

Perturbation #3 - "Get a grip"

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The dominant view that drives talent development programmes appears to be biased toward the individual athlete as either having innate abilities or having built their performance through training and practice. Adopting an individual focus of talent is a potentially limiting perspective, and potentially offers explanation for the identification and selection culture that is present in many sports at developmental levels. Despite research highlighting the inefficiency of present-day models of talent development little has been proposed to change both the culture and practices in youth athlete development environments.

Individuals are never *talented* forever. Typically what we are observing as talent is in fact a match between the individuals' current abilities and the demands imposed upon them by the environment. When such features align the individual is said to have an *optimal grip of the environment* (Bruineberg and Rietveld, 2014). This view of talent as existing at the athlete-environment level has the potential to have a powerful effect on our approach to talent development and identification at all levels of sport, but perhaps most critically in youth development environments.

For coaches to effectively develop talent they must be able to accurately assess it and then design appropriate practice environments that offer opportunities for learning and progression. Adopting an individual athlete focus has the potential for some talent to be overlooked, whilst in other cases talent is over trained and driven out of sports through injury and burnout. This is a problem in many sports, including track and field athletics.

Age group talent can therefore be understood in terms of *how* they are achieving grip. For example an age group hurdler may be successful as their body geometry (limb length) affords a fast three step rhythm between the hurdles without compromising speed. Potentially as the athlete progresses in age this match between their abilities and their environment will change resulting in either a greater or lesser grip on the situation. In this example, if the hurdler does not grow again they may not have the ability to achieve a fast three step rhythm at the next age group hurdle specifications. Conversely they may have to cope with reduced space between the hurdles if they are taller earlier in their development. The coaches' concept of *talent* in this situation is critical to the maintenance of competence, confidence and potentially even participation in the sport. It is not uncommon in athletics for athletes to have a grip in one age group and then lose grip as they transition to the next.

It is widely agreed that learning is nonlinear and that an optimal talent development environment should include some *bumps in the road* to facilitate experiential learning and individual adaptation. Coaches equipped with the world view that the behaviour they observe results from the interaction between the individual and the environment provides important knowledge to underpin the design of practice tasks. By scaling practice tasks (e.g. setting hurdles to an appropriate height and spacing) for the individual maintains key features of the performance environment for the athlete to adapt to. In order to maintain progression coaches have a responsibility to pay attention to developing individual abilities (e.g. speed, strength and flexibility) alongside designing ever more progressive representative tasks.

The mission therefore for coaches is can we design environments that challenge the *grip* athletes currently have and provide them with the abilities to get a *grip* in the next environment, and ultimately in the senior environments of our sports. Adopting an athlete-environment ontology is consequently essential to understand current *talent* as well as enabling us to develop future *talent*.

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References

Bruineberg, J. and Rietveld, E., 2014. Self-organization, free energy minimization, and optimal grip on a field of affordances. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8.

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