

Exploring Talent Development Environments in Nigeria: A Case Study of Sport Development Framework in Ondo State

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DOI: [10.36348/jaspe.2021.v04i10.001](https://doi.org/10.36348/jaspe.2021.v04i10.001)

| Received: 02.09.2021 | Accepted: 07.10.2021 | Published: 12.10.2021

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Abstract

Talent development environment is a key factor of successful talent identification and development in sports. Without effective talent development environment, athletes and their coaches would achieve little or no success in their quest to nurture sporting potentials into actual performance. Despite Nigeria's participation in international sporting competitions, sport development in the country suffers from certain functional barriers relating to the general framework for talent development. This study explored talent development environments in Nigeria, using Ondo State as a case study, in order to identify environmental barriers to effective talent development. The Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ) was used for data collection among seven hundred and sixty-eight (768) athletes who participated in the study. Data analysis revealed that talent development environments in Ondo State were weak on long-term development focus (m=2.15); poor on quality preparation (m=4.26); strong on communication (m=2.09); poor on understanding the athletes (m=3.51); weak on support network (m=2.26); poor on challenging and supportive environment (m=3.44); and weak on long term development fundamentals (m=2.36). Findings were discussed in relation with the extant literature.

Keywords: Talent development environment, talent identification, sport development, sport performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Sport development has become a key factor of nation building due to the potentials in sports for positive engagement of the youths, job and wealth creation, health promotion, as well as promotion of social cohesion. Besides, participation in competitive sports promotes the sense of national pride and identity (Phipps, Cooper, Shores, Williams, & Mize, 2015). Thus, many nations evolve evidence-based approaches to sporting talents development (Woods, Keller, McKeown, & Robertson, 2016). Previous research suggests that Nigeria is yet to advance a model for Talent Identification and Development (TID) to form a framework for identifying and developing sporting potentials among children and the youths (Elumaro, 2016), therefore, the nation's quest to occupy an enviable position among other sporting nations may remain a mirage for a long time. This study is aimed at evaluating the sporting-talent development environment in Nigeria, using Ondo State as a case study, in order to identify and disseminate environmental factors of successful sporting-talent development in the country.

Though, Nigerian athletes and teams can be said to have performed relatively well in some international competitions in the recent time, it is clear that all is not well with the environment and procedure for talent development in sports in the country. Some of the deficiencies with the process of athletes and sports development in Nigeria include poor implementation of national policy on sports, as well as the lack of infrastructure for sport participation and talent development (Toriola, Adetoro, Toriola, & Igbokwe, 2000). Other limitations identified with athletic development in the Nigerian context include issues with availability of, and access to sporting facilities across Nigerian communities (Elumaro, 2015).

Similarly, it appears that there are no clear pathways for sport development in Nigeria to guide athletes across sports in terms of their progression (Ajiduah, 2001). However, with her vast youthful population, Nigeria has the potential to raise more sporting talents than the country is currently doing, if the environment is supportive of TID in sports. Many of the top sporting nations like the United States of

America, United Kingdom, Australia, and Jamaica have optimized their sporting achievements through evidence-based programmes for sports and athletes' development (e.g. Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Baker, Côté, & Abernethy, 2003). Whereas, luck had played significant roles in the momentary victories achieved by Nigerian teams, and thus, such achievements were usually not sustained. Because many of the existing studies on TID were conducted in other cultures, and the evidence that sporting talent development is culturally specific (e.g. Bailey, 2007), it is imperative to study the talent development environment in Nigeria to unearth and minimize barriers to effective development, and to create opportunities for sustainable development in sports among Nigerians.

Studies have highlighted effective Talent Development Environment (TDE) as a major determinant of athletic development (e.g. Côté, 1999). Environmental factors associated with effective sporting-talent development include long-term aims and methods; wide range of coherent supports; focus on appropriate development versus early success, as well as individualised and ongoing development (Martindale, Collins, Douglas, & Whike, 2013). Conversely, the process of sport development in Nigeria appears to be deficient in these highlighted features. National athletes are selected through national triers, some of which are held (sometimes) only months away from a major competition; and after such competitions, teams are disbanded without continuous training or follow up. As a result, there are no effective retention and succession. It is therefore not surprising that there are fluctuations in the performance trajectories of the sport sector in Nigeria because many of the occasional victories are based on 'luck' and not good preparation. Therefore, the current study is aimed at stimulating evidence-base practice in sporting-talent development in Nigeria by examining talent development environments in Ondo State, as a case study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

A total of seven hundred and sixty-eight (768) athletes took part in the study; 439 (57.2%) males and 329 (42.8%) females. The age of participants ranged from ten (10) to forty-eight (48) years, while the average age of participants was eighteen years (18). Organisations participants played for included the Ondo State Sport council (n=412), Independent Coaches (n=239), and University or College Sport Teams (n=117). Twenty different sports were represented in the study.

Research instrument

The Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ), developed by Martindale *et al.*, (2008) was used for the study. The TDEQ is a 59-item inventory designed to assess the environments in which sport men and women develop their sporting careers to

appraise environmental compliance to best practice as indicated by seven factors of the TDEQ including (a) Long-Term Development Focus, (b) Quality Preparation, (c) Communication, (d) Understanding the Athletes, (e) Support Network, (f) Challenging and Supportive Environment, and (g) Long-Term Development Fundamentals. Martindale and colleagues (2010) highlighted a robust reliability and validity for the instrument. Similarly, in a later study, Butt, Maynard and Harwood (2014) demonstrated that the TDEQ possessed excellent ability for realistic assessment of talent development environments.

Procedure

Having secured institutional ethics approval for the study, three organisations were identified within Ondo State as formal talent development environments, because they possessed the facilities and personnel for talent development in sports. More importantly, these organizations have talent identification and development in sport as part of their core objectives, and in fact, they currently have athletes in various sports at different levels of development. The organisations included Ondo State Sport Council, Sport Teams run by Independent Coaches, and University/College Sport Units. Managers of the said organisations granted access to their athletes for the purpose of the study. Athletes were thereafter approached in clusters (i.e. according to their sports) with the help of their coaches, and only those who voluntarily indicated interest were recruited for the study. In each cluster, participants were given detailed information about the study and what their participation entailed. It was made clear to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point; and that the data collected for the study will only be used as group average and so no participant will be identifiable from the data. Thus, no personal information was required; and that there was no right or wrong answers so participants could freely express their opinions. These measures were taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants and to reduce social desirability. All participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. Also, for athletes below the age of eighteen years (n=281), the consent of their parents or guardian were obtained. The TDEQ was administered among participants (in clusters) in a quiet room inside training facilities of their organisation. The completed questionnaire forms were collected on the spot to forestall any loss or damage. In case of damage, the questionnaire was replaced on the spot. A total of 768 copies of the questionnaire were validly administered.

DATA ANALYSIS

Martindale *et al.* (2008) coded responses to the TDEQ on a 6-point scale including 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = agree a little bit, 4 = disagree a little bit, 5 = disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree. This way, the lower the score reported by a participant, the higher the

quality of experience being measured by each item on the TDEQ. Though other studies (e.g. Mill *et al.*, 2014) reversed the scoring format such that higher scores on the TDEQ items related to higher quality of the experience being measured, the current study adopted the scoring format of Martindale and colleagues in which the lower the score, the higher the quality of experience. Also, in the current study, mean scores ranging from 1.00 to 2.00 were considered as strong scores, meaning that the environment is strong on such items. This is because the score '1' on the 6-point scale means strongly agree, and score '2' agree. Similarly, mean scores ranging from 2.10 to 3.00 were considered as weak scores meaning that the environment is perceived positively but weak on items of the TDEQ that returns such scores; this is also because score '3' on the scale means respondents 'agree a little bit' to the statements made by such items. Finally, scores ranging from 3.10 to 6.00 in the current study were considered

as poor scores meaning that the environment is poor on such items, this is because scores between '3' and '6' on the 6-point scale are negative scores in which participants disagreed with the statements made by the TDEQ items. To begin with the analysis, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the TDEQ, and all the subscales recorded adequate alpha coefficient (Long-Term Development Focus, $\alpha = .77$; Quality Preparation, $\alpha = .68$; Communication, $\alpha = .75$; Understanding the Athlete, $\alpha = .74$; Support Network, $\alpha = .73$; Challenging and Supportive Environment, $\alpha = .66$; Long Term Development Fundamental, $\alpha = .76$). Following same procedure as Mills *et al.* (2014), the mean scores for the seven subscales of the TDEQ were calculated.

RESULTS

Table-1: Mean scores of the TDEQ factors

TDEQ Subscales	Mean	Confidence Intervals
Long-Term Development Focus	2.1564	Lower - 2.1257 Upper - 2.1871
Quality Preparation	4.2637	Lower - 4.1934 Upper - 4.3339
Communication	2.0981	Lower - 2.0555 Upper - 2.1407
Understanding the Athlete	3.5163	Lower - 3.4306 Upper - 3.6020
Support Network	2.2695	Lower - 2.2297 Upper - 2.3111
Challenging & Supportive Environment	3.4466	Lower - 3.4011 Upper - 3.4921
Long Term Development Fundamentals	2.3646	Lower - 2.3196 Upper - 2.4096

NB: Mean = 1-2.0 (strong), Mean = 2.10-3.0 (weak), Mean = 3.10-6 (poor)

On the whole, as shown in table I, talent development environments in Ondo State were weak on long-term development focus (M=2.1564, CI=2.1257-2.1871); poor on quality preparation (M=4.2637, CI=4.1934-4.3339); strong on communication (M=2.0981, CI=2.0555-2.1407); poor on understanding the athletes (M=3.5163, CI=3.4306-3.6020); weak on support network (M=2.2695, CI=2.2297-2.3111); poor on challenging and supportive environment (M=3.4466, CI=3.4011-3.4921); and weak on long term development fundamentals (M=2.3646, CI=2.3196-2.4096). Consequently, only one (i.e. communication) of the seven subscales of the TDEQ was perceived as good (i.e. strong) in the talent development environments in Ondo state, while the remaining six factors were either perceived as weak or poor on the quality of experience athletes have in the development process.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to evaluate talent development environments in Ondo State in a bid to identify the level of compliance with best practice

and efficiency. More importantly, the study was intended to examine the specific factors of the TDEQ where the talent development environments in the state are either strong, weak or poor in order to be able to advise practitioners on how to improve practice. The study revealed that talent development environments in Ondo State were strong on Communication subscale of the TDEQ; weak on Long-Term Development Focus; weak on Support Network; weak on Long Term Development Fundamental; poor on Challenging and Supportive Environment; poor on Understanding the Athlete; and poor on Quality Preparation.

It is interesting that communication was ranked strong in the current findings because this has previously been reported as one of the positive features of talent development in the Nigerian context (Elumaro, 2016). The strong (i.e. positive) rating related to quality of relationship that exists between athletes and their coaches. The coach-athlete relationship encouraged athletes to keep investing efforts into their development despite the various obstacles that exist in the environment. Thus, this coaching behaviour is such that

should be encouraged to foster effective talent development among Nigerian athletes. On the possible reason(s) while athletes perceived their coaches positively among other factors of talent development environment, it is imperative to consider earlier report that talent development environments in Nigeria lacked the support framework necessary to facilitate effective talent development. For example, Elumaro (2015) reported that parents, who should be a source of support to youngsters, were opposed to their children getting involved in talent development in sport. This is because parents believed that sport participation would have a negative effect on their children's academic performance. Parents' preference for academic achievement over talent development in sports had earlier been reported in other cultures (e.g. Côté, 1999), only that the emphasis may be more within the Nigerian population since education is seen as a veritable means to break through pervasive poverty in the Nigerian society.

Also, finance is another reason while parents would not support their children getting involved in sports. This is because supporting talent development in sports would have financial implications, thus, families preferred to focus on the basic needs of the household rather than spending on sporting kits, transportation to and fro training venues and other commitment that may be required. This negative posture of the average Nigerian family against talent development in sports negates the very important role allotted to the family since the early years of talent development research (e.g. Bloom, 1985; Woolger & Power, 1993). With the parents out of the support network, the coach knows that he/she has to develop a stronger relationship with their athletes. While efforts should be made to encourage a robust network of support for developing athletes in Nigeria, the existing supportive coach-athlete relationship should also be sustained.

Furthermore, the current study revealed that talent development environments in Ondo State were 'weak' on the Long-Term Development Focus subscale of the TDEQ. This aspect of the TDEQ relates with whether the environment prepares athletes for their overall long term development or only focused on what is achievable in the immediate. Athletes reported that they were written off before they had the chance to show their potential, meaning that immediate performance success received priority over long term development. Also, the environments did not encourage athletes to balance challenges with what have been achieved, thus, setbacks could have heavy implications for continued development. As a result, many potential talents never got to the podium. This corroborates existing findings that talent development environment in Nigeria does not provide support for long term development (Elumaro, 2015). Whereas, long term development focus is a key component of effective talent development environments (Martindale R. J.,

Collins, Douglas, & Whike, 2013). Stakeholders in sport development in Nigeria need to improve on this component of the environment by first encouraging the development of talent pathways across sports to serve as the framework within which athletes and their coaches could articulate their training programmes, so that there could be a trajectory for successful athletes. Similarly, the current discriminatory climate where athletes who do not achieve immediate success (e.g. performing well at national trials) are written off should be discouraged; talent development environments should provide equal opportunities for youngsters to develop their potential even when it takes a longer period to manifest talents.

Expectedly, the current findings rated talent development environments in Ondo State 'weak' on the Support Network subscale of the TDEQ. This element of the talent development environment is of a critical importance because it is directly linked to the connection between researchers and practitioners in sport science. Participants reported that they did not have access to professionals (e.g. physiotherapists, sport psychologists, strength trainers, nutritionists, lifestyle advisors etc.) to help their development. The call for integrating science into the process of talent development in order to promote evidence-based practice is popular in the literature (e.g. Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012; Pankhurst & Collins, 2013; Collins, MacNamara, & Cruickshank, 2019). Therefore, poor access to professionals as reported in the current findings deserves attention from all relevant stakeholders in talent development in Nigeria; efforts should be made to create a support framework for talent development by encouraging coaches and these professionals to work as partners in helping athletes achieve their developmental goals. Creating a robust support network in the talent development environments will also promote a multidisciplinary approach to talent development. Previous research has decried the lack of multidisciplinary approach to talent development in sports (Phillips, Davids, Renshaw, & Portus, 2010; MacNamara & Collins, 2011; Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015; Rees, *et al.*, 2016;), as a result of which in many instances, coaches would focus all efforts on physiological training with little or no attention given to psychological development among their athletes, whereas, psychological aspect of development is as important as the physiological development. Therefore, to promote effective talent development environments in Nigeria, policy makers and practitioners in sport development should encourage a working synergy between these professionals (e.g. physiotherapists, sport psychologists, strength trainers, nutritionists, lifestyle advisors etc.), coaches and their athletes.

Similarly, Long Term Development Fundamentals subscale of the TDEQ was reported 'weak' in the three talent development environments in

Ondo State involved in the current study. This element of the talent development environment is concerned with activities and efforts fundamental to focusing athletic development on long-term goals and not immediate performance gains. In the context of the current study, parents need to collaborate more with coaches to ensure that there are no conflicts between what the parent advises and what the coach wants athletes to do (Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Martindale, *et al.*, 2010; Gledhill, Harwood, & Forsdyke, 2017). Athletes also need to be more involved in the decision making process concerning their development (Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012; Dohme, Backhouse, Piggott, & Morgan, 2017; Elferink-Gemser & Hettinga, 2017), and coaches should talk more to parents about what the athlete is trying to achieve so that parents are aware of all developmental expectations. This further stresses the role of parents and significant others in the process of talent development in sports. It is however noteworthy that Nigerian parents' behaviour towards sport development among their children had been highlighted among the challenges facing talent identification and development in sports in Nigeria (i.e. Elumaro, 2015). Therefore, significant efforts need to be invested into enlisting parents' interest in their children getting involved in athletic development. This may be achieved by mass education on perhaps the role of regular participation in physical activities through sports in the overall development (including educational development) of the child. Because, only when parents buy the idea of talent development in sports would they agree to work together with the coaches in providing an atmosphere congenial for effective talent development environment.

Talent development environments in Ondo State were rated 'poor' on the Challenging and Supporting Environment subscale of the TDEQ. This factor of the TDEQ is concerned with whether the environments expose athletes to adequate challenge to push them out of their comfort zones. Challenging environment is specifically important because previous research has emphasized the role of challenge in the development of psychological skills and abilities that are key to becoming top level performer in sports (Crust & Clough, 2011; Bačanac, Milićević-Marinković, Kasum, & Marinković, 2014; Foster, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2016; Pankow, Fraser, & Holt, 2020). Therefore, to achieve effectiveness, talent development environments need to strike a balance between the challenge and the support athletes receive. The poor rating of this element of the talent development environment is partly because there is almost a complete disconnecting between developing athletes and experts in their sports. Current evidence in the Nigerian context suggests that credible platforms for grassroots talent development in sports are near non-existent in most Nigerian communities (Jeroh, 2012; Tichaawa & Bob, 2015). In few instances where there are clubs (one club per state in most instances), these

clubs do not run academies to serve the purpose of developing new talents. Instead, clubs rely on 'accidental recruitment method' in which there is no clearly defined pathway to becoming a club player, but athletes achieve this feat by chance. This structural gap is not unconnected with the fact that the existing national policy on sports development is said to lack expert opinions on talent development (Aibeku & Ogbouma, 2013). Thus, there have been calls for spirited investment into sport development both by the government and the private sector (Omuojine, 2013; Yazid, 2014; Targema & Ayih, 2017) to develop the business mindset towards sport development.

Likewise, talent development environments in Ondo State were rated 'poor' on Understanding the Athlete Subscale of the TDEQ. This factor comprises four items relating to whether athletes feel they are understood as a 'whole person' and not just as an athlete. Effective talent development environments are expected to provide athletes with experiences that enable them to grow, not just in sport, but also psychologically and socially, such that cognizance is given to the lives of athletes outside sport. Though the current findings revealed that the coach is a significant source of support to developing athletes, this factor of the TDEQ showed that coaches in Ondo State needed to develop a more inclusive relationship with their athletes. This is because whatever goes on in the lives of athletes outside sports like their state of mind, health, finance, and relationship could have a profound implication for their commitment towards talent development (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Ronkainen, Ryba, Littlewood, & Selänne, 2018; Martin & Camiré, 2020; Marsollier, Trottier, & Falcão, 2020; Allan, Blair Evans, Latimer-Cheung, & Côté, 2020). For example, in this specific context, many athletes combined athletic development with education without the consent of their parents who supposed their children should not take part in sports. Thus, coaches have to be aware of this dynamics among athletes in order to be able to support them whenever it is necessary, and also to understand when athletes are passing through difficult challenges outside sport.

Finally, talent development environments in Ondo State were also rated 'poor' on Quality Preparation subscale of the TDEQ. This subscale was designed to assess talent development environment on the amount of quality planning and guidance athletes receive towards training and competitions, and whether there are clear directions on pathways in the development process. This finding is not surprising because it relates with the entire process of talent development in this context where there is little structure to guild the development process. For example, planning does not appear popular in the environment because planning relates with long term development focus, wherein the environment is already ranked low. Since talent development environments do

not prioritize long term development, but rely more on the immediate performance gains, athletes did not receive encouragement for planning and quality preparation. Therefore, it is important that stakeholders in sport development, and particularly the government, encourage long term development agenda by creating structures and guidelines for talent development across sports.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) Nigeria is acknowledged for providing the funding for this study. Similarly, Ondo State Sport Council, and Adekunle Ajasin University are dully acknowledged for the logistic support, as well as access to athletes who participated in the study.

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