

Full Length Research Paper

Insights on the process of athletes' development in Nigeria

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The process of talent development in sports requires an environment that encourages early identification of inherent sporting potentials in youngsters and provides the necessary support to grow such potentials into refined talents. Across cultures, athletic development is achieved through a synergy between athletes, their coaches, family, school, the community as well as other significant persons and social institutions. Judging by Nigeria's rankings in global competitive sports, the country is yet to evolve an effective template for successful athletic development process. This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the process of athletes' development in Nigeria. Seven elite Nigerian coaches were interviewed. Inductive analysis of the data indicated certain contextual impediments to athletes' development in Nigeria including organizational and culture specific barriers to talent development, and two drivers of successful development were equally revealed. It was suggested that stakeholders in sport development should collaborate to evolve a template for successful athletes' development where the entire development environment provides the necessary support for athletic development.

Keywords: Athletes' development, talent identification, culture specific barriers, drivers of success.

INTRODUCTION

Elumaro et al. (2016) made some profound revelations about the unique context of Talent Development (TD) in Nigeria. More than their counterparts elsewhere across other cultures, Nigerian athletes reportedly faced many socio-cultural barriers to sports development that made TD a difficult process for athletes. For instance, while previous research (Martindale et al., 2007) proposed that an effective talent development environment required a network of consistent and coherent supports from all the relevant stakeholders (such as parents, coaches, teachers, siblings and friends). Talent development environments in Nigeria were revealed to be lacking support from significant individuals and organisations.

Though it is anticipated from the literature that there would be environment-related limitations to Talent Identification and Development (TID) in Nigeria (Adesanjo, 1997; Toriola et al., 2000; Aibueku and Ogbouma, 2013), beyond the limitations of the environment, Elumaro et al. (2016) revealed a widespread opposition to sports participation among children in the Nigerian population. Starting from the family to the school, the government and the entire society, there were very little support for sport development (Ajiduah, 2001).

However, there seems to be one consistent source of support for talent development in Nigeria, which is the

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coach. Previous research indicated that Nigerian coaches play a significant role in the TID process in the Nigerian context far beyond what the responsibilities of a coach are in other cultures. In fact, Elumaro (2016) found that coaching was an important factor of TID success among Nigerian athletes. For example, athletes relied on the coach for both moral and financial assistance due to lack of support from the family. Nigerian coaches do not only help their athletes financially or morally, but in some instances, they also provided accommodation and feeding. Thus the coach is seen as a father figure by athletes and not just a coach. This complex role played by Nigerian coaches is not common across other cultures.

Early studies of the contribution of coaches to talent development outlined the role of the coach to include knowing, observing, diagnosing, and assessing the process of talent development to set targets and draw the strategies to achieve them (Worthington, 1984; Fairs, 1987). The role of the coach in the Nigerian context seemed to transcend the above role classification. Other issues relating to coaching have been studied such as the relationship between coaching behaviour and TID (Smith et al., 1977), mentorship (Duckworth and Maxwell, 2015), coaching and coach education (Panfil et al., 2015), coach-athletes' relationship (Baron and Morin, 2009), Quality coaching and coach development (Mallett, 2011). As vast as coaching research is, very little has been done in the Nigerian context. With previous evidences of the cultural specificity of TID and the need to exercise caution in the cross-cultural application of TID research (Saltapidas and Ponsford, 2007; Collins and Bailey, 2013), as well as the extra roles associated with coaching by Nigerian athletes, it is imperative to investigate the perception(s) of Nigerian coaches on the nature of talent development in sports in the Nigerian context in order to further strengthen the understanding of the nature of TID in the country. This is important because previous studies in talent identification and development have used the triangulation method to investigate issues relating to effective TID (Wolfenden and Holt, 2005; Gould et al., 2002; Martindale et al., 2007; Black and Holt, 2009), when taken into consideration, the perceptions of the other key stakeholders in sport talent development have made valuable contributions to the understanding of the subject. To set off the process of creating the synergy among the opinions of other stakeholders such as the family, coach, siblings, peers, and friends (Black and Holt, 2009), the current study is planned to investigate the perception of the coach on TID process in the Nigerian context.

METHOD

Participants

The essence of this study was to explore the perception of coaches

on the process of athletes' development in Nigeria, to further strengthen the extant knowledge of the context of TID in Nigerian. To achieve this aim, it is necessary that participants were recruited from among coaches who have personal experiences of assisting athletes to progress from the developmental stages to the elite stage of sport performance. This high bar set for inclusion was to ensure that participants have personal experiences of the challenges faced by athletes at the various stages of development. For the sake of clarity, the participants included coaches whose athlete(s) have competed for Nigeria at either the Commonwealth Games or the Olympic Games or both. Therefore, participants included 7 Nigerian male coaches, between the ages of 39 and 52 years.

Procedure

After obtaining the ethical approval for the study from the researcher's University Research Ethics Committee, the aims, objectives, and procedure of the study were explained to participants, with the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Then, the main interview questions were given to participants one week prior to the interview so that they could familiarize themselves with the questions (Martindale et al., 2007; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992). All interviews were conducted by the researcher; at the actual interview, interviewees were asked the same questions in the same sequence, however, while and when necessary, the interviewer asked probing questions (Patton, 1990) to create an in-depth understanding of responses, and to capture a true representation of the socio-cultural context of TID in Nigeria. All interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were tape recorded for later transcription.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the three stages outlined by Côté and Hay (2002) including coding experience; inductive inference; and similarity processes. The emerging themes and general themes were constantly compared until the data was saturated. Themes and categories were presented hierarchically to represent their order of emergence (Patton, 1990) and were supported by quotes in the result section.

RESULTS

The section presents the results from the data collection and analysis, which show the views of the seven participating coaches on the nature and challenges of athletes' development in Nigeria. The findings identify two categories of barriers (that is sport-organisational specific barriers, and culture specific barriers), and the two main drivers of TID success (including Coaches' commitment, and athletes' psychology).

Sport-organizational specific barriers to TID

Development is poorly valued

All participants observed organisational specific barriers to TID in sports in the Nigerian context. For instance, though the government and the entire society celebrate sporting success, there was no support for TD in sports.

Elite coaches believed the government (in particular) did not give sport development the appropriate attention, thus, TD in sports was poorly valued by every section of the society. Similarly, athletes were seen as people who were not serious about their future. The quotes below indicate that athletes lacked encouragement due to the poor for TID:

“Athletes go through a lot of challenges in Nigeria because there is no supports and encouragement for development. The society will only celebrate them if and when they succeed in their sports, so the major the question is what happens before they succeed?” (C3)

“You know whatever happens to the head happens to the whole body, since Nigeria as a country is not giving the deserved attention to sport development, everywhere in the nation we have athletes and their coaches having to swim against the tide of several barriers to development in the environment” (C7)

“...Athletes are looked down on by the society as unserious people instead of encouraging them” (C1)

Corruption and administrative incompetence

There appeared to be some ‘sharp practices’ in the management of sports in Nigeria. To begin with, the responses from the elite coaches showed that sport administrative positions were not given based on knowledge and competence, instead, people who had connections in government got sport administrative jobs without necessarily having a background in sport management or administration. As a result, athletes and their coaches suffered from poor administration and incompetence in sport management. In the quotes below, participants expressed the need to engage professionals, with the right background and experience in sport management to oversee the affairs of sport:

“Coaches and their athletes have not been very lucky with the type of sport administrators we have in the country. It has been rough to say the least” (C4)

“Our sport administration is very bad, in fact, most of the sports administrators are politicians who do not have any knowledge of sport development and they never care about the ordeal of the athletes and their coaches because their main priority is to enrich themselves” (C6)

“There is the need to have good administrators who would develop good policies and programmes to guide sports development. People holding sport administrative positions must be those that have the enabling background for sport development. Because one of the problems of sports development in Nigeria is that

politicians who have little or no knowledge of sport are appointed to oversee sports ministries and departments” (C2)

Lack of investment

The data revealed a need for investments across many areas of sports development. For example, there were acute shortages of sporting facilities in communities thereby making training more difficult for coaches and their athletes. Elite coaches believed that access to facility is a necessary motivation for sport participation; they lamented the lack of interest from the government to invest in the development of sporting infrastructure to encourage TID in sports. According to the participants, there were States where athletes have no tracks for training, and instead, training sessions were done on the streets. The quotes below demonstrate the need for facilities to encourage sport development:

“Administrators need to invest in facilities because most people build their interest in sports based on the facility they see and would like to enjoy. This is one of the major problems of track and field in Nigeria” (C6)

“There are no facilities and equipment for sport development, access to good facilities will motivate children to take part in sporting activities regularly, and therefore enhance the chance that children would pick interest in developing a sporting career. Without money, most of the things we have spoken about will be impossible. Facility, equipment, nutrition, transportation, training kits are all factored by finance; talent development therefore is capital intensive, and as such, the government and other stakeholders must be willing to make the necessary investments” (C2)

“There are States that don’t have any synthetic tracks so where will the motivation come from? This problem is more obvious now than ever before, because in those days there were open space around where the children can go to play but now all those pieces of land have been development except the roads, so children no longer have the luxury of playing on the street because the space are not there anymore. This is reason sports are dying gradually in Nigeria” (C6)

Poor policy implementation

It is apparent that poor implementation, and in many cases, failure to implement sport development policies contributed to the pitiable state of sport development in Nigeria. Though the Nigerian government has established several policy documents on sport development (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports, 1989; National Sports Policy

of Nigeria, 2009), the current data indicate that sport development policies were often poorly implemented, or not implemented at all. The quote below demonstrates that the national policy on sports development clearly identified the need for a structure for talent identification and development; however the policy was never implemented:

“The last national policy on sport development stipulates that every state should have standard stadia, there should be community sports centres in all the Local Government Areas in Nigeria, the policy also States that there should be inter-school competitions at the primary school level, inter-Local Government competition, Zonal competitions, State competitions, and National competitions. But this has never been implemented. If a structure has been put in place to facilitate the implementation of the policy, that is when we could develop national pathways based on such national structure, but at the moment there is no structural architecture to support national pathways for sport development” (C4)

Culture specific barriers to TID

Family opposes sports development

The current findings disclosed some culture-specific barriers to sports and athletes' development. Though Nigeria is a multi-cultural society, with over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and over four hundred languages spoken, there are some socio-cultural elements that unite the Nigerian communities across the various cultural divides. To an average Nigerian family, education is regarded as the best legacy parents can give to their children (Okeke, 2009; Ayling, 2015); education is perceived to be the only way to overcome poverty, which of course is a common enemy to Nigerian families and communities.

Therefore, every other form of engagement for the child that does not lead to high educational qualifications is regarded as a distraction. Unfortunately, sports development is considered as one of such distractions (Adeyeye et al., 2013; Yakubu et al., 2019). The reasons behind the poor value for sport development among Nigerian families are not difficult to understand, there is rare access to organised sport in Nigeria, the club structure is non-existent, and sports have little potential for income generation. Sport participation at the grassroots level (that is local communities) is mainly for recreation and play, only those who get to participate at the high-elite level are rewarded. Also, the probability that the average child will develop to the high-elite level is elusive since there is no pathway for TID and there are no structures to support athletes' development.

Consequently, children who get involved in sporting activities were seen as playing away their valuable time.

The fear that sport development may distract the child's commitment towards education is founded on the fear that TID in sports is time consuming, hence, parents' fright that their children waste the time they ought to spend on their studies for playing sports. The quotes below demonstrate that parents are against TID in sports mainly because it is perceived to interfere with the education of the child:

“Parents want their children to go to school and be fully committed to their studies, therefore, parents refuse to allow their children get involved in sports/training, because they believe this would be a form of distraction for the child. So, the task of the coach is to convince parents that their children can still go to school and be focused on their studies as well as going to training to develop their athletic talents” (C3)

“...No parent is willing to support the child to do sports training, they believe doing so will distract the child from his studies, so parents need to allow their children do sports and also support them both financially and emotionally” (C5)

“In a normal condition, parents should provide encouragement to their children but rather; Nigerian parents see sport as a kind of distraction to the education of their children and would do anything to prevent their children from playing any sport” (C4)

“...Parents also prevent their children from taking part in sports because they believe it is a barrier to the children' academic development. But I told them that there are many athletes who are doing very well in their studies” (C7)

School environment is hostile to TID

As with the families, participants observed that every other section of the community was not favourably disposed towards sport development for the child. For example, the school did not encourage TID in sports, teachers were opposed to athletic development because they believe that developing a sporting career will prevent their pupils/students from devoting enough time for academic development. Athletes therefore did not only face discouragement from the family but were also exposed to a hostile school environment. Some school principals and teachers alike, treated students who were athletes as though they were not serious with their education, and punished students for sport participation just to discourage others from getting involved. The quotes below demonstrate the hostility of the school environment towards athletes' development:

“Even the teachers who should collaborate with the coach and the parents in supporting the development of

the athletes are not encouraging, they consider athletes as unserious students who waste their time on sports” (C1)

“When you do sports as a student in Nigeria you are seen as ‘a cast away’. Teachers and lecturers would see you as unserious with your studies because they see you playing sports; while in a real sense, they are supposed to be supportive of your development” (C3)

“There is a lot of discouragement from the schools. In a case where a school principal takes sports participation as a crime for the students, he would oppose sports openly and go as far as punishing students for playing sports, this makes it difficult for the children to develop interest in training” (C7)

Drivers of TD success

Athletes’ psychology

Though, the many challenges to sports and athletes’ development in Nigeria make the dream of TID in sports very difficult to achieve, this data suggest that athletes who were committed to their development, even in the face of all the barriers, moved on to achieve success in their athletic career. There seemed to be a unique psychology common to successful Nigerian athletes. For instance, while previous studies have reported the importance of support and encouragement to TID in sports, Nigerian athletes saw the absence of support as a normal feature of the TID process. In the absence of effective environments for development, athletes relied on psychological strength to follow through their development. According to the elite coaches, the athletes’ mind set is the most important factor of success. Successful development required athletes to take full responsibility and control of their own progress, athletes worked harder to compensate for the poor environment and was determined to overcome the hostility from the society. Athletes did not blame failure on the family, the school, the government and the entire community, which were not supportive of sport development. Rather, the athletes put themselves at the centre of their development and developed a strong resilience to the barriers may face within the society.

“Nigerian athletes struggle against a lot of odds; there are no facilities, there are no sponsors, there are no supports, these are the challenges of sports development that athletes have to confront in Nigeria. Hence, each athlete has to find the way through and build up himself. That is why I told you earlier “I have seen miracles”, I have seen the most unexpected happen because a particular athlete has developed a personal (internal) motivation to succeed” (C4)

“Athletes’ progress depends solely on their efforts because there is no programme in place. Therefore, the phases an athlete goes through to become an elite athlete in Nigeria is entirely based on the decision of the athlete, we have seen athletes who broke through within one year, and those who worked for years without any outstanding success, so it depends on the athletes and their trainers” (C5)

“The engine room of success in sport in Nigeria is determination, because in this part of the world we don’t have the facilities, there are no good sport programmes, food and nutrition is poor, the financial backing is not there. With all these barriers and many more that we face in the Nigerian sport development environment, it takes determination for an athlete to navigate through the problems and make it to the international stage” (C6)

“The mind of the athlete is important, some people are very determined and whatever they set up to achieve they can achieve, with this type of mindset, nothing is impossible. If an athlete decides to train and become the best, he/she can be, he would do it with joy and a sense of fulfilment, they will never complain about challenges or contemplate dropping out” (C1)

Coaches’ support

The role of the coach in the Nigerian context goes beyond organising and supervising training activities for athletes. Coaches reportedly develop closer relationship with athletes so that the progress in development is seen as the collective responsibility of both the coach and the athletes. The coach is also a role model to athletes, as earlier mentioned, parents were against their children taking part in TID and thus do not offer any support for athletic development. In fact, athletes concealed their involvement in sport from the knowledge of their parents and instead look up to the coach as a father figure and a model. The coach is thus a father to his athletes and provides the emotional as well as financial support that athletes would not get from home. This close relationship between athletes and their coaches fostered a deeper understanding and trust between the two, which ultimately enhance the possibility of successful development. Also, because majority of the coaches were formally athletes who themselves have experienced the hostility of the social culture to sport development, their stories were points of encouragement to athletes.

“Also, beyond being a coach, I see myself as a father to the children. I am concerned about their emotional well-being, I make sure am aware of whatever problem they have even those that are not sport related, and do anything I can to help them solve it to make sure that they are comfortable, because if athletes are not comfortable, they will not improve as much as you want, no matter the training you give them” (C6)

“You have to get the children closer to you because it is only under close relationship between athletes and the coach that the inner talent can be revealed” (C7)

“I have athletes that I can say they are where they are because of God’s support, because at the time of need and problem everyone will desert them, they will have to depend on themselves or their coach for whatever help and support they need” (C7)

DISCUSSION

The objectives of this study were to examine the perceptions of coaches on the nature of sports development in Nigeria, and to gain insight into how coaches assisted top elite athletes to achieve success in sport. The data revealed several key themes. Specifically, sport-organizational specific barriers and culture specific barriers were the two categories of barriers to TID in the Nigerian context. The results also identified success factors of athletes’ development including athletes’ psychology and the role of the coach. Many of the sport-organizational specific barriers to TID identified in this study are supportive of previous literature, and such barriers include: lack of formal pathways to sports development (Ojeme, 1985); lack of sporting facilities (Omobowale, 2009); corruption (Osoba, 1999; Marquette, 2012; Adefila, 2012; Elendu, 2012); poor implementation of government policies (Ewah and Ekeng, 2009; Makinde, 2005); administrative failures (Ikejiofor, 1999); lack of funds for sport development (Ifeka, 2000). The culture specific barriers are related to the larger societal problems of poverty (Shola, 2010; Awotide, 2012; Kolawole et al., 2015), and unemployment (Uyanga, 1979; Uwakwe, 2005; Innocent, 2014; Okpanachi and Andow, 2013; Iwu, 2015).

The data showed that many families were opposed to TID; there were conflicts between TID in sports and family priorities (Senbanjo and Oshikoya, 2010; Kimm et al., 2002). Parents resisted their children’s involvement in sport because education was seen as the only means of defeating poverty (Obadan, 2001), while sports development was seen as a distraction to academic development of the child. These socio-cultural factors combined to create a society-wide hostility against TID in sports (Saavedra, 2003). Contrary to the recommendation of Martindale et al. (2007), the home (parents and siblings), school, government and the entire society constituted functional barriers to athletes’ and sports development (Elendu, 2012). Similarly, the school environment was not conducive for TID. It is good to stress that Nigerian national policy on sport development identified the school among the mechanisms for athletic development. Educational as well as sports development were seen as important elements of the general development of the child (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sport, 1989). However, the current result shows that the

school lacked the clout to encourage TID.

Another clear message from this investigation is the widespread corruption and incompetence in sport administration in Nigeria. Participants reported that administrators were appointed without due considerations to the prerequisite knowledge and experience in sports administration and thus sports administration in Nigeria was characterised by incompetence on the part of the administrators (Onifade, 1985; Bogopa, 2001; Jeroh, 2012). In simple terms, many administrators don’t know what to do. Similarly, administrators were alleged to mismanage funds meant for the development and maintenance of sporting facilities and therefore have left most of the sports facilities in Nigeria in a state of total neglect and disrepair (Toriola et al., 2000; Omobowale, 2009; Asiyai, 2012). Previous studies have suggested that sports development in Nigeria requires sound policy decisions to engage qualified and seasoned sports administrators who can plan and implement effective agenda for sport development (Mgbor, 2006; Aluko and Adodo, 2011), the current findings lend voice to this suggestion.

Severe as these barriers were, successful Nigerian athletes defied all the challenges posed by the hostile social culture to achieve top elite success in their athletic career. One of such major drivers of success in TID was athletes’ psychology (Nia and Bessharat, 2010). Successful elites shared unique psychology of resilience (Smith et al., 1995; Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013) against all the levels of barriers to sport development. In fact, success or otherwise was mainly determined by the mind set of athletes. And as such, elite coaches reported that athletes’ psychology was a major factor of successful talent identification and development. Also, the results revealed that the support coaches gave to their developing athletes made significant contributions towards successful development. This finding provides further evidence for earlier studies that suggest a relationship exist between quality of coaching and successful development (Bloom, 1985; Saavedra, 2003; Short and Short, 2005; Bouwer, 2010; Schlatter and McDowall, 2014).

Furthermore, the data revealed that the problem of poor implementation of government policies constituted a barrier to sports development in Nigeria. Though previous studies (Crosby, 1996; Mambula, 2002; Soludo et al., 2004; Makinde, 2005; Olukunle, 2008) have reported in the wider national economic sense that Nigeria’s growth and development is hampered by lack of policy implementation, the current finding brings to bear the impact of policy implementation failure on sports development.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This investigation has made contributions to the TID

discuss. To begin with, the nature of talent development in a Nigerian context has not been popular in the literature, thus the introduction of coaching in the Nigerian context to the TID discuss is the first achievement of the study. Also, the current results added more weight to the argument on the influence of socio-cultural factors on TID in sports (Maguire and Pearton, 2000; Henriksen et al., 2010; Shen, 2014). While previous studies have nurtured the idea that the cultural contexts of sports development are important to the design or adoption of TID models for a given society (Collins and Bailey, 2013), the current data suggest that socio-cultural factors can in fact determine the effectiveness or otherwise of TID models. The revelations about the strong influences of social culture on TID in Nigeria also enriched the debate about the dynamic nature of TID in sports (Abbott and Collins, 2004; Vaeyens et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2010; Collins and MacNamara, 2011), such that the factors of successful development in a culture might become barriers in another. For example, Martindale et al. (2007) promoted the role of support from the family (parents, siblings), the community (peers) the school (teachers, friends, class and school mates) and the government in providing consistent and coherent support for TID, but in the Nigerian case, all the supports gears were reported to constitute functional barriers to TID. Nonetheless, through their resilient psychology (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003; Fletcher and Sarkar, 2012), elite athletes overcame all the barriers to become successful in their sports, hence, the model of athletes' development in Nigeria supports previous suggestion (Collins and MacNamara, 2011) that developing athletes may have to face some challenges to facilitate success at the elite level of sport performance.

Finally, it is important to highlight some limitations of the current findings so that readers would have sufficient guidance in the application of the result. Firstly, the characteristic limitations of qualitative research methods must be considered before attempting to generalise the result. For example, the sample size was relatively small ($n=7$) and thus, the possibility of variations in opinions and themes within a larger sample should not be ruled out. Secondly, all participants in this study coached same sport (athletics), it is also possible that coaches in other sports might add other experiences to the study that would enrich the findings. However, the current study was a follow up to the previous one and thus interviewing the coaches of participants in the athletes' study would help to monitor the consistency or otherwise of the reported nature of TID in Nigeria. Furthermore, the coaches and athletes' perceptions alone would not create a complete picture of the nature of sports development in Nigeria because other stakeholders (family, sports administrators, and the government) have all been identified among the influencing factors of TID. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies are required to

investigate the perceptions of these other stakeholders on the subject.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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