Introduction

“Talent transfer” (TT) is a contemporary term appearing in academic literature (e.g., Vaeyens et al., 2009; Gulbin & Ackerland, 2008; Bullock et al., 2009), referring to the idea of athletes “swapping” sports, or being “recycled” within a sport system. TT as a distinct phenomenon is relatively under-researched in either theoretical or empirical published literature compared with other approaches to sport talent identification and development. Despite little research, the strategy of TT has been and is currently invested in and used in a number of countries. The purpose of the current study was to provide some exploratory in-depth data on the phenomenon through accessing the expert knowledge of high level Australian coaches who have undertaken TT of athletes within the Australian sport system. Research question: What opinions, knowledge, and experiences do expert coaches who have undertaken TT hold that can inform an in-depth understanding of TT and its important components and considerations?

Method

13 expert coaches (10 male, 3 female; coaches M = 22.23yrs, range = 5-59yrs) experienced in TT were sourced and consented to participate in semi-structured interviews regarding their background, involvement, experiences, and processes in TT. Coach experience with TT ranged from 2 athletes to in excess of 50 athletes (some coaches employed TT for 100% of their program intake). Coaches were from sports of triathlon, diving, kayaking, cycling, rowing, volleyball, cross country skiing, aerial skiing, skeleton, and badminton, and a coach of mixed a male and female athletes/events.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (11) and by telephone (2) with the principal researcher, averaging 92mins in length. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked by interview participants for accuracy, then coded into meaning units, higher and lower order themes, as per hierarchical content analysis (HCA) qualitative research methodology. Nvivo9 computer software was used to code and organise raw data. Inter-coder agreement amongst researchers was obtained. An example of analysis of a small portion of interview data is included in Figure 1 in the “Results” section.

Results of preliminary hierarchical analysis of interview data revealed a large number of broad themes. Strong themes included: Definitions of TT; Important considerations for TT; Barriers to TT; Facilitators of TT; Possibilities for TT; Limits to TT; Benefits of TT athletes; Downsides of TT athletes; Coaches qualify for TT; Special coaching factors for TT; Coach TT challenges; Transferable elements; Non-transferable elements; Athlete qualities necessary for TT; Politics and TT; Trial and error; Support; TT athlete recruitment; TT athlete selection; TT efficacy; Judging success of TT; Time or Timing and TT. Each of these themes contains multiple levels of sub-coding as shown in the example data in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hierarchical Content Analysis of an Example Sub-set of Expert Interview Data

Preliminary Results

Example broad themes

Important considerations for TT
Special coaching factors for TT
Transferrable elements
What is TT? (Definitions)
Facilitators of TT
Barriers to TT

Example 1st order themes

Body/physical type
Body/kinesthetic awareness/feet
Elite athlete lifestyle requirements
Understanding of body

Example 2nd order themes

Leart physical skills
Training/physiological adaptations
Knowledge of requirements to be an elite athlete
Performance context intelligence

Example meaning units

Competition smarts
How to work in a group or team
Knowing how to play finals
How to train with better players
How to deal with equipment issues
How to deal with structure and routine

Example raw data quote

“...she already knew how to fly finals. She had played heaps of finals, so we didn’t have to spend time on that...she could just do it.” (Coach 10)

Discussion & Conclusions

Interviews with expert Australian coaches of TT revealed that coaches hold a rich and in-depth array of insights regarding the phenomenon of TT. This study uniquely contributes to the literature in a number of ways:

- The complexity of TT is clearly highlighted by the volume of data gathered and number of varying higher and lower order themes revealed through HCA, and suggests multidimensional frameworks be considered when seeking to understand TT in future research (e.g., the Differentiated Model of Giftedness & Talent; Gagné, 2004). The varying information discussed by coaches may also suggest that more ideographic or sport-specific approaches, rather than nomothetic approaches to investigating TT, may be fruitful.
- Previously unpublished insight into specific processes and mechanisms present in the TT phenomenon are provided. Most notably, specific ways of thinking about, teaching, and relating to TT athletes that are unique to the TT situation, and personal and psychological characteristics of athletes that directly transfer between sports, or facilitate successful transfer of talent, are explored. Exploration on this level is often lacking in discussions of talent.
- Future research from various sport science disciplines and methodologies may be assisted by emergent themes from this study, allowing for more focused exploration or hypothesis testing from a base of rigorously gathered descriptive exploratory data. Additionally, future research may consider exploring TT using prospective rather than retrospective research, and may explore TT athlete experiences and trajectories for TT practice may also be considered as a result of current research.

Key References


For further information

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