This briefing will be of interest to anyone who works within the talent development coaching environment. It features extracts from a larger report produced for sports coach UK by the University of Stirling. More information and links to the full report can be found at the end of this briefing.

This briefing is produced as part of the Excellent Coaching Practice Project. It is designed to stimulate debate and ideas on excellent coaching practice rather than produce an agreed definition of excellence. As such it should be read in the spirit in which it was intended.
1. **Summary of results**

The research found that excellent coaching practice within the talent development environment was likely to:

- Focus on development over results.
- Invest for the future.
- Create a respectful environment.
- Build relationships that foster empowerment and motivation.

Coaches working within the talent development environment would:

- Be approachable and inspiring.
- Prepare sessions with clear aims.
- Provide sessions that are competitive, intense and promote learning.
- Have the ability to spontaneously restructure their knowledge to changing situational demands.
- Use questioning to guide learning.
- Encourage athletes to try new things.

Coaches working within the talent development environment developed their skills by:

- Learning technical knowledge through experience.
- Learning from their participation as athletes.
- Learning from coaches in other sports.
- Learning from senior coaches in their sport.

2. **Recommendations for coach education/development**

Recommendations in this area include:

- Identifying and providing support for coaches in the talent development environment.
- Fostering 'bigger picture' thinking in relation to athlete development.
- Facilitating opportunities to learn from other coaches in the talent development environment.

3. **Recommendations for future research**

Recommendations for future research included:

- How coaches can develop life skills in developing players.
- The junior to senior transition and retaining talent (i.e., keeping players in the system).
4. Detailed Analysis by Theme

4.1 Coaching outcomes

The coaches believed that excellent coaching practice in the talent development context should be about developing players and performance. They emphasised that performance was more important than results. One of the coaches stated “if we focus purely on results then it is to the detriment of the players’ development” (TDCoachM1). The coaches also identified that they wanted to develop players who were happy, enthusiastic and hard working. The athletes believed that an important outcome of excellent coaching practice was fun and enjoyment. Enjoyment for them was when they felt they were improving and developing. One the athletes stated “It is enjoyable when you feel like you are doing something, like you are getting somewhere” (TD AthleteF3).

4.2 The Bigger Picture

The coaches in this environment believed it was important to adopt a broader view that they were developing players over the longer term. Coaches felt that focusing on results was at the detriment of player development, so emphasised their approach as being performance driven. This was an investment for the future, as noted by two of the coaches:

- I think we see the bigger picture more because we see that what we do really counts at senior level. (TDCoachM1)

- Results are important to us but at the same time it is important that [U18 coach] gets kids ready to come up to the U18s and us to pass kids onto the under 21s. We can do that without necessarily winning all the time. (TDCoachM2)

4.3 Coach-Athlete Relationship

Coaches felt that they are in a position to create the perfect environment for the cultivation of successful coach-athlete relationships. Being confident in their ability led them to have a significant influence on athletes’ attention to coaching instruction, athletes’ acquisition of specific skills, and the nature of how coach-athlete relationship are developed. Coaches felt it was essential to create a respectful environment where players feel empowered:

- Excellent coaching in my eyes would be empowering the player with the freedom to express themselves and learn in a decision rich environment. Rather than be boxed in and when they have to make their own decisions they are not confident or comfortable in that decision making environment. (TDCoachM3)

The coaches also identified that they had to approachable, motivating and inspiring. This is emphasised by the following comments:

- I think also a coach needs to be approachable. The best coaches I have had are the ones I can go up too and ask questions about my technical development or elements of the game. I can have a conversation with them and I come away from the conversation thinking I now understand. (TDCoachM1)

- We are all role models for the kids, we are trying to inspire, coach them. They look up to us, we might not realise it but they do. (TDCoachM4)
The athletes echoed these sentiments as they believed that an excellent coach should be approachable and motivating.

4.4 Planning and organisation

Both coaches and athletes highlighted similar management skills in terms of planning and organisation. For example one coach simply stated: “Being organised in terms of good planning. Being clear and concise, making sure your sessions run smoothly. Being organised for sessions” (TDCoachM3).

Cognitive flexibility (the ability to spontaneously restructure one’s knowledge to changing situational demands) emerged as being a particularly important skill enabling coaches to adapt sessions. TDCoachM2 commented that: “It is more about adaptability than recognition. Need to adapt all the time.” TDCoachM1 had a similar view:

I think it depends on what you aspire for your team to be. The players you have will determine the coaching style you have and the way the team play. (TDCoachM1)

4.5 Session Delivery

The delivery of sessions worked in concert with planned content of a session such that players had a clear understanding. Coaches tailored their communication to each individual in order to get the best out of players. This is emphasised by the comments below:

Clear and concise in what you plan to get out of the session, there is a rapport between the coach and the players and ability to communicate to the player so it meets their individual needs in terms of whether it needs to be visual or verbal. (TDCoachM2)

I think it helps that the players have an understanding of what they are about to go into in terms of in the session so they know what the session is about, what the key things they are learning. A good coach explains and the players know what they need to do. (TDCoachM3)

The coaches believed the use of questioning was important in order to check for learning and to help players think for themselves. For example, one of the coached stated:

So asking the players what went well and what do you think we can improve on. Let the players have the confidence to talk, let them have a conversation. If they are deviating then you can bring it back in. Then they have done it in through their thinking rather than be dictated to (TDCoachM3).

This comment was followed by TDCoachM4 adding “lead them to discovery”.

The athletes identified that they liked the questioning approach as it helped increase their understanding. In regards to content, the athletes wanted competitive and intense sessions where they felt they were learning. They also believed that adaptation was important in that drills should be altered or changed regularly. One of the athletes stated “once you have done it you want to either adapt it or change to something new so it is not getting repetitive” (TDAthleteF2).
4.6 Intervention skills

The intervention skills of the coach were important with regard to implementation within this environment. Understanding the technical side and being able to provide technical feedback is important with talent development. The coaches believed that this feedback should be delivered in a way that suits the players. For example, one of the coaches stated:

I think feedback is quite important. If you know the kids or adults you are coaching and you are able to deliver appropriately. Some people like a bollicking, some people don’t. So it having the ability to speak to a certain person in a relevant way I think is vital. (TDCoachM4)

Some of the athletes felt that there are differences between what females want from a coach compared to males regarding feedback:

I don’t think there is much of a difference but sometimes coaches feel they can’t shout at us as much in case he upset us. I think we can take shouting but not constantly. (TDAthleteF2)

Coaches employed a range of intervention skills that encouraged players to take on challenges and take risks: "Some sports have got far too coached. Rugby, the guys are afraid to make mistakes." (TDCoachM2). This coach also noted the benefits of taking risks:

So you were talking about not afraid to make mistakes but not afraid to try something, say you are 1 nil down with 10 minutes to go, right you two defenders off you come, five forwards here we go. (TDCoachM2)

5. Learning and development in the talent development environment

In terms of learning and development, the coaches who engaged in excellent coaching practice with developing athletes were able to transfer their experience, knowledge and skills across different situations. Diverse, but specific examples were used and athletes were given the opportunity to develop their own representations of information in order to learn and develop further.

Coaches developed their knowledge in this environment in various ways, including learning technical knowledge through experience, learning from their participation as athletes, learning from coaches in other sports and learning from senior coaches in their sport:

Yeah chatting to other coaches and be exposed to a higher level of play, it makes you start thinking. (TDCoachM1)

I can learn from other teachers showing a basketball drill for example. You take things from everywhere. If you are not willing to learn from anyone then you are not going to get anywhere. (TDCoachM2)

You also have to learn from other sports and other coaches that are role models. If you just look at hockey only you will never come up with anything new unless you look at other sports. (TDCoachM1)

Coaches in this environment felt they needed more support in terms of their own development, specifically in new areas being developed. They felt that at times it could be intimidating to have to keep up with all the latest developments all the time.
6. About the research

This research was conducted by the University of Stirling on behalf of sports coach UK. The fieldwork was undertaken with Scottish Hockey and involved interviews and focus groups with coaches, participants and parents along the sporting pathway (children, young people, adults, talent development, and elite).

The purpose of the research was gain an in-depth understanding of the coaches’ and participants’ views on excellent coaching practice.

You can read the full report on the sports coach UK website http://www.sportscoachuk.org/resource/identifying-excellent-coaching-practice-along-sporting-pathway