

## **Sport Talent Identification And Development: A Practical Step To Identifying And Nurturing Budding Athletes To Stardom In Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Sport talent identification and development have become increasingly relevant in sports performance specially in the last 20 years. Discovering recruiting and retaining talent is a global challenge and it is especially relevant for sports clubs and national federations that often see potential assets escape due to self-system inefficiencies. Everyone has ability, but it is not distributed equally or predictably. Hence there are opportunities to develop physically, emotionally and socially an to discover hidden talents, learn about oneself and develop a new sense of competence and self-worth. Often times, ability is a gift from birth but that doesn't guarantee success and from a more contemporary perspective, sport talent identification is seen as a process by which children are encouraged to participate in sports in which they are more likely to succeed, based on results of testing parameters. Going beyond the identification of talent, it is proposed that scientific perspective on the pursuit of excellence in sport be broken down into 4 key stages: Detection, selection, identification and development. However, this study suggested that for each sport that required a talent identification program, there need to be an ideal and acceptable model for both the factors that influence sporting performance and talent identification so that athletes and coaches can compare their own abilities with those athletes that resemble or are closer to the model being selected for elite junior programs. These ideal models can be formulated by taking measurement of elite athlete performances at events such as Olympic Games, world identification and development are germ are to athletes' development and sustainability. The study therefore suggested amongst others that the government should formulate programmes for identifying sports persons with potential to become elite as this will help improve sport performance in both national and international sporting competitions.

**Keywords:** Sport Talent, Identification, Development, Nurturing, Budding athletes, Stardom recruiting, Discovery, Retaining talents.

### **Introduction**

The identification and development of sport talent represent the cornerstone of athletic excellence and national prestige in the global sporting arena. In recent decades, nations have increasingly turned to structured systems of talent identification and development to build sustainable pipelines of elite athletes. For Nigeria, a country richly

endowed with youthful energy and athletic potential, the process of discovering and nurturing sports talent presents a significant opportunity not only for achieving sporting glory but also for addressing broader socio-economic challenges such as youth unemployment, social exclusion, and the underutilization of national potential (Adeleke & Bakare, 2020).

Sport has historically been a unifying force in Nigeria, transcending ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries. The exploits of Nigerian athletes in international competitions such as the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, and the African Games have demonstrated that, given the right support, Nigerian sportsmen and women can compete favorably with the best in the world (Ogunlade, 2019). However, these occasional flashes of brilliance often contradict the systemic inefficiencies and lack of strategic planning that plague the country's sports development framework. One of the most critical gaps in the Nigerian sports ecosystem is the absence of a robust and inclusive model for talent identification and development that is aligned with global best practices and adapted to the country's unique socio-cultural realities (Onifade & Adeola, 2018).

Talent identification in sports refers to the process of recognizing individuals, particularly at a young age, who possess the physical, psychological, and technical attributes required for success in competitive athletics (Vaeyens et al., 2008). Development, on the other hand, encompasses the systematic nurturing of these attributes through targeted training, mentorship, education, and exposure to competitive environments. In countries like the United States, China, and Australia, sport talent identification and development programs are deeply integrated into educational institutions, community clubs, and national sports academies, providing athletes with consistent access to resources, coaching, and career progression opportunities (Ogunlade, 2019). Nigeria, by contrast, often relies on informal and ad-hoc methods of scouting talent, which are largely unsystematic and fail to reach many promising athletes, especially those in rural and marginalized communities.

A practical approach to sport talent identification and development in Nigeria must therefore be holistic, inclusive, and sustainable. It should begin with grassroots initiatives such as inter-school competitions, community sports festivals, and partnerships with faith-based and civil society organizations. These platforms can serve as fertile grounds for early talent detection. Following identification, there must be a structured developmental pathway that includes access to qualified coaches, training facilities, nutritional support, psychological guidance, and academic balance (Okpara, 2021). Additionally, leveraging technology and data analytics to track athlete performance and progress could significantly enhance talent development efforts.

Importantly, such a system should be underpinned by collaborative governance involving government agencies like the Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, educational institutions, sports federations, private sector stakeholders, and international partners. This collaboration can mobilize the resources, expertise, and policy frameworks required to institutionalize a culture of excellence in Nigerian sports. Beyond producing world-class athletes, a well-structured sport talent development system can foster national pride, promote healthy lifestyles, and inspire the next generation to pursue their dreams against all odds.

Conclusively, the imperative to establish a practical and sustainable system of sport talent identification and development in Nigeria cannot be overstated. By tapping into the vast reservoir of youthful talent across the nation and investing in their holistic development, Nigeria can reclaim its place as a powerhouse in global sports while empowering millions of its citizens through purposeful engagement and opportunity.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **The Concept of Sport**

Sport is a multidimensional social phenomenon that transcends mere physical activity to encompass competition, entertainment, cultural expression, and personal development. According to the Council of Europe (2001), sport is defined as “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.” This broad definition reflects the role of sport as both a recreational pastime and a platform for elite performance.

In the Nigerian context, sport serves as a tool for national unity, youth empowerment, and international representation. From traditional wrestling and football matches in rural communities to global competitions like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup, sports have created avenues for identity building and national pride. Scholars such as Adesanya and Lawal (2020) argue that sport in Nigeria is not only a leisure activity but also a critical pathway for social mobility, especially among disadvantaged youth.

### **The Concept of Talent**

Talent is generally perceived as an innate ability or natural aptitude in a specific domain, whether cognitive, creative, or athletic. In the context of sport, talent refers to the inherent physical and psychological attributes that predispose an individual to excel in

athletic performance. According to Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (2004), talent is the developed form of aptitude or giftedness that emerges through learning, training, and experience. While the notion of talent as an inborn trait remains popular, contemporary scholars emphasize the interaction between nature and nurture. This implies that talent alone is not sufficient for success unless it is cultivated through structured practice, motivation, and environmental support (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). In Nigeria, where socio-economic constraints often limit access to developmental opportunities, it becomes crucial to recognize and nurture latent talents that might otherwise go unnoticed.

### **The Concept of Sports Talent Identification**

Sports talent identification is the systematic process of recognizing individuals—particularly at a young age who possess the potential to excel in specific sports. The goal is to predict future athletic success based on a combination of physical, psychological, and technical attributes. Williams and Reilly (2000) define talent identification as the process of discovering potential elite performers through objective and subjective assessments.

Effective talent identification requires a blend of scientific tools and contextual understanding. Methods range from anthropometric testing and skill-based trials to coach observations and competitive performance tracking. In Nigeria, however, talent identification is often informal and inconsistent, relying heavily on community tournaments, school sports, or serendipitous discovery by local coaches. This gap underscores the need for a national framework that institutionalizes early and inclusive talent scouting, especially among underrepresented populations (Adeleke & Bakare, 2020).

### **The Concept of Sports Talent Development**

Talent development refers to the long-term, structured, and holistic process of nurturing identified talent into elite performance. According to Bailey and Morley (2006), talent development in sports involves not just technical training but also psychological support, educational balance, competitive exposure, and access to adequate facilities. It is a multidimensional process that must adapt to the athlete's changing needs as they progress through various stages of development.

Successful talent development systems, such as those in Australia, the UK, and Germany, integrate school sports programs, talent academies, and professional pathways to provide consistent support for athletes. These models are underpinned by collaboration among educational institutions, sports federations, private sponsors, and government agencies. In

Nigeria, however, talent development is often hindered by poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and the lack of a clear progression pathway for young athletes (Okpara, 2021).

A practical and effective sports talent development model in Nigeria must consider the socio-economic realities of the country. This includes decentralizing training programs, investing in grassroots initiatives, and ensuring that talented athletes from rural and low-income communities have access to the same opportunities as their urban counterparts. More importantly, talent development should be inclusive, gender-sensitive, and aligned with educational and career planning to ensure that athletes can transition smoothly beyond their sporting careers.

### **Factors to be considered in Talent Identification**

There are factors to be considered in talent identification and these factors are as follows:

**Physical factors:** There are certain physical characteristics that help to determine the development of an athlete in the future, their physical structure can help to determine an athlete's best position and their physical attributes. For example, being tall therefore can be able to win headers from either corners of the goal kicks in the case of a football player.

**Height:** A tall player will be required to maximize their height, and use it to their advantage throughout the game. Using their height in order to gain aerial supremacy against the opponents we believe is important. Being able to win flick ons, to jump either defenders or attackers depending on the position is useful for the team. However, players can be developed not only in height advantage but with solid technical ability such as ball control, passing, shooting, team-work and communication skills.

A talented player who is not particularly tall in stature, may still develop in size as they become older. As they get to certain age, their size may well be increased.

**Weight (Body Mass):** Another physical factor to be considered when developing a player, is their weight and body mass. Attention is also paid on the player's weight in terms of positioning in the pitch and such a player may be good in short-put.

**Physiological Factor:** Physiological factors will be assessed when identifying both talent and developing a talented player and athlete. However, concentration will be on whether the player has either slow-twitch or fast-twitch fibres. Slow-twitch fibres contract more slowly than fast-twitch fibres, but they also take longer time to tire. Players such as strikers or wingers will tend to have more fast-twitch fibres. Alternatively, defenders or defensive midfielders may often have more slow-twitch fibres which contract more slowly.

**Aerobic endurance/Aerobic Power:** A further aspect of talent development is a player's aerobic and anaerobic endurance capacity. This means that a player can be developed differently depending on their endurance capacity. Due to player's being different with some being better at sprinting in short-bursts, such as strikers. Whereas other players will run and run constantly throughout the game usually a center midfielder will not. A player's aerobic or anaerobic capacity can be developed by working on his or her fitness levels by providing facilities fitness tests to be conducted and developed to take place.

**Sociological Factors:** The most important and influential factor when a talented player is developing is the support they receive from friends, fellow players, coaches and family. All of these, particularly family support from parents is important when a player is going through the sports identification programme. Having someone to run to when times are possible difficult and challenging can be very useful for the player, particularly when the player may not be performing to their full potentials, possibly due to lack of confidence or tiredness. Having support and encouragement is essential and can really help them to regain their form and confidence.

**Parental Support:** Parental support is really encouraging as it tends to help them enjoy their football even more. It is believed that players who have their outside support, attitude and belief will be more positive especially when assessing their own game/training performance. On the other hand, parental pressure to achieve is something discouraged because it demoralizes the player's spirit in the sport. The pressure put upon them by their parents can often be too great and can distract a player's focus. Their confidence and performance levels may well drop due to the stress and pressure put on them to achieve by their parents, affecting them negatively.

### **Identifying and Developing Talent at the Right Time**

Thanos (2009) opined that effective sports talent identification and development in should aim at encouraging and supporting sports participation among young people. To this end, Amot and Gaines as cited in Siva (2016) stated that sports talent and development should be recognized and encouraged in children after the age of 10, since such talent is an important part of a child's potential and one that deserves recognition and encouragement as much as any other. Cobley et al. (2012) suggested that the first stage of identification should take place at the age of 8-10 years in the form of mass screening and this should be followed up 18-24 months later. Final talent identification should take place at around 14 years of age. However, the age at which a child gets involved in a specific sport should depend on the

sport. He suggested age 7-8 for swimmers, gymnasts, tennis players and figure skaters, to age 12-13 in boxing and cycling and age 13-14 in shooting and weightlifting.

Several sports science disciplines are actively engaged in tackling the problem of talent identification and its development. Still no clear cut formula or procedure is available for identifying talent for various sports. Based on present knowledge gained from actual practice and sports science disciplines, the following principles of talent identification and development can be deduced:

**a. Starting point is the structure of future performance:** Talent identification and development is a future oriented process. The aim is to find and develop talent for high performance several years ahead in the future. Therefore one has to look for those performance factors or performance capacity which will enable the sportspersons to achieve this performance. The proper implementation of this principle involves tackling of the following tasks:

- i. Prognosis of sport performance in a sport at a fixed time in the future.
- ii. Determination of the structure of prognostic performance.
- iii. Determination of the performance capacity and its structured essential to achieve prognostic performance.

On the basis of the performance capacity and its structure demand profiles should be prepared for the different stages of training. The demand profiles serve as the base for talent identification and its development.

**It is a long term Process:** Sports talent is a product of heredity and environment. Heredity unfolds itself with the passage of time and is also affected by environment including physical activity. In high performance sports children are normally considered for talent identification. These children are growing and maturing in a certain environment. Growth produces changes in physique, capacities, abilities, personality traits, interests, attitudes etc. Younger the child the faster are the changes. Therefore it is very difficult to judge the final outcome or sports talent. Moreover, through systematic training growth and development processes can be significantly affected. The process of talent identification and its development therefore must begin in early childhood. It should be spread over a number of years and sports training should aim at maximal exploitation of growth and development, especially motor development, for optimum development of talent.

### **Factors Hindering Sport Talent Identification and Development in Nigeria**

The following are some factors hindering sport talent identification and development;

1. **Lack of Quality and accessible training facilities:** Quality and accessible training facilities and equipment create a positive environment that encourages proper training, but lack of facilities or access to facilities and equipment is a limiting factor to sports development (Rogers, 2005). Olajide as cited in Sarmento *et al.* (2018) stressed that the issues of lack of quality and accessible training sporting facilities is a serious problem in the identification and development of sport talents across Nigeria communities, to the effect that developing sport persons and their coaches either improvise for the facilities needed for training or train without them. Similarly, Ajiduah as cited in Aibueku and Ogbouma (2013) opined that such an environment would make it difficult for developing sport persons to set, pursue and achieve developmental targets because there is no clear picture of what the future has in store or what may meet them at the next stage of development. Undoubtedly, the Nigerian government has not shown significant commitment to sports development when compared to other nations that occupy dominant in sports (Abdulgafar, 2013).
2. **Coaching Knowledge of Sport Talent Identification and Development:** a coach is someone who orchestrates learning activities and mediates social climate while diagnosing and remediating performance. The basic task of coaching is to develop and improve the performance of teams and individuals. Where a coach lacks skills and knowledge for scouting and harnessing the potentials of sport persons in a particular sport, the performance and success of those sport persons suffers. The case of Nigeria is quite pathetic as persons who have to knowledge of a particular sport, are picked and appointed as coaches. This will eventually have a ripple effect on the performance of the team or individuals. The most important characteristic of a successful coach is the ability to ensure provision of high quality practice. Additionally, the likelihood of talented athletes to become elite is based on provision of best coaches and training.
3. **Time for Practice and Training for Sport Talent Development:** It has been confirmed that training is essential to developing sport talent, but it should be provided in the correct doses for the particular stage of the sport person (Stotlar & Wonders, 2006) and conversely, they must provide adequate recovery for the sport person. Training for world competitions requires at least 25-35 hours per week for several years; therefore, time and commitment are both absolutely essential (Rodgers, 2005). Given the need to invest considerable time and effort into one's activity to achieve excellence, Rodgers (2005) emphasized that sport persons require adequate tithe away from other activities to train; the sport persons may spend three hours a day in a serious training in seven days. To this



end, if little or no time is given to practice and training by sport persons, their talents and full potentials will not be realized and their performance will drop drastically.

4. **National Sports Policies and Implementation:** It worthy of note, that as far back as 1989, Nigeria has developed a National Policy on sports development and also published the guidelines for its implementation. The documents identified four distinct objectives of sports development, such as, voluntary organizations; research and planning; education and training; mobilization of resources. However, the lack of implementation of this policy has stalled the development of sports in Nigeria. Parts of the problems identified with poor or non-implementation of the National Policy on Sports include inadequate funding, lack of sports facilities, poor coaching education system, inadequate sport coaching personnel at the grassroots level, lack of research based practice, as well as, lack of proper monitoring and documentation of sporting activities. Sports development has always been included in the various national development plans; however, the successive governments have been noted to be lacking in the desire to implement the various sports development policies (Buekers *et al*, 2017).
5. **Lack of Standardized Talent Identification Service:** Lack of a standardized talent identification service to distinguish the right sports appropriateness for children and adolescents based on their physical ability and psychological character.
6. **Parents as primary decision makers:** Parents acting as primary decision makers in the identification of sports areas and talent for their children poses a challenge or hindrance for the development of sports talent in the child.

### **Practical Steps that can be adopted to address the Factors Hindering Sport Talent Identification and Development**

1. Encourage investment in sports infrastructure through collaborations between government, private companies, and international organizations.
2. Implement nationwide continuous professional development (CPD) programs for coaches, especially in talent identification and development techniques.
3. Mandate structured sports periods in primary and secondary school curricula to ensure consistent practice time.
4. Review outdated policies and align them with contemporary realities and global standards in talent development.
5. Create and deploy a uniform system for evaluating young athletes across different sports and age groups.

6. Organize workshops and sensitization campaigns to enlighten parents about career opportunities in sports and the value of early development.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that sport talent identification and development is a diverse subject that is not easily summed up. There are different views on what sport talent identification and development accomplishes, and how it should be structured. It is clear that the issues of hindering sport talent identification and development in Nigeria take their root from the wider social problems of poverty, corruption and poor leadership, which will require a change in the mindset of the political class to address. It is also acknowledged that a well-planned and organized sport talent identification and development programme is essential to the successful development of every sport. Therein, sport talent identification and development need the scientifically based and assessment should be done continuous in order to maximize sporting performance at global level.

## **Suggestions**

Based on the discussion so far, the following are suggested ways to improve sport talent identification and development in Nigeria;

1. The government should formulate programmes for identifying sports persons with potential to become elite as this will help improve sport performance in both national and international sporting competitions.
2. During scouting there is need for coaches to use scientific methods for measuring physical, physiological, psychological and social attributes of sportspersons in identifying persons with potential of becoming elite. This will help avoid poor judgment of sportspersons' potential.
3. Government should support exposure of athletes to high level competitions both locally and internationally so as to enhance their talent development.
4. There is need for the provision and maintenance of adequate and quality sport facilities and avail the required equipment for quality practice and effective talent development.
5. There is need for coaching education programmes to be established in order to provide coaches with opportunities to upgrade their theoretical, conceptual, technical and tactical knowledge of the sports that they coach.
6. There is need for schools at all levels of education to set aside time for sport participation in their academic calendars. This will provide adequate time for sustained regular and

quality training and practice to assist in development of talented student-athletes to elite level.

7. The government, non-governmental organizations and schools should formulate incentive programmes that include sports scholarships to motivate more talented youth to join in sports.
8. Develop sport disciplinary tools that can monitor athletes.
9. Assess maturity status e.g. age of the athlete
10. Effective of resources for creating more opportunities.

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