"They might be athletes" or why many sport talent identification schemes fail
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Large athlete talent identification projects undertaken by national sport governing bodies are ill-conceived and wrongly based on the premise that sport officials can somehow predict who will become a great athlete sometime in the future. Young, "talented" athletes are identified based on current ability, physical attributes, sometimes results of sport specific testing, and the skill and knowledge of the evaluator.

The results of these talent searches thus far have been unsatisfying mainly because we don't know how to identify talent yet and empirical evidence suggests that the current process just doesn't work. It focuses on youngsters who may simply be showcasing precocious abilities, or youngsters who have received some instruction in an activity performing against a backdrop of many others who have not. Neither one of these scenarios tells us anything about an athlete's current or future ability.

So why does this kind of search persist? Mainly because they're easy to do and require very little long-term work.

But they also persist because the assumption they are built on -- young athletes who show current ability will be better athletes later on -- seems intuitively right. It's only after looking into what we
know about human growth and development patterns that the present practice loses steam. Researchers calculated the chances of a 10-year-old who is the best in a sport in his community also being classified that way when he got older and found they were somewhere around 25%. Certainly not high enough to build a talent identification system around.

Children lose interest in activities, change sports, or decide that they would like to spend time on something else. This stuff of 'growing up' should be taken into account in sport development but the notion that "Athletes good at a young age will naturally be good when they get older" is a very hard one to shake.

The impossibility of identifying talent at a young age is unwelcome news to those who have heard that sport talent identification is the next big thing; the big idea that will improve the fortunes of countries who implement plans to identify local talent destined for the national and international stage.

The real story behind sport development is not as romantic as simply beating the bushes to find an athlete in the wild. It's a much more sustained and long-term effort to create talent. Yes, create it.

**Selection vs. Identification**

Within sport development circles the term *talent identification* is only used by those unfamiliar with the lingo. Although there are some who say it's possible (or will be), talent ID is still a dream. What is commonly passed off as talent ID in sports today is really talent *selection*, choosing athletes who currently show a higher level of ability than their peers.

Selecting athletes for competition is quite common. Selection trials are usually held prior to large games
such as the Olympic, Asian, or Pan American Games. This type of selection makes sense because choosing athletes who are better than their peers leading up to major competitions insures that the best athletes or teams will be competing.

However, selecting young athletes for specialized training or attention based on their being better than their peers and then assuming that these youngsters will become national level athletes later on is not supported by any kind of evidence. Using talent selection to assemble temporary teams works, whereas using it to assemble future national teams does not.

The mistake that sport officials make is assuming that the higher ability displayed by a youngster will always be the case and that athletes who are more skilled than their peers when young will remain that way as they age. If that were so, and it most certainly isn't, then talent ID would be as easy as pie.

The problem is bigger than simply getting the terminology right though. The very notion that "selecting" athletes for developmental training will somehow raise a country's fortune in international competition leads to less emphasis on true grassroots development. A few athletes may be selected in this way but those not chosen are left behind. For many this means that the opportunity to participate in organized sport has just passed them by.

Unfortunately, it's far easier to visit local schools or clubs occasionally and simply pick out those who show ability rather than create true developmental programs. Youngsters chosen this way may be better than their peers for reasons completely unrelated to athletic ability.

Development stages
Read through the **The LTAD 2.0 Resource Guide** (PDF, 84 pp.) and you may think that implementing the long-term athlete development process (LTAD) is easy. When I discovered this resource a few years ago (the 1.0 version) I was excited to find the athlete development process described so comprehensively and in such a simple way. But over the past few years I discussed the LTAD model with colleagues whose specific situations seemed to confound the process and demonstrate that while LTAD sounds easy it takes careful planning to implement successfully.

The key to LTAD is recognizing that youngsters become athletes in stages. And we can argue about whether there are actually seven stages, as outlined in the LTAD 2.0 document, or if it's some other number. A youngster may show early promise in an activity and suddenly someone decides to increase training sessions or offer specialized coaching, and before you know it the youngster is training for one sport year round. This is what happens when athletes are "identified" as talented and selected for training schemes.

The stages of development are not simply watered down versions of elite training though. What happens at the lowest levels of development is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from what happens at the elite level. Grassroots sport development requires that potential athletes learn and practice many different skills, even many different sports. On top of that, much of this training occurs outside what most people would call "sports training" and takes place rather in physical education classes, unstructured play, and other kinds of early physical activity that children engage in without any adult organization.

It needs to be said that *some* of the activities occur without adult organization. Many, however, do require structure such as physical education classes.
and club sport activities. The important task for national governing bodies (NGBs) is to make sure that the environment for these activities exists. They may not be the body that organizes them or carries them out but they have a stake in whether or not these activities or opportunities are available to youngsters.

They're not athletes yet, but they could be.

This is one of the reasons why so many 'talent identification' schemes developed by national sport bodies fail. They test youngsters who have had no real opportunities to learn, play, and practice the various activities that they are being tested on. Unless these bodies create such opportunities then the testing process is meaningless.

The important question is whether or not the youngsters being tested actually have participation opportunities. If not then testing should be put aside until youth sport programs can be developed. Developing programs for all youngsters to learn a sport and have sufficient opportunity to participate will have a far more lasting effect on athlete development than any talent ID program.

Opportunity to learn, practice, and participate in recreational sport activities is the foundation of athlete development. Without it true sport development will never take place and NGBs will be pouring money into half-baked development and testing schemes that will only preserve the status quo in sports performance.

They might be athletes

Standard operating procedure for NGBs should be based on this idea: *Every youngster is a potential elite level athlete*. Since there is no way to know which ones will actually reach this level it is the duty of NGBs to treat each youngster involved in sport programs as if they will indeed become the
best. We can't identify talent so why not operate from the premise that they are all talented. At least we'll be right some of the time.

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APA reference
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Additional resources

Fun and Games: Myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing Olympic champions, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, PDF, 8 pp.

The Sportkid Project
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