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Development of expertise in elite and sub-elite British rugby league players: A comparison of practice experiences

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1 Abstract

2 Previous studies have investigated how individuals reach an expert level by counting the
3 number of hours engaged in specific practice types. Here we sought to understand and
4 compare the microstructure (e.g. practice tasks undertaken) of these practice hours
5 experienced by elite and sub elite British rugby league players. Semi structured interviews
6 explored the practice experiences of eight international and eight domestic level players. A
7 two-staged thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The analysis revealed that both
8 player groups experienced a *rich and narrow landscape of affordances* and were exposed to
9 *early diversification* of sport experiences during childhood. Differences were identified in
10 domestic level players' experiences of amateur and professional sport, where, episodes of
11 *negative developmental environments* were reported. International players' practice
12 experiences revealed differences in their professional careers, where, exposure to *scenario-*
13 *based practice* and *dynamic learning environments* were reported. Players' insights were
14 interpreted from an ecological dynamics theoretical framework. These shared insights can
15 support coach educators in designing learning programs that help coaches recognise the skill
16 acquisition and development needs of elite performers in moving between highly structured
17 and highly varied learning experiences, based on the individual needs of an athlete at any one
18 point in time.

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26 Introduction

27 To reach the top in sport will normally require aspiring athletes, at some stage in their
28 career, to access a talent development environment (TDE). These structured performance
29 pathways are now common place across the world, with many countries investing heavily
30 into the identification and development of talent. In the United Kingdom for example, TDE's
31 are now firmly established through the academy system in many team sports. Although
32 common place, the coaching practice within these TDEs has been criticised for adopting
33 traditional teaching and coaching methods, where an overemphasis on direct instruction of
34 athletes, through a technique-focused reproductive-linear coaching style is common
35 (Partington & Cushion, 2011; Ryan, 2016). Typically, a reproductive-linear coaching style is
36 highly structured and advocates the rehearsal of optimal movement templates through task
37 decomposition and drill-based practices. For these reasons, the pre-dominant 'reproductive'
38 'linear' style in sport pedagogy has been criticised as running counter to the methodological
39 approach needed to enhance expertise in competitive athletes (~~Moy, Renshaw, Davids &~~
40 ~~Brymer, 2016~~ Davids, Button, & Bennett, 2008). In addition, TDEs that adopt these coaching
41 approaches have been criticised for being too structured resulting in the 'over-systematization'
42 of developing athletes (Renshaw, Oldham, Glazier & Davids, 2004), leading to the
43 effectiveness of such environments being questioned (Renshaw, Davids, Phillips & Kerhervé,
44 2012).

45 In contrast, an ecological dynamics perspective considers performers as complex
46 adaptive systems and examines the emergence of sport performance at the level of the
47 performer-environment relationship (Araújo, Davids, & Hristovski, 2006). From this
48 perspective, expert sport performance is developed when performers are exposed to, and can
49 interact with, key task and environmental constraints that promote exploratory behaviours to
50 search for specifying information sources (Davids, Button, Araújo, Renshaw & Hristovski,

51 2006). Specifying information supports the utilisation of affordances to positively constrain
52 movements, whereas non-specifying information is less relevant to the performer
53 environment relationship (Jacobs & Michaels, 2002). Affordances are opportunities for action
54 presented in our socio-cultural practices (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014), and are related to an
55 individual's ability to use available information to regulate and organise actions to develop
56 adaptable behaviours that supports expert performance (Esteves, De Oliveira, & Araújo,
57 2011).

58 Considering the challenges associated with the ~~linear reproductive~~ coaching style in
59 TDEs, and because previous research has identified that coaching culture and practice
60 philosophy influence practice task design (Ford, Yates & Williams, 2010). It would be
61 beneficial to investigate *how* ~~coaching culture and~~ practice philosophy might have influenced
62 the design of practice tasks and learning programmes that lead to expertise (Helsen, Starkes,
63 & Hodges, 1998), before the introduction of current academy programs. A sport that provides
64 a suitable research opportunity and lacks research into the development of player ~~expertises~~
65 practice experiences, is rugby football league. Little or no research has explored the
66 development activities of British expert rugby league players prior to the introduction of the
67 systematised academy structure that was introduced between 2001 and 2002 . It could also be
68 considered that the sport has a dominant ~~reproductive-linear~~ coaching approach because
69 formal coach education programs in the sport promote the development of optimal movement
70 templates (e.g. when learning the '6 O'clock pass' performers are required to: (1) point the
71 ball to 6 O'clock, and (2), pass over the front foot) (Rugby Football League Level 2 Coaching
72 Manual, 2014).

73 Therefore, the aim of this study was to compare the perceptions of pre academy elite
74 and sub elite British rugby league players' practice histories, in order to identify differences

75 in the interacting range of environmental and practice task constraints that they experienced
76 throughout their careers. Research-T typically research examines “elite” being anything from
77 international to semi professional standard (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015). Here we
78 wanted to compare “the best” professional (i.e. international) against other professional
79 players. Unlike previous work that has shown differences between professional performers
80 and then amateurs, where you would expect a large difference in performance, we focused on
81 the changes which might take players from domestic to international standard. It was
82 expected that findings would provide insights into the effective design of practice
83 programmes to facilitate the acquisition of expertise and talent in sport.

85 **Methods**

86 Research Design

87 In line with previous research designs that have aimed to construct or develop
88 knowledge about individuals and the social world they reside in, qualitative inquiry in the
89 form of semi-structured interviews was adopted (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The design was
90 considered to be most appropriate for achieving our philosophical aim of testing a priori
91 hypotheses of the value in adopting an ecological dynamics rationale to understand expertise
92 acquisition in sport (Markula & Silk, 2011). To achieve this purpose we connected with
93 epistemological constructionism and ontological relativism to inform a post-positivism
94 research paradigm (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

96 *Participants*

97 Sixteen past or present professional British rugby league players were interviewed for
98 the study. Eight were domestic level (e.g. played in the British Super League or
99 Championship competitions) players (4 present and 4 past) and eight were domestic level

100 players who had gone on to represent their countries internationally (5 present and 3 past).
101 Domestic level players were categorised as sub elite and international players were
102 categorised as elite. At the time of the interviews the mean player age was 33 (range 30 to
103 36) years, the range was selected to minimize effects of variations in age on participant
104 perceptions. Institutional ethical approval was granted with all participants providing
105 informed consent.

107 Data Collection

108 The development of the semi-structured interview guide was informed by theory
109 (Hanton & Jones, 1999; Cote, Ericsson, & Law, 2005), and the authors a priori knowledge of
110 the subject area. The guide ensured that each participant was asked the same set of
111 fundamental questions to invite participants to lead the conversation, elaborate, and discuss
112 their unique experiences (Patton, 2002).The interview guide was piloted on a sample of three
113 retired sports professionals. Following the pilot, a review and debrief was carried out with the
114 coauthors and minor modifications were made to the narrative. All interviews were
115 conducted face to face by the lead author and lasted an average of 40 \pm 16 minutes. Of
116 specific interest was the participants' practice experiences. Probe questions were used to
117 encourage participants to expand on responses and provide articulated accounts. During data
118 collection all interviews were audio recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim.

120 *Data analysis*

121 A two-staged thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyse
122 collected data. The first coding stage followed deductive analysis on the themes set out from
123 the onset: deliberate play, amateur sport, and professional sport. Once data were categorised
124 into the three areas, an inductive thematic analysis was employed to elicit relevant

125 information. Raw data themes were identified because they captured something important
126 about the data in relation to the research aim. These themes were then refined, named and
127 organised into groups of responses to create lower and higher order themes, and four
128 dimensions.

129 Research Quality and Rigor

130 Although rigour in qualitative research has instigated a multitude of scholarly activity
131 of late (See, Smith & McGannon, 2017), several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of
132 the data. First, purposeful sampling was employed (Patton, 2002) with specific criteria (age
133 and playing status) used to ensure that participants were appropriate for the study. Second,
134 member checks were achieved through sending copies of transcripts to a sample of four
135 participants, together with a summary of the results. All the players confirmed that
136 transcriptions and results were a true reflection of their practice experiences. Finally, in line
137 with methods employed by Sparkes and Partington (2003), the second and fourth author acted
138 as a *critical friend* and questioned interpretations made at each stage.

139

140 **Results and Discussion - A Comparison of Practice Histories and Implications for** 141 **Practice Design**

142 The thematic analysis of the data highlighted a total of 32 lower order themes, 13
143 higher order themes, and four dimensions. The four dimensions include, *Affordances*,
144 *Environmental Constraints: Social*, and *Early Diversification* (international and domestic
145 players), and *Dynamic Learning Environments* (international players) (see Figure 1 and 2).

146

147 ***Insert Figure 1 here***

148 Figure 1. Thematic map of national players

149

150

Insert Figure 2 here

151

Figure 2. Thematic map of international players

152 *Affordances*

153 Both player groups discussed opportunities for action during their experiences of
154 deliberate play, amateur sport, and professional sport. Here, we have used a Gibsonian
155 concept and termed these opportunities for action as affordances (Gibson, 1979). This
156 dimension was deemed important because it can start to provide insights for coaches into how
157 to create a resourceful practice environment to enhance a players' responsiveness to available
158 affordances (Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014). Therefore, the results and discussion for this
159 dimension will only focus on experiences of amateur and professional sport, because coaches
160 will typically not influence deliberate play activity. Within the dimension of affordances, two
161 higher order themes were identified across both player groups; these were *narrow landscape*
162 *of affordances* (limited opportunities) and *rich landscape of affordances* (increased
163 opportunities).

164

165

166 Players' accounts of amateur sport revealed experiences of *narrow landscape of*
167 *affordances* (drills) and *rich landscape of affordances* (small sided rugby games). Player
168 interviews provided further insights into the characteristics of drills, where set actions were
169 prescribed by the coach, practice task decomposition was common, and exposure to team
170 runs or sub phases of play did not include opposition players. These narrow performance
171 landscapes are problematic for sport performers because they do not faithfully represent game
172 conditions (Pinder, Davids, Renshaw, & Araújo, 2011b), at the expense of providing realistic
173 learning conditions that are rich in relevant information that support collective decision
making (Fajen, Riley, & Turvey, 2009). Intuitively, players' felt that this practice type was

174 counterproductive to their development, providing negative views in regards to its efficacy. A
175 player discusses his views on this practice type:

176 "It was more drills for drill sake type of thing, going up and hitting a pad like nothing
177 that's really going to prepare you for rugby I don't think. Going up and hitting one of
178 those pads and knocking it down and coming back has absolutely nothing to do with
179 rugby". (International Player 4)

180
181 In comparison, coach led small sided rugby games provided players with a rich
182
183 landscape of affordances. The theory of affordances highlights the benefits of these small
184 sided games, where perceiving affordances from a landscape rich in specifying information
185 allowed players' to prospectively control their behaviour (e.g. future information about
186 whether or not an attacker in rugby league will beat a defender if current foot speed and
187 running angle are maintained) (Turvey & Shaw, 1995), and allowed for perception action
188 coupling to support emergent performance behaviours (Passos, Cordovil, Fernandes, &
189 Barreiros, 2012). These important factors are exemplified through the practice landscape this
190 player experienced in relation to defensive and support players, and the related decision
191 making opportunities dependant on the actions of the defence (e.g. pass, run, or kick):

192 "He would get lots of games that would be getting the defence to move around and
193 playing then what's in front of you, and getting me to get runners running in behind. I
194 think the impact that had on me was understanding the benefits of that and the bigger
195 impact that has on the game. I think it is rather than just being told to do something
196 for the sake of doing something, it's highlighting in the player's head you know the
197 reasons and what's going to happen from that". (Domestic player 1)

198
199 Players' accounts of professional sport revealed similarities during their practice
200 histories, with experiences of narrow and rich landscape of affordances discussed. Practice
201 tasks that presented them with a *narrow landscape of affordances*, were described through
202 experiences of *drills*, *deliberate practice*, and *structured game plans*. Players regularly
203 discussed the consequences of *structured game plans* on their ability to play the game and the

204 influence on practice design, a player discusses the structured culture of the game and how it
205 influenced young players' ability to become perceptually attuned to the affordance landscape:

206 "the game has gone really structured with all these block plays and that's something
207 we are now trying to get back into them, we've noticed in some of the young
208 kids you ask them to do real basic things like we were saying about the games and
209 they don't do it. Yet they could be a half back, this kid he's the best half back in the
210 country but you put three defenders in front of him and he's looking to put a play on,
211 rather than run at them and just beat them". (International Player 6)
212

213 A difference in international players' practice experiences of professional sport, which
214 may provide insights into why they progressed from domestic to international level, was
215 *scenario based practice* tasks. Scenario based practice presented players' with a performance
216 landscape that invited specific actions required to engage effectively with the performance
217 environment through exposure to specific and relevant information (Araújo & Davids, 2011).
218 Consider the affordances this player experienced during practice in relation to teammates,
219 opposition players, and pitch orientation:

220 "we had like scenario training and we got to where we had to score a try on the last
221 play and automatically we went to kicking the ball in the air, and he (coach) went
222 right I'd knew you'd do that. He said, 'whatever you do now if we need a try in the last
223 play you do not kick it', he said 'because then the ball becomes the object', he said
224 'when you keep the ball in hand they have 13 players to take care of, once the ball
225 goes in the air they just have the ball to take care of so you move it through the hands
226 no matter what you keep the ball alive'. And we never knew it was going to come
227 down to a playoff game but it came down to that and we ended up scoring from
228 keeping the ball alive". (International Player 7)
229

230 These findings provide useful insights for coaches when designing learning tasks, who should
231 aim to provide athletes with opportunities to attune their behaviour to specifying information
232 to support and regulate actions (Araújo & Davids, 2015). This means that coaches should go
233 beyond playing small-sided games (although beneficial) and instead ensure that game based
234 activity accurately samples the performance environment and related affordances (Withagen,
235 de Poel, Araújo & Pepping, 2012), leading to greater transfer in sports which are dynamic,
236 unpredictable, and fast paced.

237 Environmental Constraints: Social

238 Within this dimension higher order themes of *positive experiences* and *supportive*
239 *environment* were experienced by both player groups, and *negative experiences* were reported
240 by domestic players only. During deliberate play a *supportive environment* was reported by
241 both player groups, where family and friends encouraged and facilitated deliberate play
242 activities. Both player groups reported *positive experiences* of amateur rugby, but domestic
243 players' accounts also revealed episodes of *negative developmental experiences*. Although
244 domestic players views on the coach were positive, consistent with previous research into
245 negative experiences of sport (Balaguer et al. 2012), domestic players perceived negative
246 experiences because of limited development and decision-making opportunities during
247 practice. In comparison, domestic and international players' positive experiences of amateur
248 sport were characterised by positive relationships, having fun, and not feeling pressure during
249 practice or competitive matches. A player provides an example:

250 "I just remember them being good blokes, I never remember being under any pressure
251 from the coaches. I always remember it being fun and quite a few good players came
252 out of those teams. Then at 16s I just remember it being good fun I don't ever
253 remember feeling under pressure, apart from the pressure I put myself under because I
254 wanted to do well in the game". (Domestic Player 8)
255

256 This player's account demonstrates the importance of coaches creating a positive social context
257 to support psychosocial needs and motivation (Vallerand, 2001). In addition, coaches who
258 provide practice settings that provide positive perceptions are likely to develop healthy coach-
259 athlete relationships, leading to athlete enthusiasm, creating a desire to learn, and positively
260 influencing sport enjoyment leading to sustained participation (Cote & Salmela, 1996).
261 Domestic players' accounts of *negative developmental experiences* during professional sport
262 practice revealed a feeling that the prioritisation of physical conditioning over tactical and skill
263 development hindered their progression as professional players. A player provides an example:

264 "we'd train 4 or 5 nights a week, Monday would be a bit rehab and light weights to get
265 the lactic acid out, Tuesday would a conditioning session, Wednesday would be
266 weights and speed work, Thursday would be game specific so run through your plays
267 and what ever you did and Friday would be a team run half an hour done. Nobody
268 enjoyed it for the way he ran things, I wouldn't say it improved me as a player"
269 (Domestic Player 3).

270
271 Conversely, practice experiences that included game-related practice, freedom to play, and
272 positional specific coaching, were considered factors that supported their development as
273 professional players. These findings highlight the importance of coaches designing practice
274 tasks, not only to support the skill demands of performers, but also the psychological processes
275 to support task engagement and player autonomy, leading to greater levels of motivation and
276 perceptions of positive developmental experiences (Alvarez, Balaguer, Castillo, & Duda,
277 2012).

278

279 ***Early Diversification***

280 International and domestic players' reported engagement in *multisports* during
281 childhood, where engagement in invasion games, striking and fielding games, and net and
282 wall games was common. Exposure to a wide range of sports during childhood has been
283 termed early diversification (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). Players reports of *playing other*
284 *sports* with friends and siblings was common, *street games* were also highlighted as a
285 common pastime for both player groups, this play activity was described as games organised
286 and played with friends or siblings that were not considered a traditional sport. Players' also
287 reported *playing other sports* in more formal organised settings during childhood, with sports
288 such as football, taekwondo, athletics, rugby union, and cricket played regularly. Previous
289 studies have identified that exposure to early diversification has creativity (Memmert, Baker,
290 & Bertsch, 2010), physical fitness and gross motor coordination (Fransen et al. 2012), and
291 motivational benefits (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). Players' perceptions of early

292 diversification were positive, suggesting that the unstructured nature of early diversification
293 may have shaped the way they played as a professional player:

294 "Until you think about it you don't really think about what you did as an 8 or 10 year
295 oldbut when you do look you had the ball in your hand and you're playing
296 unstructured and maybe that did play a little part in the way I became as a player in
297 the professional game. Where I never really liked too much structure in the way that I
298 played the game at professional level, so you kind of look back now and with this chat
299then maybe it did shape the way I played the game as a professional a little bit".
300 (Domestic Player 5)
301

302 Although coaches may not be able to influence young sport performers sporting
303 choices, and may be under pressure to maintain participation rates in their sport. These
304 findings should challenge coaches to design practice experiences that provide young sports
305 participant's opportunities to engage in diverse and functional movement solutions during
306 practice, rather than overemphasising the development of rigid movement templates in one
307 sport.
308

309 *Dynamic Learning Environments*

310 International players experienced *dynamic learning environments* across all practice
311 settings, within this dimension two higher order themes of *autonomous learning* and *athlete*
312 *centred learning* were identified. The dimension of *dynamic learning environments* described
313 frequently changing practice environments that required players to continuously co-adapt to
314 task and environmental constraints. Through the higher order theme of *autonomous learning*,
315 players engaged in *designing practice tasks* and *problem solving*. An ecological dynamics
316 analysis of these experiences highlights how international players' were provided with
317 opportunities to develop a functional relationship with the performance environment to
318 support expertise (Araújo & Davids, 2011). To enhance this important relationship coaches
319 must provide athletes with opportunities to continually co-adapt their behaviour to changing
320 task and environmental constraints to maintain their effectiveness during performance

321 conditions (Passos, Araujo & Davids, 2016). This is exemplified by this players experiences
322 of deliberate play, where playground rules presented opportunities to play against different
323 ability and older players:

324 "You worked it out for yourself, on the handball thing there were people who were
325 better than others.....It wasn't just one on one it were like 8 or 10 squares and you
326 just worked your way up when people get knocked out and were rotated to the
327 bottom. People were good at it so you had to learn that game, but not like coaching
328 you just watched what people did". (International Player 4)
329

330 Under the higher order theme of *athlete-centred learning*, players experienced *guided*
331 *discovery* during amateur sport, and *exploration* and *task constraints* during professional
332 sport. Accounts of professional sport revealed coaching philosophies and practice tasks that
333 encouraged *exploration* during involvement in the practice setting. Exploratory activity is
334 important for athletes because it can help them to "adequately solve any emerging motor
335 problem correctly, quickly, rationally, and resourcefully" (Bernstein,1967, p.228). This is
336 exemplified by a players experience of a practice task constraint designed to support their
337 search for a movement solution to the skill of tackling:

338 "you know with tackle technique he'd have you tackling holding tennis balls so you
339 couldn't grab and stuff like that. We'd never done that kind of stuff before. He used to
340 put plastic ties between your ankles so your feet couldn't get too far apart in D (defence),
341 so to keep your feet closer together so you didn't get splayed so you didn't get beat back
342 on your inside" (International Player 7).
343

344 These findings highlight the importance of coaches continually redesigning learning
345 tasks to improve the quality of co-adaptations during practice, to support players in exploring
346 functional movement solutions to help them achieve positive outcomes to support effective
347 performance.

348

349 **Conclusion**

350 Here, we compared pre academy elite and sub elite British rugby league players' practice
351 histories, in order to identify differences in the interacting range of environmental and
352 practice task constraints that they experienced throughout their careers. The findings suggest
353 that insights from ecological dynamics provide a suitable theoretical framework to guide
354 coaches in the design of practice environments that should consider the physical,
355 psychological, emotional and social dimensions of expertise acquisition. This is evidenced in
356 domestic players' *negative development experiences* that could be considered detrimental to
357 the development of their motivational and performance behaviours. In addition, international
358 players' insights into scenario based practice and dynamic learning environments highlight
359 the importance of providing specifying information through a rich landscape of affordances
360 to support and regulate actions. Where the emergence of an adaptive functional relationship
361 with the performance environment should be seen as an important part of expertise
362 acquisition. A limitation of this study is the use of retrospective interviews to investigate the
363 microstructure of practice, although an imperfect tool, their validity is acknowledged.
364 Therefore, future work could consider adopting quantifiable variables to structure systematic
365 observations of the microstructure of practice designs.

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