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Approaching the Coach's Eye – An Interview Study on Expert Coaches' Beliefs and Experiences Regarding 'Talent' and Player Selection in Table Tennis

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Athlete identification and development programs are crucial for the development of young 'talented' children into world-class athletes (e.g., De Bosscher et al., 2008). Particularly in early starting sports and those with highly limited resources, systems personified by coaches often select athletes into programs already at a young age, aiming to use resources efficiently on those athletes with the highest potential. For example, the German table tennis system starts selecting players to national player development programs at age 10. However, the coaches' decision-making processes in the context of player selection (often referred to as coach's eye; Lath et al., 2021) and their specific criteria used are widely unknown. To address this gap, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen coaches (five female, ten male; age: 32-78 years, $M = 55$, $SD = 12.96$) with high expertise in the identification and development of young talented table tennis players (10-60 years of experience, $M = 28.80$, $SD = 13.94$ years). Analysis reveals that the concept of 'talent' and the process of player selection in table tennis are highly complex phenomena. In the interviews (duration: 41-79 min, $M = 54.67$, $SD = 9.75$ min), three main areas of importance were identified: 1) coaches' general beliefs regarding 'talent', 2) coaches' specific selection criteria including individual as well as environmental aspects, and 3) the system's implementation of player selection processes. One main finding is that coaches see 'talent' as dependent on various surrounding factors including (relative) age, maturation as well as previous (practice) experience. To their understanding, all these factors must be incorporated into selection decisions. Furthermore, coaches appreciate the multidimensionality of 'talent' and include both individual (e.g., technical skills) and environmental criteria (e.g., parents' support) in their decision-making process. Also, our interviews revealed that selection decisions are usually not made by a single but by multiple coaches during group meetings. This suggests that group processes and dynamics may play an important role. In summary, our work helps to further unravel the high complexity of 'talent' and player selection (in table tennis). With that, we provide new insights and avenues for practitioners and researchers in athlete selection. Future research should further investigate the coach's eye including the relevance of both individual and environmental as well as surrounding factors within athlete selection contexts.

References

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