

TALENT IDENTIFICATION

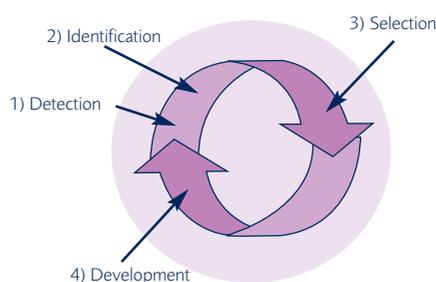
Adam Owen, Exercise Scientist for Celtic FC, provides an overview on the Talent Identification process and its bid to raise the standard of player development.

In various industries around the world, the attainment of excellence and continued development is the primary goal for many individuals. This is no different when discussing coaches, players or managers within a footballing capacity. In order to achieve success, the best possible personnel should be selected, employed or involved with the aim of attaining the overall goal or target. To achieve this within a sports specific environment, then the identification of, and the continual development of future elite performers is vital from a young age. According to previous research, in order to remain competitive, clubs now endeavour to invest significant amounts of money in attempting to identify and nurture potentially elite players (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Identifying playing potential at a younger age, ensures that players receive specialised coaching and training to accelerate the talent development process. Through the reliable identification of future elite players permitting clubs then have the chance to focus their expenditure on developing a smaller number of players.

Potential talent may not be evident at an early age, but there will be some indicators that enable trained people to identify its presence. These early indicators will not be able to determine whether or not potential talent will turn into world-class, elite level athletes, but it may be an indication of whether or not they may succeed at a later stage. At present, professional football clubs rely on subjective assessment of scouts or coaches who are supported by key criteria such as: TABS (Technical, Attitude, Balance, Speed); SUPS (Speed, Understanding, Personality, Skill); TIPS (Talent, Intelligent, Personality, Speed) and PAS (Pace, Attitude, Skill). From a scientific

perspective, the pursuit of excellence can be broken down into four key stages: detection; selection; identification; development (Russell, 1989; Borms, 1996).

Fig.1. Key stages in the talent identification and development process (adapted from Williams & Franks, 1998) - Continuous cycle through 2,3 & 4.



In the attempt to produce young talented players, Sports Scientists have a key role to play in working together with coaches, scouts and Administrators to underline specific elements of the talent identification and development process (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

Research: Predictors of talent.

PHYSICAL PREDICTORS OF TALENT

There is research evidence to suggest that a player's anthropometric characteristics (eg body mass, body composition, bone diameter, limb girth) are related to the performance in important and sometimes complex ways (Borms, 1996). There is a substantial amount of research proposing that elite youth soccer players are more physically mature than their less developed counterparts, and that coaches tend to favour players advanced in morphological growth during their selection process (Malina et al., 2000). This trend is in favour of children born early in the year (eg September to December), and is apparent in several European countries and persists in elite level squads. According to Fisher & Borms, (1990) the prediction of future elite players from anthropometrical measurements may be unrealistic in younger age groups because

performance could be affected by the players' rate of physical growth and maturation.

DEVELOPING PLAYERS

This may then point towards focusing coaching on larger groups (eg squads of 25 for age groups Under-8, Under-9 & Under-10) within the younger age groups to ensure every opportunity is given to the early and late developers to develop their technical abilities, and not disregarding the players due to their maturation levels. For example, signing 25 players at a certain age group (Under-9) allows every single child the opportunity to develop physically and technically through quality coaching. By making no releases during the 'signed season' or the following Under-10 season, the children have then been given every opportunity to develop physically and technically at the club's younger age groups, due to continued coaching and in-house coaching games. From this larger pool of players, an Academy squad of 12 players can then be selected to represent the club on a match day, whereas the rest of the squad play 'in-house' coaching games to ensure the continued development of the players in a game format are maintained.

Due to later maturing children compensating for any disadvantage in size and strength through having a better range of technical skills, it is important that the talent identification process is not overly biased towards the early maturing child. Any potential bias within the talent identification process may lead to the late maturing and potentially elite level players dropping out of the game due to decreased levels of quality coaching.

PROFILING THE TALENT

According to previous research, physiological profiles have also been used in an attempt to identify key predictors of performance (Reilly, Bangsbo & Franks, 2000). It has been suggested that when comparing successful and less successful 15-17 year olds using measures of maximal oxygen uptake (VO₂max), anaerobic power, grip strength, trunk strength and heart volume (absolute and relative), it is the successful players within these studies who

were later selected by clubs playing in the top leagues in Germany, Italy, England and Croatia. Those players who were considered less successful did not progress beyond the regional leagues (Jankovic et al., 1997).

Other research also indicated that elite youth players recorded better results in running and jumping with regards to their less elite counterparts (Panfil et al., 1997). Physiological profiling of the players may be useful alongside subjective judgments of playing skills for initial talent detection, but such measures cannot be used reliably on their own for talent identification (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDICTORS OF TALENT

According to research, as of yet there is no psychological inventory to help select players with more or less potential and it is hardly likely that any single inventory would have complete predictive power (Williams & Reilly, 2000). However, there are numerous questionnaires and tests, which may allow specific cognitive skills to be clearly shown amongst players. For example, specific tests or questionnaires may be used to test, or determine intelligence levels of the players, levels of motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. At present, the use of psychological tests for talent identification cannot be endorsed scientifically (Fisher & Borms, 1990). It has been suggested that it seems unrealistic to expect that expert performance can be or could be explained purely by personality variables, due to the range of personalities at each top professional club.

COGNITIVE FACTORS & GAME INTELLIGENCE

Consistent differences emerge when skilled players are tested on their anticipation and decision-making skills (Williams & Davids, 1995). When compared to less successful players, successful or more skilled players are faster and more accurate in recognising and recalling patterns of play; better at anticipating the actions of their opponents based on visual cues; more accurate in their expectation of what is likely to happen given a particular set of circumstances. Skilled players often possess a

'game intelligence' that allows them to analyse major features of their opponent's play (Singer & Janelle, 1999). It is not clear though whether this game intelligence is linked to academic intelligence.

Fig 2. The role of nature and nurture in the development of elite players (Bloom, 1976).

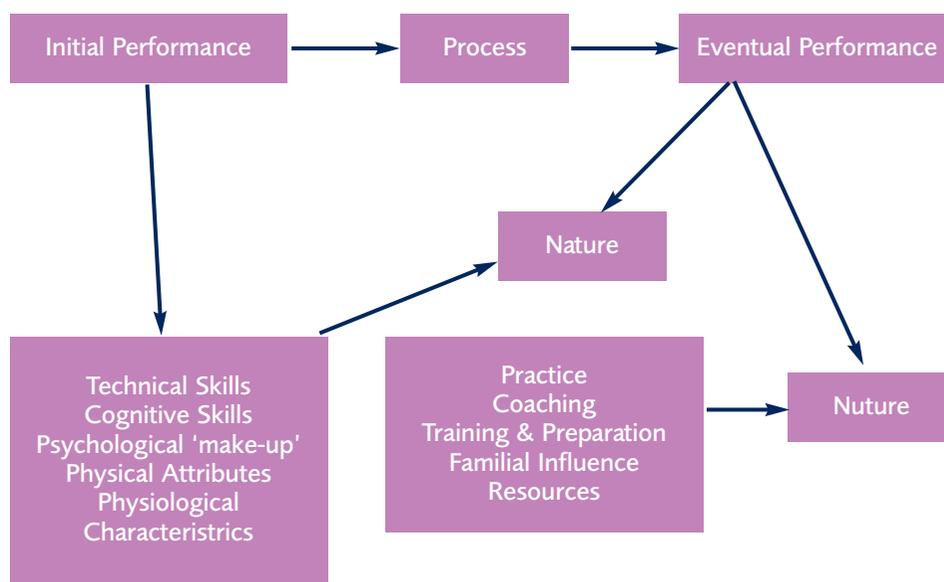


Table 1: Potential characteristics of talented football players and their coaches and parents at various stages of their careers. (Bloom, 1985).

CAREER PROGRESSION			
Individual Player	Initiation	Development	Perfection
excited, special	Joyful, playful	Hooked, committed	Obsessed, responsible
Coach	Kind, cheerful, caring, process-centred	Strong, respecting, skilled, demanding	Successful, respected/feared
Parents	Shared excitement, supportive, sought mentors, positive	Made sacrifices restricted activity	Emotionally bonded

" Potential talent may not be evident at an early age, but there will be some indicators that enable trained people to identify its presence."

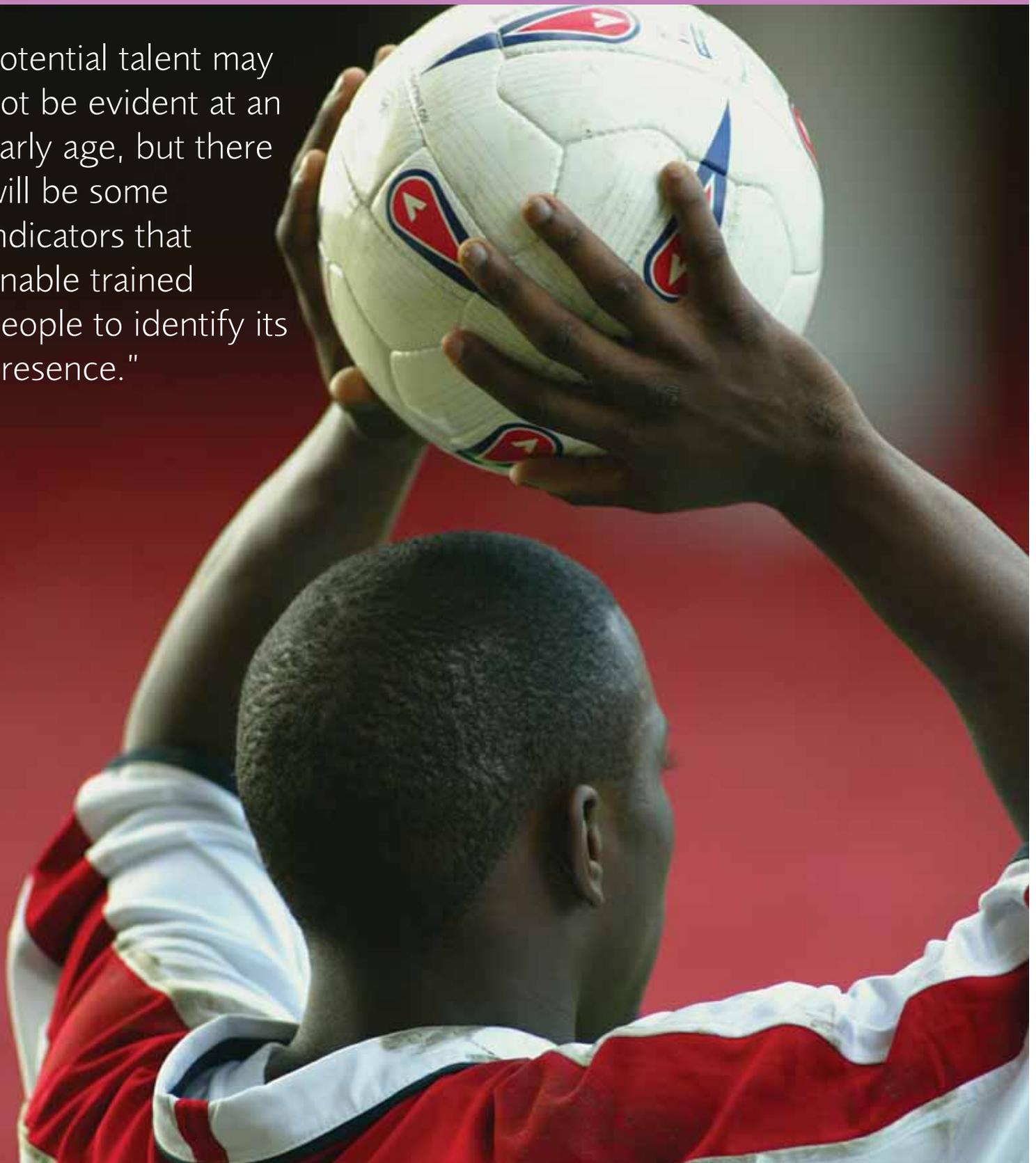


Fig.3. Potential predictors of talent in football from each sports science discipline (Williams & Franks, 1998).

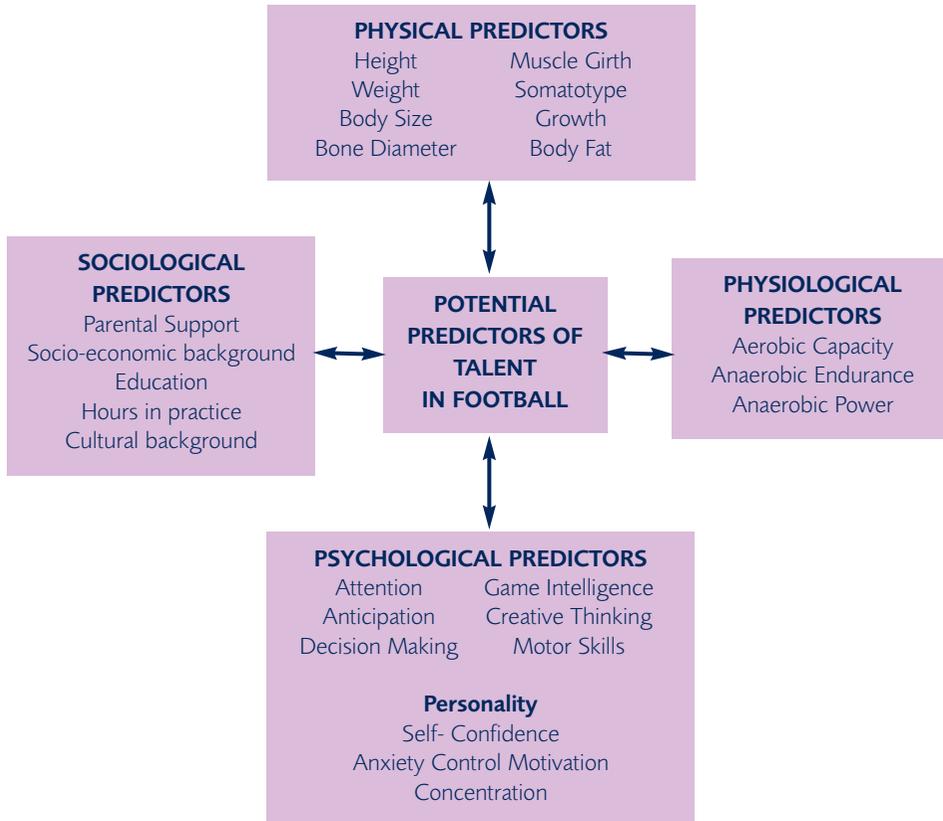
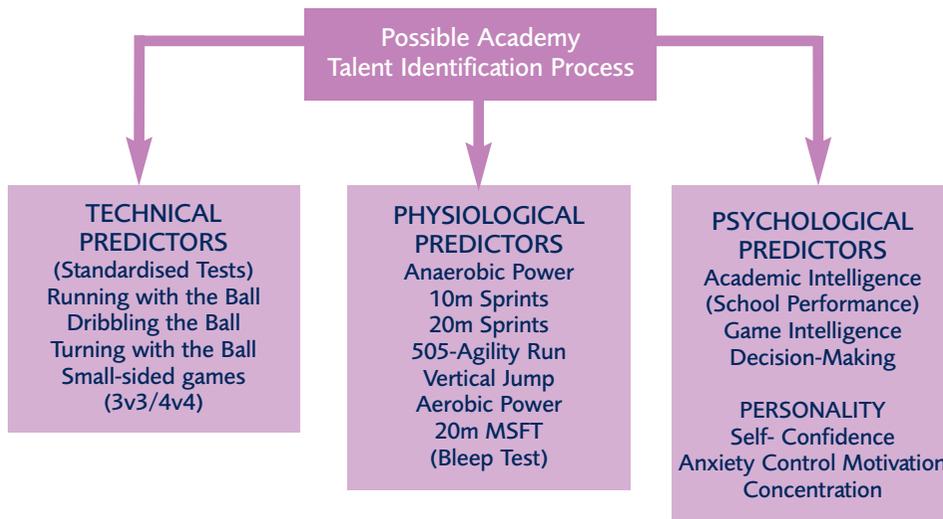


Fig 4. Possible Talent Identification Process.



PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF TALENT IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

In order to achieve continued success at all age groups throughout the club, Sports Scientists along with other individuals involved within the continued development of Academy players should try to implement a practical working talent identification process. If implemented correctly, the potential to assist the selection process that hopefully leads to the improvement in standard of players brought into the club is huge. Figure 4 shows the types of technical, physical and psychological tests that can be implemented into this process in order to give more information concerning the 'trialist players' technical, physical and psychological level.

SUMMARY

It is a well-known fact that predicting potential talent within any types of sport, especially football is becoming increasingly difficult. Also, both individuals and professional football clubs are becoming more obsessed with missing out on the next Wayne Rooney, David Beckham or Michael Owen due to the obvious financial rewards. This is why it makes sense to try and implement both a practical, and time effective talent identification programme similar to the process used in figure 4 which will help to categorise and give further information about the players technical, physical and psychological attributes. If the overall level of the 'raw' or 'un-coached' player coming into the club on trial is increasing, then further down the development ladder (eg Under-16 squad) the level of players in the system should be higher.

Adam Owen is currently working as an Exercise Scientist at Celtic FC and is undertaking an M.Phil degree in Coaching Science at NEWI (North East Wales Institute of Higher Education). Adam is an ex-player with Wrexham AFC and holds the UEFA 'A' Licence Coaching Diploma.