
EVALUATION OF TALENT IDENTIFICATION METHODS FOR NATIONAL TEAMS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN: CURRENT MODELS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

Despite talent identification and development (TID) are crucial issues for the future development and the sustainability of elite sport in any country; it has not yet been systematically evaluated and analyzed in Oman. This study sought to evaluate the current talent identification methods for national teams in the Sultanate of Oman, in order to provide future directions. The study offers the first in-depth empirical study of the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the current and future TID in Oman. The study used multiple methods of data collection including questionnaires, interviews, as well as examination and evaluation of the available literature and systems of TID. The most significant data in this study is about the challenges faced by the current talents identification methods in the national teams in Oman. The results show that it is common for the participants to have negative views towards the current talent identification methods in Oman. Accordingly, the TI methods in Oman are badly in need to be reviewed and upgraded to build a more coherent TID system.

1. Introduction

As emerging sport nation, many challenges seriously affect progression and development in Oman's sports system. One of these challenges is the lack of a clear strategy or policy for talent identification and development in the national teams. It is important to investigate and overcome this challenge if a sport system is to become a reality in the professionalization of sport in the future of the country. Therefore, this study sought to investigate issues related to developing talent identification guidelines in Oman, focusing on two main objectives. The first objective is to ascertain the participants' views about current issues in talent identification and development in the national teams in Oman, and to utilize appropriate aspects of TID systems in other countries to ensure sound developmental aspects are embedded in the Omani

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recommendations. The second objective is to realize talent identification and development guidelines which is appropriate to the Omani situation – an Arabic, Islamic country with an emerging ‘sport-interest’ –.

The Sultanate of Oman is the second biggest country in the Arab peninsula. Oman is one of the Arab Gulf countries (Gulf Co-operation Council-GCC), which also comprise the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE (United Arab Emirates) and the Kingdom of Bahrain. Oman is a small nation with a population of 2,694,518 (according to the General Census of Population and Houses for the year 2010), of which 72.4% are Omani nationals and the remaining 27.6% are expatriates (Oman Census, 2010).

The geography of the country has shaped people’s activities. The geographical diversity in the Sultanate with its long coasts, valleys, desert and mountains requires different physical attributes and adaptations for each environment. For instance, those who live on the coast understandably focus their activities on the sea and fishing. And those who live in the interior areas, where mountains, desert and valleys dominate, are mainly involved in activities relating to farming and shepherding. Accordingly, populations adapt and achieve the necessary fitness according to each environment (AL-Shamli, 2008).

The number of Omani youth who are practicing sport is increasing (three-quarters of Oman’s population is under 30 years old) (Ministry of Health, 2010). For example, the number of sports competitions organized by schools and by the sports national associations for the junior and youth sector, and sports programmes such as "summer sport" and "sports talent schools" has increased in the last few years. Therefore, a TID model alongside with all these sport programmes will help to provide more opportunities for success in sport. Hence, research the realities, identify specific problems and needs is the first step to improve and develop a future TID model for Oman. The lack of literature about Omani was one of the limitations in this study in terms of reviewing the context and realities. Because of the lack of research on TID in Oman, it is essential to mention that the contents of the study are based on limited documents, insider knowledge and personal experience.

2. Literature Review

Before discussing the issues of TID, it is worth to understand and mention the current situation and organizational structure of sport in Oman. Sport and all its activities in Oman are under the supervision of the Ministry of Sport Affairs, to which the sports federations report. The Ministry of Sports Affairs was created by Royal decree 120 in 2004 (Ministry of Legal Affairs, 2010; Ministry of Sports Affairs, 2010) and it was set up to work with other relevant bodies, in helping the Sultanate's youth develop their sporting talents and potential. From an organizational, administrative and functional point of view, these sports federations control and supervise all sports clubs in Oman with financial support from the Ministry of Sports Affairs. The sports federations are the supreme bodies that govern sports clubs, and their main task is to develop and promote

the sport they represent (Beashel and Taylor, 1996; Ministry of Sport Affairs, 2009).

In Oman, still, there is no framework or central organization to manage and administrate the TID for the country as a whole. Very few sports organizations have thier talent identification policy; and some of them have no clear policy. However, the most recent sports project in Oman was decided by a Royal Order in 2009 which established the Sultan Qaboos Sports Academy for developing sports performances and it is expected to be the institution responsible for the sport talent development. Alongside the aim of developing the sports performances, the academy will also provide educational services for selected talents (The Ministry of Sports Affairs, 2009, AL-Gilendani, 2009). The Ministry of Sports Affairs in Oman signed an agreement with a Canadian sports company to conduct a field study for six months regarding the current situation of sport in Oman in order to establish the academy. Nevertheless, to date, there is no trace of the Academy in the reality, not even for the expected time of the establishment.

In order to begin to improve a quality talents identification model, it is important to ensure that participants, performers, and competitors involved in sport have access to the best coaching at each stage of their development. The quality and role of coaches and coaching in providing sporting opportunities for participants and performers has been subject to a great deal of policy, research and practitioner commentary over the years (Nance, 2009; North, 2009). In terms of quality coaching and guidance, they are key elements in the development of sport (Nash and Sproule, 2009). Research conducted in the UK by the Sport Industry Research Centre for UK Sport (UK Sport, 2008) to gain an overview of athletes' perspectives on the world class programmes and their experiences of being elite athletes, indicated that the three most important services are: coaching (3.93); competition opportunities (3.85); and training opportunities at home (3.80). Again, this requires much consideration in any sports coaching development in Oman. Some argue that quality coaching is a key element in the development of sport and that it is, therefore, important to identify the fundamentals that contribute to the development of sports coaches (Nash and Sproule, 2009). Therefore, talents and coaching requires much consideration in any future talent identification model in Oman.

Krasilshchikov (2011) made the important point that besides other important factors determining the talent and identification and development methods, there was always one which kept overweighing all others by drastically changing the process, and that always was and still is availability or absence of human resources (sports coaches) to pick the talent. Unfortunately, the greatest challenge that faces coach education in Oman is that there are not enough qualified coaches compared with the demand, and the current levels of knowledge among coaches are inadequate in general. Omani coaches have gained their basic coaching experience from practicing the sport as an athlete at an early age and/or from available short coaching courses, then moving into

volunteer coaching for many years. Some coaches have a physical education degree and are also working as part time coaches (Ahmed, 1996). Some of these coaches have only taken short sports courses, as there is still no clear development strategy for coach education for them. Till now, there is no single Omani higher education institute that qualifies sports coaches. However, there are occasionally short coaching courses organized independently by the Ministry of Sport, Sultan Qaboos University, the Omani Olympic Committee and sports associations. Some of these courses are approved or organized by international associations, or by the International Olympic Committee when international course leaders come to Oman.

After reviewing the main characteristics and challenges of sport in Oman, it is essential to give some literature review about TID and to review some models from other countries. There are many definitions for talent identification (TI) term; Williams and Reilly (2000, p. 658) mentioned that it refers to “the process of recognizing current participants with the potential to become elite players”. Many youngsters who participate in sport aspire to participate at an elite level and the dream to become a star performer and compete on the international level may even be the main motivation for taking part from an early age (Morley, 2008). As sporting challenge at the elite level becomes ever harder, maximizing effectiveness of the TID pathway is crucial (Martindale *et al.*, 2007; Martindale, *et al.*, 2010).

Talent identification and development is currently big business (Martindale *et al.*, 2007). Effective models will help enhance the quality and sustainability of sports elites, bringing with it large financial rewards and recognition. There are many factors help to build a good talent and identification and development model in sport. For example, it not only need to be able to identify relevant psychological, physical and physiological characteristics, but need to be capable of identifying potential and developed talent (Wolstencrpf, 2002). A good model depends on genetics, environment, opportunity, encouragement, and the effect of these variables on physical and psychological traits. The question is no longer whether genetic or environmental factors determine behavior, but how they interact (Wolstencrpf, 2002). First-class talent model capable of delivering highly able and prepared athletes to the senior level are particularly essential against the backdrop of ever-increasing professionalism and standard of world-class performance in the modern era (Martindale *et al.*, 2007).

To understand the talents identification and development issues, it is essential to give some international perspectives. Historically and geographically, number of talent identification approaches was developed. They emerged in different times and countries and were determined by number of social, financial, ideological, and political factors (Krasilshchikov, 2011). The following section will review and analyze conceptual models of TID.

With practically unlimited human resources at hand, talent identification system in erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was not really

scientific but rather relied more on ‘natural selection’ phenomenon. While there were basic fitness tests and respective fitness standards recommended for talent identification procedures, TID system used to be specific and resembling natural selection, related more to casual circulation of talent in and out within the group of novices. In addition, system of school Physical Education played significant role in the identification and development of a talent in USSR. Also in China, with unlimited human resources, TID was specific, based largely on natural selection but with consequent comprehensive testing of all humanly possible contributing factors further down the line – genetically determined and acquired. With sharing of unlimited human resources factor, TID in India was general, reasonably scientific, with scientists and coaches almost equally responsible for the end product – identification of true talent. System of school Physical Education in India was not well adjusted (Krasilshchikov, 2011).

Alternatively, with very limited human resources, TID system in erstwhile East Germany (German Democratic Republic) was general and based on scientific selection as it was related more to tests and measurements of basic motor qualities. Sports scientists were surely at lead, with sports coaches involved as assistants. There are also other features such as well-adjusted system of school Physical Education, good traditions of ‘sports for all family’, active life style, and good attitude to sport. In Australian, the model is based on general, scientific selection, with scientists at lead because of limited human resources on one hand, and to well-developed segment of sports science on the other. There are also other features such as well-adjusted system of school Physical Education, active life style and good attitude to sport. This has made the TID system in Australia one of the attractive systems to other countries to adopt (Krasilshchikov, 2011). Finally, in the midst of the above examples of TID systems, and as Oman has limited human resources, the question that arises and should be asked: what type of TID system Oman need? This question is discussed in discussion section.

3. Methodology

Building on the discussions provided in previous sections, it is important to address the issues and recognise the current situation from which the Omani people can begin to build a better TID system. The first step towards achieving this purpose is to address the current situation of how the national teams in Oman select their sports talents, and to identify how stakeholders view it. Therefore, the first research question that this study tries to answer is 1) What is the nature of the current talents identification methods that national team follow in Oman? The next step towards improving the current situation is to learn from other notable TID models (from literature review) and to ensure the most appropriate recommendations from the research participants for the Omani context. Therefore, the second research question that this study tries to answer is 2) What can be learned from selected international TID models and from the perceptions of stakeholders in Oman to ensure the most appropriate

recommendations from the research participants for the Omani context? The interpretive approach has been used to gain an in-depth understanding and identify issues in TID methods in Oman. As this study requires data gained from stakeholders, data types are identified in order to answer the research questions. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the required data.

Semi-structured questionnaires have been included because combined quantitative and qualitative data can add richness to the data for the research questions of this study. The questionnaire design included a covering letter, personal details section, twelve statements and three open questions. A short covering letter included the aim of the survey, conveyed its importance, assured respondents of confidentiality and encouraged their replies (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). In addition, a general introduction to the survey that offered instructions on how to fill it out was given. This was followed by asking participants to write their information such as name (optional) gender, age, coaching experience, academic degree, and work location. Participants were also invited to write their email address at the end of the questionnaire if they wanted to receive a summary of the findings of the study.

Also interviews were chosen as a form of data collection. There were many aims behind choosing the interview as a method of data collection in this study. The main purpose was to understand individual experience and probe events related to problems facing talent identification in Oman. In addition, using interviews as a qualitative method allowed the participants to share deeper experiences and feelings than is possible in a questionnaire (Rubin and Rubin, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were developed to bring some consistency between the questions asked of different participants; this would also aid analysis and the ability to spot emergent themes across transcripts. They were designed to provide sports specialists a space to talk about their views on talent identification in Oman. There was also room for respondents' additional contributions. In this study, different kinds of sampling were used, depending on the research methods used and geographical context. For example, those working as sports coaches (both male and female), local ministers, clubs managers and athletes were chosen, because they are all involved in the talent identification process.

4. Results

All gathered data from a number of questionnaire samples were coded as frequencies and percentages and fed into the SPSS program (Statistical package for Social Sciences) (Balal and Eltlafha, 2003) to analysis. This enabled the researchers to analyse data quantitatively. The features of SPSS assisted us with descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages, and correlation analysis (Balal and Eltlafha, 2003). This program was chosen because there is a mass of numbers that needs to be summarized, described and analysed. As there is also a mass of words, all interviews were

transcribed, coded, summarized and analysed for emergent themes (Gratton and Jones, 2007; Lacey and Luff, 2007). In this section, quotes are used to enable the reader to gain a better appreciation of the context in which the main themes emerge from the data.

The participants in this study have shown a high level of consensus on the issues raised and have offered recommendations to improve the TID methods in Oman. To give an overview, the results obtained from the questionnaires and interviews in this study show that it is common for the participants to have negative views towards talent identification methods in Oman. According to the participants, the TI methods in Oman are badly in need to be reviewed and upgraded to build a more coherent system. Most of the interviewees as well as the questionnaire responses indicated that one of the main challenges facing Omani sport system is the lack of a clear strategy or policy for TID system. Picking up on this theme, one of the participants commented:

... Sports coaches are confused about the talent identification methods in Oman. There are no clear educational ways to follow. In fact, there is no clear TID strategy.

(Sports coach)

The current TI system in Oman faces many administrative challenges. This study shows that each sports organization in Oman has its own talents policy; however, some of them have no clear TI policy. For example, participants in this study agreed that there is no central organization to manage and administrate the TID system, although there is a need for it. This weakness was highlighted clearly by one of the participants:

... I think, Oman needs a central TID organization, so all talents development efforts from different sports institutes in Oman come together to build a good TID system... just like other developed countries.

(National team coach)

Participants also mentioned that there is a lack of incentives to encourage the sports coach to look for talents. Many participants mentioned that it is difficult to spend time, efforts and money to identify and develop sports talents, and there are even no technical supports for coaches from their employers. This weakness was indicated by a club coach:

Ok... I can look for sports talents, even by self-financial support, but this does not make any difference. There are no incentives from my [sports organization].

(Club Coach)

As the participants in this study have indicated, TID system is needed in Oman. Such system would give the sports stockholders a clear pathway to follow. In addition, a clear strategy will encourage coaches to work in talents development. Indeed, as discussed in the literature, a TID system should be built

alongside scientific methods. In this study, participants were asked about how the new TID system should be built in Oman. One of the participants in this study summarized the majority of the views:

We need to look at other international experiences in TID. Then, we need to select the successful one, to see how we can cooperation and build our TID system according to the needs in Oman.

(Sports official)

To give some clarification for the above point, and because of the globalization trends, TID ‘packages’ from the global north are sold to countries in the global south with no attention to cultural, social, political or economic situation. Indeed, wider international investigation needs to inform possibilities for Oman. There is a need to evaluate the experience of adopting an external system. For example, there is a need to investigate the extent to which two Middle Eastern countries; Qatar and Bahrain [who adopted the foreign models] have been successful in adapting this model into their own Arab, Islamic countries. The investigation will help to inform the future Omani TID system (discussed in discussion section).

Another challenge indicated by the participants that faces talent identification methods in Oman is the lack of qualification opportunities for sports coaches that related to talents issues. The views show that sports federations and other sports organizations are not active in providing qualification opportunities for their sports coaches in order to build the basic sport education in TID. Generally, there is a lack of investment in youth sport, especially in youth talent identification, taking into account that three-quarters of Oman’s population is considered as youth (Ministry of Health, 2010) (See earlier section).

It is clear from the above main themes of the results and from the literature review about Omani which includes a review of the sports system and the policies of the key sports organizations that the process of TID is lost between the sports organizations of Oman while it remains an essential element of any successful sport development. Therefore, greater cooperation between all these organizations should be sought to clarify the process of TID in Oman and to build a clear strategy for the country. Next section will discuss the results of this study in light of the available literature review.

5. Discussions

Talent identification has received increasing attention in recent years (Bailey and Morley, 2006) and early identification of talent from participation and community level leads to improved performance and the level of participation in later age (Lauren *et al.*, 2007; Woolcock *et al.*, 2010). Reviewing the Omani case in light of this quotation, and according to the results of this study, there is a lack of investment in youth sport, especially in youth talent identification, taking into account that three-quarters of Oman’s

population is considered as youth (Ministry of Health, 2010). Because talent development is considered an inherently worthwhile activity that helps young people realize their innate potentials (Winstanley, 2003 cited in Bailey and Toms, 2011: 150), there should be more investment in producing coaches that are highly knowledgeable in terms of talent development.

Taher and Haddadi (2011) agree with Kozel (1996) that coach's knowledge plays a big role in the talent screening and selection process. To maximize developing scientific knowledge in the area, TID should be considered by coach education designers (Bailey and Morley, 2006; Walsh, 2007). The current research evidence indicates the desirability of keeping as many people involved in sport related activities for as long as possible in order to avoid the consequences of drop out and a decreasing pool of talent from which to choose (Bailey *et al* 2010). This is particularly relevant for Oman because of the small and young population with potential for life-long participation at all levels. However, it is worth noting that the issue of talents identification and coaches' knowledge is a global issue. For example, some authors (e.g. Kay *et al.*, 2008 and Townend, 2009) argue that there are weaknesses in the coach education system in the UK. There is a weakness, for example, in ensuring that talented athletes have access to suitable quality coaching support, and a limited pool of talented coaches. Therefore, much young talent is lost because of limited or no access to developmentally appropriate sports coaching (Kay *et al.*, 2008).

As indicated in the results section, most of the participants in this study indicated that one of the main challenges facing Omani sport system is the lack of a clear strategy or policy for TID system. Therefore, there is a need for a clear TID system in Oman. However, the question that arises: what type of TID system Oman need? As mentioned in the literature review section, wider international investigation needs to inform possibilities for Oman. As some the GCC countries, such as Qatar and Bahrain, adopted the foreign models, there is a need to evaluate such experience. The investigation will help to inform the future Omani TID system.

One of the Qatari academic institutes that deal with talents programmes is ASPIRE. This is Qatar's visionary sports academy (Academy for Sports Excellence), which was started in 2004 with adopting different TID sports programmes, such as the German programme. The Academy discovers the best young talent from Qatar and around the world and provides them with educational and sport support (Aspire, 2009; QOC, 2012). ASPIRE also offers a range of coach education programmes (nationally and internationally) for its sports coaches (most of the coaches are non-Qatari). It terms of sports strategies, it is important also to mention that there is a common phenomenon occurring in both Qatar and Bahrain, more than in other Arabic countries, that has emerged in recent years, which is a growing dependence on talents foreign athletes (possible through naturalization policies) to represent these countries as 'Qatari' and 'Bahraini' athletes in international sports events. Most of these athletes are

from Africa and developing countries. Sports naturalization is supported by government and sports authorities in both Qatar and Bahrain, despite being less popular with the general public. With the abundance of foreign coaches in both countries, and the application of the naturalization policy, it can be said that there is a lack of focus on the development of national sports talents or coaches. Naturalization in sport occurs by identifying talented athletes from all over the world and negotiating with them to agree a package of privileges, as well as providing national temporary or permanent passports. Many naturalized foreign athletes have even changed their names after they obtained the nationality. For example, the Kenyan athlete Dived Niaga (the 1500m champion) was naturalized and changed his name to Dham Nigm Bashir (Saoud, 2012, p. 1).

However, naturalization (or exploitation of athletes, as some authors call it (Slot, 2012)) in the Gulf countries, as elsewhere, has been criticized. It has been noticed that there is a division of opinions about naturalization among people in these countries. The negative effects of naturalization could be neglecting the sports talents in the country as well as neglecting the development of national sports coaches. The strategy of naturalization is also an unsustainable short term strategy with no clear future aims. Finally, some authors go even further and state that this policy could deprive the naturalized foreign athletes of their human rights (David, 2005; Slot, 2012). David (2005) stated in his book, *Human Rights in Sport* that, as is the case for most types of slavery, the sale and trafficking of athletes mainly occurs in situations of economic exploitation where those with an advantage - often economic - over others, use their power to impose unfair practice. Talented athletes from all over the world dream of joining rich countries' teams in order to improve their economic situation. Slot (2012, p. 1) was quite clear about his view when he stated "Kenyan and other African athletes are being shopped around the world's wealthiest track and field nations... Qatar is the main destination and the best buyer". These accusations regarding buying the services of athletes are supported in the findings of Connor and Griffin (2012), who demonstrate that there has been a trade in athletic talent into oil-rich states, especially from East Africa and in track and field events.

To conclude the discussion of Qatar and Bahrain experiences in TID, it is important to mention that globalization is the main cause of sports naturalization, as athletes draw benefits from the international migration phenomenon and dual nationality policies as well as using the internet to present themselves to other countries in pursuit of better financial rewards (Connor and Griffin, 2010). David (2005) also claims that globalization has accelerated sports naturalization and that most professional sports leagues and federations now include athletes from other regions of the world. The 'global village' has given rich sport teams an almost inexhaustible source of talented and cheap labour, especially from Africa and Latin America. In general terms, there is indeed a muscle drain (caused by globalization) from the third to the first and oil rich worlds and that this flow is assisted by colonial linkages. For example, pre-

World War II, the global flows of athletic talent migration as they affected the UK were largely constrained by imperial ties (Connor and Griffin, 2010).

In light of the above discussion, and with limited financial resources, adopting foreign TID system or following the naturalization policy will be not the right strategies for Oman. The future TID strategy needs to take into account the real situations in Oman, such as the number of sports coaches, financial supports, Omani traditions and geographic conditions. This idea has supported by many authors, for example, Wolstencrpf (2002) mentioned that cultural differences must be a consideration when devising TID models as both individuals and development structures can be vastly different between countries.

However, limited human resources is another challenge that should be solved when building the future Omani TID. To discuss this fact in light of the literature review which has been mentioned in earlier section, countries with limited human potential might need to develop their own versions of TID program. It is also suggested to pay more attention to Pre-Talent Identification Talent Development, not to just Post-Talent Identification Talent Development alone (Krasilshchikov, 2011). It is suggested that countries, like GCC, should follow these guidelines and taking into account the recommendations given by Krasilshchikov (2011) which indicated in the left column in Table 1.

Table 1: *Options of TID system depending on the availability of human resources*
[Adapted from Krasilshchikov, (2011)]

For the countries with limited human resources	For the countries with unlimited /considerable human resources
Tailor made TID – comprehensive testing	‘Bulk and numbers’ – few specific tests
Scientific selection from the start	Natural selection at the early stage
Scientists – selectors	Coaches – selectors
Coaches - advisors	Scientists – assistants/observers
General testing and assessment	Specific testing and assessment
TID for group of sports	TID for one sport/event
Centralized training, boarding schools	Decentralized, easy initial training

6. Conclusions

It is clear from the above investigation that there is a need to upgrade the current situation of the TID methods in Oman. The participants in this study have shown a high level of consensus on the issues raised and have offered recommendations to improve the TID methods in Oman. Most agreed that the challenges above needed resolving if sport in Oman is to move forward and the future TID system needs to take into account the real situations in Oman, such

as the number of sports coaches, financial supports, limited human resources, Omani traditions and geographic conditions.

In light of the results of this study, one of the major recommendations is the establishment of a separate agency with a national framework to manage and administrate TID in Oman. Its first responsibility would be to build a general TID strategy for the country. There is no doubt that this agency will have its value in providing sports services with high quality for the society in Oman in general, and for the talented athletes, in specific. This will lead to the development of the standard of the competitive Omani sports from the low and mid-level to the high level in the future. In addition, the agency will contribute in creating job opportunities for the employees in sport area. One of the major roles of the agency is to provide an accurate prediction of those individuals who have the potential to compete successfully at world-class levels (Wolstencrpf, 2002). As Bompa (1999) cited in Wolstencrpf (2002), such idea will significantly reduces the time required to reach high performance by identifying individuals who are gifted in sport and it eliminates a high volume of work, energy, and talent on the part of the sports coach. Finally, such agency–indirectly- will facilitate applying scientific training, as sport scientists who assisting talents can be motivated to continue to monitor athletes training. As a result, there is a stronger and more homogenous national team capable of better international performance.

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