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CHAPTER 12: IMPORTANT FEATURES OF TALENT COACHES FOR TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN SPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

Elite sports have a vast importance in society, have much attention in the media, and a lot of money is involved. As a consequence, the development of talented athletes in sports is becoming a big issue nowadays. A talented athlete can be defined as an athlete who performs better than his or her peers during training and competition, and who has the potential to reach elite level (Howe et al., 1998; Helsen et al., 2000, Elferink-Gemser et al., 2004). More and more it is realized that talent development plays an important role in reaching elite level in sports and excelling at this level (Singer and Janelle, 1999, Williams and Reilly, 2000, Ericsson, 2003). Talent development is influenced by multiple factors; a successful interaction of biological, psychological, and sociological factors is needed for the development of expertise in sport (Baker et al., 2003). One of the important factors for talent development is the coach of a talented athlete (talent coach) (Singer and Janelle, 1999, Baker et al., 2003, Gould et al., 2002). A coach’s degree of knowledge and skills in many areas affect the performance of an athlete (Abraham et al., 2006). Six features with which a talent coach can contribute to the development of a talented athlete are outlined below.

The first features which are important for a talent coach are his experience and education. One of the important ways to learn the profession of coaching is by experience. Previous experiences as a player, assistant coach, or an instructor provide a coach with (sport-specific) knowledge about the sport in which the coach is functioning (Lemyre et al., 2007). The level of education of a coach seems to be an important characteristic as well. Several studies have demonstrated that elite coaches are more likely to have a higher level of education (Lyle, 2002). For example, Gould et al. (1990) found that a large percentage of elite U.S. national team, Pan American, and Olympic coaches have a high education (78% has a Bachelor degree or higher).
The synchronization of the role of the coach with developmental stages of an athlete is a second feature with which a talent coach can contribute to the development of a talented athlete. Talent is a dynamic concept and factors which form a talent do not only interact, but also change over time (Abbott et al., 2005). Several authors have phrased stages through which talented athletes progress over time (Bloom 1985, Côté 1999, Balyi et al., not dated). The cognitive, physical, and emotional needs of children change at the various stages of their sport participation. Due to these changes it is important that the role of coaches change accordingly (Côté et al., 2003). Martindale et al. (2007) also confirm the importance of emphasis on appropriate and ongoing development (not on early success).

A third important way in coaching talented athletes is goal setting. Despite some contradiction in the literature, the current opinion about goal setting is that it is beneficial in the sports domain (Kyllo and Landers, 1995, Mooney and Mutrie, 2000, Weinberg et al., 2001, Martindale et al., 2007). Skills are better acquired and maintained when goals are set than when performers are instructed to only do their best in sports participation (Boyce, 1992). Martindale et al. (2007) also stresses goal setting as one of the important generic characteristics of effective talent development environments (in direct process of coaching).

A fourth feature is the motivational climate implicated by a talent coach. Abbott and Collins (2004) conclude in their review that it is not the performance at a young age of a talented athlete that is a good indicator of eventual attainment in a sport. In contrast, motivation and appropriate learning strategies appear to be more important in order to fully develop one's potentials. Motivation of an athlete is associated with the motivational climate (Ntoumanis and Biddle, 1999). The coach of an athlete was found to have an important role in constructing the motivational climate (Pensgaard and Roberts, 2002). An often used distinction in motivational climates is the distinction between mastery climate and performance climate (Dweck, 1999). In a performance climate the athlete's perceived success and competence is based on performance compared to others (win/lose). A performance climate is created when the coach promotes intra-team rivalries, favours the most talented players, and punishes players for making mistakes. In contrast, athletes with a mastery based motivation feel successful on a self-referenced basis. A mastery climate is created by a coach when athletes are encouraged to focus on their own personal development (Cumming et al., 2007).

The degree of autonomy supportive behaviour exhibited by the talent coach is a fifth feature. Autonomy supportive behaviour can be defined as ‘a coach who takes the athlete’s perspective, acknowledges the athlete’s feelings and provides him with pertinent information and opportunities for choice,