

To Be or Not to Be: An investigation into the factors affecting the development of athletes who have been identified through talent detection

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The identification and development of talent for high performance sport is a complex and widely discussed issue. Athletes are typically identified from within the sport of interest (talent selection), and less commonly identified from outside the sport (talent detection) (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams & Philippaerts, 2008; Williams & Reilly, 2000). Despite the opportunities and efficiencies that talent detection can provide (Bullock, Gulbin, Martin, Ross, Holland & Marino, 2009), processes underpinning the identification and development of talent detection athletes and the viability of systemic talent detection programs have received modest attention within the scientific literature. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the characteristics of a successful talent detection program and to investigate why some talent detection athletes transition successfully into high performance sport, while others do not. A case study approach was adopted using flatwater kayakers detected through the Australian National Talent Identification and Development Program. Athletes were matched in pairs based on age, gender, sporting history, kayaking commencement date, training environment, and physical and physiological capacity. The key differentiating factor within each pair of athletes was their highest level of achievement in kayaking with one athlete reaching Australian team representation and the corresponding pair-matched athlete not progressing to the international level. Athletes and their coaches participated in semi-structured interviews and retrospective kayaking performance and physical testing data was used to complement interview findings. Procedures specific to thematic analysis were adopted to analyse the interview data while performance and testing data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS (version 17). Major themes relating to factors that facilitated and constrained the success of talent detected flatwater kayakers will be presented. Discussion will focus on concepts and recommendations to improve talent identification and development practices.