



ICOACHKIDS+ What makes a holistic talent development environment? Exploring the Why, the What and the How

Barnaby Sargent Megicks, Prof Kevin Till, Dr Fieke Rongen and Prof Sergio Lara-Bercial provide six principles of good practice for establishing holistic talent development environments.

Introduction

Talent development environments (TDEs) are commonplace in sporting talent systems. National teams, clubs and sport programmes often fund and organise TDEs with the aim of developing future high-performance athletes. Although pursuing an elite sporting career can be an enriching experience, it is an intensive and long-term endeavour. It inherently carries a high level of physical, psychological and social challenge which needs to be managed appropriately to minimise detrimental impacts to athletes and maximise the potential benefits of TDE involvement. Consequently, calls have been made for holistic development approaches in talent development. This article presents the why, what and how of establishing holistic TDEs including six key principles of good practice.

The Why

Holistic development is now commonly advocated in sporting, coaching and talent development discourse as a desirable approach to athlete development. Notably, the International Olympic Committee's (Bergeron et al., 2015, pp.843) consensus statement, promotes a whole-person approach, stating: The goal is clear: Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement.

Engaging in talent development is inherently challenging, both directly through what athletes may experience, and in-directly through what they might not. It is perhaps the increasing awareness of this impact that has led to concern for athletes' safe and well-rounded development. Literature in this area (see Rongen et al., 2018) reveals two general 'concerns':

- **Developmental Sacrifice** - Talent development is time exhaustive and may result in a sacrifice of social and/or educational experiences.

- **Negative Health Impact** - Talent development is physically, psychologically and socially demanding and may impact on the health and wellbeing of young athletes.

The What

Within talent development, the term 'holistic' has been used in a variety of ways, yet a clear definition has not emerged. However, acknowledging the two areas of concern discussed above and the goals of talent development, holistic development can be defined as the combination of three interrelated athlete outcomes:

- **Athletic Development** = The development of the skills and characteristics (i.e., technical, tactical, physical, psychosocial) needed to progress towards higher levels of athletic performance and competition.
- **Health & Wellbeing** = The promotion, development, safeguarding and maintenance of physical, mental and social health.
- **Life Readiness** = The development and application of attitudes and skills required to succeed in and outside of sport, now and in the future.

The How

Guided by the definition above, our research has identified six principles of good practice. These principles provide a general direction but should be considered alongside the contextual characteristics of each TDE (e.g., type of sport, size and culture of environment and demographic of athletes).

I. Philosophy of Holistic Athlete Development

This principle is the starting point for creating a holistic talent development environment. Although seemingly self-explanatory, it is critical that environments have a planned, explicit and promoted philosophy of holistic athlete development that incorporates the three outcomes of athletic development, health & wellbeing and life

readiness. As TDE philosophies function to shape staff practice, and mould how athletes should develop - a holistic underpinning needs to be inherent, and success should be defined as encompassing more than just performance gains. Within this approach, individuality and inclusion should be championed, recognising that every athlete is unique and on their own talent development journey which requires a personalised experience. An inclusive TDE is a place of belonging, actively celebrates diversity, and recognises and seeks to address hidden cultural biases.

2. Stakeholder Alignment and Support

TDEs often have many stakeholders (e.g., coaches, athlete, parents, managers and multidisciplinary staff) who need to work together towards the goals of the environment. Alignment is a proactive endeavour which should be promoted and actively worked towards with stakeholder input. This is aided by having a clear TDE philosophy and goals (principle 1) to guide stakeholders. An environment where stakeholders are aligned in their actions, where everyone (including athletes and parents) work towards a common purpose, can lead to a more coherently 'engineered' athlete development experience, with appropriate challenge and support, and consistent and reinforced messages. The 'athletic triad' of athletes, parents and coaches is at the core of stakeholder alignment. An effective triad requires investment from all three groups and a view that parents are an asset to talent development - they offer athletes support and provide coaches with valuable information on their athletes.

3. Climate of Care

A climate of care should encompass everyone and everything in the TDE. Caring for athletes is a proactive process that includes shared commitment and investment in the coach/practitioner-athlete relationship (Cronin *et al.*, 2020). Facilitating and listening to athletes' voices is likely to positively contribute to their care by empowering them to actively engage in their training and development, through formal (e.g., goal setting and review meetings) and informal channels (e.g., in session choices and divergent questioning). Athlete input may provide important information to aid coach decision-making given that athletes can perceive TDE quality differently to coaches (Sargent Megicks *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, supporting positive mental health, including providing athletes with necessary expert support and resources is an essential part of care.

4. Long-Term Learning and Development

Talent development is a complex, dynamic and long-term process and young athletes should be provided time and opportunity to develop. Two specific practices may support creating a long-term learning and development focus. For coaches, developing long (e.g., season), medium (e.g., monthly) and short (e.g., weekly) athlete and team development objectives can help align day-to-day practices to a long-term vision. It can also act as a reference point for adjusting sessions. For athletes, personal goal setting (e.g., individual development plans) creates a continuous reference for development and can facilitate athlete ownership and stakeholder alignment.

5. Appropriate Challenge

Challenge is a double-edged sword. It can act as both a tool for growth and a risk factor in holistic talent development. Athletes need to develop psycho-social characteristics and skills to cope and thrive (e.g., emotional control, discipline, self-regulation) throughout their sporting life. Gradually and deliberately developing these characteristics and skills through the planned exposure to challenging experiences over time may help prepare athletes for the increasing challenge they can experience later in their TDE (e.g., deselection, injury, transitions) and in life (e.g., school, vocation, relationships). Exposure to deliberate challenge must be individualised, as it is not the challenge but rather how athletes personally perceive challenge which is impactful to development

(Taylor & Collins, 2022). For the challenge to be constructive and safe, the type, timing and intensity should be considered in terms of an athlete's long-term needs, and the athlete should also have (the social skills to access) a caring support network (principle 3).

6. Integrated Life Skill Development

The final principle concerns the intentional development and transfer of life skills, central to the life readiness outcome. Life skills (e.g., time management, self-reflection, leadership) are important to support young athletes to cope and thrive in and out of sport, in the present and in the future. The time spent in a TDE can limit athletes' opportunities to develop life skills in other environments. Life skills should be intentionally taught, and athletes should be provided opportunities to practice these life skills in and out of sporting contexts (Lara-Bercial & McKenna, 2022; Rongen *et al.*, 2021). This explicit teaching could range from leveraging spontaneous 'teachable moments', to the personal goal setting of specific life skills and organised workshops.

Summary

A holistic development approach has been proposed with the goal of minimising the detrimental impacts and maximising the benefits of TDE involvement for young athletes. It jointly prioritises athletic talent, health and wellbeing, and life readiness development. The six key principles of good practice provide coaches and staff a starting point to create holistic TDEs. ■



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