

## **Talent Symposium – 30 Key Messages**

1. [2] Rugby is unique in that it requires a wide range of varied skills and physical attributes
2. [4] 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 maturation
3. [5] 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 later
4. [5] 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 future
5. [5] 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 age
6. [5] 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 system
7. [6] Unfortunately, any evidence about the making of great athletic contenders is incomplete, sometimes conflicting and mostly extrapolated from sports other than Rugby Union
8. [7] Rugby is a late maturation sport, further complicated by the different maturation rates that tend to apply to the different positions
9. [7] 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 change
10. [7] The RFU and the Regional Academies must continue to encourage both early engagement and late specialisation in the sport
11. [7] 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 players<sup>11</sup>

12. [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 16. [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.]
13. [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 ability
14. [10] 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 framework.
15. [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 support
16. [12] [There is a need to provide] a range of activities that stretch the decision-making capabilities and game awareness of young ambitious players
17. [12] 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 seniors
18. [13] 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 arena
19. [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 future
20. [14] 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 it

21. [14] It does demand more attractive, enjoyable and challenging training regimes, incorporating development of all the relevant attributes, at the hands of highly skilled coaches
22. [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 parents
23. [16] 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 ability
24. [16] It will require investment in coaches, equipment, training facilities and a tracking system to monitor progress
25. [16] 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 players
26. [16] Young players prior to maturation, playing to develop, must determine how competitive structures and conditioned games are designed, rather than simply playing to win
27. [16] We know that players are motivated by playing games, and that learning occurs during those games
28. [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 themselves
29. [18] 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 competitions
30. [19] 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 Cups.

***The number in brackets [\*\*] refers to the paragraph in the Consensus Statement from which it is drawn.***