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An investigation of talent in field hockey

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Abstract

This investigation was conducted to gain an understanding of the career pathways of current national female field hockey performers, and their experiences of talent identification and development. There is limited specific research within field hockey and so often development programmes have been based upon findings in other sports. 12 female senior national field hockey players were interviewed for the investigation. The major influences on achieving elite performance in field hockey were identified as support from families, schools and clubs, with an overriding influence from luck at all stages. It is suggested that the type of school attended by the individual will have an impact upon the direction that their career will take. Literature suggested that school, club and family support was a vital factor in achieving elite performance as well as luck. Overall it was found that the influence of school is dominant for private school pupils, whereas clubs are more important for grammar school and state school pupils. Family and talent development programmes were found to be vitally important for all types of youth performers and so emphasises the need to make these as affective as possible and also to make them as accessible as possible for the talented youth performers, rather than just the lucky ones.

Keywords: Investigation, Talent, Field Hockey

Introduction

The main focus of field hockey research has been geared towards the physiological requirements of the sport (Jeffreys, 2005; Spencer *et al.* 2005; Sunderland *et al.* 2005; Elferink-Gemser *et al.* 2007) [2], with little investigation into the talent identification and development procedures experienced by the elite performers in the sport. Field hockey is a popular sport, for both men and women in India, played in many schools. The best individual performers are selected to represent their state at senior national Level. The pinnacle of which would be to compete at the National Games. This research project focuses on the women who have competed at the senior national level, examining their career pathways in order to gain a better understanding of the talent development model currently in place in Indian field hockey. This will provide some evidence on how this works and how some players' journeys have developed and may help to highlight weaknesses in the talent identification programs used in the sport in India. Greater consideration is given to the sociological aspects of their careers as opposed to the physiological qualities that they possess.

Methodology

This study examines the career pathways of elite female field hockey players, with particular consideration of talent identification and talent development 40 programmes within the sport. The research was collected through qualitative methods; conducting interviews with current elite, English female field hockey players. Issues of ethics, validity and reliability are discussed, as well as issues with ontology and epistemology and how they may affect findings in the study. Many of the methods chosen for the study have been selected through the trial of a pilot study, which is also discussed.

Research Findings

The overwhelming factor apparent in current field hockey career pathways is that of luck. This is from the physiological attributes an individual is born with, through the support they gain and opportunities offered and received throughout their involvement in the sport. The main support providers come in the form of family, school and clubs.

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Alongside this comes the involvement of development programs, run by the governing body, as an avenue to elite performance. Without a combination of support elements, it appears that achieving elite performance is near impossible, however it is a matter of luck as to the quantity and quality of this support. All of the players felt their family had a significant positive impact on their playing careers. This was particularly evident during the younger years of their participation, most notably in the form of financial and access support, but also as a means of encouragement and psychological support. School was often noted as the arena for initial engagement in field hockey, with P.E. teachers or school coaches being pivotal motivators and facilitators for involvement. Provision and opportunities was varied, most significantly between players from Fee Paying and State schools. Fee paying school participants, appeared to receive more high quality coaching at school, and have easier access to better facilities. There was a huge 90 over-representation of kids within the sample as none of the participants attended standard State schools, suggesting that a large sector of the population may be being excluded from participation in field hockey simply through the type of school they attended. There was also a clear strong feeling for the importance of clubs in the continuing development of players, throughout their careers. It not only offers a regular opportunity to play high standard field hockey but was also seen as a sociable and enjoyable arena. One aspect of club hockey that several of the participants felt was not currently being utilized was the opportunity to observe club games as a means of selection for representational squads. They believed that observing players in their regular teams offered a great opportunity to see them perform in a more natural environment, and also provided late developers with an ongoing opportunity to become involved at representative level. The overwhelming feeling from the participants was that the club and the school attended by the player during their involvement in development programmes had an impact on their selection into representational squads. Several of the participants were aware of the advantages their relationships with selection coaches before selection processes had had on their inclusion in such squads. Suggesting an unfair advantage for individuals with 'good connections' within the sport, this providing a possibly easier route to elite performance.

Benefits of the Findings

This study has gathered information from female players at the top-level of the sport about their experiences and feelings about talent development in Indian field hockey. Through this data collection, a clearer understanding of the current career pathway to elite performance in field hockey has been identified. This has facilitated the design of a model for the current development pathway, and highlighted key support factors that greatly influence achievement of success in the sport. Through developing this clearer understanding of the current process, the opportunity for improvements to the system is notably enhanced. It is important to note that this study focused on a relatively small sample, due to financial and time restraints. Therefore to improve the validation and reliability of the results, further participants should be interviewed, as the current findings may not be representative of the whole elite field hockey population.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the research findings, drawing conclusions from the information gained on the sample of

hockey elite performers career pathways and the talent development programmes they have experienced. Further potential research on field hockey talent development is also discussed, in the hope that current models are enhanced to ensure talented individuals maximize their potential.

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