Unpacking the Talent Transfer Process: New Theoretical Perspectives and Program Implications

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In order to achieve international sporting success, sports organizations commenced to implement talent-transfer (TT) initiatives as alternative talent identification and development (TID) strategy. Talent-transfer is a well-recognized fast-track performance pathway for athletes whose skills match other sports and can contribute to a nations’ sporting success (Bullock et al., 2009; Vaeyens et al., 2009). Although there is growing literature in this area (MacNamara & Collins, 2011), the processes involved in the TT pathway are largely unknown. Collins et al. (2014) presented existing TT initiatives as poorly designed. Given the growing adoption of TT initiatives (Baker et al., 2018) and their importance to elite sport development, an investigation of the nuances of the TT process is warranted to guide sports organizations to effective design and implement TT strategies. Therefore, the research question of this study was: “How does the TT process take place?” Using an Australian-based TT program as a case study, this study conducted semi-structured interviews (N=10) with the sports experts and coaches involved in the program. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using content analysis. A comparative analysis across all interview data validated the codes.

The result shows that four traits define the TT process. First, TT is characterized as an ‘accelerated pathway’ towards high-performance outcomes. This acceleration refers not only to the expected fast-track performance progress but also to the integration of coaches, services and athletes in planning and delivering a fast-track high-performance program. Second, to be able to cope with this accelerated pathway, potential talents are required to have a level of ‘expected minimum skill prowess’. These skills include sport specific matchable skills and psychological traits related to the adaptability and high-performance environment requirements. The skill prowess on pre-established areas (based on the sport skills and culture) was found to be critical in the process of initiating the athlete immediately to high-performance program and her/his ability to make rapid progress. Third, coaches pointed at significant differences between ‘skill development trajectories’ between transferred athletes and transitioning athletes. Specifically, TT athletes tend to have a slower technical progress at the start, followed by rapid skill assimilation resulting in elite technical ability in a shorter timeframe. This trajectory determines why the success of a transfer pathway emerges faster than the success of a transitioning pathway. The fourth trait relates to the need for inter-organizational collaboration. TT pathways are unlikely to be successful without the collaboration of at least two sport organizations.

Existing sport development frameworks (e.g., Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, 2013) focus on talent transition and only mention the need for TT. The findings in this study offer insights on previously unexplored aspects of TT hence, broaden the field of sport development. In addition to the sport development theoretical contribution, the findings provide guidelines to high-performance managers on TT features that impact on TT program development and management. Therefore, this study provides an empirically based response to the need for a theoretical and practical contribution towards understanding the TT process (Baker et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2014).