FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO A LONG TERM TALENT DEVELOPMENT FOCUS FOR UNIVERSITY ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

Talent development in sport is a complex process involving the interaction of multidisciplinary aspects that directly and/or indirectly affect athletic progression and performance. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that contribute to a long term talent development focus so that the success of university athletes in South Africa is increased. Athletes over the age of eighteen years, who qualified to compete under the auspices of University Sport South Africa, were requested to complete the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire for Sport (TDEQ). Included in the questionnaire were twenty four items specifically measuring the extent to which athletes are exposed to development opportunities designed to form foundations for long term success rather than preparation for short-term results-driven outcomes. The results of the study revealed that five factors influenced the advancement of a long-term talent development focus which included the following: training support, coach guidance, skills development focus, work ethic and training goals. These factors are highly predisposed by the coach. Subsequently an implicit need for a theoretical model of effective sport coaching practice would be highly beneficial in providing coaches with the necessary knowledge required to provide a conducive developmental environment for athletes.

INTRODUCTION

Talented athletes have enjoyed remarkable attention throughout the ages (Abbot et al., 2002, Arnot & Gaines, 1984; Vaeyens et al., 2008). The lucrative incentive of financial gain both for the athlete and the investor has long since been the driving force behind numerous talent development projects (Bloomfield et al., 1994; Vaeyens et al., 2008; MacCurdy, 2010) and this has also been the case at Universities (Martindale et al., 2005). The optimization of a talent development environment in which talented athletes could be fostered has also enjoyed much attention in recent years (Abbot et al., 2002; Baker et al., 2003; Vaeyens et al., 2008). Administrators, coaches, parents and athletes realize that not only is the talent development process throughout the many different performance stages of utmost importance, but so too is the specific talent development focus from which the athlete is nurtured (Bloom, 1985; Côté, , 1999; Gould et al., 2002; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). However, because of the multi dimensional approaches of researchers regarding talent development processes to date, it was difficult to find a coherent approach to a successful talent development environment (Martindale et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2010). In their efforts to clarify generic individual and environmental factors that are causative of effective and successful talent development, Martindale et al., (2010) developed an integrated, holistic and systematic model with key features and key methods for effective talent development procedures. These key features describe the environment and focus needed in order to nurture and develop talent effectively.

Long-term talent development focus

Key features from the Martindale et al. (2010) model include aspects such as 1) Long term aims and methods, 2) Wide ranging coherent messages and support, 3) Appropriate development and 4) Individual and ongoing development. These key features indicate that a long term focus is required to become a successful athlete at elite
level (Bloom, 1985; Starkes et al., 1996; Smith, 2003) as well as that long-term focus requires effective, integrated goals set to direct a variety of crucial aspects to ensure a processes that will guide athletes in achieving long-term results (Martindale et al., 2005; Smith, 2003). It has often been the case that talented athletes focused too much on short term performance and success as opposed to learning (Ericsson, 1998; Balyi, 2002), which, at times, ignores crucial long-term development experiences (Zatsiorsky, 1995; Côté & Hay, 2002). Ensuing from this scenario is not only the failure of athletes to make the transition to excel on a high performance level (Moore et al., 1998), but also to reach their full potential (Bloom, 1985). Most university athletes are in a transition from junior to senior level and in some sports, may need a longer period for this progression to reach completion. According to Smith (2003), long-term development can span between 10-15 years of an athletes’ competitive life, thus emphasizing the futile focus on short-term results. Once an athlete has reached the perimeter of advancing to the highest level of sport participation, another 6-8 years of competitiveness may be needed to truly succeed (Bompa, 1999; Balyi & Hamilton, 1999). Unfortunately, the pressure to perform and the rewards in short-term success often influence coaches to prioritize short-term training methods (Côté, et al., 2003, Martindale et al., 2010). Consequently their selection is based on athletes who can perform well at present even at the expense of that athlete's probable superior long-term potential (Martindale et al., 2005).

Martindale et al. (2010) identified the need for long-term development opportunities afforded to athletes with the specific aim of holistic athlete talent development, clear long-term goals and the progression to senior level. Female athletes in sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, swimming and tennis may achieve their highest level of competition during their late teens or early twenties (the latter age representing that of university students) (Smith, 2003). However, athletes participating in rugby, soccer, volleyball, speed skating, distance running and cross country skiing tends to only achieve their full potential during their late twenties or early thirties (Smith, 2003), thus emphasizing the importance of a long-term development focus (Zatsiorsky, 1995). This study aimed to identify those factors which contributed to the long-term talent development focus among university athletes. Items from the TDEQ related to the long-term development focus factor include aspects that reflect a coach’s own individual focus with regard to long-term athlete development. Consequently the coach’s guidance, planning, mentoring, and co-operation with the athlete and other performance supplemental individuals involved with the individual athlete/team also come under the spotlight (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Martindale et al., 2010). Effective communication, a variety of consistent opportunities, the coping with situational psychological pressure, the systematic development of physical components and the development of a long-term dedication attitude are also items indicative of the development of a long-term talent development focus.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that contribute to a long term talent development focus so that the success of university athletes in South Africa is increased.

**METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

An extensive literature study was conducted on the talent development environment and the influence of a long-term athlete development focus. The literature suggested that in order to research long-term talent development, a quantitative research approach was appropriate.

**Sample**

A non-probability sampling design in the form of convenience sampling was used to gather data for the study. The rationale for this approach was the fact that respondents were available and easily accessible and the data collection was less time consuming and inexpensive. While this approach has a shortcoming in terms of sampling errors and restrictions regarding generalizability, every attempt was made to overcome these by targeting a large sample (Sekaran, 2003). Student-athletes from two universities who participated competitively under the auspices of the University Sport South Africa (USSA) were recruited at random during their practice sessions at the different university stadia and after inter-university matches.
Instrument and Procedures

A two-section questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Section A of the questionnaire comprised questions requesting demographic information of the participants. Section B of the questionnaire comprised the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TEDQ) (Martindale et al., 2010). Twenty four items using a 6-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (strongly agree) and 6 (strongly disagree) were used to measure the long term talent development focus for developing athletes.

Trained research assistants using the same written protocol approached potential participants, explained the purpose of the study and requested their consent to participate in the study. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and informed that they could terminate their participation at any time without any consequences.

Data analysis

The data was captured and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS – version 20). The data was analysed as follows: Firstly, descriptive statistics was conducted to describe the profile of the student athletes who participated in this study. Secondly, Cronbach alpha was used to ascertain the reliability of the long term development factor scale. Thereafter exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the factors which contributed to the long term talent development focus.

Results

Demographics

Of the 320 questionnaires that were distributed, 289 questionnaires were returned (response rate = 90%). Of the questionnaires which were returned 22 were incomplete. Hence, actual data analysis was conducted on 267 questionnaires.

Of the 267 participants, 50.6% \((n = 135)\) were male and 49.4% \((n = 132)\) were female with a distribution of different sporting codes as follows: rugby \((n = 52)\), cricket \((n = 7)\), hockey \((n = 40)\), netball \((n = 30)\), athletics \((n = 5)\), body building \((n = 6)\), basketball \((n = 44)\), dance \((n = 14)\), volleyball \((n = 18)\), soccer \((n = 47)\) and “other” \((n = 4)\).

Exploratory factor analysis

The suitability of the data set for factor analysis was established using the the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy. Both tests \((KMO = 0.898;\) Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity \((sig) = 0.00)\) were found to be acceptable to conduct factor analysis. Using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) together with the varimax rotation and a minimum eigen value of 1, five factors were identified. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the factors as well as their operational definitions are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach alpha reliabilities of the first order factors and operational definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Cronbach Alpha</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training support</td>
<td>.803</td>
<td>Effective and coherent relationships sustaining the effort needed during training to provide quality practice, assuring development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach guidance</td>
<td>.786</td>
<td>Direct, influential relationship that incorporates elevated levels of trust, communication and respect among coaches and athletes, aids operation at the highest levels of sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills development focus</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>Early foundations set for future progressions, through a consistent focus on improvements instead of current outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
<td>.688</td>
<td>Engagement in sport with raised levels of commitment, tenacity and intentional effort.</td>
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Training goals | .650 | Engagement of deliberate practice necessary for the attainment of sport expertise, usually deliberately planned by coach and motivated by athlete.

According to Nunnally (1978: 245), the recommended coefficient alpha to conclude that the proposed factors are reliable is 0.7. However, a study by Kim and Kim (1995) regarded a coefficient of 0.5 to 0.6 as sufficient to conclude that the extracted factors were reliable. Therefore, due to the exploratory nature of the study all the extracted factors (Cronbach alpha >6) were retained for discussion purposes.

Discussion

The five factors that mainly contribute to the augmentation of a long term talent development focus among university athletes encompass various factors specifically concerning the coach. Aspects such as the direct coach relational influences on training support, projected at enhancing the acquisition of sport expertise were evident from the results as well as being underpinned by research (Baker et al., 2003). The training support that is provided to the athletes is mirrored in the various roles which coaches perform. These include being an instructor, organizer, planner, counselor, communicator, trainer, appraiser and psychologist (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011).

The skills development focus emerged as an important factor in long term talent development. This is supported by Jowett (2005:412) who views the coach-athlete relationship as the “foundation of coaching” which has a significant influence in promoting and enhancing the physical and mental skills of athletes in their charge. Furthermore the importance of the coach-athlete relationship is highlighted through the “coach guidance” factor, which elaborates the complementary role and task of the coach that significantly enhances the athlete even beyond the confines of sport (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Coaches also increase athletes’ focus regarding skills development by creating appropriate and stimulating developmental training opportunities, aimed in progressing through stage specific and individualized levels, usually from junior to senior level (Vayens, 2008).

The fourth variable identified, integrate the athletes’ level of work ethic, mainly collaborating on their increased levels of effort, concentration, determination and commitment in exerting the required future training adaptations and performances for success (Baker et al., 2003). Surujlal (2004) suggests that by coaches assuming both leadership and motivator roles, they are able to inculcate work ethic in their athletes.

The setting of training goals is an important function that the coach is required to perform. In this role it is the coach’s task to plan, organize, direct and control the activities of his/her charges towards the objective of winning or improved performance. Ericsson et al., (1993) argues that training sessions should include the theory of “deliberate practice” which should result in specific training goals being incorporated. This can be accomplished through the meticulous planning of expert coaches, who in setting precision objectives for each practice session are able to foster optimal learning situations which will evidently become instrumental in the significant development of athletes (Baker et al., 2003 & Voss et al., 1983).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to identify the factors which contribute to long term talent development focus of university athletes. Five factors, namely training support, coach guidance, skills development focus, work ethic and training goals were extracted through factor analysis. The findings provide a useful insight into the factors that coaches need to consider in the long term talent development of athletes. The findings would be able to guide coaches to plan appropriately to create the ideal talent development environment for the long term progression of their athletes. Furthermore, the findings provide the opportunity for critical reflection by coaches regarding their current talent development environment.

REFERENCES


