

Researching youth sport

The talent and ability in young people in sport came under the academic spotlight at the recent Researching Youth Sport conference. Jonathan Ives joined the campus crowd at Brunel University.

Researching Youth Sport: Supporting Youth Ability and Talent was the fourth in a series of conferences devised to bring an academic perspective to the world of sports development. Opening proceedings, Professor Ian Rivers, head of sport science at Brunel University, suggested that the theme of the event was particularly timely. Having been engaged in the study of bullying for twenty years, Rivers explained that he has some affinity with the realm of sport but the hostile reception that the diver Tom Daley received from his fellow pupils on his return to school after the Beijing Olympics was an example of how much more there is still to do within sport to safeguard performers.

"We still haven't got it right," he said. "Research suggests that enjoyment declines the further you advance in sport."

That talent does not necessarily equate to enjoyment was echoed by Professor Valsa Koshy, who suggested that the government's definition of 'gifted and talented' is fundamentally flawed. Her work with the Urban Scholars programme focuses on academic ability but she suggested that the process by which the programme works with young people may well be of use in a sporting context. The programme had begun with the aim of identifying submerged talent. "We started the programme driven by a naïve kind of enthusiasm," Koshy said. "I subscribe to the idea that talent should be nurtured and encouraged."

The original concept was a four-year intervention to raise aspirations of young people in school and the programme is driven by the idea developed in inner-city schools that talent is present but often submerged by popular culture, peer pressure and capped aspirations. The Urban Scholar programme started with twenty students aged 12 being invited onto a university campus once a month. Teachers were asked to assess the potential of students based on "manifest, emergent and latent talent", before recruiting further students onto the programme. This first model was, Koshy acknowledged, very simplistic, focusing on specific subjects, mainly English and maths, although they found students very adept at critical thinking. With the assistance of hard-won research funding, the programme was further refined, introducing undergraduate support, more challenging lessons, the invitation of parents to visit the campus and external speakers from similar backgrounds to those students attending the programme. Three hundred students have completed the course and two hundred are currently on it. The programme has brought improved academic results, increased confidence and raised aspirations of university among those attending the course.

"The most important part of the scheme was the university campus," Koshy said. "You need the students on the programme to feel important and the campus was the most influential aspect." The input of the undergraduates had been a highly important part of the programme's success and Koshy was able to show pictures of the school students who had benefitted from the scheme. "They are examples of the bubbles of talent that we have helped to bring to the surface," she said. "It's all about second chances. Actually they need lots of chances. We keep giving them second chances until they make it."

Dr Hamish Telfer of Cumbria University explained how his use of reflective practices with young sports performers had altered the nature of the coaching experience. After long years of experience using reflective practice as a sports coach, during which "I got my hands dirty across the UK", he was able to report on three studies of the impact of reflective techniques: the first was the impact of reflective practice in his teaching of undergraduates; the second was with a national women's hockey squad; and the third with local athletics and football clubs.

Noting briefly that with the undergraduates he had tried to get them to understand more about how they were learning and the positive effects could be seen in an improvement of one degree class, Telfer focused on the second study in which he worked as a reflective practitioner alongside the coach and the squad. With the aim of enhancing on-pitch decision-making and facilitating team development, it had taken a while to get honesty from the players. Often they were thinking that they had to say what the coaching team wanted to hear and the idea that this was a judgemental process had to be countered. He found that timings of interventions was very



Hamish Telfer: putting reflective practice to the test

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The bio-psycho-social debating team with Dave Collins in the middle

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important, that many players did not like the 'wooliness' of reflective practice and that most appreciated a very structured process.

Having tutored the squad in reflective practice, the result was a very closely knit team that won the European championship. The coach had introduced the concept of senior players rather than a the usual team structure with a single captain and the reflective process had been kept 'punchy' in its delivery. Decision-making was better, team cohesion improved and the team won a trophy but the next question could this work at a local club level?

Taking the project into a club environment raised a number of questions, including how far safeguarding practice had influenced coaching practice and how successfully the concept of reflective practice might be explained to the performers. In the light of the continuing debate on safeguarding there were also challenges within the context of working with junior performers. "I'm keen to make children accountable," Telfer said. "We've tried to say to the children that they are responsible for their own actions. It's about risk, empowerment and responsibility."

The reflective approach also involves a different role for the coach, including a different way of being in charge, and new approaches for team members, such as story telling, altered images of self via the third person. While coaches might have had a problem letting go of control, performers enjoyed the sessions, responding positively to the opportunity to talk and express their views. The good news for coaches is that performers usually think that their coach is a better coach after they have used the reflective approach.

Dr Tess Kay of Loughborough University explored the impact of sport on the family and introduced the concept of Team Family as a crucial element of the youth sport system. "All excellent coaching goes to waste if you can't get kids into sport in the first place and families play an important role," she said.

Noting that she was talking about this research for the first time since it was completed some three years ago, a delay caused by the sponsoring organisations not wanting to draw attention to some of the findings of the study that highlighted shortcomings within the sporting infrastructure, Kay looked at the contribution of the family to aspiring sports performers, including the financial support, the impact on the lifestyle of the family, the emotional demands and the impact on siblings. It can lead to Team Family, with family life centred on sport, or it can create stress and conflict.

"Look at the example of a swimmer's timetable," she said. "That can quite easily destroy family life."

The study found that many parents were having to learn about the complexity of the sporting world alone, with many excluded by lack of money or lack of time. Nine out of ten sporting families said they needed more support, including finance, information and advice. "What can we do to support the supporters?" Kay asked. "Families are investing in sport. Shouldn't that support be reciprocated?"

The complexity of the performance environment was admirably demonstrated by the debate on player development in sport, which explored the nature of the 'bio-psycho-social' evidence available. Dr Paul Ford of the University of East London looked at the biological context of long-term athlete development and, having explored the implications of non-linear growth patterns among young performers and the attempts within long-term athlete development (LTAD) to reflect this, he concluded that a lot of the necessary scientific evidence appears to be missing. Dr Martin Toms (University of Birmingham) looked at the social factors essential to an effective development programme, including the need to focus on the person as much as the performer. Aine MacNamara (University of Limerick) explained the psychological skills and factors that are crucial to elite success. With the development pathway notoriously complex, dynamic and highly individualised, she suggested that talent development programmes that employ a one-off testing approach are unlikely to prove effective.

Professor Dave Collins, introduced as an independent contractor but generally acknowledged as one of the big beasts of the world of sports coaching, drew the strands together and emphasised the need to remove the roadblocks to the development of performers. Development, he suggested, should not be viewed as a multi-disciplinary process but as an inter-disciplinary process, bringing biomechanics, psychology and the social aspects of performance together to form a new whole. Long-term athlete development has suffered in the absence of this approach and he suggested that if the long-term athlete development system was to be effective it needed to include recognition of the various participation motivators and how they differ for individuals at different times in their lives. The absence of clear evidence for current long-term athlete development models was also a factor.

"LTAD is a pile of poo in terms of evidence," he said. "Not only does LTAD not work, there's no evidence for it. It really ticks me off. Funding claims need to be based on some evidence. We need to be in a position where our research is as evidence-based as our medical colleagues."

With the debating fuse thus lit, Professor Collins stood back and opened the debate to the floor. They may still be going strong.

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