While there has been plenty of research on how to develop talented young athletes, less attention has been paid to their psychological well-being. New research from Sweden aims to redress this balance by examining how athlete perception of the talent environment influences their well-being.
Well-being is important for talented young athletes. Research has shown that certain psychological characteristics are essential for the development of expertise. These include high self-confidence, concentration that avoids distraction, and being able to handle anxiety and bounce back from mistakes.

On the other side of the coin, a lack of well-being has been found to heighten the risk of burnout, demotivation and dropout from sport.

However, as researchers recently pointed out, there is a secondary and perhaps more important issue specific to those in talent development environments. While other young people can simply move to another sport or activity if they are not feeling good in their environment, this is not the case for talented athletes. For these individuals, so much of their identity is related to their sport that any feeling of poor well-being will have a much greater impact on their lives.

For that reason, the researchers sought to further understand how talent development environments can influence well-being. To carry out the study, they worked with almost 200 13–16-year-old footballers currently involved in elite academies in Sweden. The players were asked questions about their mental health, covering areas such as anxiety, ability to concentrate, confidence and their general mood. Alongside this, they were asked about the environment they were in, with several questions related to their coaches: Did they plan with the players? How was their communication style? Did the coach take an interest in them outside sport? Were they approachable, challenging yet supportive? Did they work with their parents to help them achieve their goals?
The results

What the results showed was that talent development environments could be broken down into three levels based on how they were perceived by the players (see the box opposite for what makes high, moderate and low quality environments). Using these categories, the researchers also discovered a strong link between the quality of the environment and athlete well-being. In other words, players in high quality talent environments experienced significantly higher levels of well-being than those in low quality environments. Three areas in particular showed distinct differences: communication with the coach; goal setting; and well established relationships. Understanding these can help ensure the well-being of the young athletes in talent development environments.

Communication

In high quality environments, the players said they communicated well with their coach, both inside and outside football while players in low quality environments felt there was a poor climate for communication with their coach. Not being able to communicate and gain support from their coach had a negative impact on both their skill development and sense of well-being.

Goal setting

It was only in the high quality environments that players felt they worked with their coaches, clubs and parents to set out clear goals for their long-term development. Having a long-term vision in their mind of where they are going was essential for athlete well-being, as was having these goals frequently evaluated and fed back.

Well established relationship

Having a well established relationship with the coach, club, parents and school was key to both development and well-being. When players felt that all the important aspects of their life (football, home and school) were in harmony, then they felt good and could concentrate on their development. On the other hand, when these aspects were not in harmony, there was the potential for anxiety and distraction.

High quality environments

These were environments where the club and coaches had a clear vision of athlete development and communicated it to the players. The players worked with coaches to set their performance goals, and these were monitored over time with a focus on long-term, rather than immediate, development. In this environment, the coach took an interest in the players’ life outside football while everyone felt they had access to a strong support network and good relationships between clubs, parents and schools.

Moderate quality environments

In these environments, players still felt they had long-term goals and plans in place, but they existed to a lesser degree than in the high quality environments. Players felt their relationship with the coach was only moderate, and while they could talk to the coach and get feedback, the relationship did not extend beyond football. Similarly, other parts of the support network were rated moderate.

Low quality environments

In these environments, players perceived that they have ideas about what they should work on to become better, but there was no long-term focus, and the coach was not involved in the goal setting process. Therefore, feedback from the coach was not always related to long-term goals. The players often found it hard to talk to their coach, and the relationships between club, parents and schools were not strong.
If it’s so obvious, why isn’t everyone doing it?

In a way, the results from the research may seem obvious. High quality talent environments should involve good communication, goal setting and harmonious relationships between the important aspects of a player’s life. This will create a sense of well-being that allows the player to concentrate on why they are there in the first place – to develop their football skill. Similarly, given how much of their own life a young athlete is putting into the sport, they need to feel happy as it is much more difficult to turn your back on an elite academy than a grass-roots club.

However, the results of this research showed that even though such ideas may seem obvious, they are not always happening. Even among just 200 young players, the quality of the environment could range from high to moderate or even low.

Learning from the research

This research has shown that mental well-being is strongly associated with the quality of the talent development environment. However, not all environments are meeting the needs of players. To finish their article, the researchers suggest a number of ideas for academies and coaches to improve the quality of the environment and ensure the mental well-being of their players:

• Coaches, together with each of their players, should work actively on long-term goal setting and goal evaluation.

• It is important that coaches provide feedback on a regular basis and that this is linked to long-term development.

• Use open questions in your coaching in order to let players reflect and be involved in the feedback process.

• Involving players and encouraging them to reflect on their own as well as the team’s performance (both at practice and during matches) will increase their perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which in turn can improve well-being.

• Academies should encourage coaches to learn about and use self-determination theory in practice.
If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:


Other more general reading on talent development environments and well-being includes:

