

CONSENSUS FROM THE RUGBY UNION TALENT SYMPOSIUM

THE ROYAL SOCIETY, 17-19 MAY 2013

1. Rugby talent is a minefield of the ideal versus the real world, and sporting versus commercial challenges. The goal of the RFU talent symposium at the Royal Society May 17-19 was to develop a consensus statement on the identification and development of talent in Rugby Union.
2. What will the world's best team look like in 2019, 2023 and 2027? What will the world's best players look like in each position? Rugby is unique in that it requires a wide range of varied skills and physical attributes¹. When identifying rugby talent, different criteria should be applied to the various positions, without compromising the development of all the fundamental movement and rugby-specific skills amongst all players. What will the game look like in the next two decades? We can only start from where we are, so it follows that any system of talent identification must assume that the game will continue to evolve, but not change fundamentally.
3. The characteristics that distinguish the very finest athletes – in a word, the elite - are a mix of anthropometric, psychological and physiological capacities. That is, there will be players who will at their peak have the right height, strength, speed, agility and stamina, combined with great hand-eye co-ordination, swift reactions, an ability to read and anticipate patterns of play, the capacity to instantly exploit opportunity, and the determination to overcome all obstacles both in the long term over years of training and in the heat of the battle at key moments in critical games.
4. What is the optimal recognition and training programme to identify and enhance the development of such potential between the ages of seven and 18, to enable the selection of players with promise to become the world's best, the game-changers in international contests? And what is the best way to turn a squad of such distinctive talents into a world-beating team? Given that Rugby is a complex sport involving strength, stamina, speed, skill and intelligence, there is a consensus that ideally there should be no definitive selection – the logical consequence of talent identification - until after maturation².
5. Experienced coaches can certainly identify the best players amongst their peers at any age, but early selection prior to maturation implies early exclusion of the majority and this can discourage players who might

otherwise have become as good, or better, a little later³. The characteristics that define talented athletes in early age are not the characteristics that define elite athletes later in their career. Physical and anthropometric characteristics can play an important role at an early age, but these characteristics don't promise an elite performer of the future⁴. That does not mean that there should be no talent *development* before maturation. Academics and experts agree that talent identification becomes more efficient with age; but talent development benefits everybody, at every age⁵. That is, developing all players to achieve their potential for as long as possible, without assigning labels that seem to predict their ability as senior players, makes for the most virtuous and sustainable sports system⁶. But there is no magic recipe, because the perfect training programme for player A may not work for player B. So we must adapt to each player's needs as far as resources permit.

6. Any attempt to distinguish and define this programme must be accompanied by a valid profile, based on the best available evidence, of the qualities required in a future world's best player. Unfortunately, any evidence about the making of great athletic contenders is incomplete, sometimes conflicting and mostly extrapolated from sports other than Rugby Union⁷. Some Rugby academies and coaches have amassed over a decade's worth of systematically-gathered, practical information about player development, about coaching best practice, about elite player case histories, about environmental and social factors that influence a player's development. The academies are also in a strong position to identify and frame questions that could successfully be addressed by academic research; and to experiment with the best coaching practices. There is a body of published evidence on the psychological attitudes and life experiences that drive successful competitive athletes, but no immediately-obvious way of using this to predict tomorrow's winners. Genetic data might one day offer a way of identifying athletic potential, but cannot yet do so. So there is a need both for a shared, anonymised, longitudinal database of existing player development, and a carefully-designed programme of rigorous research driven by an agenda shared by the RFU, professional clubs and the Rugby Players' Association.
7. Rugby is a late maturation sport, further complicated by the different maturation rates that tend to apply to the different positions⁸. There is also a wide consensus based on statistical evidence that selection for elite training and specialisation would be more effective if delayed until after maturation, that period of maximum growth and change⁹. In practice, almost all sports begin such selection rather earlier. So the RFU and the Regional Academies

must continue to encourage both early engagement *and* late specialisation in the sport¹⁰. Nations wherein rugby is woven into their socio-cultural fabric tend to produce players with higher levels of rugby specific skill - mostly developed through “backyard” games. Therefore in order to avoid delayed skill learning in later years, a more effective rugby skill acquisition programme is needed in conjunction with a holistic game development model to support the skill development of English players¹¹.

8. This requires judgment and a balance of the best available resources needed to develop and encourage tomorrow’s talent. Selection for national level programmes and specialisation in Rugby should be delayed until at least the age of 16¹². This commits Regional Academies and the entire Rugby system to encourage people to migrate to Rugby from other sports; to encourage young club members and school and college players to continue to enjoy and acquire valuable skills from a wide range of sports; and within Rugby to acquire a range of physical skills by combining any form of deliberate play with sympathetic and focused advice from coaches.
9. Coaches should recognise that pupils from state schools and colleges may have less exposure to Rugby than young players in private education, and be careful not to confuse the separate manifestations of experience and ability¹³. The coaches must be flexible enough to recognise the volition and self-belief inherent in potential champions, and to recognise the right moment to step in with active encouragement. England already has the largest Rugby Union player base in the world. But advancement is a complicated process, made more complex by the unnecessary and to the public perhaps increasingly irrelevant divide between the amateur and professional games.
10. Developmental learning is indexed by measuring performance over separate independent points across time. We need to adopt a more multi-dimensional view of learning and performance along different time scales. Understanding what are the short-term performance variables and what are long term learning and development variables in rugby is vital, to help support a game development framework¹⁴.
11. Ideally, there should be one single clear and easily understood pathway towards the professional and international game, supported by a carefully considered playing programme and the highest quality medical, sports science and social support¹⁵. There needs to be a clear strategic understanding that the system above all requires patience: coaches must be prepared to allow players to learn from failure, be prepared to go on

encouraging those who may not appear initially to be the most talented, and at the same time exact commitment from and set challenges for the most successful candidates to make them as capable and as skilled as they can possibly be.

12. So the structure needs to adopt agreed principles; highly context-specific, individualised, supportive and challenging. This means providing a range of activities that stretch the decision-making capabilities and game awareness of young ambitious players¹⁶. It should provide opportunities for success and failure as part of a stimulus to learning and a spur to greater achievement. Human beings are unique and will express their adaptations and strengths in a unique way. We must give each player all the tools that we have as coaches then let them perform and create. So instead of talent identification, we should seek player development programmes organised in ways that create challenges for enthusiastic young players to overcome and develop thereby their abilities to the full – whatever level they end up playing as seniors¹⁷.
13. The system must continue to recognise that to deliver the world's best team, Rugby Union in England must begin with a broad base of talent containing valued people of varying abilities, and who will enjoy the sport; some of whom will drop out for a mix of reasons, some of whom will go on to play professional Rugby, and a small proportion of whom eventually enter the international test Rugby arena¹⁸.
14. It follows that enthusiasm for, and loyalty and commitment to Rugby must be encouraged by the clubs and the wider Rugby community to sustain a large pool of younger players who have yet to reveal their full potential, but which will nevertheless include the elite of the future¹⁹. So the RFU must both promote Rugby as a game for its own sake and for the pleasure of play, a vehicle for achieving personal success and developing as a person and at the same time stress the vital importance of competition and the compulsion to win. This need not mean more games for young players; for the most gifted young players, if anything, the playing demands are too great, with layers of representative rugby applied in addition to their existing school, college or club commitments. This can too often limit and inhibit skill and physical development, rather than enhancing it²⁰. But it does demand more attractive, enjoyable and challenging training regimes, incorporating development of all the relevant attributes, at the hands of highly skilled coaches²¹.
15. Development of young players' physical abilities through an evidence-based programme, delivered by well trained and motivated coaches would make

rugby particularly attractive to young athletes and parents²². This could be a strong stimulus to even greater popularity of the game if the focus were on developing the character, physical and psychological attributes of the young player. Such a strategy would directly result in higher performing athletes staying within the game and progressing to the elite level; this because they would be less likely to be injured due to the poor practices and lack of knowledge which pervade many junior sport environments.

16. This raises questions of commitment within the game to development principles that prioritise the development of young players to achieve their potential: the RFU's payments to the professional clubs incentivise home-grown talent, to maintain a player pool from which the national team is selected. The creation of a pool of world-beating players will depend on a cadre of skilled and flexible coaches prepared to develop new strategies to address the development of ability²³. This will require considerable awareness, and fine judgement at every level of a player's development. It will require investment in coaches, equipment, training facilities and a tracking system to monitor progress²⁴. It will also require the investment of fresh resources and sufficiently physically-developed, responsible, self-aware, self-organised decision-makers within the elite to create this new generation of talented players²⁵. Above all, for young players prior to maturation, playing to *develop*, must determine how competitive structures and conditioned games are designed, rather than simply playing to win²⁶. We know that players are motivated by playing games, and that learning occurs during those games²⁷. One reason is that the elements of the game are inter-related. For example, spotting a gap, deciding what to do and then executing an appropriate movement are all inter-related - they are best practiced together wherever possible.

17. The solution is a games-centred approach to our coaching, in which we design games to provoke the learning we require. The games challenge the players to solve particular problems. The coach may ask questions when needed to accelerate the learning, but the use of direct instruction is reduced as we help players learn for themselves²⁸.

18. Ultimately, those individuals with flair and highly developed skills must then be turned into team-players focused on victory. Without more deliberate player development throughout the game, culminating in accurate identification and selection of the very best players, a World Cup winning team will only sporadically emerge. So there must be a change in attitudes, methods and investment throughout the game if England is consistently to

top the IRB world rankings and Premiership clubs are to dominate the final stages of European competitions²⁹.

19. The evidence currently available to those concerned with identification of talent is imperfect, and very little of this research has been driven by Rugby Union. There is a clear need for longitudinal data that will deliver a more reliable profile of the great team-players needed for the next three World Cups³⁰. There is a clear need for better understanding of the skills, qualities, motivation and mental toughness that go into the making of a Rugby champion and how those attributes can be nurtured amongst the greatest number of young players for as long as possible. There is a clear need for a more coherent vision of the tools needed to select the finest talents. England is good at Rugby. But the journey to greatness starts now.