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Into the Abyss: developing a bespoke athlete transition model for professional rugby. Part 2: investigating a case-study environment to guide practice

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Keywords: *talent development, performance, culture, academy*

Abstract

Using the C.A.R.E. theoretical framework developed in Part 1 of this study, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with specialist transition coaches in order to inform the development of a bespoke athlete transition model for their professional rugby club. Findings identified many common psychomotor and psychosocial factors for successful player transition from the Academy stage to full professional contract. Four superordinate concepts were built from this data: (i) knowledge and understanding of team dynamics, (ii) expected player competencies; (iii) positive behaviours for modelling; (iv) self-awareness and resilience. On the basis of our research to date, we suggest the future transition model needs to support players develop awareness of self, and awareness of context. Further analysis of the case-study environment highlighted important cultural influences that will impact successful transition and must underpin the club's future strategies and action plans.

Introduction

With the objective of developing a bespoke athlete transition model for a professional rugby club in the north of England, Part 1 of this study sought to investigate the area of talent development in sport. The Academy level (16-21 year olds) was the focus of this exploration. In particular, Part 1 uncovered numerous elements that are required to best shape young players' successful progression and integration into professional sport. Analysis of existing talent development theory identified a range of TD influences that needed to be further explored. These included:

- models and guides: (Araújo and Davids, 2011; Bailey and Morley, 2006; Balyi and Hamilton, 2004; Bloom and Sosniak, 1985, Côté, 1999; Gagné, 2004; Gulbin, Crozer, Morley and Weissensteiner, 2013; Henriksen, 2010; Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005)

- talent development professional practice from a variety of sports: (Henriksen, Larsen and Christensen, 2014; Holt and Mitchell, 2006; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen and Christensen, 2013; Van Yperen, 2009; Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams and Philippaerts, 2008; Williams and Reilly, 2000)
- and rugby specific examples: (Hill, MacNamara and Collins, 2015; Jones, Mahoney and Gucciardi, 2014; Rothwell, Rumbold and Stone 2018).

These items were collated and organised around the second author's athlete development model (Grecic, 2017, 2019) to establish the C.A.R.E Transition Model to guide this investigation.

As noted in Part 1, the management and operation of the transition stage is deemed crucial for long term athlete development (Stambulova, 2009) and bears great influence on the athlete's future career (Taylor and Collins, 2018). Therefore, the aims of this research study were two-fold. Firstly, to investigate current practice most relevant to successful talent development transition at the case-study rugby club. Secondly, to analyse any gaps in provision and identify potential opportunities for learning at the club, its staff and players. Ultimately said learning will help inform and develop a bespoke transition model and may be useful for other clubs who operate in similar environments.

Case study club

As noted in Part 1 this study takes place at a professional rugby club in the North of England, UK. This study is part of a larger project to determine and enhance all elements relating to the club's talent development processes and systems. Previous work has seen the club revise their holistic player development model for younger players (13-16 year olds) in their DPP pathway (Developing Player Programme) and Junior Academy (16-18 year olds), developing their own 'DNA' framework. The club competes in the highest tier of domestic competition in England and has a Professional playing squad composed of many UK and International 'capped' players (those that have achieved full representative honours playing for their country) as well as locally developed players who have progressed internally at the club. Following the club's new ownership there has been an even greater focus on developing local talent and an aspirational target that 75% of the professional playing squad will graduate from the club's own academy by 2025. As noted above, in order to facilitate this objective, the club had recently reshaped its development pathway and now sought to determine the most aligned and effective rugby transition model to maximise the numbers of Academy players progressing into the first team squad.

Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA was adopted for this study as, according to Smith and Osborn (2008) it aims to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds. The currency for an IPA study is the meanings that experiences and events hold for participants. The approach is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's lifeworld; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's perception or account of an event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the event itself. This study sought to enable an understanding of the experiences of the participants and gain an insiders' perspective (Conrad, 1987) into their epistemology for which IPA methodology has been well utilised (Smith, 2011).

Methods

Participants

In accordance with IPA guidelines (Smith and Osborn, 2007) and a case study research design (Jones, 2014), four coaches were selected as 'key informants' (Jones, 2014) based on their current role at the rugby club and their experience of elite transition activities in professional Rugby with 16-20-year-old males.

Sample criteria:

- Ex-professional rugby players for a minimum of 10 years
- Played international senior rugby union
- Contracted at an English Tier 1 club as a player
- First-hand experience of the transition process for 16-20-year-old males, as a player, at an English Tier 1 rugby club
- First-hand experience of the transition process for 16-20-year-old males, as a coach, at an English Tier 1 rugby union club for a minimum of 2 years
- UKCC Level 3 rugby coaches qualified for a minimum of 2 years
- As such the participants formed a homogenous but high-level sample on which to base the research.

Procedure

Each coach gave their informed consent to contribute to the project. All coaches' responses have been anonymised; denoted as coaches C1 to C4 in the text. Any personal information that may identify them was removed / replaced. Arrangements were made to conduct the interviews at a mutually convenient date and time, at the rugby club's high-performance training centre, where all the coaches work. The interviews were carried out by the first author, the rugby club's Academy Manager who has worked in the field of professional rugby for the last 10 years.

Data Collection

Designing the interview guide

The interview sought to explore the experiences of the club's transition coaches. It was hoped that they would be best placed to interpret current operations at the club. Equally, it was hoped they would be able to reflect on their journey through the development pathway into professional rugby, their successes and struggles, as well as the key elements and critical success factors for successful transition.

In order to drive these discussions, a four-section interview guide was created for this study based the C.A.R.E. Transition Model developed in Part 1 of this study, targeting the areas of Cognitive, Athletic, Relational, and Emotional influencers on Transition. At first a general feeling for the environment was sought followed by more structured questions and prompts around the four predetermined areas. Examples of the starter questions included;

- *'In your experience what are the most important factors for young players to successfully progress into professional rugby?'*
- *'What are the biggest challenges young players will face?'*,
'How best can we support players during this time?', etc.

These were followed up by more targeted questions such as,

- *'What mental stresses can a player expect when transitioning into senior professional rugby?'*,
- *'Are there any physical expectations of players succeeding in professional rugby?'*,
- *'What interpersonal skills will players need to develop when working in a First Team environment?'*,
- *'What skills will players need to deal with the emotional pressure that comes with being a professional rugby player?'*

Probes were used throughout the interviews to help the researcher explore the comments provided by the participant (Patton, 2002). Examples of such probes and prompts based on the model included;

- *'Can you explain a little more about the playing policy?'*,
- *'What do you mean when you say training needs to be at a higher intensity?'*
- *'Could you give me an example of what that would look like?'*,
- *'It is interesting that you use the word 'intelligence' – how do you describe that, what does it look like in training?'*,
- *'When have you seen a player do that?'*,
- *'Why do you think that happens?'*,
- *'How would you support the player there?'*

Interview procedure

Following introductions and an orientation period, the interviews were conducted and audio recorded in order that rapport and the flow of the interview conversations were not impeded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim. The Coach interviews took place over 2 days and the interviews lasted between 55 and 75 minutes.

Trustworthiness

Two techniques, bracketing and member checking, were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Bracketing describes how the researcher will consider the influence of personal views, values and experiences on the data collection and analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Although IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher, this should be interpretative and avoid imposing views formed purely through their own experience (Nicholls *et al.*, 2005; Winter and Collins, 2015). A reflexive journal was utilised by the researcher to assist with this. Member checking is the process of sending a copy of their transcript to the participants in order to assess whether the themes identified accurately captured their input and experience whilst also providing an opportunity for elaboration or clarification of any points (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). All participants were also provided with a summary of the findings. None of the transcripts or findings were changed following the member checking process.

Data analysis

Following the IPA procedures suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008) and further defined by Smith *et al.* (2009) the transcribed interviews were read and re-read several times as the researcher engaged in an interpretative relationship with the transcript to gain a sense of meaning. This follows an idiographic approach to analysis, beginning with particular examples to recognise and build themes, and slowly working up to more general categorization or claims (Smith *et al.*, 1995).

Using the left-hand margin of the transcript, notes were written to describe what was interesting about what the respondent said. In the next read-through comments were also recorded in the right-hand margin alongside any significant notes, in an attempt to summarize similarities and differences, make connections and begin preliminary interpretations. Next these comments were extracted, listed as emerging themes on a sheet of paper chronologically based on the sequence with which they came up in the transcript. In trying to make sense of the connections between the emerging themes, the next stage involved a more analytical or theoretical ordering which resulted in themes being clustered together and concepts beginning to emerge.

Subordinate Themes	Superordinate Concepts
Individual Roles and Place in the Squad Unit and Team Roles linked to Game Plan Complex Terminology Support Network Exploration	Knowledge and Understanding of Team Dynamics
Learnability Mental and Physical Capacity Work Ethic Discipline and Respect	Expected Player Competencies
Humility Individual Responsibility Honest and Accountable Determination and Confidence	Positive Behaviours for Modelling
Personal Status Self-Perception Mental and Physical Self-Assessment Social Skills and Relationship Building	Self-Awareness and Resilience

Figure 1. Professional Rugby Transition Analysis Themes and Concepts

A table of emerging themes (figure 1), now ordered coherently, was constructed to capture and identify the strongest views on the topics by the interviewee. The table and the process itself highlighted the clusters of themes, and these clusters were in turn given the title of, and represent, superordinate themes. An identifier (a tag) was

added to locate key utterances in each transcript. That is, where the quote was initially made in relation to the CARE concept. Finally, patterns across the 4 transcripts were studied for connections and conflicts. Consistent with the iterative process of IPA, as the analysis continued, earlier transcripts were reviewed in the light of these new superordinate themes, and instances from those earlier transcripts were included in the ongoing analysis. Once each transcript had been analysed by the interpretative process, a final table of superordinate concepts was constructed.

Results

Following the initial analysis, 166 individual coding units were identified. These were brought together sequentially which created 20 emergent data themes. These were then theoretically ordered into subordinate themes and amalgamated into 4 higher-order superordinate concepts as illustrated in figure 1 above. The results offered evidence from all participants. Following IPA guidance on what constitutes an acceptable and valid range of data, quotations from at least 50 percent of the sample for each of the study questions are presented below (Smith, 2011). In most instances, fewer but longer quotes have been selected to demonstrate the richness of the data in the participants' own words.

Knowledge and understanding of team dynamics

Possibly the most obvious requirement for a player transitioning into the professional environment is for them to know their rugby roles, understand the terminology and learn their club's playbook. These are the processes they must become familiar with and were evident in many of the interviewee responses. Important here too was the ability to identify who to go to in order to clarify any gaps in knowledge, and remedy this quickly so as not to look out of place in the team and/or negatively impact team performance. Coach C1 explained some of these complexities that young players entering the First Team environment will face.

I think that's important to remember that they are individuals that play within a unit, that plays within a microunit, that plays within a team. So, a whole chain of things (are expected from them) and we just go straight from the individual to the team when there's a load of little facets in between that we tend to miss.

Coach C3 noted also that the players needed to understand what this new environment was asking from them,

So, when they're stepping up into first team training, so what are the calls? What's the terminology? What are the principles of how we play? That certainly, I would say that's a heavy load. An understanding of those in an applied sense as well, because it's all right having terminology, but when it's applied, does it look different to what is stated on the paper?

Another important theme that arose relating to understanding the processes was not only to recognise the support network at the players disposal but to utilise it if

they are struggling with the amount and pace that the information is given. Coach C3 highlighted that many players are often oblivious to this, but this is a valuable tool to support their transition.

They need to learn the processes itself, but they need to learn there's a support system that's around the academy, use it... it's just like, 'Oh, how come that wasn't there when I was there?' 'Well, actually, it was, but you chose not to use it.

Expected player competencies

There was significant conversation with all of the coaches around the capacity to; receive new information in different ways, process the information quickly, retain that information and then be able to deliver back what they have learned almost instantaneously on the pitch – what we have termed Learnability. C4 described how this expectation is very different to many players' experiences during their time further down the talent pathway.

I think there is a distinct difference in how stuff is delivered here to how they would be... have stuff delivered academically and in other rugby programmes that are external (to us). So, I think how information is given and delivered in a very simple manner by all of our coaches. Well, there's a lot of information that needs to be retained under pressure on the pitch and it's delivered differently than school because you don't have an opportunity to fail, just get it right.

Possibly the most pertinent quote made regarding what is expected of these players was made by C2, who described the ability to be able to adapt quickly,

The biggest thing is them being able to learn, adapt real quick and know their stuff even though their skill level's not quite - potentially not up to it.

Physical and mental stereotypes were also explored by coaches. An interesting emphasis is presented below regarding the first physical body shape impressions set by the player and the expectation for the player to have the physical capacity to meet the increased training load. Coach C2 thought this was a critical aspect of the player's acceptance into their new environment.

Firstly, they need to look as close to their finish product as possible because it's accelerated for us. They need to physically be able to train three times a day with men because they don't slow down.

C2 went on to explain the importance of being physically 'fit for purpose' in order to meet the specific playing style of the club, as well as the implications for failing to meet the club's exacting standards,

So here, the emphasis is about being an athlete and being able to move... Yeah. So be fit, as in aerobically fit, and able to move around the pitch while still being strong, with some 18 year olds, they're not going to be that, but by 21 or 22, they have to be that... to suit this environment because if they're not, we take the next bloke or we buy someone in.

Many other expectations from the First Team coaching group were also discussed as having great bearing on a player's successful integration into the squad. For example, Coach C4 explained,

I think the ability to consistently work hard is a 'given' in a professional rugby environment. However, it is important that the player understands how to communicate their efforts through actions as well as verbally. The ability to develop, earn and develop trust with coaches I think is really important. So, coaches do like certain things. If they know that a player is trustworthy in terms of their attitude, their willingness to get better, the way they come and seek improvement, I think that's an important skill for them.

Possibly one of the most challenging expectations for the new players in the environment is the ability to be able to keep pushing themselves forward, to be noticed positively by the coaches and senior players, whilst showing consideration and respect to senior players. C2 explains and provides an example of some current successes,

Well, in this environment (the players) have to be hard working and determined. Yeah, okay. So, (X and Y) obviously done really, really well. So, (X and Y) were very much would speak when spoken to, very polite but also very, very hard working. And they didn't have to interact too much with older players, first team players, because they let them play and do the talk in their training. So, they were always the best performers on the pitch and they just fit in seamlessly because of their actions and what they've done. I think that's the biggest thing for young lads coming in is if they can learn that quick.

Positive behaviours for modelling

Although some of the subordinate behaviours for modelling listed in the results table may be similar the nuances between them are significant and acknowledged in the quotes presented below. Coach C1 explained what he wanted to see in a player moving up to the first team environment.

Humble and honest, first and foremost. You've got to be humble, not big headed and piss people off because if you can't back it up, then you're in trouble. You've got to be honest, honest with yourselves and honest with those around you and not being frightened to share things rather than just scroll everything away.

Attitude, everybody says, 'Oh, if he works hard and he's got the right attitude,' well, what's the right attitude? What is the right attitude? Right attitude is being humble, is being honest, and wanting to be successful for the person next to you rather than for you. I think that's the big thing. This is an old cliché, it's not about I or me, it's about the team and the environment.

Coach C3 was a little more forthright in what behaviours were needed to get players noticed and earn the right to be selected in the First Team squad. He explained a player needed to be seen to,

Train your ass off, prove yourself, and then you're going to get your shot. Prove yourself again and then if (the Director of Rugby) is happy with you, then it just becomes the game of...you know, to be consistent so he just keeps on picking you.

C3 did recognise however how hard it was for young players to break into the First Team squad and the complex competitive nature of professional rugby. He explained the advice that he gives to players is,

To continue to improve yourself and show that you're willing to fight for what you want. So, we talk about these young lads being more professional than professionals because that's what they get judged on.

From this data we may summarise that the behaviours needed to survive and thrive in this environment as being;

- humility - the ability to recognise areas for personal development,
- accountability - the willingness to accept your weaknesses and actually do something about it,
- honesty - a player's approach to working hard to rectify any weaknesses,
- determination - the relentless commitment to see the task through and
- character - defined by the enthusiastic attitude and adaptability required to make a success of a situation regardless of the adversity.

Self-awareness and resilience

This section evoked more emotional dialogue than any other as significant emphasis was placed upon understanding the players' requirement of intrapersonal skills and the processes needed to develop these. For example, Coach C3 noted,

I think they need to learn how to focus on the now, like the present. Like, it's good to see goals, but you're not going to get to your goals if you don't take those minor steps you need to instead of taking like a big jump, top of the mountain and then falling, just gradually improve.

Coach C1 developed this theme by explaining that players actually need to look inwards but also outwards to appreciate how others were perceiving them,

Players need self-awareness, self-awareness in appearance and attitude. So, how do you think you come across and are you aware of that?

He also linked this theme to the social intelligence and wider context appreciation of the players. To explain this, he developed his idea by providing a vivid metaphor...

I think the first bit of the mind always goes, 'Well, you 'effing tossers. Some of you stood in dogshit and it smells and by the time you're going around the room, you then realise it isn't them. You look at your own feet and you're the one who stepped in dogshit. It's that ability to self-appraise before looking at others. Maybe, yeah, 'my bad', or if it isn't your bad, then accept it and then talk about it afterwards.

The coaches developed this theme of social intelligence and how it conveyed considerable weighting. For instance, they stated the importance of players' interpersonal skills in relation to their status within the squad and the relationships that they build. Coach C2 gave the following example,

So, yeah, the big thing, especially in this environment, is they're going to have to learn who they can speak to and how they speak to them, how they respond to that, which would be different to what they'll have had in the last two years of school. And even a third-year academy lad, if he's not played too much, still has to be able to recognise different kinds of relationships for what they are and how they work.

C4 continued with this theme stating,

They come into a professional environment where you're getting paid, relationships can become more transactional in terms of you deliver this, this person then likes you, you then can achieve and move on to the next step. And, that's with the players—for somebody who's not particularly streetwise or socially aware, they can probably miss opportunities if you look at it in a sceptical kind of way where if you realise actually I need to behave a certain way around this person to impress them and a certain way around that person to impress them, then you could climb. A social climber.

C4 developed this example by expanding the scope of the player's actions,

The same sort of thing can happen within a rugby club. So, the awareness of how you need to build a relationship with the Director of Rugby, with the SandC coach, with the senior players, with your peers, of social awareness and awareness of sort of status is probably something that players could be helped with. If they get that stuff right, they make a great impression early doors. If they get that stuff wrong, so whether that's just being a little bit sloppy in a conversation with a senior coach or conduct with a physio or something like that, word can spread pretty quickly.

Coach C2 supported these ideas but noted that the first thing that players must be aware of is the environment and quickly realise the inner strength that is needed to survive and how they need to adapt.

I think, first of all, when they come in, they will never been in an environment like this. They would never—the language for starters, the way that people speak about everything is totally different in this environment. It would never happen in another workplace ever. If it did, there'd be nobody there. So first thing is getting their head around, well, this is—I've never heard people talk—because this is a very frank, open, honest environment in some ways and you get told exactly what he's thought of you, so having that emotional resilience, emotional toughness in a way, not into shutting it off but being able to not take things to heart too much is massive in this environment.

C4's responses supported this theme and the need to be mentally tough in order to cope with the new pressures they will face in this environment. He described the new hierarchy that they need to understand and the need to slowly build up respect with their peers,

I would say that's a stressor for the players. They go from being captain or superstar for that school team, gone pretty well in the academy, potentially played England age group stuff up to then and then becoming bottom of the pile, bottom of the pecking order.

He went on to explain further,

The hierarchy of the peer group, when they chirp up in conversation and stuff, if they've not earned their stripes as that's deemed by the group, they've not done enough to be able to stand up and speak. Just an awareness around that will help them probably choose when to speak, what to say....it might be valid, it might be a valid point, but they've got to live what they're talking about for a little bit first to get the respect of the people around them.

Discussion

The four superordinate themes found in this study have highlighted the need for each to be considered and embedded within any bespoke, future transition model for the club. These four areas:

- Knowledge and Understanding of Team Dynamics;
- Expected Player Competencies;
- Positive Behaviours for Modelling;
- Self-Awareness and Resilience,

clearly demonstrate an information and communication gap in preparing players for this next step of their career.

As highlighted within this study's introduction, many of the elements contained in these four areas have already been demonstrated to have impact in a variety of athlete transition studies in rugby and other sports. Indeed many studies promote the essential components of players' self-awareness and resilience as defining characteristics of the psychological characteristics for elite performance (Anderson, 2011; Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke, 2017; Rees *et al.*, 2016; Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett, 2002; Orlick and Partington, 1988; MacNamara, Button and Collins, 2010). Here the emotional and social intelligence required for a player to flourish in this environment takes the form of intra-personal and inter-personal abilities (Abbot and Collins, 2004; Bailey and Morley, 2006; Burns, Cohen and Weissensteiner, 2019; Gagné, 2004) which are evidenced as having a major influence on the successful, or otherwise, transition of athletes (Brown, Arnold, Reid and Roberts, 2018; Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler, 2010; Jones and Lavallee 2009; Larsen, Alfermann, and Christensen, 2012). The other 3 categories that were built from the emerging data all link into a much wider construct, that of cultural awareness. Many studies have promoted the need for athletes to fully appreciate what is expected of them within the organisational context they find themselves, and develop the ability to match their behaviours accordingly (Cresswell and Eklund, 2006; Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Hardy *et al.*, 2017; Larsen, Alfermann and Christensen, 2012). The inability to do this has often been quoted as the determining factor as to why the athletes have not successfully transitioned into a professional career in their chosen sport. In a rugby union context Taylor and Collins' (2019) study highlighted that amongst the factors which might contribute to a failure to transition, the most significant reason was the lack of psychological skills to equip the athlete to adapt to the new culture. Barab and Plucker (2002) also highlighted the importance of

players' psychological ability to draw information from environmental factors in order to better adapt to the development culture they found themselves in. Support therefore is required both to better equip transitioning players with the psychosocial skills required, but also to enable them to better identify and analyse the cultural environment to which they are entering. Indeed, Henriksen's and others' work on TDEs, recognises that all parts of a player development scaffolding, needs to be aligned to the organisational culture that already exists (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler, 2010; Larsen, Alfermann, and Christensen, 2012; Wylleman and Rosier, 2016). Knowledge and understanding of all facets of the athlete's role and the environment in which he/she is going to operate, become critical factors in becoming successfully assimilated within it.

When considering the data from this study it becomes clear that a cultural analysis of the club's TDE (Talent Development Environment) would be valuable for us to effectively interpret the results and build upon this work. Henriksen's ESF (Environment Success Factors) model (Henriksen, 2010, described in Part 1 of this study and embedded in the C.A.R.E. investigative theoretical framework) can be seen to illuminate the organizational culture underpinning the environment that the transitioning players are entering. Organizational culture here is characterized by the integration of the key basic assumptions into a cultural paradigm that guides the socialization of new members (Henriksen, 2010). To analyse the organizational culture of the environment, Schein's (1992) cultural theory is incorporated into the model by outlining three levels of investigation, those of; cultural artefacts, espoused values and basic assumptions.

1. **Artefacts:** these 'artefacts' are physical items visible at a surface level. Aspects (such as dress) which can be easily discerned, yet whose underlying meaning are hard to understand.
2. **Espoused Values:** beneath artefacts are espoused values. These are the conscious strategies, goals and philosophies that guide movement in the environment.
3. **Basic Assumptions:** the core, or essence, of culture is represented by the basic underlying assumptions and beliefs, that are difficult to discern because they exist largely at an unconscious level. They provide the key to understanding why things happen the way they do.

Environment analysis

Recognising that an understanding of organizational culture is a core element for a successful transition, we present our findings and observations of the case study club in line with Schein's model.

1. Artefacts: The club's artefacts can be described on 3 levels:

a) The Shirt: the match shirt represents the identity and history of the club. The shirt demands the respect of the group in acknowledgement of the blood, sweat, tears and successes that have gone before. An almost spiritual understanding that as a custodian of the shirt, pride should be taken by each player to leave it in a better place from where they picked it up.

b) The Most Valuable Player (MVP) Board: the MVP board represents the celebration of the shirt and the players that have worn it match by match. A weekly tradition sees one player's name etched on the board each match, recognised and congratulated by the group for their efforts in honouring the shirt.

c) The Dice: the dice represents discipline to the shirt and the expected behaviours of the group. If a player steps outside the agreed behaviours of the group, then that player will have to roll the dice and face the consequences that follow. The punishments handed out by the group are agreed by the group and upheld by the group.

2. The club's 'espoused values' can be described as process, performance and outcome goals, and strategies to support achieving the club's mission and vision. The models listed below are displayed on the walls at the training centre where the players and staff spend their days and referred to in a multitude of contexts every day.

a) Success Model: This First team model describes the 'process of converting attitude into performance' and ultimately success as an outcome and inclusive of the four tenets, of; belief, knowledge, skill and motivation.

b) 10% them and 90% us: This strategy is intended to help the senior squad focus on what's important for the group to be successful and build confidence through dealing with controllable factors.

c) Deep and Narrow: This strategy emphasizes the importance of the depth of knowledge and understanding required for the player and their individual focus on their roles within the team structure to achieve individual and group success.

3. The 'basic assumptions' are the 4 superordinate concepts from this study:

- a) Knowledge and Understanding of Team Dynamics
- b) Expected Player Competencies
- c) Positive Behaviours for Modelling
- d) Self-Awareness and Resilience

These themes now uncovered and made conscious through the study form the foundations by which the strategies/models and artefacts above can be considered. Together they help situate and describe the full nature of the club's culture in relation to successful transition of players into a professional playing career.

Schein (1992) defined the culture of a group as,

A pattern of shared, basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Through this case study, the ‘basic assumptions’ were described in depth by the coaches, now recognised as the norms of the culture that are required for successful integration of players. These assumptions, along with the artefacts and espoused values, highlight the organizational cultural paradigm in which transition from academy to First team occurs. See figure 2:

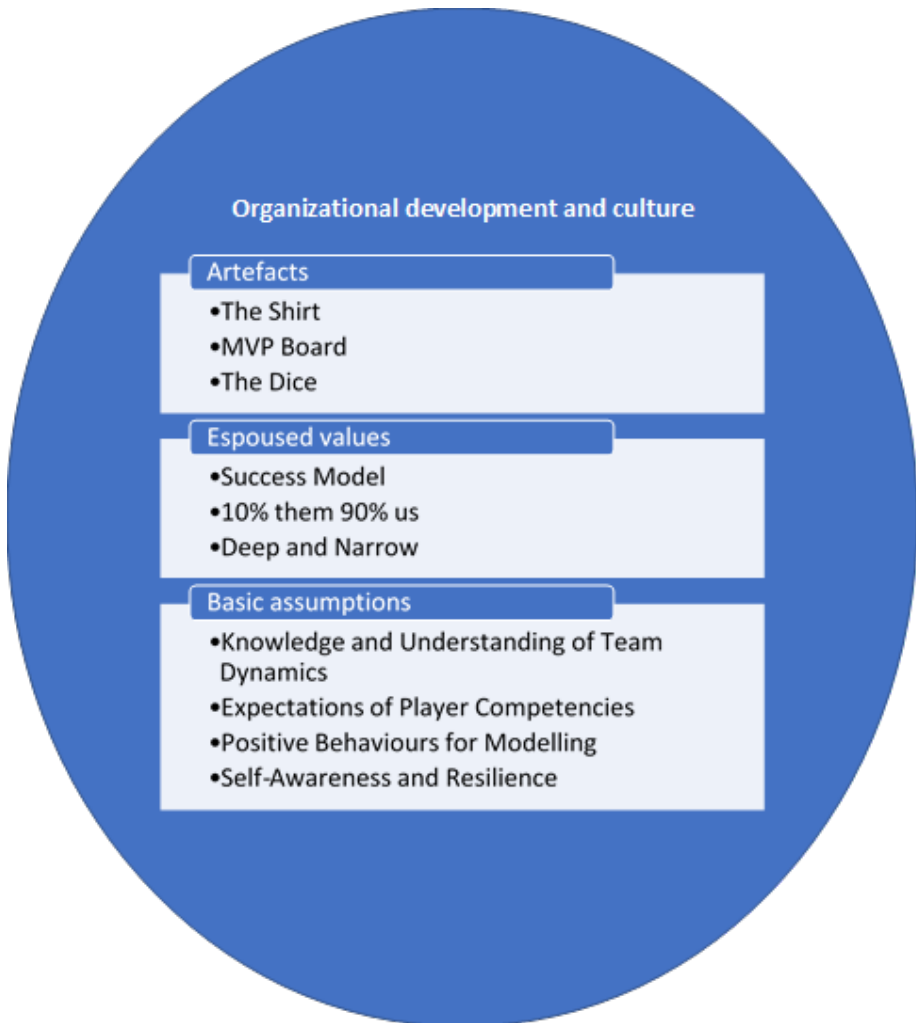


Figure 2. A Cultural Paradigm of Transition to First Team Rugby

Conclusion

The aims of this research study were to investigate current TD practice for transition stage athletes and to identify any gaps in provision that could be considered during the development of a bespoke transition model for the case study rugby club. From the study's data a series of issues have arisen that serve to help and hinder the player's navigation through this stage. Primary interview data has allowed us to identify gaps in provision and gain new insights into what is required to establish a more effective transition process at the club. These gaps related to the communication of key information about the environment and culture to the players. However, valuable information emerged about the perceived development needs, support and training required to help improved current practice.

In summary the findings of the current study highlight the importance of proactively developing players knowledge and understanding in several key areas in order to promote greater adaptability and support their successful transition into the professional environment. The specific areas to focus on can be separated into two categories:

1) Knowledge of Self, which refers to developing self-awareness and self knowledge (Nesti *et al.*, 2012) and,

2) Knowledge of Context, which refers to developing a greater understanding of the dominant expectations and norms in the new (professional) environment. This has been reported as an effective way for supporting transition in professional sport (Morris, Tod and Oliver, 2014).

Developing knowledge of self involves developing self-awareness, the capacity to understand and recognise one's own dominant character traits, motivations, behavioural and relational preferences and patterns of emotion. Developing self-awareness allows individuals to better understand how themselves and others may relate, perceive and respond to each other. Awareness of this kind will ensure players are better prepared to navigate the personal and interpersonal challenges encountered during transition (Nesti and Littlewood, 2011).

Knowledge of Context i.e. our primary results plus the secondary analysis of the environment from a cultural paradigm perspective, uncovered the unwritten assumptions, values and beliefs at play at the club with specific reference to the transition journey of young athletes into a full-time professional career. This knowledge of context should prove invaluable in shaping players expectations and interactions whilst also providing a framework for the club to reflect against and ensure that key messages become explicit and aligned to creating the best possible TDE and transition processes.

The next steps...

The study's findings situated within the Cultural Paradigm developed above can now be used to inform future action and priorities on how best to support player transition. Of course, this study has had a limited scope due to its small number of participants and focus on just one sport. Despite the measures to mitigate bias through the lead researcher's status within the club, this may also have tainted some of the participants' responses. Follow up work on current players' experiences and the alignment or otherwise of their own state of preparedness and environment assessments would help to triangulate our findings. Indeed, it may well be pertinent to seek out those players who had less than successful experiences at the club in order to unpick any cultural practices that may have driven out potential talent.

Moving forwards in response to our findings two actions are being considered to improve player transition, including the use of psychometric/personality profiling and an Emotional Capital Report (ECR) as proposed by Newman (2010), as well as individual proactive 1-2-1 psychology sessions for transitioning players (Nesti *et al.*, 2012). These have already been implemented by others and have been associated with improved transition outcomes in relation to player retention and lower financial outlay on reactive player assistance (Morris, Tod and Oliver, 2014). Running alongside this, a transition preparation programme will be developed to improve knowledge about the First Team environment. We will do this through individual and group level psycho-education and support. Initially this will include a player mentoring programme, utilising senior and ex-players, and coach forums to provide opportunities for players to ask questions of coaches and clarify expectations prior to transition. We have also considered how best to ensure the alignment of this transition stage within the entire talent pathway at the club. In order to achieve this objective, we have agreed to:

1. **Design and implement** a holistic Transition Information Pack based on the findings of this research which evidences skills and attributed developed further down the pathway and the processes by which they will be reinforced and required in the transition stage and valued in the first team environment.
2. **Review, amend and align** the current DNA player development model's psychological elements in line with the findings of this research and aligned to the new transition process.
3. **Create a transition player development model** - building on the DNA model, based on the 4 superordinate concepts that emerged from this research and embedded in the cultural paradigm of the club
4. **Align the 3 models** (DNA, transition model and Success model) to demonstrate and promote a fully connected player development pathway from entry point to a successful transition as a senior professional.

Only time will tell how successful this will be.

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Reviewer Comments

Reflecting on my career as a rugby player, coming through the Junior ranks and into elite levels of the game, this research heralds a much needed change in transition practices, brought about through a culture for learning at a club, rather than luck and ‘who you know’, which in part, has been my experience. This research sets out to analyse gaps in provision and identify potential opportunities for learning at the professional rugby club, its staff and players. The two; staff and players, are a unit at a club, or should be, but when pressures increase through ‘transitioning’ to elite squads, then the gaps appear. There needs to be the kind of impetus or desire for learning which these authors put forward in their CARE model, as I can say first-hand that interests in education at a club do tail off as commercial pressures for success ramps up. That is, when coherent learning between players, coaches and support staff is most in need, the red mist for a win and financial gain comes down, to the detriment of all involved in the longer term. The dialogue from interviewees in this research resonates with me, placing me in the conversations and asking decisions of me as I read through. This was me! I have been the player and the coach. The primacy demonstrated in this research is what the rugby world needs to bring about change for in rugby careers, whomever they may be lived by.

