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## **Talent development coaching: Challenges and realities**

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## **Abstract**

Academic literature has paid considerable attention to talent identification but much less to talent environments and the challenges facing sport coaches in such a domain. This paper provides insights into the challenges facing a coach in a resource-constrained environment, with goal ambiguity between immediate performance success and longer-term player development. Having identified prescriptions for good practice, the paper recounts the first author's experience in attempting to accommodate conflicting goals and a novel performance model, within an U19 national volleyball squad. Particular attention is paid to recruitment, stakeholder perceptions, player commitment, a shared performance model across age groups, and longer-term player welfare. The paper concludes with a reminder that in such situations, coach support and welfare should also be a concern for sport federations.

**Keywords:** sport coach; talent environment; goal ambiguity; performance model.

## **Introduction**

This contribution to *Practical Advances* explores the realities of attempting to adhere to sound talent development principles in a particular resource-constrained environment. We recognize that sport coaching can only be understood in its particular context (Lyle, 2020). The purpose of the paper, therefore, is to illuminate the intersection of development principles, institutional goals, resource availability and coaching beliefs, and the consequent impact on coaching practice. This is not a review or aggregation of relevant literature; it is a personal reflection by the first author that is intended to highlight the pitfalls, challenges and compromises inherent in coaching practice.

There is an enormous body of literature within which to site any enquiry into talent development, with a substantial number of review sources (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2018; Megicks et al., 2022). Indeed, the very concept of talent is itself a source of

debate (Baker, 2022; Baker et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there is a clear emphasis on talent identification, with attendant implications for development stages, retention, selection and specialisation (Leite et al., 2021; Till & Baker, 2020). Much less attention has been given to the realities of applying and implementing by coaches the plethora of recommendations. However, more recent writing has focused on the talent environment within which coaches and other practitioners operate (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Megicks et al., 2022; Taylor & Collins, 2021).

In contrast to the emphasis on talent identification and development with younger children and youths (Baker et al., 2020), this personal reflection is centred on an older group of athletes – an Under-19 team-sport national representative squad – who might be said to be at the end-point of identification and selection, but with a clear developmental purpose, both individually and collectively. Representative team sport at this older age-group level might be described as sub-elite, that is, it constitutes a stage or step prior to full senior international participation (Swann et al., 2015), but with many of the characteristics of the elite sport environment. This older-age group phase is a transition within a sport’s performance-development structure, with an inherent purpose to act as a feeder system to senior teams. It can also be described as a transition stage, in which athletes’ abilities are yet to be fully developed but in which international competition requires a degree of specific preparation (Horton et al., 2014).

From our own considerable experience as coaches of national squads, the team sport context and (where it applies) the non-full-time status of the athletes foregrounds issues such as selection, club liaison and the scheduling of training camps and international programme preparation. The developmental agenda, that is, the balance between and within technical, physical, psychological and tactical development, will be dependent on the developmental status of the sport and the consequent extent to which the age-group coaches are able to rely

on a population of players who have moved beyond mastery of basic skills. Putting this in simple language, representative team squads are often thought to be arenas in which tactical and psychological preparation will predominate, rather than technical development. In addition, the developmental status of the sport will impact the perceived balance of reward and commitment – all of this within an umbrella set of objectives focused on individual player welfare.

This paper draws attention to the challenges and realities of a talent development coach in the sport of volleyball, who is charged with recruiting and developing talented players who aspire to play the sport at a senior performance level. The first section outlines research-informed guidelines and principles that may be adhered to when identifying, recruiting and developing adolescent-aged athletes who are perceived to have the potential to compete at international level. The second section takes the form of a narrative that highlights the challenges of a talent development coach operating in the under-resourced and poorly-subscribed sport of indoor volleyball in England – attempting to follow the principles of appropriate practice and upholding athlete-centred principles and practice. The paper concludes with an optimistic vision: how a talent development coach, constrained by a culture of short termism and limited resources can still create a worthwhile, developmental, positive experience, within which aspiring athletes can improve, while facilitating an appreciation of what it takes to play the sport at a high level.

### **Perspectives on optimal talent identification (TID) and talent development environments (TDE)**

Despite the wealth of literature referred to in the introduction, there are few evidence-based prescriptions for effective development practice. The phrase talent identification and development is in common usage but the emphasis is very much on talent identification processes and systems (Leite et al., 2021) and the development aspect is assumed to an

extension and embodiment of the identification process (Cobley et al., 2020) rather than an examination of the specific and contextualised application of development practice. Indeed, one of the criticisms of talent identification and development research is its lack of contextual reference. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the literature is concerned with the limitations of both research and practice in identifying ‘talent’ (Baker et al., 2020). The focus on younger age groups is evident, with debate centred on the balance between deliberate play and deliberate practice, diversification and early specialisation (Chase & DiSanti, 2017; Coutinho et al., 2016).

However, there has been a welcome increase in attention to talent development environments, an inclusive term understood to refer to the micro and macro context that surrounds the athlete (Henriksen et al., 2010) or the athlete’s curriculum, which integrates both stakeholders and environments (Taylor & Collins, 2022). In a series of papers, Taylor & Collins (e.g., 2020; 2021) refer to the totality of the athlete’s experience and emphasise the need for shared mental models and vertical (with subsequent stages and expectations) and horizontal (across all stakeholders) alignment. There remains, however, a dearth of reporting on the practicalities of applying and implementing such principles from a domain-specific, context-specific, sport-specific and coach-focused perspective. This may be particularly important in adopting and incorporating a concept of continuous development in and between older age-group programmes and in the transition into elite programmes.

There are, nevertheless, a small number of prescriptions for sound practice in creating effective talent development environments, against which coaches’ practice might be evaluated. For example, Henriksen et al. (2014) operationalise Athlete Talent Development Environments (developed from his earlier thesis), the effectiveness of which are interestingly defined as organisations producing “senior elite athletes from their juniors” (p.134). The features of a successful environment are identified as: training groups with supportive

(internal) relationships, links to elite role models, supportive wide environment, development of psychosocial skills (life skills), diversification in training, a focus on long-term development, a strong organisational culture and integration across stakeholders (Henriksen et al., 2014).

Megicks et al. (2022) carried out a questionnaire survey of talent development environments (TDEs) across 5 European countries, comparing athlete, parent and coach responses. They identify five principles for the development of effective talent development environments: (a) a *climate of care* embedded by a strong coach-athlete relationship that focuses on the individual's development both as an athlete and a person; a TDE for *long term athlete* development - planning cycles have a future orientation, with an absence of early specialisation and an emphasis on performance progress over results; (c) aspiring elite athletes need to be *challenged* in order to improve but also to develop perseverance and resilience, learning to make sense of and cope with 'bumps in the road'. This should be scaffolded by a strong support network comprised of coaches, managers, psychologists, parents etc. to ensure that the athlete is not overwhelmed; (d) attention to *life skills*, including self-regulation, time management, conflict management and leadership. While recognising that these life skills can be acquired and practised implicitly, there is also a need for a more purposeful and explicit curriculum helping athletes to monitor and evaluate their programmes; (e) *stakeholder alignment*, the guidelines recommend the creation of an 'interdisciplinary' team bound together by a shared model for long-term holistic athletic development.

What is very apparent from these guidelines is the responsibility of the head coach to lead the process and the skills, knowledge and attributes that are required. The recommendations identified above imply a significant toolbox of coaching expertise, including an in-depth knowledge of the sport, a capacity to model performance to develop

and prepare an aspiring athlete to be competitive at elite level in the future, and incorporation of individualised growth/maturation data, personality traits, family history, socio-economic circumstances, training age, levels of confidence, self-esteem and so on. The coach must also possess a high level of inter-personal and advocacy skills in order to communicate with the stakeholder network.

McCutcheon's (2022) 'formula' for competitive excellence in sport perhaps reflects the harsher and more pragmatic realities of what it takes to become an elite sportsperson. The building blocks to achieve competitive excellence are identified as Competitive Excellence = Talent + Sport-like Practice + Learner Intent + Teaching/Coaching (2022, p.28). McCutcheon (2022) suggests that talent development can be characterised as a contractual arrangement between the athlete and coach, in which responsibility, buy-in and commitment are important. The athlete learns to compete by applying the necessary skills in competition and if appropriate as part of a team. Part and parcel of the learning process is the ability to cope with and learn from failure, thus developing further the skills of reflection and resilience (Collins & MacNamara, 2012).

McCutcheon (2022) describes the talent development coach - a teacher who has developed a clearly defined, research-informed, long-term curriculum and pedagogy that provides a pathway towards excellence. He contrasts this with less-impactful functions such as formulating game plans, tactics and match coaching. McCutcheon also emphasises the importance of the rigours of deliberate practice where athletes need to commit consistently to doing their best throughout the pathway. However, even if all the building blocks are in place, and are strong and robust, there are no guarantees that talent will prevail; there are too many confounding variables (Baker, 2020). Nevertheless, McCutcheon stresses that TDEs cannot ignore the contribution of innate qualities to the prospects of aspiring athletes making



it to elite level. Sports such as basketball and volleyball in which the game is predominantly played by tall athletes is an obvious example.

Till and Baker (2022) identify a number of characteristics of an effective system, including, a consensus among talent development coaches on what constitutes holistic talent in their sport; an emphasis on characteristics beyond technical ability and physical prowess such as decision making, and ability to perform under pressure; and an understanding of how the sport will be played in future, encapsulated in a shared target performance model that provides a coaching vision and a curriculum framework for training and competition. The target performance model determines a style of play and the values and beliefs that will prepare for and support future senior performance programmes (Till & Baker, 2022).

We end this section of the paper by noting that an aggregation of the recommendations in the previous four sources, each of which focused on talent environment prescriptions, would be a demanding 'ask'. It is important to understand that development programmes exist in a wider context of elite sport development. For example, de Bosscher et al. (2006) identify nine pillars that support elite sport development. These include financial resources, policy structures, number of participants, talent identification and development systems, training facilities, coaching processes and development, and international competition. Based on responses from coaches in coach development workshops that we have delivered, we identify a number of environmental criteria: a pool of talented committed athletes, expert coaching from highly qualified, innovative coaches, state-of-the-art sports science and medicine, regular national and international competition at appropriate levels, a holistic approach to athletes' development, adequate training venues and equipment, and good talent identification and feeder development systems. The implication is that the immediacy of the coach's management and delivery of the programme/intervention has to be understood in the context of the broader range of factors within which it takes place.

Each of us has been involved in talent development in the sport of volleyball in the UK for nearly twenty-five years. From our own experience, the ‘ideal programme’ may be an unattainable ambition for what would be considered a ‘minor’ sport. Such a research-informed model would unquestionably challenge current practices in delivering an optimum talent development environment. Funding for elite Olympic sport in the UK is based on the likelihood of attaining a podium place in a major World, European, Commonwealth, or Olympic Games (Bostock et al., 2018). The likelihood of a minority sport such as volleyball procuring the resources to implement a programme that addresses all of the recommendations for effective practice is slim. It is in this context that we describe the reality of the lead author’s experience as a talent development coach in the sub-elite domain.

### **The reality<sup>1</sup>**

In October 2022, I was appointed Head Coach of the England U19 Junior Women’s volleyball programme. It was explained to me on appointment that this was, first and foremost, a player development programme, while also having to prepare a team to compete in international competition in Europe.

### ***Context***

Volleyball England (VE) is the national federation responsible for the governance of the sport in England. The annual report for 2022-23 (Volleyball England, 2023) identifies a total income of just over £1.5m, of which £650k is an annual grant from Sport England to govern the sport. The remainder of the income is made up of membership and competition fees, coaches and officials education courses and showpiece events. Although there is some additional grant funding for related salaries, all of the indoor and beach talent development programmes, including the senior indoor national teams, were funded entirely by players

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the paper attempts a more authentic feel by being written in the first person. The words are those of Stephen McKeown.

and/or families of the players. In all of these programmes, the coaching is entirely voluntary with only travel and accommodation expenses being covered. With minimal external funding, there is enormous pressure on VE to keep the costs of running its talent development programmes to a minimum. Players on VE's talent pathway have to pay for the entirety of their participation in the programme. If a player is fortunate enough to be selected to either one of the junior or senior national teams, travel, accommodation and even competition fees have to be self-funded. There is even a fee for players to take part in the annual national trial!

From a national coach's perspective, the challenge of devising a holistic talent development programme aligned to the guidelines and principles outlined earlier in the paper is considerable. The minimalist budget underwrites one training camp per month and two international competitions in a season. With the cost of a weekend-long camp that includes 8 hours hall hire, 2 hours classroom, food and accommodation being priced at £120 per participant - without travel costs, it is perhaps inevitable that both players and parents develop a strong sense of entitlement - 'What are we getting for our money?' The young person's participation in a talent development programme is regarded as an investment, which should culminate in representing their country at under-17 or under-19, if not senior national level. However, the federation, in an effort to balance the books, applies subliminal pressure on the coach to select as many players as possible for the squad, regardless of their potential, in order to generate income to pay for hall hire, equipment, training and competition kit. At the same time, there is still an ambition, if not a clear expectation, that the national coach will produce a team that will be competitive in international competition, which significantly influences the potential for securing additional funding from the UK's high-performance sports agency, UK Sport.

In these circumstances, ethical dilemmas become evident: (a) should coaches knowingly recruit players who they believe lack the potential to develop into a senior national

or professional players, in order to mitigate high costs? (b) should the coach focus on building a team that prioritises current ability at the expense of latent and/or late-maturing talent in a long-term athlete development programme that may discover those with greater future potential? The rationale for the former is that being able to field a more-competitive team at junior international level may secure funding that makes the programme more viable in the future. The result is that the key stakeholders (members of VE responsible for overseeing TID/TDE, the players, club coaches, parents, coaching staff) can exhibit considerable goal ambiguity. Without clarity on the long-term aims and purpose of the programme, there is potential for misconceptions and unrealistic expectations, particularly from parents and players.

### ***The approach to selection***

On my appointment as the head coach to the England U19 junior women's programme in October 2022, I attempted to develop a shared understanding on the purpose of the programme by stipulating three aims, ranked in order of importance:

- 1) Contribute to player recruitment to the England senior programme.
- 2) Develop players to a level at which they could compete in the English senior leagues, achieve scholarships to play NCAA in the USA, and/or play professional volleyball in mainland Europe.
- 3) Field junior national teams that would be competitive in international competition.

The focus was clearly on developing players for the future, which suggested a commitment to invest in the development of the players over one, two if not three seasons. However, this understanding was based on the premise that the majority of players in the squad that I had inherited had the potential to become senior international players. What became very apparent in VE's current talent identification system, which relied heavily on recruiting players from a one-off, open trial, was that minimal consideration had been given

to identifying players with innate athletic talent, including the ability to produce speed, generate and absorb power while being agile on a volleyball court.

International volleyball is predominantly played by tall people<sup>2</sup>. The average height of a top-10 women's international team is between 1.85-1.95m, with more and more players in recent years exceeding 2.00m. The average height of the current England JW squad, with many of the players having already surpassed their peak height velocity is under 1.72m. Average reach height from a spike jump is currently measured at 2.72m, which is 8-18cm less than the U17 squads of top European rivals such as Italy, Germany and France (two years younger than the England U19 squad)<sup>3</sup>. There is no doubt there is still a place in top international teams for players who are as small as 1.65, specifically in the backcourt specialist libero position. However, few if any talent development squads that have aspirations of competing at senior international level in major European, World Championships or Olympic Games can accommodate 50% of the cohort under the height of 1.75m.

Athletic prowess can certainly be enhanced and is not totally determined by innate abilities. However, in a high-net rebound sport such as volleyball, vertical height and lateral reach are essential components. VE's current TID system may identify some of the best young volleyball players in the country, but even with a better-resourced TDE, they are probably not the athletes who can be developed into international volleyball players. Indeed, in all likelihood, the athletes who have the required physical characteristics are not playing the sport at all. They are playing more popular, better resourced sports that can provide greater esteem and recognition – if they are playing sport at all! This is one of the many

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.volleyballworld.com/volleyball/competitions/vnl-2023/players/142479>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cev.eu/national-team/age-group-championships/>

constraints that a minority sport with a small player base encounters when trying to produce teams to compete internationally in global sports such as indoor and beach volleyball.

In addition to disregarding the physical demands of playing the sport internationally, the TID system does not consider the psychological demands, including athlete adherence, resilience and ability to perform under pressure. Megicks et al.'s (2022) holistic guidelines for TDEs are far removed from the reality. Even Till and Baker's (2022) recommendation to invest in players who have a genuine desire to play the sport at the highest level is not explored. Players who are fortunate enough to have a coach who encourages them to pursue opportunities to play volleyball beyond the club environment and have supportive, financially-sound parents are more likely to attend a national trial than those players who may have a desire to play the sport at its highest level, but do not have the means to do it. In essence, the current TID system does not support the TDE principles or programme.

### ***What can the coach do?***

From a head coach's perspective, there is no practical solution to the problem, other than to 'make the best of what you've got'. In the 2022 volleyball Nations League, Thailand's women's national team shocked the volleyball world by beating major volleyball powers Turkey (the current reigning champions), Serbia (current world champions) and China (ranked world number 1 in 2020). What was particularly noteworthy is that the height and profile of the Thai team is not so dissimilar to the current England JW, with only one Thai player 1.82m tall<sup>4</sup>. In recent seasons, Thailand has been very successful when competing internationally by playing a very fast, variable game to compensate for their lack of height. They beat their opponents' defence with speed and a combination of deceptive attack

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<sup>4</sup> For comparison, the statistics for the current Thai women's squad are: average height 1.76m and spike reach 2.76m; for world number 1 team Turkey they are height 1.80 and spike reach 3.03. Note, however, that these averages include 'libero' players who are commonly in the region of 1.65-1.70m but who do not compete at the net where height is an obvious advantage. (see: [https://en.volleyballworld.com/en/vnl/2018/women/teams/tha-thailand/facts\\_and\\_figures](https://en.volleyballworld.com/en/vnl/2018/women/teams/tha-thailand/facts_and_figures) <https://en.volleyballworld.com/volleyball/competitions/vnl-2022/schedule/> )

approaches in rally play. I announced to the players that this was the style of play that we intended to adopt in the England junior women's programme. This is the type of volleyball that they needed to acquire and develop, if they want to play senior international volleyball, given their current height and athletic profile.

A shared target performance model (TPM), as recommended by Till and Baker (2022), provides a clear rationale and purpose for the programme. The obvious drawback in devising a TPM so heavily influenced by the Thai way of playing is that it is technically, physically and mentally very demanding, requiring what I can never aspire to - thousands of hours of deliberate practice. The reader will recall McCutcheon's (2022) formula for competitive excellence that recommends thousands of hours of game-like practice. Once again, the reality is at odds with the prescription. With just under 100 hours of court time available during monthly training camps and an additional 20 hours at a summer camp<sup>5</sup>, it is impossible to amass the level of learning and practice time that will equip the players, even in the medium to long-term, to acquire such a highly complex, sophisticated style of play. In short, you do the best that you can with the resources available.

While being mindful that any practice needs to be as game-related as possible, one also has to take into account that the ball contact rules of volleyball make it a very precise technical game. The first author's approach is to employ a blend of explicit internal-focus learning drills with more implicit external-focus game-like practices, through which the players can appreciate then acquire the techniques, tactics and movements laid out in the heavily Thai-influenced target performance model. However, the process is highly reliant on the players buying into the process. They are given regular opportunities to reflect on where they are in their learning and what they need to practise in the period between national

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<sup>5</sup> Age-group players will commonly play for and train with their club sides, which significantly increases the total immersion in preparation. However, the minority status of the sport and its attendant commitment levels means that the total weight of deliberate play and practice falls short of that recommended. We comment on this later.

training camps, not just from a technical and tactical perspective but also from a physical and mental perspective. Players are expected to do that work at their clubs between training camps. Players' intention or commitment, as presented in McCutcheon's formula for competitive excellence, is an integral part of any programme, but cannot be taken for granted.

Over the past year or so, the coaching staff has encountered reticence from the players to adopt even the most fundamental techniques, to explore different systems of play, and even play in different positions. Many of the players come from highly successful clubs and are used to winning. They find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that being involved in a TD programme that manifestly prepares players for the future is different from being a member of a club team whose principal and immediate objective is to win as many games as possible in a season. The belief that the most important benefit from training and preparation is to win matches is difficult to challenge, particularly when parents and even club coaches think otherwise.

The culture of short termism and early specialisation is prevalent across nearly all youth sports (Te Wierike et al., 2015), but it is particularly impactful in sports that have such a narrow talent base. The evidence from 'relative age effect' (RAE) research is that there is a tendency for coaches to favour those individuals with an early maturational advantage, particularly in sports in which physical capacity is an advantage (Cobley et al., 2009). When combined with an emphasis on winning (Lewis et al., 2015), the focus on short-term benefits may encourage a narrower, more-specific skillset, to the disadvantage of longer-term, more holistic development (Andronikos et al., 2016). Indeed, there is also potential for later-maturing players, who have had to rely on psychological and skill-based coping to exhibit a reverse-RAE (McCarthy et al., 2016).

This is evident in volleyball. For example, as already identified, young tall English volleyball players are the exception. Too often, however, because of their height, coaches at



an early age identify, train and play them as specialist blockers at the expense of learning other facets of the game, including service reception and back court defence. These roles are given to smaller players who can make a useful contribution in junior club volleyball, but do not necessarily have the physical characteristics and/or athleticism to become senior international players. It therefore requires a change of mindset from the taller players in the programme who are only considered average or below average height in an international context. It is challenging for these players who have been coached with a specific skill set and particular movement patterns to accept that there is a deficit in their development that they need to address if they have aspirations of playing senior international volleyball.

This change may not be supported in their clubs, where the coach, through necessity, is obliged to select smaller players to take these reception and backcourt roles. The coach therefore may neither have the time nor the inclination to coach these skills to the taller players. Requests from national squad coaches to consider broadening the skill repertoire of their taller players are quite often ignored, on the grounds that they have no other junior players who can play this front court specialist position. Similarly, the shorter players who have been selected onto the programme have to come to terms with the fact that they have to adapt their techniques to compete against much taller players, particularly when they are in front court. They are confronted with the same dilemma when they train with the club: *'Why should I ask my coach to change my reception and hitting technique, when it is clearly successful when I am playing for the club.'* In brief, the level of junior domestic competition in England, and the profile of the athlete that plays the game at club level in England, does not necessitate significant forward-looking changes in how the successful junior club teams play the game.

The role of competition as a player development tool in junior volleyball is also a significant constraint to a national long-term player development programme. The thought of

not playing your strongest 6 players on court, playing a different formation that gives players opportunity to take on different roles and responsibilities, or even to give a player the opportunity to play in a different position is anathema to most club coaches. Our experience and our observations of other coaches highlight the dilemma for coaches of foregoing more-immediate competition success for longer-term benefits – for players and clubs. It is not unusual for coaches to withhold players from national team training on the grounds that they have a ‘more important’ tournament or match to play for their region or club.

Players in the national programme have to make sense of and adapt to a challenging agenda. This has often been misconstrued by the players, their club coaches and parents as the coaching staff deliberately sabotaging their chances of ultimately achieving their sporting goals and that the programme as a whole is anti-competitive: *‘If you are genuinely interested in producing elite players and a successful senior national team, then the juniors need to win every game.’* The coach therefore has to spend time reminding players, and other stakeholders, that fundamentals, change and staged progression are integral parts of the development process, and in order to prepare for the future players may need to learn to play in different positions and in different systems. The simple adage that it may be necessary to ‘take a step back in order to take leap forward’ is apposite, emphasising the role of communication, clear objectives and vision, and a consensual performance plan in the TDE.

There is an expectation that the team that takes to the court in an English shirt is ‘set up’ to win or remains as competitive as possible when playing (as is usually the case) much stronger opposition. However, the ultimate goal is player development; players and other stakeholders should respect and be mindful of how the coach sets a team up in response to both the opposition and the performance model. More often than not, players learn more and develop more quickly when they lose (implying more performance problems and challenges)

than when they are winning. The acceptance of making errors, failing to meet objectives and coping with losing has to be an integral part of the talent development environment.

Talent development environments extend to the level of coordination and cooperation between development stages (for this, read national squads at U17, U19, and senior women) (Taylor & Collins, 2021). At present, head coaches in the context described in this paper operate in relative isolation, formulating their individual player development and competition programmes. From my experience, perhaps as a result of constraints on time, resources and central coordination, communication or collaboration between the respective squads is at best minimal. This, I am sure has not escaped the notice of the players, and their parents, as they progress through the talent pathway and attempt to accommodate the discreet technical, tactical, physical and mental skills espoused by each of the programmes. In addition, conspicuously absent from the talent development pathway (from the clubs, through to the regions, the national U17 and U19 programmes to the senior national team) is a shared understanding of an English style or way of playing. I feel sure if English volleyball had an agreed style of play, cultivated at grass roots, right through to the senior national team, then current TID and TDE systems would have a clearer focus, encourage collaboration, create a more seamless transition, and, as a result, be more effective.

In summary, I found myself in circumstances in which limitations in player resources, the intensity of the preparation and competition programme, the absence of a strategic plan across development squads, stakeholder perceptions about what constituted ‘success’, and, in particular, the lack of correspondence between the requirements of senior women’s volleyball and the attributes of players on the programme placed a severe strain on my capacity to create a TDE that adhered to the principles previous outlined. This necessitated a change in technical and tactical thinking, preparation, and playing style – and, crucially, a longer-term vision both for a style of play and individual player development. The response to this was a

further challenge to the development environment. On reflection, the absence of ‘buy in’ from club coaches was crucial, particularly achieving consensus about the balance between immediate playing success and longer-term player career progression.

There are always historical layers of influence that impact on practice. Over-reliance on a one-off open trial system which lends itself to identifying current talent at the expense of latent and or late maturing talent, the absence of attention to physical stature and psychological traits, and the likelihood that the players selected need to be well supported both emotionally and financially impact on player capital within the programme. This is compounded by an under-resourced programme, a culture of short-termism and early specialisation, and the promotion, particularly to parents, of a vision and consequent goals and expectations for national age-group programmes.

### **Reflections on coping with or managing reality**

Since taking on the role as Head Coach, Stephen has often reflected on whether or not he would be much better off if he did not have a clear, research-informed understanding of what talent development should entail. Would he (and others) be less ethically compromised if he was blissfully ignorant about what constitutes optimal TID and TDE? Could teams be selected to compete in international competitions without having to consider long-term player development or even athlete welfare in general? Would there be less tension and scrutiny from parents and club coaches? To date Volleyball England has not provided any guidance or direction on how to deal with these current dilemmas and issues. Having been assured at interview that his philosophy on talent development was correct, no substantive feedback has been provided or further professional development offered. In particular, liaising with parents is daunting and even stressful, and Stephen is now currently doing his own research on effective mechanisms for liaising with both parents and players, while staying aligned to young athletes’ welfare guidelines. Once again Volleyball England finds itself in a no-win,

‘Catch 22’ situation. It requires professional support and funding to optimise its TID and TDE systems, and staffing resources, but is not likely to receive it unless the national teams are more successful in international competition.

In Stephen’s words:

*Unfortunately, reality dictates that it would be unethical for me to ignore my knowledge and understanding of optimal TID and TDE. I still need to remain true to my own values and beliefs. I am conscious that my position as head coach merely provides me with the opportunity to question or at best challenge current culture, systems and practices. However, I have a limited capacity to change practice at a system level. It is what it is! I appreciate that even in optimal and well-resourced TID and TDE systems, it is never a given that talent will prevail. Players can invest thousands of hours to being as good as they can be, but fall short of reaching an elite level. There are so many variables in play that militate against an individual succeeding, including the subjective opinion of a coach, the quality of the cohort the athlete is being judged against, incurring an injury at a key milestone in their development or changes to how the sport is being played at elite level and consequently what player characteristics are required. That’s the reality!*

This begs the question. Are those thousands of hours invested by the athlete a waste of time? The work of Gould and Caron (2008) in outlining the positive benefits of participating in a talent development programme suggests not. Key transferable life skills that should be developed in any programme such as a propensity to apply oneself to meet goals and deadlines, the ability to cope with adversity, even failure, being an effective team member and above all being a morally upright person are integral to what and how Stephen coaches. All of these skills can still be developed in the England U19 junior women programme, despite its obvious limitations. While reluctantly complying to the vagaries of

VE's current TID and TDE systems, he pushes back vehemently on the notion that the relationship between coach and player is now purely transactional.

*The relationship I prefer to cultivate between myself and the players is much more transformative. The underpinning purpose of the programme is to develop them as better people; to provide them with the opportunities to reflect on where they are in their journey as a player and even a person; set their own goals and then assist them in preparing plans to meet them; create bumps in the road that deliberately make things more difficult and help them to cope with failure; counsel the player on how to manage disappointment and the extra pressure that comes from not succeeding; suggest strategies to overcome these bumps while working with and supporting their team mates. For the few who are fortunate enough to acquire a professional contract or to play for their country, then that can be considered the 'icing on the cake'. For the vast majority who do not make it, then they are still better and more enriched for the experience.*

*This is how I make sense of and hopefully remain effective as a coach in an under-resourced TDE. The coach-player relationship is fundamental in this transformative process. It remains fundamental to my philosophy as a coach.*

There are also 'technical' matters that impact on the TDE. There is a need to be realistic about what can be achieved. The programme is attempting to adopt a style of play that is very technically, tactically, physically and mentally demanding. Therefore, this needs to be accompanied by realistic goals and an aligned programme that the players perceive to be achievable and enjoyable! Given the limited amount of time on the court, there is no expectation that the players will reach the dizzy heights set by the Thai seniors and even their junior women's programmes. However, it offers a way forward for the players to improve and, in favourable circumstances, to be competitive on the international stage - but the

players need to buy into this vision. While accepting that this may not be obtainable in its entirety, aspects of the ‘Thai way’ can be mastered and applied successfully in competition. Deliberate practice can be tedious, but if this results on occasions in producing a fast varied offence and or dynamic defence leading to a successful attack in transition, then the players should be walking away from training camps or finishing a closely-contested match with a degree of accomplishment, satisfaction and even enjoyment. The time invested is not wasted and they can reflect on the improvements they are making.

*As head coach, it also preserves my sense of self-worth and even sanity.*

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the paper is to give a first-hand and reflective account of the lived experience of a coach in a particular domain. Although we acknowledge that there may be implications for coach development, our approach is less about suggesting that coaches should be ‘helped’ to deal with the situation we describe than that (a) expectations (coaches and other stakeholders) need to be modified, (b) organisations need to examine their resource allocation priorities in relation to objectives, (c) coaches need to have a greater awareness of the underlying reasons for limited progress, and (d) all stakeholders need to have an awareness of the potential impact of conflicting objectives and stakeholder perceptions on coaches’ well-being.

It is appropriate to raise awareness of the realities of a resource-constrained coaching process but we would suggest that this should not lead to a particular form of coach development. Rather, *in-situ* coach development in which a reflective, developmental conversation is firmly grounded in an appreciation of context and pre-disposing factors and their impact on coaches’ reasoning, strategising and behaviour should account for the context-dependent example provided here (Muir & North, 2023).

It would be easy, and perhaps accurate, to conclude that in this situation the imposition of a (necessary) technical model made it more difficult to operationalise Megicks et al.'s (2022) five principles, or to create a talent environment as proposed by Taylor and Collins (2022). It would also be easy to conclude that limits on budget, time and resources make it virtually impossible for optimal TID and TDE systems to be developed in small federation sports such as Volleyball England. Nevertheless, we hope that this paper has gone a little way to suggesting that some improvements can still be made despite the constraints. In the minutiae of coaching practice, coaches can work to developmental goals and whenever possible avoid short termism. Programme objectives and delivery can be constructively aligned to meet the needs of players who aspire to extend their careers beyond domestic club volleyball. Coaches can devise explicit individualised development plans to ensure the holistic development of every player.

Although we have not fully developed the argument, we might suggest that our earlier assertion that, particularly part-time, national teams focused on tactical and psychological preparation for competition, has to be tempered for sub-elite programmes, in which a more deficit or refinement technical agenda is required. This adds to the coach's potential dilemma in balancing the development of the various components of performance preparation.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to make firm recommendations about what an organisation can do to overcome, for example, the short-term mind-set described; any focus on organisational priorities, policies and strategy is fertile ground for another paper. Nevertheless, achieving appropriate objectives can be facilitated by attention to system characteristics, we might suggest that smaller federations could consider the introduction of talent transfer schemes in an effort to compensate for the limited talent pool, while recognising in existing or revised TID systems both the innate and acquired talent in the existing talent pool. Opportunities to identify and recruit talent should certainly go beyond a



one-off open trial so that players of a different training age or who mature at different rates, can be brought into a programme at the most appropriate time and level. The federation can also lead on the creation of a shared technical, tactical, physical and mental model within which players can make sense of their learning, be inspired and enjoy, all within the remit (to varying degrees) of a TDE - regardless of time and resource. This shared model can then be implemented at the different stages of player development within more-connected age group programmes.

As a footnote it is perhaps worth recognising that being ‘small’ does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage. A shared vision for any TID and TDE system can be so much easier to achieve with fewer stakeholders to be brought on board. There are many smaller federations across the world that ‘punch well above their weight’ in international competition because of their acumen in maximising the limited resources at their disposal, while getting whole-hearted buy-in from clubs, coaches, players, parents and administrators.

Some consideration has to be given to the role of the coach in the TDE. In all environments, coaches are key to achieving objectives; it is they who set the tone, establish a working culture, determine (with collaboration) the performance programme and manage the delivery. In well-established and well-resourced systems, coaches might be thought to act in a supportive environment. In the circumstances described in the paper, the coach is ‘fighting the system’, albeit acting in the best interests of the players and the organisation, and providing a well-founded programme. This can ‘take its toll’ on the coach and the federation has a duty of care to ensure that support is in place to monitor and manage the coach’s physical and emotional wellbeing, and recognise the potential impact on long-term commitment to the sport.

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