements) relevant to TID, suggesting the influence of the latter is often overlooked. While, there has been no published research that has explicitly examined secondary TID determinants in Australia, some studies have focused on the athlete/coach/parent context, while others on talent identification in a sport development framework.

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of secondary factors on TID. A qualitative study, utilizing a multi-layered (macro, meso and micro) and multi-stakeholder (athletes, parents and officials) approach, was conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TID programs are concentrated on recognizing and nurturing individuals with the greatest potential to excel in sport (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008) and have been the focus of considerable research and investment by governments internationally.

TID is important at the macro (e.g., national policy) and meso levels (e.g, pathway). As Vaeyens et al (2008, p.70) noted, 'practitioners... should be aware of the numerous processes that influence and interact with ... the development of talent'. At the micro level, Côté (1999, p. 411) argued that understanding 'childhood and family conditions ... is a necessary step in the development of explanatory theories about ... excellence in sport'. As talent is a complex concept, hard to define and lacks a clear theoretical

framework, this research utilised a grounded theory approach reflecting a variety of stakeholder perspectives (Vaeyens et al, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Twenty-seven focus groups comprised of Cricket and Australian Rules athletes, parents and officials from six Australian states were conducted. The regional sites were identified according to their level of sport talent yield calculated according to the number of players who entered the AFL player draft or achieved first class representation in cricket, relative to junior player registrations in that region (Woolcock & Burke, 2013). The regions were classified as “over”, “median” or “under” performing. Nine focus groups were conducted in under performing regions, 11 in median performing regions and 7 in the over performing. This approach enabled contrasts to be made between those areas that produced either proportionally more or fewer talented athletes.

Issues addressed included: the most influential people for athletes; enablers/constraints to continuing engagement; and, organizational aspects relevant to sporting career. Participants also discussed the influences of: officials; coaches; local clubs; governing bodies; governments; institutes and academies of sport; other athletes; and, levels of competition. The discussions, which typically took between 1-1.5 hours, were recorded and transcribed and data analysed using NVivo.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper focuses on two main themes (and associated subthemes) that emerged from the analysis:

- Social Context
- Parents
- Siblings
- Peers
- Sports Clubs
- Schools
- Sport Management
- Goals for TID
- Pathways
- Attributes of TID Programs
- Selection and Feedback Processes
- Management of Human Resources

There was clear evidence of increasing sophistication and professionalisation in pathway structures and processes, reflected in the above themes, from the Under to the Over performing regions in the following areas:

- mentors, monitoring and more individual attention for athletes
- geographic equality in opportunity
- commitment to younger age participation

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- managing parents - communication/support networks
 - access to support staff
 - transparent selection processes with independent selectors, testing and video analysis
 - consistent and regular individual written feedback
 - coaching development pathways with mentoring and support staff and emphasis on coaching soft skills
 - enhanced relationships with school systems
 - appropriate club culture based on positive values

The results provide crucial insights into TID and club processes relevant to the development of elite athletes. While all athletes have been through local clubs, it is evident that when clubs get it 'right', this is a key factor keeping talent in the sport system. The results indicate that it is a combination of formal processes (e.g., athlete monitoring) as well as the more subtle influence of club cultures (e.g., attitudes to winning) that are important. A number of recommendations are made for both local sport clubs as well as for State and National Sport Associations.

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