

## Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLOK)

Title	An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/35721/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/35721/</a>
DOI	
Date	2020
Citation	Wilkinson, Stuart G and Grecic, David (2020) An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team. <i>Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Sciences</i> , 14 (1). pp. 209-230. ISSN 1754-2375
Creators	Wilkinson, Stuart G and Grecic, David

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLOK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>

# An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team

**Stuart Wilkinson<sup>1</sup> and David Grecic<sup>2</sup>**  
(University of Central Lancashire)

Keywords: *Coach education, talent pathways, rugby, workforce development*

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Talent Development environments (TDE) within the transition stage of professional rugby. The aim was to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts by the coaching teams that work specifically with Academy players to facilitate transition to the first team playing squads. A focus group was established in order to explore TDEs more fully following a series of talent development workshops delivered by the authors, that presented a range of recognised academic theories and concepts. Data were collected and analysed thematically. Findings suggest that those currently working in professional rugby's talent development transition stage have a series of 'gaps' in their theory to practice which are limiting the successful creation and operation of the most conducive TDE for their players. These especially relate to the generated themes of organisational connectivity, philosophical alignment, psycho-social nurturing, workforce development, and legacy building. The paper concludes by recognising the fundamental role that education and training has in any aspiration to create effective TDEs. It also recognises the over-arching responsibility the Academy Manager has in how best to proceed and fill the gaps, not just within this transition stage but throughout the talent pathway.

## Introduction

Talent Development (TD) is a popular subject for research in general (Bloom 1985, Gagnè 2000 and Ericsson 2006) and particularly in sport (Côté, Macdonald, Baker and Abernethy, 2006 and Balyi 2002). Recent academic focus has moved towards the investigation of the environment in which the Talent Development processes take place (Larsson and Nyberg, 2017, Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler, 2010) and the particular life stage of the athlete (Wormhoudt, Savelsbergh, Teunissen and Davids 2018, Alfermann and Stambulova 2007). In the sport of rugby (union and league formats of the game) numerous studies have sought to expose the most impactful markers and practices by which players should be selected and developed in order to facilitate their transition from junior Academy players to senior



Professionals (Cresswell and Eklund 2006; Hall, Gray and Sproule 2015; Hill, Macnamara and Collins 2015; Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Rothwell, Rumbold and Stone, 2018). Unfortunately, research has also identified professional practice and player traits / characteristics that have a detrimental effect on this transition (Taylor and Collins 2019; Stambulova, 2009).

Taking a reflective personal narrative approach, we have previously demonstrated a clear disconnect between the Talent Development Environmental information available to coaches who operate in this domain, and the applied first hand practice by the first author, during a career that has spanned 30 years in professional rugby as a player, coach, manager and consultant (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019). In this paper we presented the core tenants of TD research and compared how this best practice was operationalised by Academy and First Team players, coaches, managers and sport science performance support teams. In this context the specific areas of TD identified were:

- A focus on players' attributes.
- Talent managers' knowledge base
- Talent coaches, role frames and philosophy to practice.
- Talent pathway organization.
- The environment (and how it is developed)
- Talent pathway professional's promotion of positive relationships and social interactions.

Wilkinson and Grecic's (2019:165-166) findings revealed that in each area the first author had experienced, there was a clear mismatch between how theory was applied to practice by all those working in this domain.

In order to investigate this phenomenon (theory to practice divide) in more detail it was decided to purposefully target a professional rugby club in the North of England, UK, and in particular the team of staff (Academy Manager, Coaches, and Sport Scientists) that have responsibility for the transition of its players into professional rugby. In recognition of the various learning which members of this group would have undertaken, both formal qualifications and informal personal development (Jenkins, 2018; Cushion and Jones, 2001; Lyle 2002), a brainstorming TD workshop at each club was proposed in order to expose both the team's shared mental models, but also individual differences in knowledge and experience within the group (Cushion, Armour and Jones, 2006). Here we do note that the coaching role in sport has been investigated extensively (Abrahams, Collins, and Martindale, 2006) and therefore we have made a conscious decision to explore the knowledge

and understanding of the wider team that support player development during the transition stage of their career (Stambulova, 2009). Of course, the Academy manager's role here is also important to define. As the leader of the group he/she is ultimately responsible for influencing the group to achieve their common goals and defining the roles of those within that group.

Indeed, Burke, Carron and Eys (2005) noted that said role, defined as the pattern of behaviours expected of individuals in each social situation, is a structural and a crucial component for effective function and performance in teams. The main purpose of a coach in a team performance is, according to Lyle and Cushion (2017), to achieve competitive goals by influencing numerous performance variables. Therefore, a coach's ability to positively influence players and the team is critical for success. Our investigation was therefore focused on not just the TD declarative knowledge of the team and how it is applied, but also the team roles, responsibilities, goals and leadership methods adopted to best facilitate successful player transition (Wilkinson and Grecic 2019).

## Methods

A focus group was convened at the professional rugby club in order to dig deeper into the initial findings of Wilkinson and Grecic (2019). A total of 8 transition stage professionals were included, these people are employed by the club to support a successful pathway from junior to senior professional rugby (Junior and Senior Academy Coaches, First Team Coaches, Academy Manager and sport science support staff). The focus group interview was selected as the most appropriate method to gain group insight into the phenomenon (Breen, 2006,) whilst also allowing the researchers to take on participant observer roles, in order to facilitate deeper debate and discussion around the talent development topic (Smithson, 2000). Focus groups are proposed to be highly appropriate in situations where the research is aiming to generate new ideas and/or examine current practices, both of which were intentions of our study (Andrew and Jonathan, 2006; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rock, 2007, Liampnttong, 2011). In line calls from Morgan (2017) for more innovative uses of focus group research, we decided to set up 4 repeat visits to the group to allow participants' reflections about concepts discussed to feed forward into the subsequent meeting. In line with focus group methods, the researchers shared role of facilitator and observer, recording not just verbal input but nuanced behaviours, such as body language and delivery tone and impact (Morgan, 1988).

While the focus group method is meant to facilitate rich, in-depth discussions (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996) we were very aware that this method may pose potential issues. We would have to carefully manage group interactions, ensuring all participants had a voice. Some participants might be lethargic and dull while others are dynamic and involved. It would be our role as facilitators to chair the debates

without imposing our own views or ideas. We were also conscious of other limiting factors such as the context of the group. Individuals within the club who work closely together to support the athletes may find it stressful and challenging to discuss issues that are close to their heart. In this case their professional practice, values and beliefs. We would have to ensure we created and maintained a supporting and safe environment in which participants could ‘check and challenge’ each other’s views. The focus group method may also present unwanted bias as subjects may try to impress the researchers or group, or simply say what they believe to be the socially acceptable response (Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub, 1996). Indeed, the power dynamic would also be present due to the inclusion of participants with different positions in the club’s coaching and management hierarchy (Academy Manager, Lead coaches, Head of Sport Science, etc). Careful ‘scene setting’ and introduction activities were required in order to develop trust and rapport and establish the discussion protocols within the group.

### **Participants**

The project used a purposeful sample of the staff that operate with transition stage players at a professional rugby clubs known to the researchers. The club and participants were contacted before the focus group meetings, supporting information agreed and consent forms signed. This was also an opportunity for the researchers to reacquaint themselves with the club staff, the procedures involved and to clarify the purpose of the study (Wagstaff, Fletcher, and Hanton, 2012). The inclusion criteria were that the transition staff who had more than 10 years’ experience working in this TD stage in rugby, were professionally qualified (Coaches, Analysts, Managers, Physiotherapists, Strength and Conditioners), were employed full time at the club, and had a role dedicated to supporting players in this transition stage. Input at this stage varied between participants but included dedicated coaching time (a combination of on-field practice sessions and off-field support i.e. leading footage of games reviews/previews, mental skills workshops), physical development sessions (strength and conditioning, rehabilitation, prehab etc), and individual / group planning activities. Primary inclusion criteria for the club staff reflected Erickson *et al*’s work (2007) which defined a High Performance Professional as someone working with highly skilled athletes in a sport environment which focused primarily on outcomes. Institutional ethical approval was received prior to proceeding with this study.

### **Procedure**

The focus group took on a workshop approach with activities provided by the researchers to stimulate debate and consideration of the main themes identified in their previous research. A series of four repeat visits were scheduled and dates / times agreed. Each workshop was introduced by the Academy Manager who stressed the

value of the activity and the positive benefits it could bring to the club's overall coach training programme. Interestingly, the staff perceived these workshops as a collaborative starting point of their time together rather than being finite events that they would move on from. More of this later.

One example of a workshop task facilitated by the researchers was the Transition Timeline. Here the group was asked to construct a pathway timeline in order to highlight the positioning and influences upon their transitional stage. The task was structured so that age related concepts were linked across the separate age bands and environments (eg. U14, U16, U18, Junior and Senior Academy, First Team). This timeline with age bands, was pinned to the wall on flip chart paper and the participants instructed to fill post-it notes with essential attributes and needs of players/teams without consultation (i.e. passing, speed etc), which they then stuck alongside the corresponding age band/environment on the timeline. The researchers then provided an extended task where each age band/environment was split into four quadrants based on traditional thinking about positive player attributes i.e. technical, tactical, mental and physical. The participants were asked to revisit their post-it notes and move them to the quadrant where they believed it was best placed. The researchers then led discussions in order to facilitate individual and group reflection. They introduced a variety of academic TD research and theories which had been applied in different environments. This was used as a tool to stimulate intra and inter sport comparisons and prompt further group analysis and debate. All input and comments were recorded to capture the groups physical output from the timeline tasks.

Another example of a workshop task designed to facilitate rich data was the Developing the Environment task. Here a series of concentric circles were drawn on a whiteboard and the participants asked to fill in as many aspects of the TDE that they had, could or should have influence upon. This task was designed to help participants discuss, share and reflect on their unique and important role and how each added value to the overall development of their players. The importance of self-awareness was introduced as was the concept of increasing personal control over the behaviours. This task was used to get participants thinking about their own roles and interactions within the TDE but also as a prompt for them to consider how they themselves were the architects in designing the transition TD environment in which they operated. The expectancy-value theory was introduced here too in respect of how positive coaching behaviours can lead to increases in athlete enjoyment, self-esteem, and performance increases, as well as multiple dimensions of support (i.e. emotional, informational, tangible, and relational) (Côte, Hancock, and Abernethy, 2014).

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on all data from each of the club workshops. Workshop task physical outputs e.g. whiteboard, flip chart, post-it, notes and diagrams were recorded at each event. These additional resources were utilised as a stimulus for group discussions rather than serving as primary data sources collected for content analysis. Focus group discussions around each task were recorded and transcribed verbatim. TA then took place in accordance with the six-step protocol by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data, reading and re-reading the focus group discussions. During this stage interesting items were noted for later consideration. General codes were then allocated in order to capture and identify these interesting points from the data. Codes were then clustered into bigger groupings and the relationships between these clusters considered. These larger groups were then reviewed and refined into the final generated themes with vivid examples selected that would best illustrate the theme in context to the original research aim and wider TDE literature.

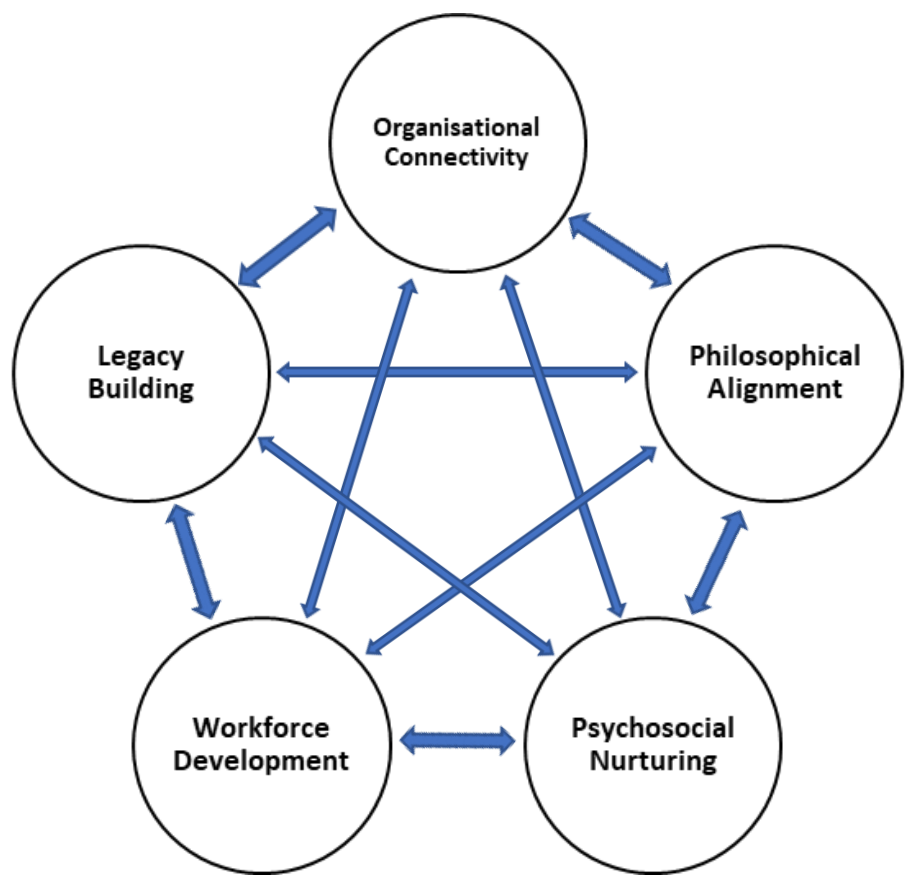
TA was selected as the most appropriate analysis method as it provided the researchers with a flexible means by which to describe, summarise and interpret the data. Here it is important to consider the reflexivity involved in this procedure. In order to answer the research question and dig deeper into the phenomenon of TDEs in professional rugby, the researchers adopted a deductive, critical and constructivist lens by which to unpick and interpret what was going on at the club. In particular, the inductive nature of the study built upon the TD categories identified by Wilkinson and Grecic's (2019) study and the workshop tasks consciously designed to illicit discussion around these topic areas. The critical lens resulted from the desire to make meaning from the participants' responses rather than simply appreciate their experience of their environment. Finally, we applied a constructivist theoretical perspective in order to appreciate how TD topics are understood and framed by each of the respondents.

On reflection the workshop tasks we designed worked effectively in stimulating areas of debate and uncovering layers of both individual and team understanding. The subsequent discussions, with us adopting the role of critical friends and questioning both the teams' knowledge and professional practice, served to highlight many gaps but also identified valuable areas for development. The results of this process and the themes that we actively generated can be seen below.

Clearly this group of staff was very experienced and had worked with some of the best junior players in their region. Furthermore, these coaches had tremendous work experience within their different area of expertise.

**Results**

Below we present and discuss the findings of our data analysis. The major categories generated from the focus group discussions are presented. Each category’s underlying, organising concept is then described with selected quotations provided to enable the reader to better appreciate the particular data that led to the final categories.



**Figure 1.** The Rugby Transition Helix – a thematic analysis of TD concepts and issues.

**Organisational connectivity**

This theme encapsulates and reflects the holistic TDE theory that not only promotes clear linkages within the club top to bottom, but also from the club to its external stakeholders. Here issues were identified such as: lack of handover protocols between the different playing stages; the absence of Director of Rugby’s input lower down the talent pathway; lack of knowledge about First Team culture and KPIs, varied contracts with feeder schools and universities, unclear working



protocols between playing and non-playing support teams, and a lack of engagement with the wide community and players' parents.

During the Developing the Environment workshop task, the lack of integration and utilisation of parental support was identified as a major area of weakness. When reviewing the workshop's diagram, the researchers noted the inclusion of the 'parents' label and probed deeper by asking about the team's experiences of working with parents and what consideration had they given to involve parents at the different stages of the pathway? A participant explained he had been at a club that made a conscious effort to do this, but also, others that tried to side-line parental input,

Yes, I mean, we need to see the other side of the coin as well, I'm not saying that is wrong or anything like that, to involve players parents, but I have seen the two kinds of player development approaches... obviously, I knew which one, sort of like, where I got the most success definitely. One for the kids and it's the one where we share information with the people the players depend on the most... the mums and dads.

His colleague intervened. He had worked in other sports and had noticed TD elements and support that were missing at this club, but which he would like to implement:

I like little things like the resource pack for parents they have in rugby league, it included things like, letting parents know why the coaches were getting players to speak to each other and making them watch and then feeding back to each other, erm, identifying what they thought was good and what they thought they could have improved. Erm... I thought that was just... that was great and it got everyone to buy in to it, erm, rather than saying... the voice of the coach just saying how this should be done. Certainly, informed parents on training approaches.

Members of the group highlighted the prominent challenge for them with parents getting involved with many issues around games and training, that they perceived were having a negative impact on them and the programme. A coach from the group noted,

I've had the conversation about what I do and how parents see it when I started here and it was like, look make sure you're harder on X this year than any other kid because I'd prefer Y's parents not to come up to me and say that your all favouring him because he played for England Academy... that sort of thing.

The group also discussed how a lack of parents' understanding of the game, and how the rugby staff work, often led to small issues being inflated, which ultimately affected their son's performance. A lead coach gave an example,

Parents can see what we do as negative. I'll pull a player aside and tell him why I did it, you know, do parents need to know why? Yes... but they don't need to know how I delivered this do they? I'll give a player a hard time in front of everyone but the reason I gave him a hard time, I'll tell him after, sort of thing, but I don't describe this to

parents... often the player will agree and then like tonight, his mood has changed...I often think if his parents of softened him up and criticised what I did.

Another member gave a further example of this issue when he described his use of weekly best player awards to motivate and reward his players,

I have to be very careful that I don't favour anyone, giving out best players and stuff. You have got to be aware of that because the parents are so sensitive, they pick up on anything, their imagination runs wild and before you know it a divide between players can happen...(The coaching process) is a hard boundary, where you can be too tough on one or too supportive on another (player) but that's because they are all different, different things motivate them and it is these subtle coaching skills parents don't get.

The participants even described situations when unhappy parents had taken things into their own hands and raised an issue with the club management. One coach recalled,

I can remember a great session, despite a poor result and I pulled a player aside to discuss a matter, before I even opened my mouth he asked if I had received a communication from his parents? I said no and asked why? He had been the victim of a bite and while he complained to me, they thought I was too harsh. He had some excessive leg pulling from his teammates that had upset him. I was immediately frustrated that the parents hadn't come to me with the concern rather than contacting (the Academy Manager). I took it personally too but in reflection we have no clear structure around such issues, and I thought my 'come off or carry on' was enough for a rugby player...how do we address this?

One participant intervened here too:

This highlights how roles became muddled, yeah, the parent justified the coach's poor behaviour and the coach explained the need to be unfair in their eyes. This instance highlights how coaches needed unconditional parental support which he did not receive due to fact we don't speak to them...we need to keep the roles clear and separate in the coaching space and the only way to do this is by educating them(the parents).

These examples of the group's interactions with parents and players highlight the importance of the club developing a holistic TDE that values, utilises and maximises the input of all stakeholders in the process. As illuminated also in discussion about the pathway timeline, transferring players from one environment to another, and also when exiting the club, confirmed there is a need for a complex and dynamic system that staff can call upon to quickly generate help in supporting them and/or the players cope with the multifaceted challenges they are likely to face. An organisation that could provide and promote support rapidly in response to any such challenge was a common request from the group. Much theory supports this need and offers suggestions of what such an environment would/should look like. Work by Martindale *et al.* (2005; 2007) emphasised the need for effective TDE's to provide systematic, planned, integrated, long term, inclusive programmes which ensured those within it were consistently sending and receiving coherent messages of

support. Henrikson *et al.* (2010; 2014) suggests a TDE where all interactions between key figures in a player's athletic and non-athletic life is considered to have implications for the holistic development of that person and group. Meanwhile Grecic's model (figure 1) of effective talent pathway management, based upon a club's philosophical congruence and actions, also emphasises many of this study's thematic cross-linkages, such as; the need for a clearly articulated vision and mission (Legacy Building), carefully aligned planning and operations (organisational connectivity), considered workforce education and deployment (workforce development / psychosocial nurturing), and explicit evaluations against agreed performance outcomes (philosophical alignment).

### **Philosophical alignment**

This theme included clusters of data related to the different views, beliefs and models driving coaching and player development at different levels of the club. Particular issues were identified about the lack of consistent and openly communicated factors on which to base the club's talent pathway identification, recruitment, progress and professional practice. There was evident confusion over the vision and mission of the club and how the transition stage fitted in with the developmental focus of the early pathway stages, and the required performance outcomes of the First Team squad. Discussions centred around what type of player and person each pathway stage would see as model examples of their work. This debate focused on the attributes each stage sought to develop, and how these were built upon in later stages. These discussions highlighted a lack of a shared mental model across the pathway and emphasised the difficult position of this transition group as they try to navigate the path between the younger stages' creative and humanistic focus, and the pragmatic, transactional model espoused by the First Team's staff. One coach explained how he has to serve two masters in how he coaches within different parts of the pathway,

It is definitely the hard thing, it's going to be... getting people to have conversations with the hierarchy and stuff like that, it is probably the most difficult thing, coaching that way (Academy and below) is different to how we coach at first team and I have had these conversations and I do want to find like the balance between erm what is right and what is wrong in that sense, well what do they need, what do they want?

Another member added,

When I am me implementing senior coaching style, that is going to be different... yes, I need to stick to it but sometimes you get a little bit kind of scared in a way, I need to... well I know, but I need to get this line right, I need him to run this tactic because he's going to go over to the first team and I suppose yes that is my worry really erm coaching that way.

A sports scientist in the group developed this theme further,

It reflects on us too. If a player can't do what they (First Team coaches) want they come back on us, 'what is this \*\*\*\* you've given us... they can't catch or run, what are you doing over there?

A manager in the group joined in the discussion to support the work of his teammates,

Yes, but if you just did what they want and need the players wouldn't develop like they do. They would just know one way and if that doesn't work for them, what next? So many wouldn't be playing for England now if that is all you did.

Another member of the sports science support team aptly summarised the main issue felt by all the team when he explained,

It's easy for some of us. We know how strong, how fast, how fit the player needs to be to get into the First Team. You guys are working in the dark and the posts are always moving when new players get bought so maybe the first team need to play a different way.

The examples above relate to Rouse and Morris' (1986) work on the importance of shared mental models in teams. Here, it is obvious that the club coaches' ideas, values and beliefs about player development need integrating, not only with each other, but with those responsible for driving the First Team playing style, culture and outcomes. Clarity is required on many aspects of the TD journey, from the markers selected to base player recruitment, selection and de-selection, through concepts of learning and practice design, to relationship management behaviours employed by all those in the pathway. In this context a player moving up an age group or on to first team selection isn't without difficulty. Playing styles, philosophical alignment and luck all play a part. A philosophical statement, however, that is aligned to the club's philosophy would be useful. It would force coaches to examine how well their behaviours align with the overall needs of the players and the TDE the club is striving to create. Philosophical alignment therefore links to other generated themes in so much as it should underpin the actions of those located at all levels in the organisation, offer a clear vision and mission for practice, and drive not only the macro level planning of the club but also the micro level relationships between players and coach. More of this final point below...

### **Psychosocial nurturing**

During the 4 quadrants follow-up task within the Timeline workshop, data emerged highlighting large gaps in the teams' knowledge and appreciation of players' mental, tactical and social skills. What emerged was a lack of bespoke training programmes systematically embedded into the players' development programme focussing on these areas. Great emphasis was evident on the physical and technical areas but apparently at the expense of a more holistic focus on their players' development. Important areas seem to have been overlooked such as the

soft skills of relationship building, communication, and leadership. There was also an absence of a cultural awareness of both the club and the First Team environment to which the players were aspiring. These observations and concerns were voiced not just in respect of the players but of the coaches coming into the club too operating at all levels of the organisation.

During the workshop discussions the group was prompted to dig deeper into their understanding and focus of their players' mental skill development. Discussions about players' self-organisation, and the game model implemented during transition, questioned the need for more of a focus on creativity, resilience, and leadership. A Junior Academy coach responded first,

Erm yes I think there is... this area (transition stage) really does bring some like people to the fore with some developing as leaders, they would have picked up a lot of kind of, within the small sided games becoming like problem solving, you've seen who was the leaders out of the group and you can identify who they were and I think that only encouraged their confidence to take into games and when it did come to backs against the wall or it did get a bit tough, they were the ones that kind of like stood up and players sort of followed their lead, but yes so I think yes, that was definitely part of it.

However other coaches intervened and questioned whether these things just happened or whether the team themselves facilitated their development. One Senior member of the group mused,

When do we (the coaching staff) ever get around to implementing this mental skills model that is directly connected to a game model? If we like how we want to play, we just do it.

At this point the researcher probed,

Do you have a mental skills model? I mean are you periodising your mental skills programme to coincide with your periodic training plan'?

One Senior Academy coach responded,

Not really. We run a goal setting workshop, they are linked on together but there's not much transfer, I think if we can implement a model during practice, I think not only does it give players a better experience, a bit more enjoyment within the game which is important because if they're not enjoying it then they're not going to be sticking at it during games or even when training gets tough.

Of course, psychological factors are incredibly important to athletes' development and research has identified the development of psychological skills as determinants for elite performance. The work of Orlick and Partington (1998) identified psychological factors that distinguished successful athletes from their less successful counterparts, whilst Gould *et al.* (2002) found that successful Olympic athletes were more committed, focused and engaged in extensive mental preparation than less successful performers. More recently research by Aine MacNamara and

Dave Collins has proposed a Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs) model (e.g. McNamara *et al.*, 2010, Collins, MacNamara and McCarthy, 2016) that provides the foundation and framework for coaches to work on in developing their players' psycho-social and psycho-behavioural skills which can offer support as players try to navigate the challenges they will face as they progress into elite professional sport. Embedding such a model and periodising its delivery over the course of a player's career, pathway stage, or season is not an easy task. It is here that Psychosocial Nurturing links to the other generated themes from our study. Such an important fundamental of player development has obvious implications for the Philosophical Alignment, Organisational Connectivity, and Legacy Building of the club. Here however we note the key role that Workforce Development will have if positive gains are to be made in this area. In particular we point to work by Collins, Collins, Macnamara and Jones (2014) which highlighted Academy coaches' inability to articulate mental skill training for players and certainly emphasised the gap in support for academy players while they transition through the empty space between talent pathway stages.

### **Coaching workforce development**

This theme spanned various environments and topics covered in the workshops including how Pathway Coaches, Volunteers, the Transition Coaches themselves, the Managers and Sport Scientists could and should be best supported in their work and careers. Clusters were formed around the different needs evident for those operating within the different stages of the pathway, and how these requirements needed to reflect the agreed player attributes and game plan being explicitly developed at that stage. Through discussions it was clear that this theme was the most connected and integrated with the others and would ultimately underpin the success or otherwise of the club's future transition model.

When the workshop conversations moved onto how the desired environment could be best developed and what this would require, a number of issues were highlighted that would only be resolved if a planned and coherent programme of staff development and training could be established. For example, a manager in the group explained,

I think going back to the whole development model, it helped with that in terms of - this is how we will encourage them to play the game... then how can we encourage our coaches to coach them to be able to play the game in this way... but I am not sure how much our coaches understand this.

A Senior coach explained the need to focus training and development on all the coaches in the pathway. He noted the need to be aware of,

... coaching them (coaches further down the pathway) to coach how to play the game in the future, not the game of the past that they may have played, and not the game of

the present (that they are coaching now). When challenged as to why this was an important part of the club development her replied, “Well... (this is needed because) we are coaching our players to play the game of the future”.

Another member of the group seemed less sure however,

Erm... but with (our playing style) I don't think we have got the flexibility to be able to do that...yes, lining the coaching development with learning and development again is critical for the way that we are going.

He was also realistic in his reflection of what is currently happening at the club and the mis-match between the coaching philosophies of those in the pathway with the First team staff,

I think it (considering the development needs of staff) will probably cause more meetings because it is new and are we in fact aligned to the senior coach's views on this.....we all know that we are not.

When challenged on how the group needed to proceed to improve the environment at the club and the development of all those within it, a Senior coach made a telling request,

I hope one of the biggest things we can take away from this is we actually need to put in a realistic action plan for those things, things like coaching to the coaches (so that it can actually be made to happen)... certainly a lot of that focuses around (our junior programme) and actually (the need for) having a well-established connection with senior teams' philosophies.

These examples highlight a number of interconnected issues which link closely this theme with Philosophical Alignment, Legacy Building and Organisational Connectivity. Linking back to our original paper we noted that many academies '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' (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019:159). Here, again, clarity over the role, vision, game model and philosophy of the programme would aid all involved and could shape the type of training and information sharing the coaches describe above.

By identifying the skills required for success in the club's bespoke TDE, learning and support could be clearly targeted. What this would look like and how it could be facilitated would however need further consideration. Within the focus group discussions participants indicated that their current coaching/personal development programmes provided intentional learning opportunities through nationally recognised professional qualifications, along with years of unintentional experience within professional rugby. Unfortunately, neither of which were coupled with reflective processes around the TDE they are actively involved in. Even when opportunity had arisen to align learning episodes and professional practice, this had

not been taken. For example, a senior coach explained how he had been sent on a mental skills training PCDE's seminar. Although he had found it interesting, "there was no follow up and I've not done anything with it". Wilkinson and Grecic (2019:159) magnified this issue when they stated specifically about this transition domain that the Academy Manager, players' and coaches' 'own personal development is a poorly resourced gap'. Indeed, it has been shown that coaches prefer to learn from a variety of sources (Lyle and Cushion 2017) and that efforts could be made to guide academy coaches that may allow them to potentially transform their current understandings and experiences into new forms of life that can support each one of the generated themes (such as in figure 1).

### **Legacy building**

This theme encapsulated discussions linked to the purpose of the programme, the group's mission, vision and desired outputs. Linking back to other topics relating to the modelling of an archetypal player that reflected the club's values, stakeholder engagement, coach development and education, debate moved toward the future and the impact the group were having at the club. The group agreed their overarching intention was to provide a great player/learner experience and an aspiration to develop good people that would go on to represent the club in the wider world.

Lots of good debate took place about the Organisational Connectivity i.e. the stages, linkages and positive experiences whilst transferring players from one age group /environment to another, right through to senior professional level and beyond. The researchers therefore tried to dig deeper by probing the group on how they could best do this, as well as gaining wider support from the Senior Management and owners at the club. One manager initially responded,

So the plan that we should be putting together, should be about that, us actually evidencing the financial benefit, the advantages for the club in taking that approach in terms of its engagement with the whole internal community, part of that virtual cycle of engaging the community, supplying the academy, supplying the first team and then getting more people playing in the end so it is how... the challenge now is for the wider club to understand the importance of getting that right, getting those transition programmes right and understanding that they have got to develop a whole person because that is what... players parents, family, communities want to hear, it is the heads, hearts and minds.

All group members agreed with the sentiment of building an inclusive, holistic development model that supported players right through their careers. As discussions deepened the group identified issues and examples that they needed to consider. One of the coaches shared a conversation he had had the previous week about the effectiveness and level of support he was offering his players and whether this changed as the players progressed though the pathway to the higher levels.



We had a discussion this week about X and Y (two brothers who are players) still academy lads, do we still look after them as an academy because actually the first team players play for their country at the top level?... well yes, they are 18 years old! They have still got a lot of stuff that they need wrapping around them and you know that is important as well for that message to go out there because you know they are the people that could fall off the cliff if we don't keep looking after them now. I don't think they will because they are well rounded guys but... you never know what could happen while they are in that space.

The researchers probed deeper into the type of support currently on offer and the stage of development this support model or framework was at. A Senior coach responded:

I think so, one of things from banging away here is we don't actually put in a realistic action plan in for those things (long term development, support for transition, and an exit strategy).

Later the same coach considered how the group could progress from this point in time, with what they had shared and reflected upon as a group,

Well because it is a new area or even a new role and you want to do everything first time round, realistically we are not...so I think there are certain elements we need to (focus on). Focuses around scholarship to academy and actually having a plan of what do we need to do this year and then we can build on. We need to decide what (are) our fundamentals we need to get in place first and foremost and then where do we go after that.

This theme could be described by an aspirational term provided repeatedly by different members of the group; we aim to develop 'good people'. What this means, and how it can be achieved, were explored within this theme's interconnections with Philosophical Alignment, Psychosocial Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Organisational Connectivity. An interesting focus however was the group's intrinsic motivation and their hope to build long-term positive relationships with each of their players. With this aspiration in mind we refer the reader to Côte and Gilbert's (2009) integrative definition of sports coaching, who proposed that the quality of such coach-athlete relationships is determined by the degree of closeness, commitment to the relationship, complementarity, and co-orientation between both parties. These attributes were highlighted in the group's responses to many of the workshop tasks, especially in the type of environment and working relationships they aspired to create. Such an environment also supports the basic need of every athlete to belong to a social group whose members are mutually supportive (Carron, 1982). However reflecting this theme's linkage with Workforce Development, and Organisational Connectivity, Williams and Kendall's (2007:1157) research in similar sporting domains found that 'more work needs to be done to facilitate this transfer of knowledge effectively', and that 'better communication may be needed for areas such as sport science, to have any significant applied value'. If such coach

knowledge and communication could be embedded in a formal training and succession plan it could form a work development guide and inform the evaluation of both staff and players.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to dig deeper into the knowledge and behaviours of those working in rugby Talent Development. Our previous study (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019) identified a clear mis-match in TD theory to practice within this environment. This present study therefore sought to explore the ideas, opinions, beliefs and reflections of those rugby professionals who had a clear responsibility for player development. This was in order to verify, disprove or identify additional areas of interest from our previous findings.

The Academy stage of a local professional club was targeted as they are directly accountable for players' transition from junior to adult professional status. A focus group method was determined the most effective means of gaining group views of current practice. These focus groups took the form of a TD Workshop delivered by the researchers in order to prompt consideration of the key themes from the previous study. Findings supported our initial work as the group identified clear gaps in their professional practice relating to Organisational Connectivity, Philosophical Alignment, Psychosocial Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Legacy Building. These findings support a wide body of research that promote the effective implementation, management and communication of numerous operational and humanistic concepts that underpin these major themes. At this point however, we must make clear our own position as the researchers as we conducted our Thematic Analysis and generated these themes. Data were scrutinised and evaluated from the position of informed rugby coaches, TD practitioners and researchers. We are informed by TD theory that promotes best practice in elite sporting environments by nurturing and maintaining truly holistic TDEs. We both consciously hold a sophisticated epistemological stance which in this rugby context promotes creativity in learning and the generation of new ideas in order to nurture the constant evolution of the sport.

Despite the findings from this study closely characterising those from our previous work, this could be considered a positive outcome, we must consider how the themes we have generated now add to the debate about TDE in rugby, and how transition is managed? An interesting finding from the process itself was the attitude of the participants. All greatly valued the workshop exercises and quickly realised their collective weaknesses and gaps in knowledge and application. All commented on the importance of taking part in more similar activities and hoped that this would simply be the start of their learning journey. They commented on their many

previous learning experiences and their lack of pragmatic TD application and/or relevance to their specific transition stage needs. In fact, Workforce Development was the strongest theme to be developed and highlighted the immediate need for further education not just for players, coaches and officials, at all levels of the club, BUT most importantly, for themselves as transition professionals in order to maximise their impact on this stage.

What transpired from the whole focus group exercise was the pivotal role that the Academy Coaching Team and manager were being challenged to play across many stages of the club's pathway, not just within the transition point for which they had initially been employed. Indeed, during the workshops the Academy Manager commented on his evolving role in the club and recognised that he, in particular, would be the one tasked with creating and developing an effective TDE to ensure positive transition for all the club's players. He requested additional support and advice on how best to implement a bespoke model for his club and this will therefore guide our future work in this area.

## References

- Abrahams, A., Collins, D. and Martindale, R. (2006) The coaching schematic: validation through expert coach consensus. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 24, 6, 549-564.
- Alfermann, D. and Stambulova, N. (2007) Career transitions and career termination (pp. 712-736). In, Tenenbaum, G. and Eklund, R.C. (Eds.) *Handbook of sport psychology*. Wiley, New York.
- Balyi, I. (2002) Long-term athlete development: The system and solutions. *Faster, Higher, Stronger* 14, 6-9.
- Bloom, B.S. (1985) *Developing talent in young people*. Ballantine, New York.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research Psychology*, 3, 1, 77-101.
- Breen, R.L. (2006) A practical guide to focus group research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30, 3, 463-475.
- Burke, S.M., Carron, A.V. and Eys, M.A. (2005) Adults' preferences for physical activity context. [Manuscript in preparation].
- Collins, D.J., MacNamara, A. and McCarthy, N. (2016). Putting the bumps in the rocky road: optimizing the pathway to excellence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, article 1482.
- Collins, R., Collins, D., MacNamara, A. and Jones, M.I. (2014) Change of plans: An evaluation of the effectiveness and underlying mechanisms of successful talent transfer. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32, 17, 1621-1630.
- Carron, A.V. (1982) Cohesiveness in sport groups: interpretations and considerations. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 4, 1, 123-138.
- Côté, J., Macdonald, D.J., Baker, J. and Abernethy, B. (2006) When 'where' is more important than 'when': birthplace and birthdate effects on the achievement of sporting expertise. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 24, 10, 1065-1073.

- Côte, J. and Gilbert, W. (2009) An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 4, 1, 93-119.
- Côté, J., Hancock, D.J., Abernethy, B. (2014) Nurturing talent in youth sport (pp. 22-33). In, Papaioannou, A.G. and Hackfort, D. (Eds) *Routledge companion to sport and exercise psychology*. Routledge, New York.
- Cresswell, S. and Eklund, R. (2006) The nature of player burnout in rugby: key characteristics and attributions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 18, 3, 219-239.
- Cushion, C. and Jones, R. (2001) A systematic observation of professional top-level youth soccer coaches. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 24, 1, 1-23.
- Cushion, C., Armour, K. and Jones, R. (2006) Locating the coaching process in practice: models 'for' and 'of' coaching. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 11, 1, 83-99.
- Ericsson, K.A. (2006) The influence of experience and deliberate practice on the development of superior expert performance (pp: 35-44). In, Ericsson, K.A., Charness, N., Feltovich P.J. and Hoffman R.R. (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.
- Gagnè, F. (2000) Understanding the complex choreography of talent development through DMGT-based analysis (pp: 66-69). In, Heller, K.A., Mönks, F.J., Subotnik, R. and Sternberg R.J. *International handbook of giftedness and talent* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Pergamon, Oxford.
- Gould, D., Diffenbach, K. and Moffett, A. (2002) Psychological characteristics and their development in Olympic champions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 1, 172-204.
- Hall, E., Gray, S. and Sproule, J. (2015) The microstructure of coaching practice: behaviours and activities of an elite rugby union head coach during preparation and competition. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 34, 10, 896-905.
- Henriksen, K., Stambulova, N. and Roessler, K.K. (2010) Successful talent development in track and field: Considering the role of environment. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 20, 2, 122-132.
- Hill, A., MacNamara, Á and Collins, D. (2015) Psycho-behaviour based features of talent development in rugby union: a coach's perspective. *The Sport Psychologist*, 29, 3, 201-212.
- Jenkins, S. (2018) Working with coaches and their teams in youth and collegiate sport in the USA: An interview with Dr Andy Gillham. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 13, 3, 305-314.
- Jones, R. and Mahoney, J. (2014) On the transition into elite rugby league: perceptions of players and coaching staff. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 3,1, 28-45.
- Larsson, H., Nyberg, G. (2017) 'It doesn't matter how they move really, as long as they move.' Physical education teachers on developing their students' movement capabilities. *Physical Education Sport Pedagogy*, 22, 2, 137-149.
- Liampnttong, P. (2011) *Focus group methodology: principles and practice*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Lyle, J. (2002) *Sports coaching concepts: A framework for coaches' behaviour*. Routledge, London.
- Lyle, J. and Cushion, C. (2017) *Sports coaching concepts: A framework for coaches' practice*. Routledge, London.

- Martindale, R.J.J., Collins, D. and Daubney, J. (2005) Talent development: A guide for practice and research within sport. *Quest*, 57, 2, 353-375.
- Martindale, R.J.J., Collins, D. and Abraham, A. (2007) Effective talent development: the elite coach perspective in UK sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 19, 2, 187-206.
- McNamara, A., Button, A. and Collins, D. (2010) The role of psychological characteristics in facilitating the pathway to elite performance. *The Sport Psychologist*, 24, 1, 52-73.
- Morgan, D. (2015) *Dyadic interviews*. Routledge, London.
- Orlick, T. and Partington, J. (1988) Mental links to excellence. *The Sport Psychologist*, 2, 2, 105-130.
- Rothwell, M., Rumbold, J. and Stone, J. (2018) Exploring British adolescent rugby league players' experiences of professional academies and dropout. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 18, 2, 485-501.
- Smithson, J. (2000) Using and analysing focus groups: limitations and possibilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3, 1, 103-119.
- Stambulova, N. (2009) Talent development in sport: A career transitions perspective (pp. 63-74). In, Tsung-Min Hung, E., Lidor, R. and Hackfort, D. (Eds.) *Psychology of sport excellence*. Fitness Information Technology, Morgantown, WV.
- Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.N. and Rock, D.W. (2007) *Focus groups: theory and practice*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Taylor, J. and Collins, D. (2019) 'Shoulda, coulda, didnae' why don't high potential players make it? *The Sport Psychologist*, 33, 2, 85-96.
- Tourangeau, R. and Smith, T.W. (1996) Asking sensitive questions: the impact of data collection, question format, and question context. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, 275-304.
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, J.S. and Sinagub, J.M. (1996) *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Wagstaff, C., Fletcher, D. and Hanton, S. (2012) Exploring emotion abilities and regulation strategies in sport organizations. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 1, 268-282.
- Williams, S.J. and Kendall, L. (2007) Perceptions of elite coaches and sports scientists of the research needs for elite coaching practice. *Journal of Sports Sciences* 25, 14, 1577-1586
- Wilkinson, S. and Grecic, D. (2019) Talent development for professional rugby league: observations and analysis from a career in rugby's high-performance environment. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 13, 1, 153-174.
- Wormhoudt, R., Savelsbergh, G., Teunissen, J. and Davids, K. (2018) *The athletic skills model: optimizing talent development through movement education*. Routledge, London.

## JQRSS Author Profiles

**Stuart Wilkinson<sup>1</sup>** 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, Wakefield, Newcastle).

**David Grecic**<sup>2</sup> is a Professor in Sport, Health and Physical Activity at the University of Central Lancashire. His work in talent development spans both physical education and amateur / professional sport.

## Reviewer Comments

This research renders visible the ongoing need for learning and support in what more broadly may be understood as Coach Education. This need is especially evident for highly ranked players as they ascend to the first team (and descend out of it) as well as CPD for their coaches (Continuing Professional Development), which keeps pace with the needs of their players. Advancing a coherent plan of coach education, as is proffered here, can also become a competency base for extending the aspirations of the club and team success. There is a Bourdierian feel to the notion of workforce development in this research which brings some useful order to comprehend the ‘professional development’ being put forward, especially in the model presented, which establishes a foothold for these relative outsiders in a competitive sports environment (the outsiders being the authors; researchers as coach consultants in this instance). The work of John Bale (2013) *A Life in Sport* illustrates how the currency of labour can be interpreted through sport, which may be a relevant avenue to explore in this project. Stemming from this, are other concepts which seem to be pertinent here; the sense of duty, commitment to others and responsibility (individual and group) which may be fruitful facets of workforce development to critique with these professionals in their respective roles, duties, obligations and expectations. Transitioning up and down through the ranks for these players seems to relate to a kind of social mobility, requiring a good deal more than physical skills to cope at a higher level, which the coaches dialogue featured above reflects. That is, there appears to be a significant element of social bias, opinion and almost a gambling flavour by those coaches / managers who may ‘take a risk’ on moving a player up or down in a team. While physical ability is one measure, the social influences and opportunitites whereby transition occurs seems haphazard and somewhat whimsical. Those players have to earn their place so to speak, which may only be achieved if the decision maker values the work being performed by a given player. This is where this research might seemingly have major positive impacts on the ground, making a difference to peoples lives in high level sport, coaches, players and support staff, because all parties are more aware - educated through their vested interests - to support the vision, but also to enjoy being in a balanced, fair and professional working environment... or ‘TDE’, and hopefully be on the winning team.

Bale, J. (2013) *A life in sport and other things*. MMU centre for Rsearch in to Coaching, Manchester.

