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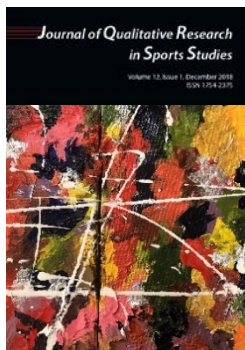
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Talent development for professional rugby league: observations and analysis from a career in rugby's high-performance environment

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Keywords: *Talent Development Environment, Academy, Rugby League*

Abstract

Many research theories and frameworks have been proposed to describe the talent development environment in a variety of sports and other high-performance domains. None of these, however, have suitably described the context the first author had experienced in high level rugby league during a career that has spanned 40 years as professional player, club and international coach / manager and more recently as a consultant and researcher. The paper presents current talent development literature in respect to common features that have emerged from this domain. A series of personal reflections then illustrate how these areas are operationalised in rugby league based on the first author's experiences. What transpires is a clear mis-match between theory and practice and a glaring lack of appropriate support for those who lead in this domain. The paper therefore proposes the need for a new rugby league specific framework which can guide and support those who operate within the rugby league talent development environment.

Introduction

Talent development (TD) is a well-researched topic in many high-performance domains. This is extremely evident too in high performance sport (Abbott and Collins, 2004; Coutinho, Mesquita and Fonseca, 2016; Gullich, 2014, Ford and Williams, 2012; Johnson *et al.*, 2016; Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005; Wolfenden and Holt, 2005). Here studies have attempted to explain the process in detail so that others can learn lessons in order to replicate its assumed success (Collins, MacNamara and McCarthy, 2016; Hardy *et al.*, 2017; Rees *et al.*, 2016; Tucker and Collins, 2012;). Such studies range from a focus on the personal characteristics of the individuals involved in the talent journey (Christensen, 2009; Collins, MacNamara and McCarthy, 2016; Gledhill, Harwood, and Forsdyke, 2017; Jones and Lavellee, 2008, Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Le Gall, Carling, Williams and Reilly, 2010), models and frameworks to explain the journey (Balyi, Way and Higgs, 2013; Bailey and Collins, 2013; Côté and Vierimaa, 2014; Gagné, 2003; Gulbin, Crosser, Moreley and Weissensteiner, 2013), the transitions that take place

(Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavellee, 2004) and the environments that are required to support successful nurturing of those who have been identified as ‘talented’ (Davids, Güllich, Shuttleworth and Arujo, 2017; Henriksen, Stamulova and Roessler, 2010; Larsen *et al.*, 2013; Martindale and Mortimer, 2011).

Improving the talent development process is a critical focus area for a very large and diverse range of rugby league stakeholders. These range from the sport’s National Governing Body the Rugby Football League (RFL), elite professional clubs competing in the Super League, (the sport’s highest level of competition in the UK) right through to a plethora of grass roots amateur clubs, service areas, schools, colleges, universities and related associations. Playing a pivotal role in this pathway are rugby league’s Super League academies (for 16 to 18 year olds). All academy programmes seek to optimise the efficiency of their talent development pathway especially those with less resources who need to maximise the development of their elite athletes to remain competitive. These Academies are assessed in their ability to achieve this through a bespoke talent development accreditation - The Super League Academy Accreditation (RFL, 2017). The process is focused on three key areas: the quality of leadership and management (Academy Managers ability to connect brand, cultures and playing methods to junior environments such as scholarship players, Embedding the Pathway initiatives and Primary rugby league strategies); how well Academies meet the needs of players; and the delivery of the player development system (i.e. Are players physically ready for senior teams; do they have well established techniques already pressure proofed; a detailed game understanding, good decision-making skills; strong psychological profiles and a range of coping and confidence-supporting skills).

In recent years there has been a growing research output emerging from the wider professional rugby environment (Hall, Shirley and Sproule, 2015; Jones, Mahoney and Gucciardi, 2013; Ross, Gill and Malcata, 2015; Rothwell, Rumbold and Stone, 2018; Smart, Hopkins, Quarrie and Gill, 2014; Taylor and Collins, 2018;). Many generic TD models and ideas however are still being utilised to guide professional practice in the sport. What follows is a brief review of the key generic TD features which have influenced the rugby environments that the first author has operated within. Personal reflections are then provided to analyse just how reflective is the reality confronted by those who work in this environment compared to the academic theories of best practice that are supposed to underpin it.

Method

This paper took its qualitative influence from Jenkins’ (2018) paper *Working with coaches and their teams in youth and collegiate sport in the US: An interview with Dr Andy Gilliam*. The paper idea found support from Sparks and Stewart’s

paper (2016) on the pedagogical value of personal narratives and built upon the authors previous work using qualitative research narratives (Grecic and Palmer, 2013; Grecic, 2017; Wilkinson, 2014). Although conversational interview research papers are published in sport (Pedersen, 2011; Zhu, 2018) Jenkins' paper adopted a staged interview, with distinct categories assigned, and was used to enable coaches, parents and sports performance practitioners to gain a better insight into Dr Gilliam's work and experiences so learning could be taken. This methodology is not new in the talent development domain that this paper has as its focus. Often retrospective interviews have been utilised to shed light on the athletes' path to sporting expertise (Côté, Ericsson and Law, 2005; Diogo and Goncalves, 2014), and the coaching behaviours required from those working in this environment (Côté and Sedgwick, 2003). In our paper we present the findings of an interview between two coaching practitioners and researchers who both work in talent development. The focus is on the first author due to his extensive experience from a life operating in this domain. His lived experiences presented as personal narratives provide a lucid counterpoint to the prominent academic research which introduces each category.

Talent Development Characteristics – The Highs and Lows

1. The focus on players' attributes

When considering the player's attributes required for successful progression in professional sport many sporting organisations have traditionally adopted a simple model allowing them to target the technical, tactical, physical and mental developmental areas. Here each area is profiled in order to determine the minimum, desired and optimal standards that successful athletes in that particular sport should display (Hill, MacNamara and Collins, 2015; Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke, 2017). Sporting 'curricula' are created which can guide the coaches and athletes towards the 'best-fit' configuration of skills (English FA, 2019a; RFU, 2019). Within such models, physiological factors for performance are often at the forefront of many's thinking (Li, Wang and Pyun, 2014) whilst physiological testing and understanding athlete genetics is also being promoted to reduce some of the current uncertainty in talent ID (Suppiah, Low and Chia, 2015). In performance sport many physical markers for successful progression have been identified (Higham *et al.*, 2013; Hoare, 2000, Le Gall, Carling, Williams and Reilly, 2010; Robertson, Woods and Gashin, 2015), that are also easily adopted for recruitment and selection purposes.

In respect to mental skills, over 20 years ago Côté, (1999) and Simonton (1999) both identified a number of desirable psychological characteristics for young athletes. These included the attitude, emotions and desire to achieve success, as well as the ability for them to employ mental skills within their performance. Similarly, such attributes have been evidenced in guiding and supporting athletes in transition

(Collins and MacNamara, 2012; Larsen, Alfreman and Christensen, 2012; MacNamara, Holmes and Collins, 2008), and providing support for effective and stable performance (Abbott and Collins, 2004). The identification of skill transfer and performance attributes have been acknowledged within talent literature, specifically, the ability for individuals to evidence mental toughness after experiencing difficulties (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr and Philippaerts, 2009; Bullock, Gulbin, Martin, Ross, Holland and Marino, 2009). Psychological characteristics in developing performance excellence; such as toughness and resilience, have also been identified due to their significance in recognising elite potential and certainly as potential indicators for future success (MacNamara, Button and Collins, 2010; Van Yperen, 2009). Within rugby research these psychological indicators have been related directly to player success and transition, whilst their lack therewith, contributing to their deselection and drop out (Cresswell and Eklund, 2006; Rothwell, Rumbold and Stone, 2018; Taylor and Collins, 2018)

Thankfully the common ‘4 corner’ model – technical, tactical, mental, physical, (for example see – English FA, 2019b) has more recently evolved to encompass the social and personal skills required to support a more holistic view of athlete development (Henricksen and Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman and Rosier, 2016). Utilising Lerner’s 5 C’s of Positive Youth Development (Holt, 2008; Lerner 2009) and research into player welfare (Anderson, 2011; Henry, 2013; Ivarsson, Sterling, Fallby, Johnson, Berg and Johansson, 2015), coach-athlete relationships (Kidman, 2005; Jowett 2005; Jowett and Poczwardowski, 2007), and career exit transitions (Alfreman and Stambulova, 2007) sporting organisations have moderated their ‘core’ focus by considering how their athletes’ social and emotional intelligence can be developed alongside the more traditional player attributes.

Question: How do professional clubs select and develop their players? What characteristics are they looking for?

Historically in the real world of professional rugby league, all professional academies have adopted what is globally known as the ‘style of rugby’ that they want to play in matches and they look for players and look to develop players who can ‘fit in’ to this style. This style (which has usually emerged from years of socialisation into the culture of the club) forms the curriculum on which training sessions are planned and players’ performances are measured against. The elements of the club’s style of play usually include areas such as a sports craft criterion (techniques and tactics), positional needs, physical requirements, and current views on rugby leagues’ mental skill standards. This also evolves at intervals during the season, with new rugby style videos being produced as a guide for practice showing clips of the players performing the skills correctly in each of the curriculum criteria. Interestingly, rarely personal dispositions and potential are accounted for, but may appear in discussions between certain coaches.

What clubs are looking for in a player and the expectation of players' attributes looks completely different from club to club. Typically, coaches will provide compelling examples of how the players they have selected can easily adopt to the club's playing style and how they seem to easily 'buy in' to the curriculum on offer. In reality, the players' acceptance may simply be due to a capital gains view and an attitude of 'I'll do that because the coach will pick me.'

Something else to consider is that although many clubs and organisations I've worked with have invested a great deal of time and resources into testing the physical capacities of its players this has often been delivered in a poorly considered manner for the needs of the sport and the player themselves. Some clubs confidently adhere to a battery of generic fitness tests and have a pre-conceived idea of the skills needed to excel, and some are still using a skills testing model such as passing 10m off the left hand and to the right, or are selecting players on height, and weight metrics, not actually reflecting the demands of the sport. Additionally, many clubs pay lip service to psychological and social development of players without putting any psycho-social development plan in place. Their curriculum or coaching method is just about guiding players to follow patterns or to comply rather than become problem solvers in the game. Workshops on Grit, Growth Mindset, Resilience by sports psychologists do take place but often here players simply sit, listen, get bored and there is little or no follow up on the training field.

2. Talent managers' knowledge base

Research identifies the critical role of leadership within the TD environment. Organisations may employ Performance Directors, Academy Managers, Heads of Service etc. to lead the development of their athletes and the increased performance of their organisation. Regardless of their titles the people filling these posts have a crucial impact on all areas of the sport's talent pathway in their role as performance leaders. Performance leadership has been defined as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2010:3). Indeed, Thorpe and Holloway (2008) outlined the general aims of performance leadership and management, which are 'to share understanding about what is to be achieved, to develop the capacity of people and the organization to achieve it, and to provide the support and guidance individuals and teams need to improve their performance' (pp. 88). In a sporting context Fletcher and Arnold, (2011) noted that these performance managers' duties commonly include the development of a vision, the management of operations, the leadership of people and the creation of a culture. These in turn serve to shape the organisation's environment, expectations, behaviours, resource recruitment and deployment, as well as on field playing style and performance evaluation.

With such a diverse range of knowledge and skills required to carry out their duties successfully many sporting leaders are ill equipped to step into such high-pressured roles where their high stakes decisions have massive implications for athletes and their staff's careers (Cruickshank, Collins and Minten, 2014; 2015).

Research suggests that support is required in many diverse areas to help prepare and develop the leaders in their role. For example, help in establishing an approach, understanding roles within the team, developing contextual awareness, enhancing personal skills and strengthening relationships (Arnold, Fletcher and Molyneux, 2012). If rugby league academies are not mindful of the performance leader's needs the individuals tasked with such an important role could have a catastrophic impact on the club's talent pathway.

Question: Who are the 'talent managers' in rugby, what do they need to know, and how do they gain such a role?

Head of academies in rugby league are really the talent managers of our sport. Most do have rich internal representations of how things should be handled when they are confronted with real-life complex coaching situations. However, where uncertainties exist concerning the given information, where a multitude of various behaviours can be exhibited, and where possible constraints might be presented within their new roles of talent managers I've found that many leaders do not have the requisite abilities, experiences, role frames to cope. Management process skills... human resources reviews, personnel audits... and identifying the skills required for success by the coaches and athletes is a key feature of their role but it is much more than this. In particular player and coach recruitment and their own personal development is a poorly resourced gap. When I've worked with many newly promoted academy managers I've noticed a lack of succession planning in regards to more experienced players nearing retirement and Academy coaches and support staff who will move on to bigger and better roles. I remember on many occasions this lack of succession planning, a lack of recognising potential gaps in the senior playing roster, having a negative impact on the club. For example, if a team might need a hooker... because of retirement... they weren't thinking about who is best around, where that player is now, how to attract them and where the next second, third and fourth best were in that position. Even if this conversation was taking place there was a complete lack of connectivity to the first team's visions, the organisation's long term aims or how the identified players' disposition and personality were aligned to the historical representation of club's archetype.

When I think about how my own professional development was supported by the Talent Managers I would reflect that all the leaders I have worked for didn't spend any time really understanding my own needs as a coach. They didn't or couldn't facilitate a plan to develop me, to expose me to challenges and experiences that would help me grow.

In my experience the Talent Managers all seemed to appreciate the way coach education provided their staff with some basic grounding, with enough working knowledge to start off their coaching, however they lacked any kind of process model as a method of understanding the complexity of practice design and practice within the very different challenge that rugby league academies present. From my perspective I don't think many of the leaders I encountered were ready for or well enough equipped for their role. These leaders could have been the lynchpin of the club, the cultural architects driving their vision and mission, the life and blood of the club with influence at every level of

performance. Instead due to a lack of knowledge of the role and complexities of the Academy environment and how it is governed by the RFL they often left me feeling that I was being managed by people that didn't care, weren't knowledgeable enough and couldn't provide me with the challenge and I support I needed.

3. Talent coaches' role frames and philosophy to practice

There is a common assumption that coaches whom bear most influence on the day to day actions of athletes must be high performing and experts in their roles. Much research has been undertaken to determine the knowledge and behaviour of such coaches (Abrahams, Collins and Martindale, 2006; Côté *et al.*, 1995; Cushion and Jones, 2001; Cushion, Armour and Jones, 2006; Jones, Armour and Potrac, 2004, Lyle, 2002). Despite debate over the terminology used to describe them (what does the word 'expert' actually mean in high performance sport?) the common features of practitioners who operate in the talent domain included; a desire to facilitate learning, a commitment to long term development, extremely high standards for both training and competition, an high ability to plan and deliver training sessions, and a high level of declarative and procedural coaching knowledge (Nash, Sproule and Horton, 2011).

For a fuller debate on the coaching competencies and knowledge required to work at this level see Nash, Martindale, Collins and Martindale's work on determining evidence-based criteria on which judgements of coaching expertise can be made (2012). What seems evident however is that in order to operate successfully at this level talent coaches should constantly be critically reflecting on their practice, their impact on their athletes, and how they can make future improvements. In order to do this effectively researchers promote the importance of coaches understanding their role and scope of influence. Gilbert and Trudel note the importance of such role frames as coaches can use them to help them interpret situations and make coaching decisions (Gilbert and Trudel, 2004). Bateson's (1972) analogy of a picture frame has been used to illustrate the idea of delimiting certain features of a situation, based on an individual's frame of reference; and this has been employed by Schön (1983, 1987) and Gilbert and Trudel (2004), to interpret how academy coaches frame their role in light of dilemmas of practice. This is paramount: dilemmas of practice are the mechanism by which any reflection or engagement with experiential learning is triggered (Trudel and Gilbert, 2006, Schön, 1983). Indeed, Schön (1983) argues that role frames will filter information which is most salient to the practitioner, ie, in order for these academy coaches to engage in unique problem-solving, but only the reframing of a situation through experimentation will develop their long term personal growth.

Question: What role frames do talent coaches adopt in rugby academies and how have you found their levels of knowledge and coaching philosophies?

In my experience the coaches I have worked alongside display many of the 'expert's' attributes such as a clear role frames, detailed knowledge of the sport... They have however demonstrated many under-developed areas. In particular, I've witnessed; a lack of reflective techniques to support decision making, an inability to fully understand integrated development methods, poor skills at facilitating change, and a worrying lack of relationship management skills. They need more support in this area by being exposed to other fields that directly impact the environments and people they interact with. They need help to learn about how concepts from social psychology, organisational psychology, and anthropology can all help them in their role.

Many Rugby League academy coaches I have worked with would quite rightly consider themselves an expert coach and take their talent development role extremely seriously. In my opinion the word 'expert' has become synonymous with the word 'professional coach' in this area of practice. Unfortunately becoming recognised as an 'expert' here requires much more than just the attributes listed by Nash and others. In rugby you need to be an expert not only in learning but also through the socialization of what the sport, the club and the culture require of you. I've seen many 'expert' coaches fail due to their lack of being able to 'fit in'.

Of course the ultimate goal for all academy coaches is player performance. This involves actually looking at something to improve, devising a plan, evaluating it and deciding whether it will work. Some become coaching innovators, starting to set the trends and pioneer new ways and methods of coaching within rugby league. One of the most important abilities however is definitely reflection. Learning how to self-critique enhances the ability to judge the past, the present and even, in part, the future. For me, I believe this is vital for coaches to reflect on the success of any given training session, game or competition and a thread within academy coaches that is under developed.

A common theme I have witnessed many times in coaches is their focus on identifying the importance of constantly trying to search for new information that could give them the edge and improve their practice. Unfortunately, though much of their previous development had come through such means as knowledge of the clubs playing styles, reading books, encounters with sport scientist, other coaches and experiences outside sport but rarely the historical evaluation that influenced the growth of the club within the game of rugby league.

Coaches should have the ability to identify areas of strength and weakness using evaluation tools and then adapt their evaluations in the form of specific goals, thus setting targets to achieve before the next training session, but this simply isn't happening. Dynamically linking sessions synoptically cannot be seen. Instead everything is still delivered in silos with a complete lack of an integrated method between the coaches.

Because the role of the coach significantly impacts upon the learning process for young players, all element of this process is extremely important. How coaches develop trust with players, how they can demonstrate empathy and care for their players is essential support here that they need. This should be part of any analysis of coaching behaviour and should be central to evaluating coach effectiveness. What is needed therefore is a type of systematic approach that can assist the sequencing and interrelated steps to

improving the coaches' own coaching practice, thus a dynamic, organised, systematic and deliberate approach to improving their players.

4. The talent pathway's organisation

The multidimensional nature of talent requires purposeful and considered training provision and organisation (Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler, 2010; Martindale, Collins and Abrahams, 2007). This process starts with the initial identification and recruitment of talented athletes and continues through many transitions into and out of professional sport (Stambulova, 2009, Alfreman and Stambulova, 2007). Current measures to assess talent identification and development (TID) however have been widely criticised in the application of understanding and acceptance of appropriate measures to predict talent (Baker, Schorer and Wattie, 2018; Collins, MacNamara and Cruickshank, 2018). Specifically, Suppiah, Low and Chia (2015) identified issues with current TID processes, noting anecdotal reports where Olympic athletes were overlooked for elite performance and associated TDE programmes based on TID assessment. Despite the importance of TID in professional Rugby League, there remains a paucity of evidence that could possibly help guide academy coaches, certainly the mechanisms that underpin TID are not fully understood by many academy coaches.

In addition to enhancing awareness of TID to start the pathway any successful organisation must clearly understand how it will manage the transition between the various stages of an athlete's career. It must also recognise the valuable input stakeholders will have in the process, as well as how it will provide additional support within the academy pathway structure, such as education and training, and sport science support (Li, Wang and Pyun, 2014).

Academies also need to be clear on how they will provide multiple entry and exit points within their pathway but they also need to appreciate the impact sometimes simple pure luck may have on the entire process. Indeed, Vaeyens *et al.* (2008) identified the effect chance can have on potential athletes, suggesting a help or hindrance approach. According to Bailey *et al.* (2010), this is of great importance as unsuspecting good luck can act as a catalyst in sports participation and progression (Bailey, 2007). This growing body of literature that is investigating talent transfer can improve the management of young academy players' careers and only enhance any sport's talent pathway.

Question: How well organized and aligned have you found the rugby talent pathways you have worked within?

In the current rugby league academies, player transitions are not a gradual well-planned process rather than the outcome of a scouting, trial game or any other selection event. There is a lack of connectivity within the pathway. Rarely do coaches meet and discuss

what the club need, spend time discussing players' potential, what they've got and what they need, and looking further than just putting a team out for an Academy game.

Traditionally, the time spent on the pathway sits between 1-3 years depending on the entry but the players and their academy manager don't always work together to negotiate challenges or provide the support needed to help the athlete both survive then move on to the next environment. The players' success in coping is often subscribed to the belief that work on specific technical, tactical, mental and physical performance domains are the means to best prepare the player for their role and navigate traditional issues around college, school or work commitments and the lack of available support from specialised coaches.

In my experience the development of the total person is a high priority by many to support the transition from junior to senior level in high performance sport. This is a complex process that involves a unique mix of genetic and environmental influences which at the moment are only occasionally considered by most clubs at a strategic level. Linking to some of the other talent factors discussed previously, without knowledge of the essential rugby league attributes such as the psychological characteristics and how these influence the development of young professionals it is extremely difficult to educate the senior rugby managers and CEOs that a growth mind-set, grit and coping with the rigor of an elite environment will play pivotal roles in aiding their players' progression to the senior squads.

For a successful pathway to be created and managed the mental, physical, technical and tactical development initiatives programmed by academy managers are central. I have found however that many rugby league talent development environments are not connected to organisational structure and aims. For this to happen will require a shift for the club and pathway from merely developing the players' competitive skills, to the total development of the person. This will support the humanistic coaching and holistic attributes needed to play at senior level but many organisations may not be aware of this imperative.

5. The environment

The success of performers and development of athletes is often attributed to the environment in which they flourish (Suppiah, Low and Chia, 2015). The TD environment (TDE) across performance domains is identified by Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005) as a critical factor. It is also highlighted with regards to acknowledgement of contextual differences in performance (MacNamara and Collins, 2015). Ivarsson *et al.* (2015) evidenced the value of collaboration and harmony between the different environments the athlete finds themselves in as being key their development i.e., the club, school and home environments maintaining similar values to provide security for athlete development. Research by Abbott and Collins (2004), Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002), as well as Williams and Reilly (2000) noted the importance and the great extent to which the full range of social environments support athlete potential and retention in elite level sport. The range and quality of social support can actually be a key factor in the success of the TDE

(Burns, Cohen and Weissensteiner, 2019; Knight, Harwood and Sellars, (2018). Suppiah, Low and Chia, (2015) warn however that we must always consider what actual success is in TD, which is determined by a plethora of bio-psychosocial factors. This highlights the risk that any incompatibility between stakeholders such as the parents, peers, academy coaches, senior coaches or CEO beliefs could have on the TDE and the potential success of the TD process

Question: How have you generally found the environment in which you have worked in rugby league?

And... Would you say that your experience shows the talent environment needs to be a humanistic and holistic one? and is this what actually occurs in practice?

Yes of course, that is vital. It will require a mind-shift but it is understood by the young coaches who are now entering this environment. Unfortunately, this isn't the norm now. Really.... some environments are toxic. If you were to go in you might see clashes between the Academy Manager and the Academy Head coach about operations, player relationships etc. Sometimes players are brought in based on personal recommendations from ex-players, and friends of the manager without any sensible data gathering having taken place on the player. This caused conflict, 'why is he here?', resentment and further clashes.

The environment must be inclusive and holistic. There is a need to embrace all stakeholders such as parents, schools, peer groups not just club employees. Clear consistent messages from significant others are very important for the players. There is a real need to manage this process through parent workshops such as with the 'Embed the Pathway' initiative, school teacher liaison meetings, individual development plans shared with everyone, and top-level support and leadership. Lots of support is required to best prepare the young players, for example Mental Health support like with 'State of Mind', physical injury and rehab support, career transition support, financial advice, family support etc. This support needs to be the right support engineered by the academy manager so they can form an adaptive transitional period for the players who ultimately develop internal methods to match the variety of demands they will face. Simple things such as goal setting for their playing performance, developing career plans or meeting deadlines on their industry or educational projects can all be effective. Until recently these areas have received limited attention in rugby league pathways but are definitely needed.

6. Promotion of positive relationships and social interactions

Longitudinal TDE has also been associated with strong coach-athlete relationships, specifically during the latter stages of development (Li, Wang and Pyun, 2014). Previous research dictating the extent to which coaches should acquire understanding through interaction and communication with players (Carlson, 2011; Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler 2010; Martindale *et al.*, 2007) indicates Rugby League academies should be supported and encouraged to maintain effective

relationships within the delivery structure. Indeed, perceived pressures in TDE have been suggested to be resolved through effective communication and better relationships (Li, Wang and Pylun, 2014).

Many theorists now promote a more caring emphasis within coaching practice in order to promote a more holistic development of the athlete (Dohsten and Barker-Ruchti, 2018; Purdy, Potrac and Paulauskas, 2016). Gilbert's 'Coaching with Care' (Gilbert, 2016), many new caring pedagogies (Velasquez, West, Graham, and Osguthorpe, (2013), and Grecic's C.A.R.E curriculum (Grecic, 2019; Grecic and Ryan, 2018) include explicit focus on developing emotional, relational and social competencies to enable athletes to not only survive but flourish and thrive in high performance sporting domains (Brown *et al.*, 2018; Knights, Sherry and Ruddock-Hudson, 2017). There is also an associated body of work that not only promotes positive psychology to support young athletes but also explicitly seeks to develop 'happiness' in them as an anchor for their careers and a counterpoint to the pressures of being a main actor in sporting talent pathways (Carr, 2011; Mann and Narula, 2017; Narula, 2016; Seligman, 2012).

Question: How would you describe how relationships are typically developed and managed in rugby academies?

Senior players, coaching staff and the historical brand of the clubs all help develop behaviours that form the boundaries of culture. But within those boundaries, it is vital to treat academy players well, and consistently. The academy has never been harder or more important to a club's future. Players dream of being a professional, often sacrificing their education or jobs in a hope to gain a contract for the senior team. Unfortunately, the reality is nothing like the dream these young players had. The physical and mental pressure, the challenge from older players who are fighting to keep their contracts as the new young batch of players enter their domain, is stifling. The developmental ethos of youth rugby, of friendship and understanding disappears in the harsh reality of professional sport. Pressure for results changes coaches and support staff actions and interactions. Players fall in line, afraid of speaking out. Often their love of the game subsides as does their mental wellbeing. Players hunt out escapes and sadly some intentionally give up, intentionally make clumsy choices or blame coaches for their non-selection. Ideally, the academy and club should embrace these individuals and put their well-being and happiness first. I don't see this happening very often. In reality most players feel a sense of unsafety and that the doorway to selection will only open if your relationship with the coaching staff is based on you doing and saying what the coaches want to see and hear.

What's rarely mentioned or discussed amongst academy coaches is how to improve players social and emotional skills. Yes, plenty is spoken about sports craft or mental states to play at the next level but not a player's ability to confidently hold conversations with a diverse range of people that they may meet during their career. The social and emotional development for young academy players is important to prepare for the next

phases of life like a career, teammates, family, and relationships. Educating coaches on how to nurture and develop these social interactions are essential layers of the environment that I think are missing. Mental wellbeing should be as important as passing the ball. It all starts with teamwork which is an area all academy coaches have an abundance of knowledge about. Unfortunately planning these social interactions isn't as evident as their focus on the simple sports craft of rugby. Social and emotional skills are essential; communication, leadership, respect for others, fair play – abiding by the rules and laws, developing friendship bonds for life and positive psychological development are all cornerstones good professionals need. The more they care for their teammates, the more likely they are to care about, and attempt to understand, people in general. When players have understanding and empathy, the more able they become to translate the world through someone else's viewpoint, not just their own. Done well, and nurtured by the coaches and the environment, these players have the potential to achieve great things.

Conclusion

The paper has presented the literature associated with the key features of the talent development environment experienced by the first author. Personal reflections have then uncovered deeper layers of professional practice and presented a very different picture of what one might presume is happening in Rugby League's talent pathway, specifically in the Super League Academy stage. What is clearly evident within the Focus on Player Attributes, Talent Managers Knowledge Base, Talent Coaches Role Frames, The Talent Pathway's Organisation, The Environment, and the Promotion of Positive Relationships and Social Interactions, is that there appears a huge theory to practice gap by all concerned parties. With such extremes evident between the first author's experiences and the best practice guidelines from generic sports literature and research what can be done to bridge or at least reduce the knowledge to practice gap? It appears that the common agent of influence across all factors is the Academy Manager who provides the leadership, management and direction of travel for his staff and players. It would be prudent therefore to start here.

What can be done?

What is crystal clear from the first author's accounts is that the nature of the environment is extremely bespoke to the sport, the country and indeed the club or local in which it exists. A series of resources to shape and guide Academy Managers and the decisions they make concerning each TD factor may provide a useful road map to guide their actions. It appears the nature of current support is too generic for clear application therefore a bespoke Rugby League tool kit should be developed shaped by the Academy Managers themselves with the flexibility to be adapted to each club or person's specific needs.

Next steps...

Research is needed to understand the specific Rugby League Academy Manager's role in more detail and the current demands, expectations and pressures. From this a gap analysis could be created to identify the areas requiring greatest support as well as highlighting the desired outcomes of such support. From here the exact nature and type of support, as well as what this would look like in practice, could be clearly articulated and plans put in place to source, develop or create any associated resources. Only then will Rugby League Academies have the bespoke leadership and management knowledge and understanding that they require. Only then will they begin to operate closer to their full potential and provide their people with the environment, expertise and support that they deserve.

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JQRSS Author Profiles

Stuart Wilkinson¹ is currently a Lecturer in High Performance Coaching, Course Leader and PhD student at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK. Previously Stuart had a career as a professional Rugby League player in the UK and Australia (Barrow, Carlisle, Wests in Australia and Workington) a professional coach (Leeds Rhinos, Wigan Warriors, Widnes Vikings, Salford City Reds and The RFL) manager (England Schools, Great Britain Academy, England, Wales, France, Russia and Serbia) and High-Performance consultant (Italy, Germany, Sale Sharks and Newcastle).

David Grecic² is a Principal Lecturer in Talent Development at the University of Central Lancashire. He has also been a consultant in high performance sport for many years. In particular, he has worked with the RFL, the English FA, British Cycling, and England Golf to develop their talent pathway and improve the talent development environment for their athletes and other stakeholders.

Reviewer Comments

The voice of experience comes through strongly in this paper, calling for change in how Rugby League is managed, coached and indeed, played. The authors highlight the complexity of talent identification and development by illustrating the various elements that need considering in ensuring young players remain healthy. Each element is worthy of study in its own right. Unfortunately as the reflections testify to, these elements are often not considered leading to a broken development pathway and often broken players, who give up playing the sport. This paper should be read by those involved in rugby league player development whether at academy level or elsewhere. There are lessons to be learned as to what constitutes an environment in which players can thrive and feel happy and healthy. This environment needs cultivating at all levels of the sport for the future of the game.

