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## A Comparison of Youth Coaches' Conception and Understanding of Football Talent Selection Criterion in Between Three Provinces in Ethiopia

Ashenafi Kefyalew Tariku\*

Department of Sport Science, Sport Academy, Debre Markos University PoB 269, Debre Markos, Ethiopia

\*Corresponding Author's Email: [ashutizi@gmail.com](mailto:ashutizi@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Studies were point out that, the root cause of football talent wastage was, basically, lack of knowledge and understanding about the nature of talent. Talent Identification in football, by its nature, is an incredibly subjective topic that lends itself to many opinions and perspectives. The purpose of this study was to identify and compare the key criterion coaches' preferences to make decisions on "Talented" football Players in between Amhara regional state, Dire Dewa and Addis Ababa city administrations youth development centres, in Ethiopia. Cross-sectional survey research design was utilized with thirty coaches (n=30) identified with whom conducted semi-structured interviews. Then interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, finally comparison was made in between provinces talent selection criterion. In general, the finding of the study displayed that, minor differences in the pre-selection screening process, which were utilization of Magnetic Resonance imaging (MRI) at Addis Ababa city administration for age check-up and reception in age differences (above 15 years). Whereas, interms of talent selection criterion, Familial support, sociability, Love of the game and fighting spirit were criterion commonly preferred. However, passing and shooting (double leg utilization), dribbling with speed, controlling skills (Ball skill elements) with dominantly short combination play and physical strength were highly preferred by Addis Ababa and Dire Dewa city administrations development centre coaches. In addition, coaches of Amhara regional state development centres utilized ball skill elements as attacking and defending skill elements as a selection criterion not in isolated way. Up on the findings, Coaches seems to acknowledge the process of talent selection in a multi-dimensional perspective in similar fashion, but for pre-selection screening Magnetic Resonance imaging (MRI) and physical strength element preferences were prioritized uniquely at Addis Ababa city administration for talent selection criterion. Talent selection processes in all the study areas were seemingly acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of talent. However, Coaches must have common conceptual understanding about the components definition and its elements and better to articulate/set half common selection criteria as a country level.*

**Keywords:** Coach, Football, Talent Selection, Talent Selection Criterion.

## 1. Introduction

The identification, recruitment and development of youth players is a large field within professional soccer (Ford et al., 2020). Identifying and nurturing talented individuals is an important element of education, music, and art, but no field has embraced the concept as tenaciously as sport (Baker & Schorer, 2010). Indeed, understanding the qualities that underpin elite or performance excellence and facilitating their development, is a cornerstone of the sport sciences (Baker & Schorer, 2010).

Organized programs of talent identification and development (TID) can be traced to the 1950s (Baker & Schorer, 2010). Different features such as the promise of financial wealth, better education and training encourages parents, coaches and administrators to support soccer development programs, that focus on 'recognizing a future star' (Williams et al., 2020). Thousands of coaches, scouts, sports scientists, administrators, and young players engage in this process, usually in large, well-funded facilities known as youth academies (Ford et al., 2020).

In this study, three different youth development programs, i.e. Government run development program (Ethiopian Youth Football Player Development Program (EYFPDP)), Professional Football clubs and private owned programs in three different provinces of the countries, were under investigation; these were Amhara regional state, is found in north western part of Ethiopia which is the second largest region in terms of

population and developmental program coverage.

Dire Dawa city administration is found in eastern part of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa City administration, which is the capital city, most professional football clubs were resided (most preferred and well organized in terms of football infrastructure, availability of organized youth's competitions etc....) in the country (Ethiopia).

Whereas, in reference to development programs: Government led development program EYFPDP, Professional Football clubs, and private owned programs respectively. The Ethiopian Youth Football Player Development Program is a national development scheme, which is designed for the development of "talented" youths in football through the process of selecting and delivering of appropriate Coaching environments as U-13, U-15 and U-17 age category (Federation, 2011). Similarly, private owned programs were almost the same structure with the government run program but it is owed by interested persons or organizations. Whereas, Professional football clubs development programs were run by clubs competing in the highest league of the country (Ethiopian premier league) as 'team C and B' development category.

In every generation, a rare and valuable resource for society and a great deal of potentially valuable human talent is wasted (Tranckle & Cushion, 2006; Williams, 2020). The root cause of this waste, basically, from a lack of knowledge and understanding about the nature of talent and a failure to grasp what makes people

motivated enough to develop talent (Dries, 2013).

It is clear that good concepts and better understanding of talent in soccer is among the key variables of excellence development (Ford et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). Talent Identification, by its very nature, is an incredibly subjective topic that lends itself to many opinions and perspectives (Levett & Levett, 2018). Talent identification programs are associated with the subjective evaluation of players' potential by coaches and scouts, who base their criteria primarily on personal taste, knowledge, and experience (Bergkamp et al., 2019). Traditionally, the identification and selection of talented persons into a youth soccer development centre has been interrelated to a talent scout or coaches subjective, predetermined image of the ideal player (Hill & Sotiriadou, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2016) (Bergkamp et al., 2019).

However, this method can result in a repetitive poor judgment in Talent selection processes (Unnithan et al., 2012a) and can lack reliability (Williams & Reilly, 2000) when used in personally (i.e., a coach or scouts). Outcome measures based on from physiological, psychological, physical (anthropometrical) and soccer-specific play (Reilly et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2016; Dodd & Newans, 2018; Doncaster et al., 2020), Psychological, (Larsen et al., 2012), Sociological and Technical skills (Figueiredo et al., 2009; Zago et al., 2016) have all been used, in either alone or combination as pointers of talent in soccer.

It is unlikely that, in the study setting of this enquiry, there was a scarce of documents which gave articulated answer for what and how talent selection criteria applied to select 'talented' football players, disorganized talent management strategies (i.e. inconsistency in development duration, inconsistency in selection and graduation (training) age) and seemingly, differently oriented players were grown from those under investigated areas of the county. So, the purpose of this study was to specify the specific key criterion to be compared on coaches' preference to make decisions related to "Talented" youth football Players in between Amhara regional state, Dire Dawa city and Addis Ababa City administrations youth development centres of Ethiopia in 23/2024.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Cross-sectional survey research design was utilized. Regards to youth development coach's sample size, who were registered in 2023/24 as youth development coach, Thirty (N= 30) sample youth development centres in Amhara regional state, Addis Ababa and dire Dawa city administrations were selected by utilizing inclusion and exclusion criterion. It includes professional football Clubs as 'team C and B' (N=8), Government run youth player development program (N=21) and even private owned youth development centres with the same age category as government (N=10). Each development centre had one coach, thus the totally they were Thirty nine (N=39). Then, the researcher prepared inclusion and exclusion criterion, i.e.; coaches having coaching license (CAF 'D' & above), having prior experience in

identifying talent in the development centres and having at least five years of coaching experience in the development centre. Whereas, exclusion criterion includes; working without coaching license, had no prior experience in identifying talent and having less than five years of coaching experience in the development centres. Accordingly, Thirty (N= 30) potential coaches satisfied the inclusion criteria (n= 8, n =14 and n = 8) from professional football Clubs, Government development program and private owned youth development respectively.

In agreement with the subjectivist epistemology underpinning this study and the purpose of this study i.e. to specify the specific key criterion to be compared on coaches' preference to make decisions related to "Talented" youth football Players in between Amhara regional state, Dire Dawa city and Addis Ababa City administrations youth development centres of Ethiopia, the researcher, considered the 'middle ground' of semi-structured interviews to be most appropriate for the purposes of answering the research question. Identifying a framework of questions meant that the researcher would be able to keep myself and the interviewees 'on track' with the objectives of the research and allow comparison across interviews, while retaining freedom to probe for clarification and further depth along different avenues as they arose (Best et al., 2017).

Coaches are considered as the frontline of stakeholders, for talent selection process in the development centres. Semi-structured interviews were therefore employed in

order to identify key criterion which youth development coaches run through in selecting of promising football players in three different Provinces of the country, Ethiopia. These were Dire Dewa city, Addis Ababa city administrations and Amhara regional state youth player Development centres. The Administration of semi-structured interviews took place as follows:

First, a background interview questions were created for coaches used as an initial contact to gain their biographical information. Next, the researcher utilized semi-structured interview guide questions, for coach, by developing areas of interest and relevant issues in line with an existing literature. Then, piloted the interview guide questions with coaches of similar qualification level and background. The participants gave valuable feedback related to the clarity and comprehension of the questions. The piloting interviewing process gave insight in questioning techniques, typical answers to expect as well as technical and voice recording considerations.

The interview approach was included a chain of prearranged nine open-ended questions of: defining 'elements' of talent', Criteria used and prominence of the selected qualities of talent, and how to assess the identified elements of talent for instance, Please describe in as much as in detail the process of how you identify a potential youth to retain in the program?. Pre-determined questions were employed in combination with suitable probes, which maximized the depth and richness of responses. All coach participants agreed to participate in the study and the interview

processes were held in Amharic language (Among Ethiopian working languages) and audio recorded with permission gained from the coaches, then transcribed into the English language by professional language translator and researcher as well, resulting in 45 pages of transcribed text.

To develop credibility of data interpretation, Member checking was employed to confirm which the transcripts were exact. Prior to data analysis of this study, a copy of the Amharic transcribed interview was delivered to the entire (n=30) coaches. Coaches were specified the chance to explain or alter any of their responses and also requested if they had any doubt, concerns around the interviews. So as to confirm that participant replies and notions have been equally represented, are exact and comprehensive, member checking is significant (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Ultimately, the Qualitative data collected from semi-structured interview transcript was organized and analysed using thematic analysis. A thematic analysis method is 'a process of segmentation, categorization and relinking of aspects of the data prior to final interpretation' (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Then, the process of assigning themes into categories involved both inductive and deductive analysis approaches then comparisons were made.

### 3. Results

Generally, coaches in the study provinces demonstrate that, similar awareness about coaching and had good perceptions into how coaches conceptualize football talent to select the upcoming fresh leg

footballers. Coaches understanding and intuition identification for the talented player in football is a cornerstone of effective talent selection and development schemes in addition to sports sciences support (Huijgen, 2013).

The outcome was presented by sorting out of two broad phases within the dataset (an inductive process), i.e. pre-selection and Talent selection phase. At the pre-selection phase, all Thirty (N=30) coaches started the task of identifying a promising youth footballer by announcement on the schools, club head office and residence areas noticeboard, and then, registration took place.

Then, the commonly practiced pre-selection requirements in governmental and private programs, among those registered youths were: - birth and elementary school (especially, 1-4 grade) certificate checking exact age of a youth and must be not less than 11 years old. Differently, professional football clubs youth development coaches at Addis Ababa city utilized MRI results without age restrictions (above 15 years) for similar purpose as 'C' and 'B' team category. As such, using of science-based support systems offering a more holistic method has been an increasing emphasis on Talent selection in soccer (Reilly et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2016). Finally, youths who satisfied the above requirements became a candidate for the next potential selection process.

After finalizing the pre-selection process, coaches proceed to the next stage of the potential selection process, i.e., Talent selection. The results, discussions and

comparison of the talent selection process in between Dire Dawa city, Addis Ababa city administrations and Amhara regional state youth Development centres were considered research on talent identification in football through a deductive approach (using prior researchers identified variables) i.e. Psycho-Social Components, Biological Qualities, Tactical elements (cognitive-perceptual), and Ball performance skills. Pseudonyms were employed to guarantee anonymity of coaches.

### 3.1.Psycho-social Elements

The Findings of this enquiry shown that, psych-social qualities were considered by nearly all coaches under investigation. However, familial support, being sociable, love of the game and fighting spirit (brevity) were believed to be considered as a key talent identification criterion.

In common phenomenon, most coaches in the study provinces development centres boldly acknowledged the power of being brave and better fighting spirit has more credit for selection. Coaches believe youths who displayed this element are likely had high chance of become successful football player.

For instance:

*'...During common ball situations, I prefer a player who is fighting for a ball may have better chance of selection', Coach Yonas'.*

Whereas, Addis Ababa development centres coaches specifically, emphasized

coping behaviour used as a selection criteria. These may be related to the location advantage of become a capital city resident and international competitions were basically held at the city, which got a chance of observing and coping of foreign players experience. Coping has been identified as relevant in many athletic contexts and coping behaviour have been shown to play an important role in sport performance (Allen et al., 2011).

Familial support was among the variables which all province coaches commonly recognized as an important element for a talented youth football player to succeed. To decorate this, Coach 'Ameha' mentioned, *"...I will assess familial interest and confirmation from players family". Because, familial support is an important component for athletes' future development career and confidence.* Studies supported that parental support and a positive attitude to the Childs involvement in sport are extremely important during the entire period of growth (Côté, 1999).

The other qualities boldly stated by coaches originate from Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa city administration were "love of the game", and "sociability with teammates". Coach 'Fedelu' believes that:

*"...it doesn't matter for me whether he is thin or muscular, tall or short. I evaluate his love of the game, while he is among his peer group. If he has the right amount of love of the game, that is enough for me. The rest is my job. It is his love of*

*the game is an important matter”.*

### 3.2. Biological Qualities

Contrary to the above stated element, Differences were discovered in utilizing physiological qualities for selection purpose in between study provinces. Specifically, predicted height, speed, and physical strength were believed to be the most vital physical qualities. Seventy five percent of perceived predicted height, speed, and physical strength, as key elements in detecting talented footballers in the development centres.

However, Different results were discovered in terms of physical strength variable utilization as a selection criterion. Which is in between study provinces as well as, in terms of development programs, i.e. Government and private development programs, boldly favours physiological quality elements such as speed and predicted height as a determinant selection criterion. Unambiguously, speed is well recognized by majority coaches. This result is consistent with the works that has acknowledged speed as a vital physiological variable for fruitful execution in soccer, mostly distances ranging between ten to Twenty Five meters (Dodd & Newans, 2018; Fernandez-Rio & Mendez-Gimenez, 2014; Unnithan et al., 2012b).

*"Speed is an important element when I recruit the talented one; for example, the most repeated in soccer is five, ten meters running speed, so that it is so an*

*essential. Being able to win someone else to a ball at times, and then the next run is probably the twenty meters, twenty-five meters, or thirty meters because that is where they are making runs without the ball and the quicker they get back into their positions the better he is "* (coach Feysel and Dessu).

Similarly, dominant number of Government run program coaches highly recognized predicted height as a physical element that differentiates talented players with less talented one. For example, Coach ‘Ameha, Hagos and Benaim’ stated that:

*"I will anticipate the probable physical element development of a young boy by simple predicting athlete’s family history’.*

This finding of coaches are even implicitly biased towards physically larger players, when no apparent performance advantage is evident (Furley & Memmert, 2016). Consequently, soccer coaches automatically associate tall players with positive performance attributes and small players with negative performance attributes. With this in mind, due to maturational effects, literature’s has suggested that using talent identification strategies that exclusively focus on physical attributes may exclude talented players who develop later (Furley & Memmert, 2016).

Whereas, professional football clubs development program recognized, speed

and physical strength as a determinant selection criteria but not Physical height (it may be for goal keepers). These may be professional football clubs select talented boys as 'B' team member for a short replacement of the main or team 'A' sooner, which recognized strength as a bold selection criterion.

For instance:

*'I arrange games and during common ball situations, were the best way indicators of a strength boys. ...able to cover a ball, took priority over and eliminate dangerous situations.'*

Strength is one of the most vital predictors of potential in football. Also, similar with the studies, physical strength was an element emerged as a key element of talented footballers. Mostly, coach participants' recognized strength as an important factor in winning one-on-one contests with the opponent. In relation to physical strength, it has been inferred that coaches decide on soccer players that are athletic and more matures in physically, than physically less matures of soccer players (W F Helsen et al., 2000; Werner F. Helsen et al., 2012). But, the use of physical strength as a potential or performance forecaster for the purpose of talent identification has been greatly criticized as a result of differences in physical growth and maturation in adolescents (Hill & Sotiriadou, 2016; Williams & Reilly, 2000). However, in the talent identification process, players physically less mature may be ignored and

being out from soccer totally (Finnegan et al., 2016; Roberts, 2014).

### 3.3. Tactical Understanding Elements

In relation to Tactical understanding variable, similarities were observed among the study provinces in detecting talented footballers. Many coaches perceived that game reading, positioning and instruction understanding as a key element in detecting talented footballers. Coaches, boldly recognized that, talented footballers are those who have superior *Tactical understanding* elements, for instance the capability to 'read the game', 'positioning' and 'instruction understanding' (Broadbent et al., 2014).

For example, Coach 'Elmo' mentioned about how he identifies a potential one in terms of game reading and positioning.

*"...I organizing 5v5 games to observe how he changed his position in relation to ball possession situations and their game reading quality of a potential boy. Then, a boy who satisfies me in terms of good anticipation and decisions made was my preferred one".*

It is consistent with the studies on Perceptual-cognitive skill related ability to "read the game" (Ali, 2011), identifying, locate and process environmental information so as to incorporate it with existing knowledge and current motor abilities in order to select and accomplish fitting action and combining to produce two judgments, decision-making and



anticipation (Broadbent et al., 2014). The most prevailing finding was that players who excelled in the tactical elements positioning and deciding had a significantly higher chance to reach the professional soccer level.

On the other hand, receptive to instruction was recognized as being a vital cognitive-perceptual element of a talented player. For instance, Coach ‘Goshu’

*“...It is simple to expect that some youth potentials would react against the instruction given to them during training sessions”* were mentioned as an important element.

### 3.4. Ball Performance Skills

The results of this study discovered that, ball skills were an essential concern in identifying talented youth football players. Especially, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administration coaches have greatly recognised ball performance skills with short combination playing's. In this instance, especial consideration have given for double leg utilization, dribbling with speed, controlling a ball and shooting skills were believed to be the most important (key) ball skills mentioned by majority of coach participants. Technical skills are a prerequisite for playing soccer and are fundamental in soccer performance (Huijgen, 2013).

In similar way, majority of coaches described the importance of passing in both legs (double leg utilization), dribbling with speed, shooting and ball controlling as a vital elements for excellence in football players and coaches also recognized these

qualities as differentiating the ball skill elements between talented players and those considered as less talented. For instance:

*‘....I prefer a boy passing with different parts of his feet and with both of his legs (double leg utilizing player)’* Coach Zewede and Mulunehe.

Similarly,

*.....Am crazy of ball skills and wasted most of my time in searching of this possessed youth,.....technical skills were used as key identification criteria: “I put emphasis on the capability to passing a ball, controlling a ball with different parts of his body, dribbling a ball with speed, heading a ball and other techniques like shooting...”* coach Fetsum and Mulunehe.

In agreement with this, studies have emphasized that the execution of skills is one of the most important aspects of soccer and sound technical ability has been identified as the best indicator for success in soccer (Ali, 2011). Technical skills are grouped as with the ball performance actions and consist of: ball control, passes, crosses, dribbles, tackles, headers, shots, corners, free-kicks, and throw-ins (Russell & Kingsley, 2011). Consistent with this study, dribbling speed is considered as vital to the result of the match, with elite soccer players performing so many brief strong actions during a game (Huijgen, 2013).

Contrary to this, coaches from Amhara regional state development centres utilized ball Performance actions as attacking skills and defending skill elements as a selection criteria. For instance,

*“Controlling a ball with speed and arranging the ball for the next step is an indicator of talent in football for attacking movements, and interceptions and tackling as defending movements are vital elements of talented football players”.* (Coach Zewede)

However, ball skill performances actions were perceived as a vital criterion of talented youth in the study provinces: coaches at Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa city administration specified that, it has to be short ball oriented.

*‘...am crazy of short ball activities and my preference basically ball skill movements with short combination play, ...players intention to pass not more than 10-12m distances, ...which shows his confidence rather than evaluating perfection of actions, has got priority of selection’.* (Coach Ewentu).

#### 4. Conclusion

Even though, there was very slight difference of selection criterion utilization in between development programs and provinces, the findings of this investigation on talent selection criterion in between

study areas development centre indicated that, coaches seemingly to acknowledge the process of talent selection in a holistic perspective and tried to implement science based identification strategies to a limited extent.

The following findings were discovered:- Psycho-social elements, such as; Familial support, sociability with teammates, crazy love of the game and fighting spirit (brevity) were criterion commonly preferred, Ball skill elements;- passing in both legs (double leg utilization), dribbling with speed, ball controlling, shooting skills were highly preferred by Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations development centre coaches; Whereas, coaches of Amhara regional state development centres utilized ball skill elements as attacking and defending skill elements as a selection criteria not in isolated way.

Physiological qualities, such as; speed, physical strength, and predicted height were dominantly preferred by government and private development centre coaches but not professional clubs development coaches (predicted height); and cognitive-perceptual elements, such as; game reading, positioning and instruction understandings and coping behaviour exceptionally by Addis Ababa city development centre coaches, were commonly preferred as a key elements that alienated between talented and less talented players.

#### 5. Recommendation

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations were

suggested. Even though, coaches acknowledge the process of talent selection in a holistic perspective, they must have common conceptual understanding about the components definition and its elements. For instance, defending and attacking technique in general is difficult to predict. More in-depth utilization of science based identification trainings and experience sharing for coaches will help to easier the process and possibly to produce half common criterion as a country level will minimize the dropouts, even if talent identification is still has unanswered questions and better to follow work in progress approaches.

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