

Digging for diamonds: Talent identification process values potential over performance

Published 03/05/16 by [Blake Richardson](#)

TiD

PEAK PERFORMANCE: Adolescents reach physical maturity at different stages, making the job of talent identification that much harder

- **Talent identification (TiD) is the recognition of current participants with the potential to become elite performers**

TiD graphic



- **Physical mismatches during adolescence can camouflage talents in others, which have yet to emerge**
- **Current performance should not be the only gauge for detecting talent. There's more to TiD than how well individuals perform on any given day**
- **The complexity of the biological, psychological and social factors at play within developing performers makes trying to spot potential in young people very much a gamble**
- **Relative Age Effect (RAE) can give some athletes an initial advantage which makes it challenging for others to catch up**
- **Psychological development is just as important as physical, tactical and technical**

advancement but can be more challenging to observe and assess

When it comes to the physical attributes of adolescent athletes, size **often** matters.

Particularly in contact sports, the tallest, strongest, most physically developed in the team are usually – not always, but often – the star performers.

They may get more pitch time and play in key positions which can develop their all-round skill set. More touches and increased [decision-making opportunities](#) helps them learn more through their experiences compared to others.

In football terms, they are the rock solid, ‘thou shalt not pass’ defenders, the midfield generals, the end-of-season golden boot winners. The players who, in the pre-match warm-up, cause opposition parents on the sidelines to remark, only partly in jest: ‘I hope they check their age registration forms, they look like sixth-formers to me’; or, one dad to another, ‘That 12-year-old lad is taller than me, can kick it further and has a hairier top lip!’

A fairly straightforward choice then, it appears, for club coaches and PE teachers when it comes to selecting which 11, 12 and 13-year-olds meet the requirements for representative honours!

But is it really still the case, in the search for our stars of tomorrow, that physical characteristics are the foremost factors in determining which players are fast-tracked through the talent pathway?

In fact, there has been a shift in emphasis in recent years, with coaches now being advised that potential should trump performance.

This sea change is a triumph for common sense.

David and Goliath

Talent identification (TiD) is the recognition of current participants with the potential to become elite performers. Once identified, the process of development and then possible selection completes the talent cycle (Talent detection is discovering those with potential from outside the sport in question).

Physical mismatches that develop during adolescence can, however, cloud the judgement of coaches, camouflaging the emergence of others with talents.

The biggest and strongest individuals may run roughshod over pre-pubescent youngsters of the same age and appear to be more technically adept than they actually are, their stand-out performances leaving an imprint in the minds of their coaches.

A few years down the line, when the playing field has been levelled up in terms of physical maturity, the Goliaths may become the Davids, or the Average Joes. Their dominance might not be as obvious, eclipsed by the burgeoning displays of others, who have started to grow in confidence thanks to an injection of speed and strength, resulting in newfound agility, finesse or poise.

‘It’s true that a big, strong 13-year-old in rugby, for example, may perform better, dominate play and score more tries, but that doesn’t mean to say they are necessarily the ones in the squad who will develop into a Super League player or an England international,’ says [Andrew Bradshaw](#), who is one of the England under-18 girls hockey coaches and UK Coaching’s (formerly sports coach UK) Coaching Advisor (Talent and Performance).

‘When you are looking at talented individuals, the word “talent” is misleading in some respects. When classifying a young player as having talent, people’s interpretation of that is often that their current performance is good. But the question we need to ask ourselves is – would we be better looking for

potential rather than being fixated on performance?

'Performance gives us a 'snap-shot', coaches should be more concerned with the 'film' – the full, developing story.'

Andy adds: 'There has been a tendency to pick on performance rather than on potential, so in these crucial developing years, coaches take the bigger and stronger players. That's not to say some of those won't go on to make it, but the challenge is, those who are less developed because of later maturation, how do you manage to keep them in the system long enough to see them flourish?'

Skipping Bale

Coaches must scratch [below the surface](#), and recognise that there may be important reasons why some players are currently performing well.

It might be that those who are technically able have had more opportunities – they have developed an older 'training age' than their peers. They may have played the sport for longer, whereas some children may be late-comers. Perhaps their parents have separated, or both work full-time, and found it difficult driving them to training or matches.

The physical prowess of some children, meanwhile, could be a direct result of them being one of the oldest in the team, simply meaning they have been developing for longer. Research into [Relative Age Effect \(RAE\)](#) shows that people born earlier in the school year have been more likely to become elite athletes. The findings are consistent with the majority of team sports.

Their size affords them a head start. They might have received extra or better coaching, had access to better facilities or competed against more challenging opponents. These factors make it harder for the late developers – those born in July or August – to make up the lost ground. Some may even drop out of the sport altogether, their interest having waned due to a perceived lack of nurturing and an imbalance in the level of support.

It is the coach's job to give wings to those who are flying under the radar.

'An example is the now Real Madrid galactico Gareth Bale,' says ConnectedCoaches Community Champion Andy, a UKCC Level 4 coach.

'Although he was a technically gifted young player and very quick through his formative years in the Southampton academy, it was apparently touch and go whether he would be given a scholarship. His eventual growth spurt put strains on his back and the club questioned whether he would be physically and mentally tough enough to make it. But they were patient and delayed their decision, enabling Bale to eventually thrive ... and the rest is history!

'The advice is, can you keep your pool bigger for longer, and can you make sure you don't discount those who are smaller or just less developed? Also, don't just discount the bigger or stronger ones either because they could go on and be great too. You want to have a balanced outlook and understand all the factors at play ... not an easy job!'

Striving 'four' success

[Sara Hilton](#) is Director of the North East Wales Girls Performance Centre, and coaches the North Wales Regional football squads, helping players advance from regional to national level.

Earlier this year, she attended her first national camp, coaching the Wales Under-15s and Under-16s girls' teams. She says the younger age groups are scrutinised mainly on technical ability, then, as they get older, the focus of the talent identification strategy extends to four areas:

1. Technical
2. Tactical: Do they take on information well? Are they displaying leadership qualities and a tactical mind?
3. Physical: Are they athletic, fast and strong? And are they physically capable of playing in the position they want to play in?
4. Psychological: Are they confident? Do they communicate well? Do they work well in a team environment and cope well under pressure?

‘If it’s an under-16 player we are looking to bring into the performance centres, we try and make sure they are already very capable in all four of those areas,’ says Sara.

‘With the 10 to 12-year-olds I coach, we don’t really concentrate on the physical as they still have time to grow.

‘Maturation rates can be a bit of a gamble but that’s out of our control as coaches. They may come to us as one of the tallest players but, by the time they get to the under-16s, they might be one the smallest players on the pitch.’

Sara says a greater importance is placed on players’ psychological development than ever before. A point echoed by Andy, who says: ‘The psychological or mental characteristics of an individual are really important.

[‘Mindset](#) is a term which is in vogue at the moment. You are looking for players who want to learn, are approachable and have the drive and motivation to carry on improving. You want players who are curious and creative.

‘The challenge is to be able to develop these skills, attitudes and behaviours in all your performers by creating the correct environment and being conscious of what they may look like at different ages and stages.’

How players cope with emotional adversity can have a bearing on their chances of making it to the highest level. A player might be thriving at club level, enjoying being a big fish in a small pond. But talent and complacency are dangerous bedfellows.

‘I’ve seen it myself within club football,’ says Sara. ‘You get a manager raving about a certain player, maybe around the age of 12, who is by far the best player in the team, who scores goals from everywhere. But at 16 she is nowhere near the other players. She is small now by comparison to the others, and slower. But because she had so much success, with people telling her how good she was, she is complacent and thinks she is better than what she is.

‘It can have a big effect psychologically on the player.’

And it can be damaging when realisation dawns – the player’s confidence can take a hammering.

Performance centres can be unforgiving places. Players whose mental skills are less developed may find that their physical and technical attributes are not enough to see them graduate to the next rung of the ladder. A player must be able to develop and evolve a robust strength of character that enables them to cope with the various internal and external pressures that are linked to high performance sport.

Coaches will scrutinise players’ coping mechanisms during [pressurised situations](#). They want to measure mental resilience and ability to retain focus in times of stress and analyse their decision-making skills at key moments. They want to see who can take advice and who [learns from their mistakes](#).

‘The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage’ (*Arie de Geus*)

‘When you are looking at identifying players who might have talent you are looking for snapshots of those abilities in players – psychological as well as technical and tactical. They won’t be fully developed yet but they will display some signs,’ says Andy.

Calculated risk

A crystal ball would be a more useful coaching accessory than a football at times.

To some extent, coaches have to make an educated guess as to whether their young charges have the whole package: the mental mettle; ability to learn and take instruction; plus a generous helping of talent.

‘There may be someone who has potential but is not quite there physically, and you must decide if that is because they haven’t developed yet,’ says Andy. ‘It is a bit of a gamble but what you try to do is make it more of a calculated risk.’

Having a really clear model of performance to help guide observation, identification and development is one way of making sure you’re looking for the right types of things.

This would cover a whole range of areas, including physical profile, [movement skills](#), technical and tactical abilities and mental abilities.

It would change across different ages and levels but in developing, and then using it, would challenge coaches to fully understand what they are searching for, how to look for it most effectively and then develop it in the best possible ways (this process is also a great vehicle for stimulating coaching conversations with other coaches).

‘Having a crystal clear understanding of the core competencies that drive success in a particular role will give you the freedom to look for and correctly identify relevant talent in many different places’ (*The Gold Mine Effect*, R Ankersen).

An informed decision on whether an individual has what it takes to succeed can only be made after getting to know more about them as people, as well as performers. But if you can delay ‘selecting’ until after maturation (like Gareth Bale) this removes some of the risks.

The [coach-athlete relationship](#) is absolutely key, then, as you strive to build a detailed personal profile of each player. You want to discover what makes them tick, understanding their individual characteristics, their motivations and ambitions.

Andy stresses that there is so much more to talent identification than simply how well they play on the pitch.

‘Whether you are trying to identify talent over the course of a number of sessions or from within a wider development pool, so much of it is getting to know the player in front of you. This is what we try to do throughout our hockey selection processes.

‘Identify any challenges they might or might not have faced, at school and at home, such as whether they have parental support, or are maybe struggling with their travel and to get to places, whether they have had exposure to other sports.

‘That starts to tell you a lot more about the person in front of you than simply whether they are playing on the pitch relatively well. You get to know what drives them and motivates them, what it is they want out of their involvement with sport. Are they being pushed into it, do they really want to play hockey, or is something else driving them?’

‘That gives you more of a picture to say, “There are some characteristics in this individual that seem to be

there that are going to be really helpful in the future” – things like being self-motivated, resilient and having the ability to self-reflect.’

Personal touch

The personal touch is something Sara says she and her performance centre coaches pride themselves on.

She agrees that having a good relationship with the players is a prerequisite when it comes to deciding if they have all the ingredients needed to make it as an international footballer.

‘All those things that are going on in their lives can affect what is happening on the pitch,’ she says.

‘I’ve know the majority of the players, particularly within the under-16s, for about four or five years now.

‘I have a chat with them before the session; find out what they are doing after school, what other sports they do. And I have a good relationship with the parents too, getting to know every one of their names.

‘Some players I can be firmer with than others – who may crumble if I took the same approach.’

It is important, too, to be on the look-out for idiosyncrasies that may need ironing out before a player can make it to the next level.

Some players, for example, may struggle to raise their game on the big occasion, while others are a pain at training, going through the motions like a slug in quicksand, but reaching full throttle at the first sound of the referee’s whistle.

‘Nerves can get to some players on match days,’ says Sara. ‘Sometimes you have to have a quiet word with players and tell them to just relax and play their own game. It happens across all ages, and as coaches, it’s important we understand that that can happen.

‘I’ve also found that some players don’t train very well, or they can be poor in technical sessions but then they go into a game at the end of the session or into match day and they will be fantastic. I don’t know if it’s the element of having opposition, but when no pressure is put on them, they don’t flourish.’

A performance coach will endeavour to smooth the edges of a rough diamond, but Sara also sounds a warning: ‘The older they get and the more results-driven the environment becomes, so it becomes tougher to be patient with players who don’t respond to what is thrown at them.’

Spirit of fair play

Being on a perpetual treasure hunt is a privilege and a responsibility for a coach, both for the club coaches who are lucky enough to unearth hidden gems and those at performance centres charged with the task of polishing them as players so they may one day sparkle on the international stage.

And like all choices we make that have life-changing consequences, the decision-making process should not be rushed. If possible, buy yourself some time, or, as Andy says: ‘Try and keep your pool bigger for longer’, thereby limiting the chances of a golden nugget slipping through the net.

It is important coaches look beyond the advantage some athletes may possess in adolescence – whether that be physical, social or environmental.

After all, you wouldn’t judge a boxing bout if one of the fighters had one arm tied behind their back.

In the interests of fair play, wherever possible, try to judge from a level playing field by giving every athlete time to shine.

Please leave a comment if you have found this blog useful

Next Steps

UK Coaching (formerly sports coach UK) has a range of resources and opportunities for talent and performance coaches that you might be interested in. Here are just a few:

- [Talent and Performance resources on their website](#)

These resources provide insight, ideas and reflections that will help you become a better coach.

The Talent Foundation Series of workshops provide an excellent introduction to the key themes with Talent Development. The workshops and key content are as follows:

- [What is Talent?](#)
 - o Giftedness and talent
 - o The concepts of nature versus nurture
 - o The interaction of biological, psychological and social factors, and the links to mindset
- [A Head for Talent](#)
 - o Mindset – what is it?
 - o How mindset can inhibit or accelerate learning and development
 - o How your coaching practice encourages a growth attitude
- [Talent Across the Ages](#)
 - o Relative Age Effect and other development ages
 - o Developmental transitions and non-linearity of development
 - o The links to mindset
- [Getting Better, Better](#)
 - o Principles of talent development
 - o Deliberate practice and the 10,000-hour debate
 - o Investigate how to assist players/athletes to accelerate their development

All the workshops will provide an opportunity to apply the learning into your own sport and current practice and share knowledge with other coaches working in similar talent settings.

Find a workshop [here](#).

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including Itunes. [Listen here](#).

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now](#).

tags : rae, relative-age-effect, talent, talent-and-performance, talent-development, talent-identification, tid