

# THE OPINION OF YOUTH SOCCER COACHES ABOUT TALENT SELECTION FOR SOCCER

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**Abstract:** Society and clubs invest a lot of effort, time and money to discover young people who have the potential to develop into top athletes. But, there are still many questions about a universal theoretical approach, agreed terminology and possible characteristics of talent that would bring practical benefit. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the essence of talent concept in sports and to evaluate the degree of agreement between the opinions of Serbian youth soccer coaches on the important issues of detection, identification and selection of talented soccer players in comparison with other researches. 161 youth soccer coaches with a high level of competence participated in the survey. The word talent is often heard in everyday speech to emphasize the qualities or skills of a young person who achieves above-average results in a certain field. There is no universal definition of talent. Over time, talent concept expanded and dynamized, so that today talent is approached multidimensionally, assessed holistically, and a conclusion is reached with a certain degree of probability. Coaches traditionally select players based on personal taste, observing movement patterns in the game and using their intuition based on experience, and using test results to monitor changes in morphological characteristics and motor skills. In addition to the existence of a disposition for the development of appropriate abilities, strong motivation and a favorable environment with an optimal training process are needed to realize the talent according to the planned outcome in the form of a competitive result. A reliable judgment about the ultimate range of a talented athlete is hindered by intense developmental changes in childhood and youth, due to which talent changes its structure. Further research should be focused on discovering the main and secondary components of giftedness, their interconnections, influences and changes during childhood and youth. This topic raises many questions such as: How not to stifle the individuality of talent? Would the discovery of the undiscovered make the game of soccer lose its charm?

Keywords: giftedness, identification, prediction, development.

Field: Social Sciences, and Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the essence of the concept of talent in sports and related concepts, with the aim of better understanding the process of discovering and developing young soccer players. The review of papers on talents and the opinions of Serbian youth football coaches on the factors that influence the selection of talented players should contribute to clarifying the concept of talent for football.

Coaches, parents, managers, whose attention is directed towards top sports, believe that success is not achieved by an individual of average abilities, but by a person who possesses a high degree of natural abilities for sports. Larkin & Reeves (2018) point out that talent is the degree to which a person possesses physical, physiological or mental traits that significantly contribute to success in sports. Marconi, (2013) claims that there is a dilemma among scientists whether the term talent is used as a synonym for abilities.

Disposition is a set of relatively permanent organic, physiological, neuro-psychological structures on the basis of which, under favorable circumstances, a greater number of psychomotor, intellectual and sensory abilities can be developed that enable the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The degree of development of the disposition affects the quality of the resulting abilities. Gagné (1999) distinguishes four groups of natural abilities that he calls gifts: intellectual, creative, socio-affective, sensorimotor skills.

When someone possesses above-average abilities to successfully perform a certain activity, they are said to be gifted. Gagné (1999) points out that a person is gifted in at least one ability if he is among the first 10% of his peers in terms of the level of development of that ability. Also, he believes that talent is a person who possesses skill and knowledge to a degree that ranks him among the first 10% of his peers who are active or have been active in a specific field or fields. Giftedness are transformed into talents through the process of formal, unformal and informal learning under the influence of internal and external catalysts.

In the last twenty years, progress has been made in research and empirical knowledge in relation

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to the identification and development of talents in football (Williams, Ford, & Drust, 2020). The content of the concept of talent was expanded by adding new significant abilities. Static observation of talent is based on the assumption that talent is immutable, so initial testing is sufficient to detect it. Over time, the concept of talent expanded and became more dynamic. Talent is seen as a process that, in addition to the initial level of built abilities, is determined by maturation processes and the influence of external conditions and socialization.

Talented people have reserves for high ranges, and thus development opportunities. This holistic approach to the concept of talent includes sporting and non-sporting areas, micro and macro level and takes into account the developmental aspect - past, present, future. (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010), whereby it is recognized that there is a non-linear individual course of individual development (Marconi, 2013).

The widely accepted systemic theory of development focuses on the person-environment system and examines the subsystems that should differentiate the talented from the non-talented, while recognizing that there is a non-linear individual course of development (Marconi, 2013).

For Williams & Reilly (2000), a sports career is a circular process consisting of four steps (Wolstencroft, ed., 2002; Sieghartsleitner, Zuber, Zibung, & Conzelmann 2019): detection, identification, selection and development of talents.

Talent detection refers to the discovery of gifted individuals for a sport in which they do not yet play. Talent identification is the process of recognizing individuals who, according to medium and long-term development plans, have the potential to be extremely successful in the sport they are already playing. Talent development is the nurturing of talents by creating an optimal physical, social and cognitive environment for the realization of potential. Talent selection is an ongoing process. The selector compares the abilities of a certain person with a specific model and gives a short-term or long-term prognosis of his possibilities to successfully accomplish tasks (Bergkamp, Niessen, den Hartigh, Frencken & Meijer, 2019). The specific characteristics on which prognostic statements are based are called predictors, and the expected or absent event is called the criterion (Roberts, et al., 2019). Prognostic action begins by defining qualitative or/and quantitative criteria that are determined in relation to the competitive result in a certain sport and age group. After defining the criteria for talent identification, available, measurable, time-stable and mutually agreed upon predictors should be determined.

## 2. METHODS

The opinion of youth football coaches in alignment with the results of available studies and talent identification practices in the most productive football academies (Matthew et al. 2020) should clarify the understanding of the concept of talent in Serbian football and expand knowledge about the factors important for the process of identifying and supporting talents.

Overall 161 coaches of youth schools of the soccer Super League, the First League and the Serbian League of Serbia took part in the research. Educated coaches of different ages work in different regions. In the past, they actively played soccer as amateurs and professionals with different years of experience and worked as coaches with players of different ages. The coaches filled out a pre-prepared survey during the annual coaches' conference, before the start of the competition season. A questionnaire with open and closed type questions was used to collect data. The questions in the questionnaire are clear, understandable and adapted to the problem and goal of the research. The results are expressed by frequency distribution and percentage values. A descriptive method was used to describe, compare, evaluate and interpret the obtained data.

## 3. RESULTS

Survey participants work in youth schools of clubs in 4 regions of Serbia. As much as 40% of the total number of interviewed coaches come from western Serbia, which is expected considering that this is the region with the largest number of clubs. About 72% of coaches are between the ages of 31 and 50, what with the fact that 63% of coaches have been actively involved in football for over 15 years, that 45% of coaches have played at the amateur level, and 32% at the professional level, then that almost 94% of those surveyed coach has a soccer license or diploma of high education, guarantees that it is a sample whose opinion is respected. Around 52% of coaches have an average coaching experience of 5 to 10 years, and 25% of coaches have 11 to 15 years of experience. About 60% of coaches worked with players who continued their senior career at the amateur level, and 46% of coaches worked with future

professionals. The high age differentiation of the soccer game system has led to the fact that the largest number of coaches have gained experience in working with several categories of players between the ages of 10 and 18. We believe that the sample of coaches is competent enough to express a valid opinion on the concept of talent in Serbian soccer.

Coaches express different opinions about the economic and educational status of families of talented boys and about the importance of the environment from which talents come. For 55% of respondents, the economic status of the family is not important. On the other hand, 45% of coaches believe that talents come from families with weaker existential opportunities. Almost two-thirds of coaches express the opinion that parents' education is not an important factor for nurturing talent.

About 47% of the surveyed coaches believe that the size of the settlement is not important for the emergence of talent. Research by Radović, Bačanac and Vesković (2005) conducted on talented young athletes showed that the favorable socioeconomic status of the family and the high level of education of the parents are decisive factors in their positive attitude towards children's sports, and that the largest number of young athletes in Serbia live in urban areas. It is known that some sports are reserved for children from wealthier families, and others for children of lower socioeconomic status. The surveyed coaches believe that economically independent and above-average wealthy families and large settlements are not the environment from which soccer talents come.

Researchers believe that there is no one model that leads to success and that fits all countries or can be applied to all sports (Fernandez & Giménez, 2014), but it is undeniable that the parental home is important everywhere because it provides different types of social support. Both parents provide emotional security in times of stress, financial help and support during travel. When players seek guidance on how to solve existing soccer problems, it is usually the players' fathers who provide informational support (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn 2004). The absence of social support for elite soccer players, who ended their professional career unexpectedly early due to de-selection, leaves significant emotional and psychological consequences with feelings of anxiety, anger and humiliation (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

Neglect of the mental health and well-being of young elite footballers and professional players exists even in elite academies (Sothorn & O'Gorman, 2021). Although there is no guarantee of success, the following are important for the development of talents in sports: the athlete, the sports environment, the school environment, the family environment and the social environment (Wolstencroft, 2002).

Coaches highly valued all offered predictors of talent. The highest rating was given to "game sense - game intelligence", with a rating of 5 by 81.4% of coaches and a rating of 4 by 18% of coaches, which is a total of over 99%. The next most important predictor is "willpower-perseverance" with 75.2% of 5 results and 22.4% of 4 results, which is a total of 97.6%. Next is the predictor of movement speed - straight and curved, with 63.4% of answers with a grade of 5 and 31.7% of answers with a grade of 4. In the last place, but still in terms of importance, is the technique with the ball and without the ball, which is the highest grade rated by 51.6% of coaches and 39.1% of coaches with a rating of 4, which is a total of 90.7%.

Analyzes conducted in other countries gave similar results. Jokuschies, Gut, and Conzelmann, (2017) found that coaches use their extensive knowledge and visual experience when recognizing the movement patterns of talented players with a high degree of confidence. Subjective indicators of talent used by coaches include aspects of personality, cognitive-perceptual skills, motor abilities, assessment of the degree of biological development, quality of soccer technique, social environment and physical constitution. The dynamic nature of talent allows a deficiency in one area to be compensated for in another (Jokuschies, 2016). Coaches describe the qualities of a talented soccer player through soccer skills (playing intelligence, physical abilities, and soccer technique) and personal qualities (Christensen, 2009) that they value according to their own taste.

The coach's opinion on the optimal age for talent recognition and the beginning of technical-tactical training was agreed upon. Almost 70% of coaches believe that the optimal age for recognizing talents is between the ages of 8 and 12 ("the golden period of motor development"). In this stage, motor learning abilities are at their maximum, movements are more economical, so technical and individual tactical elements are performed better. Excellent body proportions and an increase in functional capacities, along with a high willingness to take risks, enable an increase in the volume of training. Anticipation of one's own and others' actions in the game, finding one's way in space, thirst for knowledge and excitement are signs that increased attention should be paid to tactical requirements, and are also signals by which an experienced coach can "smell" talent. That is why 85% of the interviewed coaches believe that the period from 8 to 12 years is important for technical-tactical training.

When asked about the most common forms of organizing selective activities, the interviewed coaches could choose several answers. In the second half of the 20th century, clubs cooperated with teachers who led school sports sections - the first steps to the beginning of organized sports - and enrolled

the most talented students aged 11-15 in the clubs. Today, the surveyed coaches believe that talents can be distinguished by following school football competitions (93 answers), but only 4 coaches are in favor of cooperation with physical education teachers. Coaches monitor competitions in which the youngest participate and rely least on competition and one-time selection (28 responses). Almost 78% of coaches value competition matches, tournaments and training sessions for monitoring and talent selection the most.

Although, thanks to intuition (Christensen, 2009) experienced coaches quickly make successful decisions, only 15.5% of coaches value the importance of one selective match for talent evaluation. The surveyed coaches believe that the least useful (6.2%) is the information they receive during testing. Measuring motor skills can provide useful information in terms of predicting future career progression (Le Gall, Carling, Williams & Reilly, 2010; Reilly, Bangsbo, & Franks, 2000) however, using only these measures would not be sufficient to compare an already selected, homogeneous group of soccer players (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Additional information on physical and psychological characteristics and technical - tactical skills are preferred.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Researchers agree that physical, physiological, psychological (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Mirkov, Kukolj, Ugarkovic, Koprivica, & Jaric 2010) and sociological factors (Trbojević, 2018), the amount of exercise (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), perceptual-cognitive (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012) and tactical skills and abilities (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Reilly, Williams, Newill, & Franks, 2000) and genetic (Pacheco et al., 2018) play an important role in the recognition and development of talent, but not in isolation.

It seems that football coaches in Serbia have a clear view of what they need in talent assessment and are able to complete the task of selecting talented players. Although the interviewed coaches were not asked to describe what talent is and to explain the facts and processes on the basis of which they draw conclusions, we believe that they would have difficulty in verbally expressing their opinion as was the case with coaches in other studies.

Christensen (2009) doubts that talent identification is an objective process and examines the construct of an "eye for talent." Top coaches recognize talent as a "flash", but they lack common professional terminology to verbalize their implicit knowledge.

Kannekens, Elferink-Gemser and Visscher, (2011) found that tactical skills are the main determinant of talent and that players with a sense of positioning have a 6.60 times greater chance of transitioning to professional football. Based on a series of successive processes that make up perception-decision-execution, Cros (2013) points out that talent possesses special abilities and the potential to develop them. Talented player possesses the ability to quickly choose a solution and perfectly execute the correct football movement in a given situation. Talented soccer players need high-level perceptual skills, a good visual search strategy for important aspects of the game, the speed of switching from internal to external attention and vice versa, the use of useful information from memory, the ability to predict the flow of the game (Williams, 2000; Mills, et al, 2012).

Limitations of the environment, the task and the player's personality are three potential obstacles that should enable or encourage the performance of appropriate (Heywood & Getchell, 2017) actions from the category of key soccer skills: receiving the ball, running with the ball, playing 1:1 and shooting the ball.

Along with positioning and communication in the game, these are 6 important predictors of talent (Cros, 2013). The surveyed coaches expect the least benefit from the battery of motor and psychometric tests because the obtained results are difficult to integrate into a complete conclusion.

Test results are used to establish a database of young players selected for development programs (Williams, Reilly & Nevill, 1999) and can be interpreted with a certain level of knowledge and experience. Established, high motor skills are not a guarantee of success, but it is necessary for players to possess a high level and optimal alignment in the relevant skills. If players are compared within a positional role, differences in morphological and physiological characteristics are reduced, both in elite senior and elite youth players (Reilly, Bangsbo & Franks, 2000).

Cros (2013) adds, in addition to 6 technical-tactical predictors, that agility, balance and coordination are an important part of talent, and that they should be concluded by analyzing movement in the game. In doing so, one should avoid selecting players based on physical size criteria and take into account the effects of relative age and acceleration in development. Coaches have their own taste in selecting players not only in terms of cognitive-perceptive abilities, but also tend to appreciate the personal qualities of

players that they recognize by following their behavior in the game or in different life situations over a long period of time.

Researchers (Toering, Elferink-Gemser, Jordet, & Visscher (2009) believe that the reflection that acquires knowledge about strategy and the effort to complete tasks in unfavorable conditions separate elite from sub-elite players between the ages of 11 and 17.

Holt and Dunn (2004) argue that the key to success in football is the possession and mutual interaction of the four main psychosocial abilities of players: discipline, commitment, resilience and social support. Discipline refers to taking responsibility for personal development, respecting club rules and being willing to sacrifice social life and delay gratification. Dedication refers to the motivation to continue a professional career, with the love of the game being the most important motive of successful players. Resilience is a player's ability to bounce back from adversity and overcome emotional stress.

Social support is especially important during the period of identity formation, when a strong struggle takes place between the desire for emotional separation from parents and the need for their further support (Vranješević, Trikić, Koruga, Vidović, & Dejanović, 2003). During the long period of growing up in sports, the role and influence of coaches, family and friends on the general and sports development of players changes. An experienced trainer becomes a partner and supporter from an educator and teacher.

The surveyed coaches highly rated the predictors of talent from several different dimensions and did not give a significant advantage to any of them. We believe that they approach talent identification in a holistic way because it allows them to make the final decision about selecting or deselecting a player more easily than other methods. Regardless of which method is used for prognostication, conclusions should be drawn with a certain degree of probability for several reasons (Marconi, 2013): a) the developmental course from child to adult is heterochronous and non-linear; b) some abilities are more genetically determined, while others are more susceptible to external influences; c) expected and unexpected events can cause changes in the development course.

Talent detection among children who do not play sports is rare, but successful examples of detection and support for talented players are described in the literature (Milosavljević, 2003).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Youth football coaches gave agreed answers to the questions about important indicators of talent. They are obviously familiar with the traditional system of talent selection and nurturing. Coaches recognize talents in selective matches, but also monitor them over a longer period of time. The decisions they make in predicting talent are based on intuition behind a rich experience in talent recognition, on visual recognition of player movement patterns in the game and on personal taste according to the player's personality traits, which corresponds to previous research (Christensen, 2009).

Knowledge and formal education are complementary elements that influence the reduction of random guessing typical of inexperienced coaches. An inexperienced coach can be misled by current physical and physiological qualities resulting from the effects of acceleration and relative age, so attention is paid to bigger and stronger players, which increases the risk of a biologically younger player with unrecognized potential leaving the club or playing football. A wise coach follows the development of a player in whom he sees at least one of the exceptional qualities.

The structure and composition of talent should be distinguished. The composition is the elements that make up the talent, and the unique way of connecting these elements, which are in a dynamic balance, builds the structure of the talent. Due to the changes of one element, the order and the way the elements are interconnected, talent moves from one structure to another, while the composition remains the same. The balance is established at a new level. The most intensive developmental changes take place in childhood and youth. This means that a player who currently does not possess the desired quality, or whose talent the coaches have not noticed, does not mean that he will not show it in the future.

Finally, since giftedness is the beginning and talent is the result of a learning process (Gagné, 1999), it is necessary to create a unique training program for young players based on scientific studies and empirical experiences, which will be implemented by coaches educated on the philosophy of a football association, respecting the trend football games, which could one day grow into a recognizable national football school.

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