The aim of this research was to investigate previously overlooked environmental and socio-cultural factors linked to enhancing sports talent identification and development (TID). The results will be used to inform a broader project focussed on providing empirical evidence about the relationships between athletes, sport clubs and families which will help to reshape future Australian sport policy and club management practices in the area of TID.

The TID processes responsible for Australia's international successes in the past have relied somewhat narrowly on biophysical markers alone, many of which have been adopted and improved by other countries. Biophysical selection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. For Australia to regain its international sports ascendency, it is essential to again lead innovations in TID.

International research acknowledges antecedents of sport talent are varied and complex and there is an interplay between determinants of talent. A range of both primary (e.g., relative age, genetics) and secondary factors (e.g., socio-cultural and contextual elements) relevant to the development of sport expertise have been identified, with the latter being both significant and often overlooked in terms of their influence. Further, socio-cultural elements (e.g., the family/peer milieu; sport officials/coaching maturity) of sport TID are typically examined in isolation despite acknowledgement that TID requires the successful interaction between environmental, interpersonal and organisational elements. This research is the first socio-cultural empirical research into TID in Australia and examines the nature, strength and efficacy of interactions between two contexts central to the nurturing and development of talented athletes – the family/peer setting and the sport organisation (i.e., sport club).

This research was exploratory in nature and focussed on gaining insights on important factors in sports TID in Australia from the perspective of athletes, their families, and club officials. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine participants associated with a team from the national competition of the Australian Football League (AFL). A semi-structured interview schedule was developed following an extensive literature review. Of the nine interviews conducted, three were with athletes from the under 18 team, three were with a parent of the athletes interviewed, and three were with club officials. The interviews began by asking each participant to provide a biographical and sporting history. The remainder of the interviews explored, from the participant’s perspective, what they thought were: important motivational factors; people which are most influential; aspects other than people which were influential; and the major constraints and barriers faced by talented athletes.

Thematic analysis of the interviews supported research which had been conducted in contexts outside of Australia. That is, familial support and the family environment play a critical role in TID. Some of the factors that emerged were the provision of practical and psychological/emotional support from the athlete’s family. Practical support included finance, time, and transport to training and competitions. Psychological and emotional support was consistently seen as an important factor in overcoming constraints such as injury and non-selection in teams. One new finding to emerge was the disparity between the perceived importance of sporting and governmental bodies when comparing the responses of athletes and club officials. These findings will provide valuable input to the broader study for which this research has provided data.

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