



## Article

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**Shoulda, Coulda, Didnae – Why don't high potential players make it?**

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## **Abstract**

Given the non-linear nature of talent development, there is a lack of research investigating those who don't *make it*. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to explore the reasons why performers of high potential didn't meet their expected performance level. Participants, who were experienced talent developers in high level academies from football and rugby, identified five broad reasons for these failures: namely, lacking mental skills, serendipity, pathway based failures, maladaptive family input and lacking physical skills. Using a three-part focus derived from the data, we suggest ways in which talent pathways can optimize their output and prevent these failures.

Sport is littered with examples of the gifted youngster who fails to realize what many perceived to be their ultimate potential. Much research supports the conceptualization of talent development (TD) as a non-linear process and many young ‘superstars’ can attest that early success may not necessarily translate into eventual elite status (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Collins, MacNamara & McCarthy, 2016a; Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr & Philippaerts, 2009; Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenziel & Gagne, 2013). Indeed, talent pathways across both Olympic and professional team sport have been shown to have a significant turnover of athletes that are selected and later deselected in their pathway (Gullich, 2014; Gullich & Emrich, 2014).

Importantly, however, this rise and fall might sometimes be something to be exploited rather than avoided (Collins & MacNamara, 2017; McCarthy, Collins & Court, 2016) as it can contribute positively to subsequent progress. It would appear that challenge factors play a significant role in the development and refinement of talent. Indeed, it has been proposed that ‘talent *needs* trauma’ (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Consequently, those athletes who *do* make it will have experienced *and successfully overcome* a significant number of more or less traumatic challenges, whether pathway-related or naturally occurring (cf. Collins, Macnamara & McCarthy, 2016b). These may include issues such as acute or chronic failure (real or perceived), injury, or non-selection. Equally importantly, those performers who almost ‘*made it*’ may not arrive at the key roadblocks with the skills to overcome the challenge (Collins et al., 2016a) leading to potentially career-ending derailment. Against this backdrop, researchers have started to examine the potential positives of failure and challenge for athletes as they prepare for and hopefully progress along the pathway (e.g. Rees et al., 2016). There is

clearly a need for a subtle balance, however, as too much challenge may well risk derailment.

Unfortunately, only very limited research has considered those who have failed on a pathway (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). The vast majority of research to date has focused on those who have succeeded, or on identifying contrasting strengths in individuals (e.g. Van Yperen, 2009) or environments (e.g. Bean, Harlow, Mosher, Fraser-Thomas & Forneris, 2018), ignoring the considerable learning opportunities (not to mention the ethical imperative) from explicitly considering failure and perhaps leading to a survivorship bias in the extant literature (Smith, 2014). In this regard, Bailey and Collins (2013) claim that signs of success within a system are often an illusion rather than signs that the system is working effectively. In fact, they continue to state that “there are no ways of knowing who might have succeeded through different systems, and who... (if) selected from the system... might have (under different circumstances) gone on to achieve high performance” (Bailey & Collins, 2013; p. 249). Therefore, to truly understand why performers do *and don't* ‘make it’, there is a need for greater ‘granularity’ in our understanding of how athletes progress (Gulbin et al., 2013).

The importance of this focus has been stressed in several parallel environments, such as organisational psychology (e.g. Denrell & Fang, 2010; Denrell & Le Mens, 2011), an idea more broadly applied by other authors (e.g. Edmondson, 2011). Indeed, several authors are now stressing the importance of considering null findings as an important source of data, not least because of the reinforcement or challenge they may offer to established ideas built on studies of success (e.g., Landis & Rogelberg, 2013). With specific regard to talent development, current ideas on what it takes to be successful

would surely be enhanced if these same factors were shown to be the weaknesses in those who didn't! Furthermore, an enhanced understanding of why those identified as prime talent underachieved or failed to finish would be of considerable utility to practitioners.

Crucially therefore, and given that the vast majority of talent research has investigated those athletes who *were* able to realize their talent (cf. Gledhill, Harwood & Forsdyke, 2017), there is a pressing need to examine the factors involved when a performer *could* have, or even *should* have made it, but didn't. Accordingly, and reflecting this gap in the literature, our purpose was to conduct an investigation of the 'talent graveyard'; examining those who did not make it and the reasons why performers perceived as being of both high potential and high performance (cf. Baker, Schorer & Wattie, 2018), later failed. We thus sought to qualitatively investigate the factors identified by experienced talent developers who had seen highly gifted performers fall away, despite the very high potential and performance that they originally demonstrated, in order to provide recommendations for practitioners to maximise the effectiveness of TD pathways.

As such, our specific aims were to (a) understand the causes of athletes' demise across two professional team sports (b) to identify any causes perceived to have occurred more frequently than others and thus (c) to understand what the coach or talent system could have done to prevent this.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Philosophy, Design and Methods**

Given the aims of the study and our wish to produce practically meaningful knowledge, we employed a pragmatic research philosophy. Under this approach, methods are

selected with the aim of answering questions and providing solutions, without being driven by a distinct epistemological approach (Giacobbi, Poczwadowski & Hager, 2005). Rather, Pragmatism prioritizes questions and methodologies that are practically meaningful. The examination of why apparently gifted players fail to realise their apparent potential was seen as highly relevant, most especially to those practising in TD environments.

The adoption of qualitative methods allowed for the rich exploration of the issues faced during the TD process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative research is characterized by the use of an explorative approach and the collection of rich descriptive data (Silverman, 2006) with the aim of producing a useful map of the world, rather than a correct one (Stearn, 1998). To this extent and in line with the pragmatic research philosophy, which considers that researcher biases and preferences can be used to support novel insights, the study was aided by our experience as leaders and active practitioners in elite sports talent development pathways (cf. Giacobbi et al., 2005; Morgan, 2007; Bryant, 2009).

### **Participants**

We recruited two purposeful samples of experienced TD coaches from high level, professional academies or holding positions in national UK pathways. These were 10 rugby coaches drawn from 8 academies, aged between 28 and 48 years ( $M= 37.8$  years;  $SD = 6.36$ ) with between 5 and 18 years coaching ( $M=11.2$  years;  $SD = 5.15$ ) and 10 football coaches drawn from 4 academies aged between 27 and 62 years ( $M= 37$  years;  $SD = 7.9$ ) with between 9 and 32 years coaching ( $M=21$  years;  $SD = 8.2$ ). The samples were chosen as a result of the roles played by the authors in the respective sports, and the

need for highly experienced TD coaches who would have the requisite experience to have worked with players that fitted the sampling criteria. Our request for their views on three players was based on pilot work, which suggested this as a suitable number for clarity of recall. Finally, the two sports selected and our focus on male players represented the best resourced and largest academy systems currently in the UK.

The players for whom data was gathered were all male and perceived by these experienced talent developer participants to be a 'dead cert' for future success, their potential being obvious for an extended period of time; yet falling away later. All coach participants were invited to take part through personal contact and, following the protocol approval by the University Ethics Committee, completed informed consent.

### **Data Collection**

Contact was made with each participant at least one week prior to interview. Each was asked to consider 3 players who had, on first observation, been perceived to possess very high potential but who subsequently did not make it to the top of their sport; the standard originally expected of them. The first author conducted interviews with rugby coaches and the second with football coaches to facilitate the purposeful sampling of participants and enhance the trustworthiness of data. Guided by the exploratory nature of the study and based on the pragmatic approach (Giacobbi et al., 2005) a semi-structured interview guide was developed and refined through pilot work with two coaches in each sport of similar qualification and experience. It consisted of open-ended questions that elicited responses informed by literature and our applied experience; in addition, follow-up probes and prompts were developed to allow elaboration on key points and promote consistency across participants (Patton, 2002). The guide is available on request from the



first author.

Interviews were arranged at a quiet location to suit the participant: a pre-briefing allowed them to reflect on the players that were to be discussed. Interviews, after initial briefing and warm up questions, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were taped for subsequent analysis.

### **Design and Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and, given the lack of prior research in the area, an inductive content analysis was conducted to identify the factors implicated in the failure of players 'making it'. The procedure used by Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russell (1993) was followed, starting with each transcript being read several times to ensure familiarity and understanding. Qualitative analysis software (QSR NVIVO 9) was then used to take raw data units and build thematic hierarchies by creating tags (e.g. "Unwilling to spend time training"; "Inability to cope with performance errors"; "Poor interaction with coaches"), similar tags were then grouped into sub-themes and then a framework of higher order themes.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

Given that the process and outcomes of interviews are shaped by trust and rapport with participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), these features were enhanced by both author's a) role in the sport in which the participants were coaching and therefore the knowledge of their career to date; and b) awareness of the issues being discussed as experienced practitioners. The conduct of qualitative data analysis was enhanced by the use of qualitative software (QSR NVIVO 9) and conceptual memos were kept to log both authors' interpretation of the data and stimulate later discussion. Both author's

interpretation of data was challenged through the presentation of meaning units and the themes to which they had been coded with both acting as critical friends (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). Where alternative coding was suggested, discussion occurred until agreement was reached.

Following completion of data analysis, to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and reflecting best practice recommendations (Smith & McGannon, 2017), all coaches were contacted to garner their reflections on the results of data collection, having been sent a copy of the tabularised summaries (see Figures 1 and 2) in advance. Of the twenty, eighteen responded and took part in a follow up interview. All perceived the results to be highly representative of their experiences in TD, actually acknowledging and endorsing ideas presented by other participants; both within and outwith their own sport.

For example, one rugby coach commented, “hindsight is always 20:20, but there appear to be a lot of factors here that are highly influenceable (sic) by the coach and academy”. Another stated “it’s knowing the player inside out that really counts”. A football coach observed, “suppose it’s not surprising that the egg chasers [rugby coaches] have the same issues as us...same country, almost the same kids!” Furthermore, given the resources and status involved, several coaches from both sports also expressed surprise at the clear systemic failures that took place.

Importantly however, none expressed any disagreement with the content or nature of the coding, nor reported any additional factors that would explain why highly gifted players might be derailed. Encouragingly, all coaches expressed how practically useful they found this work to be and there was significant interest in how it could be operationalized to further enhance talent development systems.

## Results

The purpose of the present study was an exploration of the reasons why high potential/apparently gifted football and rugby players failed to realize their potential. Accordingly, and reflective of the high order themes identified, data are presented under five categories which emerged from the data; lacking mental skills, serendipity, pathway-based failures, maladaptive family input and lacking physical skills). The derivation of these themes are shown in Figures 1 and 2, with the two sports presented separately so that readers can evaluate the degree of overlap in the data. In all cases, quotes are marked R or F, depending on the sport pertaining.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 here

### Constellation of Mental Skills

Participants repeatedly identified players who failed to reach their potential as lacking a variety of psychological skills. Players frequently lacked the commitment necessary to succeed, as demonstrated in a number of ways, including a lack of application in training: “I would have to work to gee him up all the time...otherwise he really wouldn't try” (F). They made poor lifestyle choices “He'd had a year out to focus on rugby but just ended up going out on the piss two or three times a week” (R) or were unwilling to spend the requisite volume of time practicing “some of his work that would be quite methodical and time consuming as a hooker, the throwing in, he didn't find it as appealing”. (R) Others players were unable to properly apply themselves in training and overly focused on games rather than training: for example, “as H got older, he was only interested in playing”. (F)

Of interest, and in line with literature highlighting the potential role played by dual-

effect characteristics (cf. Hill, MacNamara & Collins, 2015), one athlete was identified as struggling with repeated injuries as a result of *over* commitment:

He was so obsessed to be the best that he would be out doing a lot of extra skill work.

He would...go into the gym and not follow what he was meant to follow and generate a load his body couldn't handle. (R)

A lack of coping skills was also seen as a critical factor in maximising potential. Key issues identified were the inability to cope with performance errors. "He just couldn't handle making mistakes. Either blamed others or refused to see that he was wrong" (F), or the inability to cope with performance pressure. As one coach stated:

it was his ability to perform under pressure, he had all of the skillset and the physical attributes to play in the academy level competition. But when it came down to it, when the pressure was really on, he shrank. (R)

Others demonstrated an excessive need for recognition and praise "W just needed constant praise and attention. When he didn't get it he sulked!". (F) Also identified was coping with the pressure of competition from others as time in the pathway progressed: for example,

He preferred to come and train with the younger group, than be challenged with that pretty challenging great group that we had coming through at the time, with the players that were in it. (R)

Coaches also highlighted a lack of self-regulatory capacity, with players having difficulty managing freedom "Moving into digs was an issue...moving to his own place even more so. He just couldn't resist the 'distractions'" (F), demonstrating poor learning skills "I think his tactical problems were down to poor learning skills...he was a bit

thick!" (F), Poor training behaviours were also seen as a problem, with one coach stating: "we had to force him to do extra 1 on 1 tackling stuff. That would always be coach driven, not player driven" (R) as was lacking a focus on individual weaknesses "he had a particular strategy that brushed over any weaknesses or any areas that he just wouldn't confront" (R).

Other athletes lacked the motivation to support a journey to high performance, being selective with their training "He is the sort of guy, if he sees you looking, he will bust a gut. If you are not looking, he will just stay in that same pace." (R), being over confident "F was just too cocky – he thought everything was easy and he lost interest when it wasn't" (F), or burning out "he is a kid who played at five, he played all the way through prep, he went to [rugby playing school]. I actually think he was rugby burned out." (R).

Of interest, there was one distinct difference between the themes identified by football and rugby coaches underlying motivation, particularly related to the impact of external rewards. Football coaches identified the impact of being distracted by money "The problem was that he got too comfy too quickly. After that he seemed to lose interest" (F) or getting too much attention "G had everyone round him...agents, family, fellow players...all telling him how great he was going to be" (F). In contrast, rugby coaches identified the role played by a wealthy *personal* background as reducing levels of motivation "Did he have the desire to push on? I questioned that at times because he had a very comfortable upbringing." (R) or having other career priorities "he didn't necessarily have the.... desire to take on a full time career in rugby". (R)

A number of players also lacked the social skills to cope in team sport

environments; such as demonstrating narcissistic tendencies:

If we had played a game, if it was a chance to pass the ball to a person in a similar position to him or score a try, he would not pass the ball. That's the focus that he would have...he would rather throw it on the floor than pass it to someone else that may score, his read was they may look better than him. (R)

Other players were identified as having difficulty fitting in with team mates, "Never really part of the group...always a bit of a loner" (F), with one lacking the cognitive maturity to progress "I think he was just far too young as a person, even though he was massive, he was in a man's body, but he was just a 14/15-year-old in his head" (R) or another the emotional maturity "He just couldn't talk to people...see their point of view, use their opinions. He didn't notice even when people were pissed with him" (F). Others demonstrated an inability to interact with coaches in a productive way "he had a fall out with us and because of that he decided to go to the other franchise. He went to the other franchise and he had exactly the same problem" (R).

Finally, some players lacked the ability to adapt to the demands they faced "A very fragile confidence. So, I think he bluffed his way through a lot of things (R). Others lacked focus on the pitch and made numerous unforced tactical errors "As he got older, J just didn't read the game well enough. As things got more tactically complicated, he stayed still". (F)

### **Serendipity**

Serendipity was also identified as a factor in the downfall of high potential players, with others of similar potential preventing selection opportunities: for example,

I think in any other club, in any other moment he would have been taken on. It was

between him and T to support as a third choice inside back, so we had D, J and we went for T. (R)

Or similarly in football “Just unlucky really. Lots of good players in his position so by the time he got to the Youth Team, he just wasn't getting time on the pitch”. (F)

Another significant serendipitous factor was injury, with players who suffered injuries consequently lacking the time to develop or grasp opportunities, “Very unlucky with injuries...eventually he just couldn't get back”. (F)

### **Failures of the Talent Development System**

Systemic failures were also identified as factors in a player's lack of progress. Examples cited were a lack of challenge, either through early maturation “He was a very mature 16-year-old; very physical hence why he was able to play up in age group so quickly. That might have caught up with him in the end” (R), early dominance through physical characteristics “He was one of the biggest and just used size and aggression to win. Unfortunately, he never went beyond that” (F) or a lack of challenge preventing appropriate technical/tactical development. As identified by a rugby coach:

...in hindsight collectively I don't think we developed other aspects of his game. It was very much ball in hand, play what you see. Well I think he then struggled when he was in environments where it was more tactical, where it was more strategic and he was actually asked to do things not based on the pictures in front of him, just based upon building pressure and territory. (R)

Just as too little challenge was seen as a factor that derailed progress, so also was too much, leading to players' avoidance of challenge. In one example, a rugby coach reflected that “Maybe playing him up all of the time was a mistake and if we had pushed

him back down into his age group, he may have been able to develop some of those skills that he was lacking.” (R)

A similar issue arose from ~~or~~ a steep step change in demands proving too much for the player “I think the jump in demands and pressure was just too sudden. One minute he looked really good, the next he was under pressure”. (F)

TDE's were also identified as not supporting players enough, with some being guilty of ~~not being~~ lacking understanding when young players were given opportunities “I am not sure that the Club gave him the support he needed. He got the breaks but just didn't step up”, (F) or by failing to prepare players for transitions “the preparation coming into senior rugby, or coming into a senior academy position was poor... I don't hold them fully responsible, I hold the job of the academy is to prepare them...but this was poor” (R). Poor use of, or action by coaches was also mentioned. Either players failing to match coaches to their needs as individuals “This was another one who just didn't use us. His sources outside always seemed to know better, so J didn't make the changes he needed to” (F) or coaches failing to engage with players well enough “I never met his Mum, but again probably someone we should have engaged with them early” (R)

### **Maladaptive family input**

Players' families were also seen as being a significant factor in the derailing of performance potential; whether through wider family input “Family from Hell! Brother saying what he could and couldn't do. Uncle putting his oar in. Mother like a frightened rabbit” (F), or by the family preventing the engagement of the player with challenge “He was the golden child at times and could do no wrong. If he wasn't selected for England, then whose fault was that and those sorts of conversations? It was never R's fault” (R).



Coaches also identified players being set up to fail by families who spoiled them “God, they thought the sun shone out of his arse. He got everything he wanted...sometimes even without asking for it.” (F). Although no evidence was found of this in the rugby sample, footballers were also seen to be derailed by the business involvement of family members “It was Team [player's name] – everyone was involved, advising on clubs, playing styles, tactics but most of all, business!” (F). Other parents were simply seen as excessively driving their child's development “he said ‘look, I will never touch a rugby ball again.....too much pressure from my Dad’” (R).

### **Lacking physical skills**

Finally, coaches highlighted a lack of physical ability as being a factor in the failure of some player's progression. Some didn't grow as expected “H just fell away. Fantastic prospect at 11, just way too small at 17” (F), whilst others didn't enjoy physical confrontation “What a talent ...could do anything with the ball. But didn't like the physical challenge” (F). Amongst the rugby sample, coaches pointed to a lack of physical size preventing the ability to compete, for example:

A couple of times in the collision situation he just folded like a deck chair unfortunately. He just got brutally outmuscled and he just couldn't stop people in his channel. He either made a clean line break or he got folded up like a piece of paper.  
(R)

### **Discussion**

Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (1995) proposed that the process of talent development is moderated through the resources of the individual, their environment and other serendipitous factors (Gagné, 1995). Support for all three of these

factors was identified in both samples and, whilst there are clear contextual differences that highlight the importance of domain specific TD processes; there were also clear similarities which suggest that many of the prerequisites for developing talent are transferable across domains: at least in this UK team sports context. Accordingly, we now consider the detail and implications of our results under three headings; namely, the individual, serendipity and the environment.

### **The Individual**

These results build upon previous work that focuses on the centrality of a constellation of mental skills in facilitating a performer's journey and across transitional stages of development (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Van Yperen, 2009; MacNamara 2001a/b; Larsen, Alfermann & Christensen, 2012). Previous work has established that elite level performers have appropriately high levels of psychological resources and athletes will demonstrate a constellation of mental skills on their way to the top (Orlick & Partington, 1988; Gould, Diffenbach & Moffett, 2002; Collins et al., 2016a). Supporting the previous work of Holt & Mitchell (2006) at a lower level of academy performance, this investigation of the talent graveyard suggests that, albeit one of several factors, the most common reason for failure amongst a group of 60 high potential athletes was their individual *lack of* sufficient psychological resources. This despite them possessing many other prerequisites of attaining elite performance, as shown by their selection to the academies and identification by our experienced participants. Our data supports the contention that ability alone may be a necessary but not sufficient to support the development of expertise (Baker & Young, 2014; Toering, Elferink-Gemser, Jordet & Visscher, 2009; Tucker & Collins, 2012).

Of significance to this examination of failure in developing performers was the perception that many didn't have the commitment or motivation to take them to the next level of performance. On its own, this is hardly a revelation, yet clearly illustrative of the nature of motivation and commitment-like resources being critical for the realization of talent. Perhaps, in keeping with the findings of Savage, Collins and Cruickshank (2017), motivational and commitment-based resources may be foundational characteristics for other capacities to be fully realised.

It is also clear that some players can achieve a very high level of performance at the academy stage without necessarily having a 'full set' of the appropriate psychological resources. Support was also found for the importance of self-regulatory processes to progression, especially at the high end of the pathway as pressures really began to bite (Toering et al., 2009). Therefore, given that players were derailed by a variety of psychological factors, it would seem prudent that the full set of skills are systematically introduced and developed as a curriculum in academy settings (cf. Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs) – MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010a; 2010b; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen & Christensen, 2014). The subtle distinctions between specific players' issues is illustrative of the utility in providing a *range* of skills, from which individuals can draw to address their particular range of challenges. This multi-skills approach is in contrast to others, which focus on only one element (Collins, MacNamara & Cruickshank, 2018). For example, resilience (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016), Grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007) or Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006) may draw on several of the underpinning skills described within the

PCDE framework. The pathway is full of different challenges however, and developing athletes should be optimally equipped to handle as many as possible, including being able to ask for help (cf. the PCDE of 'seeking and using social support'). These varied demands, and the impact of an associated lack, are clear within the data.

Finally, the power of family influences on individuals stresses the importance of interactions with parents to ensure common understanding and direction of development (cf. Martindale, Collins & Daubney, 2005; Pankhurst, Collins & MacNamara, 2013). The aim of this being to build understanding and harmonize development. Problems may reach a terminal level, however, and coaches may need to have some quite 'direct' conversations, even to the extent of removing players from the pathway to prevent others being affected.

### **Serendipity**

It is also clear that, for a number of reasons, some athletes were derailed by a constellation of serendipitous factors. These came in the form of other similarly high potential players blocking competitive opportunities, injury preventing players engaging with the necessary practice, or playing opportunities. In several cases, there was very much a '*wrong place at the wrong time*' effect. Very much in line with previous recommendations, the prevention of this can occur if best practice would consistently focus on planning for these instances to prevent a lack of game or training time. Such deliberate thinking should inform and support the operationalization of an individualized pathway with long-term aims and objectives (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010; Ivarsson et al., 2015; Larsen et al., 2014; Martindale et al., 2005;). This should certainly be the case with foreseeable issues, such as physical development, which should surely

be identified early as a limiting factor and, as far as possible, addressed.

### **The System**

What is clear in the data is the role played by appropriate challenge along a talent pathway and its' crucial role in the development and reinforcement of mental skills. As identified in Collins et al., (2016a) many of the performers who didn't quite '*make it*' were characterized by a smooth ride through the early stages of academy level performance. Subsequently, however, this smooth ride was perceived to derail their potential in several ways. The first being a sudden step increase in the challenge level that they faced but which felt ill equipped to deal with. Comparatively, those performers who *do* go on to become the very best are more likely to approach challenge with a 'can do attitude' (Collins et al., 2016a).

The second but related factor was seen as too little challenge early in their development. This was perceived to be a greater issue amongst rugby players than footballers (although both sports reported it), which may be representative of the more physical nature of the game and comparative ease with which advantage can be found at lower levels of the sport. This, in turn, may then inhibit the development of the necessary skills to compete at a later date. These differences may also be representative of the structured nature of football pathways that can support the changing of training/playing age groups at an earlier stage than rugby, with a later selection processes and limited opportunities to manage challenge levels.

Of note, just as a lack of a bumpy path was found to derail, so was a pathway that went beyond the bump to the crash. Those athletes who experienced *too* great a challenge either went into their shell and avoided further challenge or it had such a significant

impact on their confidence that they were unable to recover. This in itself would suggest that the individualization of challenge is complex and a '*gung ho*' attitude to throwing athletes into traumatic experience is unlikely to yield optimal benefit (Savage et al., 2017).

Talent systems were also perceived to be at fault for failing to provide adequate support for athletes, particularly around transitional phases; also lacking understanding when athletes were engaging with a period of challenge. The process of supporting challenge and the facilitating the essential reflective process is vital if traumatic experience is to be effectively deployed throughout a pathway (Collins et al., 2016a; cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). It would therefore seem prudent for pathways to deliberately deploy challenge factors and plan for transitional periods (Collins et al., 2016b) *but* in careful association with growth-facilitating debriefs.

Extending this point, the support network around an athlete is a vital dimension of talent development and the interdisciplinary team around the player is key in their development. Based on our data it is clear that, in many cases, the staff support network around the athlete was insufficiently focused on, or understanding of, the nature of challenge experiences for athletes. For example, in the case of one rugby player: "There was one session when M came in, but the session nearly ruined the kid. He just tried tweaking a few things and the young lad couldn't get his head around it". Talent systems therefore need to carefully consider the appropriateness of the staff members that are placed with specific performers and sufficient knowledge of the athlete or an inappropriate coach placed with an inappropriate athlete (Webb, Collins & Cruickshank, 2016).

Clearly this study is not without limitations. Firstly, as with any retrospective enquiry, there is a risk of hindsight bias in addition to recall errors. Given that we are asking coaches, at least in part, about their own potential errors, there are significant risks of self-presentational bias. There is also a risk that, although the players were perceived by the coaches to be of high potential, decisions about the future potential of athletes are deeply complex and certainly influenced/potentially biased by the coach's overall impression of the athlete (cf. Christensen, 2009; Den Hartigh, Niessen, Frencken & Meijer, 2018). Furthermore, in this regard the data collected are clearly not triangulated with other views of the player's experience; for example, from the player himself, their parents, or other staff members. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the impressions of the coach are critical given their role in the decision-making process about the player's future. Therefore, whilst the viewpoints they offer cannot be seen as the whole truth, the impressions that coaches formed of each player were critical features of the reasons players were later excluded by the respective pathway and were highly impactful. It is also worth noting that, with regard to personal bias, expectancy or self-fulfilling prophecy, all the players discussed were presented by the coaches as positive examples; players who should have made it.

Of course, albeit against the lack of previous work in this area, this exploratory investigation was deliberately wide ranging and, consequently, can only offer limited or tentative causative inferences based on the data. Future research directions might consider the role played by TDEs and practitioners in preventing high potential athletes falling away. In this sense, a longitudinal investigation of the experiences of early identified performers and the challenges that they face along a talent pathway would

further the understanding of the reasons why able athletes fail to reach their potential.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the data presents a number of reasons for those performers marked out as 'sure things' for future elite performance, failing to reach their potential. Unsurprisingly, these included injury, systematic failure and physical limitation. Notably, however, the most common derailer of talent was a *lack* of psychological resources and the associated lack of appropriate challenge throughout a developmental journey. Of course, in presenting the importance of mental aspects of TD in a sport psychology journal, we are preaching to the converted. We would stress, however, that even though the importance of mental factors would seem well established, failure to address/cater for this element was the major factor in the derailment of these high potential athletes. We hope that this paper, focusing on why such high potential was lost, offers practitioners with even more ammunition to promote the mental skills side of TDEs.

The data also demonstrate the need for a range of skill development with young developing athletes. Although a lack of motivation or commitment was seen more commonly than other factors, these were wide ranging and went beyond uni-factor constructs or causative experiences. Therefore, to understand why very gifted performers fail to realize their potential, we need to consider their individual resources, as well as the environmental and stakeholder input to their development, against a breadth and depth of skills.

Finally, we would like to stress the importance of the approach we employed; namely, looking at the failures of a system as offering as many insights as a focus on



those who succeeded. The importance of this is stressed in both academic (e.g., Gilovich, Griffin & Kahneman, 2002) and popular literature (e.g. Taleb, 2007). As Kiely (2011, p.144) succinctly puts it:

Employing isolated examples to support any stance, as is frequently the norm in performance environments, is a one-sided and ultimately irrational argument. A valid assessment of the worth of any training scheme necessitates that both the scheme's successes and 'failures' be factored into analysis.

We hope this perspective has usefully added to the knowledge base.

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Prescribed Themes	Higher Order Themes	Lower Order Theme	Raw data exemplar	Mentioned in relation to
Mental	Lacking motivation (24)	Over confidence	“F was just too cocky – he thought everything was easy and he lost interest when it wasn’t”	9
		Selective on training	“Y would do what he wanted to do, what he was good at. But when it came to the weaknesses...”	5
		Distracted by money	“The problem was that he got too comfy too quickly. After that he seemed to lose interest”	4
		Too much attention	“G had everyone round him...agents, family, fellow players. All telling him how great he was going to be”	6
	Lacking Commitment (14)	Poor lifestyle choices	“He learnt bad habits from the wrong crowd and just went deeper and deeper”	4
		Unwilling to spend time practicing	“He would do the team sessions but just didn’t want to know about other stuff...the stuff he really needed”	3
		Lack of application to training	“ I would have to work to gee him up all the time...otherwise he really wouldn’t try”	5
		Overly focused on games	“As H got older, he was only interested in playing.”	2
	Lacking Coping Skills (21)	Inability to cope with performance errors	“He just couldn’t handle making mistakes. Either blamed others or refused to see that he was wrong”	6
		Inability to cope with performance pressure	“As he got towards the top end his form just dropped away. He couldn’t handle the pressure of expectation and became a shadow of the player he was”	7
		Coping with competition from others	“As everyone around him got better, D just dropped away. Seemed like he didn’t like not being the centre of attention anymore”	3
		Need for recognition/praise	“W just needed constant praise and attention. When he didn’t get it he sulked!”	5

	<b>Lacking confidence/ Focus (7)</b>	Poor ability to adapt to demands	“I think he found it hard when he got to Youth level...varying demands, challenging opposition...just a lot more work”	5	
		Unforced tactical errors	“As he got older, J just didn't read the game well enough. As things got more tactically complicated, he stayed still”	2	
	<b>Lacking self-regulation (15)</b>	Difficulty managing freedom	“Moving into digs was an issue...moving to his own place even more so. He just couldn't resist the ‘distractions’”	4	
		Poor learning skills	“I think his tactical problems were down to poor learning skills...he was a bit thick!”	3	
		Poor training behaviours	“J was very easily distracted...anything out of the ordinary and he just lost focus”	3	
		Lack of focus on weaknesses	Like I said, he just wouldn't get focused on his areas for development. IAPs just didn't work with him”	5	
	<b>Lacking social skills (16)</b>	Narcissism	“What a cocky bugger! Like a bloody peacock...always preening himself”	3	
		Not ‘fitting in’ with team mates	“Never really part of the group...always a bit of a loaner”	2	
		Poor interaction with coaches	“We just didn't know what made him tick. Almost like he didn't want to know us even when we were evaluating him”	4	
		Cognitive maturity	“Coupled with that, K was just childish”	3	
		Emotional maturity	“He just couldn't talk to people...see their pint of view, use their opinions. He didn't notice even when people were pissed with him”	4	
	<b>Serendipity</b>	<b>Lack of opportunity (5)</b>	Other players preventing selection opportunities	“Eventually wrong place and wrong time. There were just two goalkeepers ahead of him in the race”	3
			Injury	“Very unlucky with injuries...eventually he just couldn't get back”	2
	<b>System</b>	<b>Too little challenge</b>	Early maturation	Way ahead of his peers in skills. Playing him was a problem because of his attitude. He fell between two stools really”	3

	<b>(9)</b>	Dominance of performance at lower level based on physical	“He was one of the biggest and just used size and aggression to win. Unfortunately, he never went beyond that”	4	
		Lack of technical/tactical development	“One moment he found everything simple, the next he was confused. I wondered if he felt the challenge to improve early enough”	2	
	<b>Too much challenge (9)</b>	Avoiding challenge	“As the pressure came on, D just hid”	3	
		Steep step change	“I think the jump in demands and pressure was just too sudden. One minute he looked really good, the next he was under pressure”	6	
	<b>Lack of support (8)</b>	Lack of understanding when given opportunities	“I am not sure that the Club gave him the support he needed. He got the breaks but just didn't step up”	4	
		Poor use of coaches	“This was another one who just didn't use us. His sources outside always seemed to know better, so J didn't make the changes he needed to.”	4	
	<b>Not facilitating opportunity (4)</b>	Lack of game time	“Just unlucky really. Lots of good players in his position so by the time he got to the Youth Team, he just wasn't getting time on the pitch”	4	
	<b>Family</b>	<b>Maladaptive Family input (24)</b>	Wider family input	“Family from Hell! Brother saying what he could and couldn't do. Uncle putting his oar in. Mother like a frightened rabbit”	7
			Preventing engagement with challenge	“I think they were so worried about him getting damaged, mentally or physically, that they just kept him away from it”	2
			Spoiled child	“God,,they thought the sun shone out of his arse. He got everything he wanted...sometimes even without asking for it.”	6
Business involvement by family members			Brother saying what he could and couldn't do. Uncle putting his oar in	2	

		Parent driving development	“Dad was in charge. We couldn't make a decision without him questioning it”	7
<b>Physical</b>	<b>Physical Characteristic (5)</b>	Didn't grow as expected	“H just fell away. Fantastic prospect at 11, just way too small at 17”	3
		Didn't like the physical confrontation	“What a talent ...could do anything with the ball. But didn't like the physical challenge”	2

Figure 1: Issues identified as blocks to achieving potential – Football

<b>Prescribed Themes</b>	<b>Higher Order Themes</b>	<b>Lower Order Theme</b>	<b>Raw data exemplar</b>	<b>Mentioned in relation to</b>
<b>Mental</b>	<b>Lacking motivation (25)</b>	Over confidence	“I don't think he had the drive, I think it came to easily to him”	2
		Burnout	“he is a kid who played at five, he played all the way through prep, he went to (rugby playing school), I actually think that he was rugby burned out.	1
		Other career priorities	“he didn't necessarily have the.... desire to take on a full time career in rugby”	1
		Selective on training	“the extra level of physical training which weren't necessarily his perceived strengths, didn't really inspire him so I think he lacked motivation on that”	14
		Wealthy Background	“Did he have the desire to push on? I questioned that at times because he had a very comfortable upbringing.”	3
	<b>Lacking Commitment (32)</b>	Poor lifestyle choices	“he'd had a year out to focus on rugby but just ended up going out on the piss two or three times a week, really loved that lifestyle as opposed to getting his head down and working hard.”	11

		Unwilling to spend time practicing	“Fundamentally a bit lazy, so again some of his work that would be quite, that needed to be quite methodical and time consuming as a hooker, the throwing in, then he didn't find it as appealing.”	5
		Lack of application to training	“P wanted to play the game, but I think the training was very much something secondary to that”	14
	<b>Over commitment (1)</b>	Leading to injury	“He was so obsessed to be the best that he would be out doing a lot of extra skill work. He would...go into the gym and not follow what he was meant to follow and probably the load on his body couldn't handle”	1
	<b>Lacking Coping Skills (10)</b>	Inability to cope with performance errors	“you just knew that if it made one mistake that would be the end of the game for him, he just couldn't come back from it. It was a regular pattern throughout his U16 season”	6
		Inability to cope with performance pressure	“it was his ability to perform under pressure, he had all of the skillset and the physical attributes to play in the academy level competition. But when it came down to, when the pressure was really on, he shrank”	5
		Coping with competition from others	“He preferred to come and train with the younger group, than be challenged with that pretty challenging great group that we had coming through at the time, with the players that were in it.”	3
		Need for recognition/praise	“he was always looking for... and the chat with his Dad was that he wanted recognition.”	3
	<b>Lacking confidence/ Focus (8)</b>	Poor ability to adapt to demands	“A very fragile confidence. So, I think he bluffed his way through a lot of things”	5
		Unforced tactical errors	“he always had a very high work rate, sometimes it was just like hot air, busy doing nothing”	3
	<b>Lacking self-regulation</b>	Difficulty managing freedom	“This kid was always late and there was always an excuse”	2



	<b>(12)</b>	Poor learning skills	“There’s little bits of shape and his attack and he is like, you know he has done it as a 16 year old, as a 17 year old and you are coming to the end of the academy league and you are asking him to draw it on a whiteboard and he can’t do it. I can remember one session in particular and it wasn’t to embarrass the kid, but I knew he didn’t know it and I’m like, how do you not know this?”	3
		Poor training behaviours	“we had to force him to do extra 1 on 1 tackling stuff. That would always be coach driven, not player driven”	5
		Lack of focus on weaknesses	“he had a particular strategy that brushed over any weaknesses or any areas that he just wouldn’t confront....so would not want to spend time on things that weren’t good in his game”	2
	<b>Lacking social skills (13)</b>	Narcissism	If we had played a game, if it was a chance to pass the ball to a person in a similar position to him to score a try, he would not pass the ball. That’s the focus that he would have, so he would rather throw it on the floor than pass it to someone else that may score, his read was ‘they may look better than me’	1
		Not ‘fitting in’ with team mates	“he was very asocial person, he would be a massive, massive loner would always be with himself. Communication skills very poor, social interaction very poor. Very much a loner in an achievement environment would sit on his own at the table, social interaction very limited.”	4
		Poor interaction with coaches	“he had a fall out with us and because of that he decided to go to the other franchise. He went to the other franchise and he had exactly the same problem”	3
		Cognitive maturity	“I think he was just far too young as a person, even though he was massive, he was in a man’s body, but he was just a 14/15 year old in his head and I think that was a big factor”	3

		Emotional maturity	“T used to do that in training...would take himself off to the side of the pitch and scream, have a minute to himself and then come back in”	2
<b>Serendipity</b>	<b>Lack of opportunity (6)</b>	Other players preventing selection opportunities	“I think in any other club, in any other moment he would have been taken on. It was between him and T to support as a third choice inside back, so we had D, J and we went for T”	3
		Injury	‘he has missed so much time from injuries he has almost lacked time to develop “	3
<b>System</b>	<b>Too little challenge (32)</b>	Early maturation	“He was a very mature 16 year old, very physical hence why he was able to play up in age group so quickly. That might have caught up with him in the end”	7
		Dominance of performance at lower level based on physical characteristics	“as soon as he struggled to use his physicality to exert himself on the game, he didn't have the psychological skills to cope with not being dominant and his confidence took a real big knock”	17
		Lack of technical/tactical development	“in hindsight collectively I don't think we developed other aspects of his game. It was very much ball in hand, play what you see, well I think he then struggled when he was in environments where it was more tactical, where it was more strategic and he was actually asked to do things not based on the pictures in front of him, just based upon building pressure and territory.”	8
	<b>Too much challenge (12)</b>	Avoiding challenge	“maybe playing him up all of the time was a mistake and if we had pushed him back down into his age group, he may have been able to develop some of those skills that he was lacking”	3
		Steep step change	“I think there was probably significant challenge when he moved up and didn't necessarily cope that well.”	9

	<b>Lack of support (10)</b>	Lack of understanding when given opportunities	“When he started his first few games he looked like a man, but he wasn't, he was a kid and this is where the club will learn from it and this is my issue about pushing kids far too quickly.”	1
		Lack of preparation for transition	“the preparation in to coming into senior rugby, or coming into a senior academy position was poor... I don't hold them fully responsible, I hold the job of the academy to prepare them was poor”	3
		Poor use of coaches	“There was one session when M came in, but the session nearly ruined the kid. He just tried tweaking a few things and the young lad couldn't get his head around it”	6
	<b>Not facilitating opportunity (2)</b>	Lack of game time	“they are now in the senior academy with five players ahead of them in their position, unless those players are badly injured, they are not going to play”	2
<b>Family</b>	<b>Maladaptive Family input (8)</b>	Wider family input	“I think he's put his parents and some of his school teachers and some of the people around him probably had an influence, his parents weren't actually rugby people at all, which is probably a strong indicator, they were doctors, he wanted to be a doctor, that was more important for him to go down that route, than it was a rugby player”	2
		Preventing engagement with challenge	“He was the golden child at times and could do no wrong. If he wasn't selected for England, then whose fault was that and those sorts of conversations. It was never R's fault”	3
		Spoiled child	“He was a single kid, single son, he was very pampered at home”	2
		Parent driving development	“he said ‘look, I will never touch a rugby ball again’.....too much pressure from my Dad”	1
<b>Physical</b>		Didn't grow as expected	“Probably the most skilful player I've ever worked with...unfortunately for him, size caught up with him. He	3

	<b>Physical Characteristics (6)</b>		never grew, when he left us he finished on 1 metre 65 as a fly half and he weighed less than 70kgs”	
		Didn't like the physical confrontation	“he didn't enjoy contact, so we had to force him to do extra”	1
		Preventing ability to compete	“I think a couple of times in the collision situation where he just folded like a deck chair unfortunately. He just got brutally outmuscled and he just couldn't stop people in his channel. He either made a clean line break or he got folded up like a piece of paper”	2

Figure 2: Issues identified as blocks to achieving potential – Rugby