Although substantial research has been conducted in an attempt to understand the factors that are associated with the development of elite level athletic talent, there is a distinct lack of research relating to those ‘experts’ responsible for the subjective selection of potential champions and the characteristics that define them. Although many sports ultimately rely on the skill of recruiting (or scouting) for their success, there is no formalised guide that outlines the characteristics skilled recruiters possess. This research stands to address this overlooked area of expertise and provide a significant contribution to an area of knowledge that is currently under-represented in the field of research. Research on expertise in sport has noted that many coaching practices are based on "anecdotal evidence and historical precedence" developed from "intuition, tradition, and emulation" (Williams & Ericsson, 2005, p. 302). In related work, decision making research distinguishes between the two approaches of intuition and deliberation, where the former relies on “feelings” and more automatic decision processes, and the latter on careful analysis of data (Betsch, 2007). In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of the head recruiters of 10 Australian Rules football teams. Recruiters were asked about the key information sources they use in evaluating athlete potential, as well as the characteristics they believe define a skilled recruiter. Recruiters also completed the Preference for Intuition and Deliberation (PID) scale (Betsch, 2007) to assess their preferences in decision making styles. Interviews were transcribed, verbatim, and analysed in sentence by sentence open coding using NVIVO (version 9) software to identify emergent and recurrent themes. Preliminary thematic analysis of the interviews shows a pattern in which expert recruiters appear to initially identify talent based on an intuitive and subjective assessment. This initial assessment, however, is then validated through a structured and systematic process of data collection and evaluation. This study also explored the characteristics that recruiters use to define potential expertise in an athlete. The preliminary analysis of the interviews suggests that in addition to competency associated with the fundamental technical skills of the game (e.g., kicking), there is significant importance placed on an athlete’s perceptual-cognitive ability, particularly when in a game play situation. These findings will be discussed in the context of their importance in the overall selection process employed by expert recruiters.

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