Iowa ODP: Talent Identification, Selection, and Development

The Iowa Olympic Development Program is designed to identify, select, and develop young players who exhibit the key qualities of an elite youth player. The framework, or selection process, adopted for the ODP program is evidence-informed, strategic, and intentional from the youngest to the oldest age groups. The purpose of this article is to educate parents and coaches who may not be well versed in the realm of talent identification, selection, and development within youth sports.

Prior to discussing the topic of talent identification and development, it would be prudent to first define both terms. Talent identification has been described as the process of identifying and capturing young athletes with ability, and those with potential, to develop into elite athletes (Williams & Reilly, 2000). As for talent development, the focus is on creating a systematic and developmentally appropriate learning environments that help to maximize potential throughout each stage of the development process (Reilly, Bangsbo, & Franks, 2000). The identification, selection, and development process are intricately linked and the criteria for selection varies at each stage of development.

The consensus within the athlete development literature is that predicting future performance of young players, especially those in the preadolescent (9-11 years of age) and early-adolescent (12-15 years of age) stages of development, is not an exact science. In other words, no one can, with certainty, predict whether an 11 or 12 year old player is going to be the best player at 16 or 17. This is because young players are in many ways complex systems that grow and develop at different rates and there are numerous factors that impact whether a player will reach their potential or not. Anyone who suggests they have the ability to predict talent with precision, at the younger age groups, is either a genius or naïve regarding the multiple layers of complexity within talent identification and selection process. Talent identification, or the prediction of expertise, involves giving consideration to a number of physiological (Le Gall et al., 2010), psychological (Williams, 2000), sociological (Meylan et al., 2010) and technical skills (Figueiredo, Goncalves, Silva, & Malina, 2009).

Contrary to the research literature, one of the common mistakes that elite development programs make is to promote early specialization coupled by early elimination/deselection (i.e., refining the talent pool too early in the process) without critically thinking about the short and long term goals of player development (Güllich, A., 2013). The fact remains that it is difficult to predict who is going to be best player later in the development process and thus it is crucial that programs, especially in the early stages of development (9-14), are more inclusive during the selection process. This is important because it helps to ensure programs captures both early and late developers and make a commitment to nurture these players along until a more accurate assessment can be made.

As an example, one common mistake, especially in the pre-adolescent age groups (9-13), takes place when a less experienced parents or coach see a young player who has a high impact on the game (i.e., scoring goals or running past teammates) and automatically labels them talented. However, another parent, with an ‘educated eye’, may deduce, more accurately, that this player simply possesses a temporary physical advantage over their peers. In this scenario, one parent gets the temporary physical advantage (i.e., early physical developers often board in January-March) confused with talent and the other, more ‘educated’, parent realizes that a temporary
physical advantage during the early stages of development is short-lived. One of the unintended consequences of placing too much emphasis on one specific category (i.e., athletic ability or physical development) is that it can often cause coaches/parents to miss the 'late developers’ (i.e., born October-December) during the identification and selection process. Keep in mind that these ‘late developers’ might in fact be your most talented players later in the development process and thus must be identified, selected and developed during ALL stages in the process is critical.

With this insight in mind, the Iowa ODP has adopted the following approach to talent identification, selection, and development. The goal is to ensure that we not only capture those who are performing well now but also those players, especially in the younger age groups where predictability is lower, who have the potential to perform later. In terms of age group pool sizes the goal is to be inclusive and capture as many current and potential performers during phase one in the selection process then continue to refine the age group pool as the player’s progress through to the older age groups where a more accurate assessment can be made.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Development Stage</th>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Selection Overview</th>
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<td>Phase 1: Preadolescence</td>
<td>Two Youngest Age Groups: 2006 &amp; 2005</td>
<td>Identification of early and late developers. The goal is to identify a larger pool of players to ensure we have captured a broader talent pool - those who are performing well now and those who show the potential to perform later. There is no set number in this age group as it is dictated by ability and potential. Those who show commitment, ability, and potential are included during this stage.</td>
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<td>Phase 2: Early-Adolescence</td>
<td>Two Middle Age Groups: 2004 &amp; 2003</td>
<td>The age group pools are refined to a pool of approximately 30-35. As players pass into the early-adolescent stage their abilities and potential emerge more clearly in the selection process and thus the pool can be refined.</td>
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<td>Phase 3: Adolescence</td>
<td>Two Older Age Groups: 2002 &amp; 2001</td>
<td>At the older two age groups players have entered into the adolescent stage of development and various factors (i.e., physiological, technical/tactical abilities) become more apparent. We have more data and assessment points to make accurate decisions. Therefore, the age groups are refined to approximately 25-30 players.</td>
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_Iowa Soccer_

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References


