From Talent to Qualification

A Sociological and Methodological Discussion of Player Talent Identification

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Abstract

This article proposes a reassessment of the concept of talent and offers tools for a conceptual and methodological shift in the study of talent identification in sports. Drawing on American pragmatism, specifically the pragmatic maxim, the article aims to clarify the concept of talent in talent identification that makes an athlete open for selection. The article organizes, presents, and discusses existing research on talent identification and highlights the need for a conceptual reevaluation. Instead of solely focusing on talent identification, the article suggests studying player qualifications through explicit and implicit tests, where the label "talent" is one outcome among several. The relevance of measurement, attachment, and judgment in this context of valuation is discussed. The article underscores the importance of considering the involved agents and the situational and historical context of these qualifications.

Keywords: American pragmatism, pragmatic maxim, talent, talent identification, valuation

1. Introduction

The concept of talent in sports presents difficulties in definition and study, making it challenging to grasp the nature of talent and its identification. This article offers a fresh perspective on studying the process of talent identification in sports that makes an athlete open for selection to perform at more advanced levels of the sport. The article discusses previous research on the topic and utilizes central tenets of American pragmatism to reassess the concept and study of talent and talent identification. To achieve this end, a shift in scholarly attention to a specific set of practical questions posed during talent assessment situations is advocated.

Conventional talent research often focuses on talent assessments in particular situations and activities, with scouting most clearly linked to talent identification. However, it is important to acknowledge and study the many other situations where the assessment of players' qualities is relevant and where the outcome may lead to identified talent, such as practices, locker room interactions, media reporting, etc. Focusing on "talent" as an object of research linked to particular situations and speech acts limits the view of what happens when players are considered talented. Moreover, many studies of talent identification have taken talent for granted. The question of *what* talent is remains elusive (Baker et al., 2018; Menger, 2019; Wrang et al., 2022). Consequently, it is unclear if previous research studies the same thing when referring to talent. Hence, in addition to exploring *who* possesses the talent and *how* talent is identified, as extensively studied in prior research, it is suggested in this article that it is imperative to address a fundamental question of *what* talent is and *when* talent is identified.

This article follows American pragmatism, a philosophical tradition from the 19th century, with influential contributions by, for example, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey, which has undergone a revival and significantly influenced the social sciences. At the core of American pragmatism is the pragmatic maxim, wherein commonplace yet undefined concepts are defined in terms of their practical consequence. Following American pragmatism, the article suggests that "*what* talent is" can be gauged through the pragmatic maxim. By focusing on *when* talent is identified, research should concentrate on the broader concept of *qualification* to study player or athlete evaluation more comprehensively. The qualification process involves evaluators with the power to make decisions by identifying, categorizing, and evaluating valuable qualities that character-

ize a desirable player. Talent is just one qualification among several others that make a player or athlete open for selection. The limits to *when* talent is identified are recognized empirically by focusing on the process of qualification that may happen through various types of situations. The approach suggests examining *when* and *how* players are qualified as "talented" while also considering that "talent" functions as a label and becomes part of a narrative as an outcome of such a process.

This article develops a conceptual and methodological take on talent and its identification through two parts. The first part provides an overview of influential research about talent identification and development in sports. The second part is the main contribution of this article, which broadens the understanding of talent and its identification by employing the pragmatic maxim and the concept of qualification. It is argued that qualification helps researchers understand the distinction between talent identification and the process of selecting someone to perform at a more advanced level of the sport. The conclusion suggests further research should investigate the qualification processes of individual players for teams as organizations at different levels, in varied situations, and over time, to study talent assessment through the lens of American pragmatism.

2. Examining approaches and findings from talent identification and development research

This section reviews previous research on physical, physiological, and psychological metrics for talent development, research on common heuristics used to reduce uncertainty in talent identification, how talent is developed in relation to these heuristics, and a common approach to study the sociocultural and institutional factors involved in talent identification.

2.1 From objective physical, physiological, and psychological metrics to subjective experiences in talent assessment

Talent development has been studied using physical, physiological, and psychological performance measurements to predict future success. Physiological processes internal to the body, physical performance, and psychological aptitude become proxies for talent. Physical performance

includes a player's relative strength, height, and speed, indicating talent (Baker et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these measurements relate to the "relative age effect" (RAE). Players born early in the year may have gained maturity advantages compared to peers of the same age (Roczniok et al., 2013; Wattie et al., 2015). The RAE results in short-term and long-term competitive advantages for these athletes, increasing their likelihood of being considered talented.

Psychological factors for developing talent include family support (Côté, 1999), involvement in sports development programs (Vaeyens et al., 2008), and motivation and dedication to engage in purposeful practice (Chambliss, 1989; Ericsson and Pool, 2016; Ericsson et al., 1993; Gladwell, 2008). Chambliss's (1989) study of Olympic swimmers shows that success occurs through small qualitative changes in technique, discipline, and attitude, not only repetition. Talent combines several smaller abilities into a functioning whole, which Chambliss calls "the mundanity of excellence." This amalgam of abilities means that an individual can perform something or solve a problem with less resistance than others (Kahneman, 2011, p. 35). Duckworth's (2016) studies of GRIT and the adjacent development of psychological metrics to measure it have shown the importance of perseverance and passion for achieving success. These physical, physiological, and psychological measurements are based on *objectified* and standardized tests to indicate sporting success and future top performance.

Sociologically oriented research looks at the organizational and system aspects of talent identification and the *subjective* experiences of those involved (Clarke, Cushion, and Harwood, 2018; Lund and Söderström, 2017; Tranckle and Cushion, 2006; Wrang et al., 2022). Some of these studies include the emic perspective of coaches and players, such as highlighting the importance of studying children's experiences of being evaluated as talented or not (Clarke, Cushion, and Harwood, 2018; Wrang et al., 2022).

2.2 Reduction of uncertainty in talent identification: three reoccurring themes

The purpose of testing athletes using objective scales or the process of talent identification by those evaluating performance is to minimize uncertainty regarding future performance. The uncertainty about quality and future performance arises regarding the player's characteristics and what combination of characteristics is required of players to succeed. Managing uncertainty and making predictions serve as means of exerting control

and generating knowledge about potential outcomes, specifically regarding players' future abilities (see Régnier et al., 1993; cf. Fürst, 2018; Karpik, 2010).

Lund and Söderström (2017; Lund, 2018), who follow a sociological tradition in studying talent identification, have identified three key central themes for talent identification, which function as heuristics for uncertainty reduction. These themes have been identified in the context of association football and are relevant to other sports. For example, Lund (2018) has also used these themes and distinctions to analyze talent identification for the more individual-centered sports of golf, athletics, swimming, and gymnastics.

I use Lund and Söderström's classification to discuss central reasoning within general talent identification research.[1] The themes are (1) *finding comparable predecessors*, (2) *relying on previous results*, and (3) *assessing the attitude of the player*, and they will be discussed below.

When *finding comparable predecessors*, a qualitative simulation is done to understand a player's potential development, aligning it with another player's development. "Comparables" or "comps" are used in various contexts, such as using comparables to price housing (Howell and Korver-Glenn, 2018) and using similar books to select book manuscripts for publication (Fürst, 2017, 2018). However, comparables are seldom standardized and can be strategically developed and used to legitimize an uncertain choice of personal interest to the evaluator. Hence, selecting and using comparables are rarely neutral and can reinforce societal inequalities (Howell and Korver-Glenn, 2018). Talent then becomes an issue of what is used as a source for comparison and how this comparison is carried out in practice.

Relying on previous results is also significant in talent identification, as it can provide future development projections. However, past performance does not guarantee a continuation in the same trajectory. The "relative age effect" (RAE), as discussed above, is often an issue in this context, where people born early in the year may gain cumulative advantages. Similar patterns have been identified in domains outside of sports, such as academia and culture, where early small advantages in a career lead to further advantages over time (Menger, 2014; see Rosen, 1981). The persons have been involved in competitive situations, called "tournaments," where pivotal outcomes such as being selected by an important team or personal trainer may lead to further advantages (Menger, 2014). Hence, discussing previ-

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1 Similar classifications have been made in studying gatekeepers in the cultural industries (Fürst, 2017).

ous results often overlooks social background and structural position that gives access to resources for development and future opportunities.

Assessing the attitude of the player is also important for talent identification. Demonstrating exceptional dedication to the sport, the team, and personal development can be used as resources to select a player (Guenter et al., 2019). Appearing selfish, being a rotten egg, or having parents who misbehave can be reasons against selecting, for example, young ice hockey players for an ice hockey team (Guenter et al., 2019).

2.3 Social dynamics and structural factors in talent identification

The heuristics described above show that "talent" is not confined to an individual's inherent abilities or performance measurements but needs social recognition and validation from others for the athlete to be selected and develop at more advanced levels of the sport.[2] Talent becomes the combination of characteristics recognized in someone with the ability or potential to succeed better than others (Menger, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, the social nature of talent identification arguably requires that people in distinct positions embedded in social structures can identify and qualify players as talented. Therefore, it is essential (sociologically speaking) to have models of talent identification that include structural factors that show the inequalities where some players are more privileged than others and have an easier time developing and being identified as talented.

A common sociological explanation for some players being selected over others draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) concepts of "taste," "fields," "positions," and "homology" between social fields. Homology suggests similarities and alignments between fields. Using the example of ice hockey may be illustrative. In this example, homology may occur between a field of ice hockey players and an institutional field of ice hockey clubs. Within each field, there are struggles about what makes it worthwhile to engage in the sport and what constitutes a legitimate player and team. Homology between fields proposes a hidden selective mechanism for establishing certain people as talents, as highlighted by Lund and Söderström (2017) and Tranckle and Cushion (2006). Coaches' tastes for talent vary based on their respective positions within the field (Christensen, 2009). This posi-

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2 Being named and judged as a "debutant" is another example of a social category or role that requires one to be (publicly) recognized in the role (by someone with the power to name one in the role) in order for it to gain validation in future (public) social contexts (Fürst, 2019).

tion not only affects their power to determine who is talented but also shapes their vision of who they may perceive as talented.

Players and teams can vary between those who do the sport for the game's sake and those who seek external rewards, and these are the common outermost poles of a field. Hence, through homology, selections become easier when a player, a hockey team, and the person assessing talent are in similar positions within the respective fields and express similar interest in a certain way of playing the sports. The selection process becomes more challenging if they have different positions within the fields and have contrasting ideas and preferences regarding the game. Similarly, it would be difficult for a commercial book publisher, which usually publishes genre literature, to publish a book of poetry. The same principle applies to organized sports, where compatibility and shared perspectives play a role in talent identification.

However, a more full-fledged empirical investigation of talent identification using Bourdieu's theories has yet to be done. The case of ice hockey can once again be used to illustrate this approach and its potential contribution to talent identification research. A thesis is that homologies are established between the players' field and the teams' field, which makes some choices easier than others, allowing everyone involved to perform in a way that can be expected of them. Elite players who have been socialized for a long time by having played in the youth activities of several prominent clubs and participated in exclusive tournaments have, in various ways, developed their game to align with what is currently valued by ice hockey clubs. However, deviations are made from this smooth matching. Choices are made unsuitable to the player or the team, where one or both sides may have difficulty adapting to the other.

In a full empirical investigation, it is required to examine the fields, positions, homologies, and strategies that teams, players, coaches, etc., take on the respective fields and the expressions of ways of playing hockey they represent. Such a project would also investigate the underlying structure of power relations between players, teams, and team managers and test whether it is the case that there are homologies between fields that enable special choices and exclude others for both players and representatives of the teams. However, this approach is still missing a vital component: the "what" and "when" of talent identification, which we will explore next.

3. From talent identification to player qualification via the pragmatic maxim

As shown above, much research addresses *how* talent is identified, such as which physical, physiological, and psychological metrics to use to predict future performance and determine who possesses talent. Meanwhile, the more sociologically oriented research focuses on talent identification and how talents are identified through various heuristics. This focus in research makes talent identification rather static and reified, which limits the view of the situational aspects of talent identification. Instead, this article turns to the variability of talent identification by posing the question of *when* talent is identified.

The concept of talent and its identification will be reexamined using the pragmatic maxim to understand better its scope and how it can be studied. Addressing the notion through this procedure shows how an answer to *what* talent is can be provided. The methodological intervention also emphasizes *when* talent is identified (to complement *how* it is identified).

The pragmatic maxim is a basis for American pragmatism and is used to clarify concepts. The maxim was formulated by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce believes that we should look for examples of the concept or idea, create a definition, and then apply the pragmatic maxim in the third step: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (Peirce, 1955, p. 31).

The interpretation of the maxim has been debated for a long time (Swedberg, 2015). William James is one scholar who has tried to simplify the maxim by emphasizing that the essence of the maxim is to find out the practical effects of an object in terms of what we can expect regarding experiences and reactions (Swedberg, 2015). Exploring all the practical consequences of talent—such as being selected to play in important games, receiving awards, or being approached by scouts—provides a pathway to develop a clearer understanding of the concept and make it more applicable and valuable for empirical research.[3]

The use of the maxim as a method is not about a reduction to empiricism. Instead, it can be understood as how we interpret the world and to do so more systematically by taking into account the practical effects that

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3 This focus also aligns with the idea that talent and its identification require social recognition for validation.

a conceptualization has: "The conception of something (an object) affects us (via a sign); and we (the interpretant) can conceptualize the practical effects of the original conception (a new object) – which in turn determines (via a new sign) our full meaning of the phenomenon (the new interpretant)." (Swedberg, 2015). The conceptualization can be opened up through the maxim for reflection and investigation by studying the practical effects of its use and the situations where "talent assessment" occurs.

The pragmatic maxim provides a criterion for the analysis of concepts like that of talent and talent identification.[4] The maxim enables the search for a variation of talent and talent identification by tracing the concepts' practical consequences in different cases, over time, and between situations (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014, p. 69–72). A historical investigation of talent assessment in multiple cases (and by different actors, such as coaches, scouts, etc.) is necessary to understand its meanings and manifestations. Moreover, talent identification varies between situations and the tests players are subjected to, necessitating their consideration as indications of talent. In other words, people have "become" talented in different ways and through different practices and manifestations throughout time, i.e., talent and talent identification are variable concepts through their practical consequences.

Hence, the central question for applying the pragmatic maxim revolves around tracing the practical consequences of who has talent, how talent is identified, and when talent is identified. By asking *when* talent is identified, one seeks variation and approaches the question of *what* talent is, in which talent is identified by the practical consequences of people's actions. Hence, a closer examination of traditional conceptions of talent and ways of studying talent and its identification can be put into question through this method.

It is difficult to believe that talent is solely assessed when coaches select players for highly selective elite teams. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between talent identification and player selection. To identify someone as talented does not necessarily lead to the person being preferred over other players. Not everyone who demonstrates potential for future excellence will be selected (or even considered talented) due to factors such as biases and practical constraints, for instance the availability of players or the coach's limited knowledge about certain individuals. Instead, talent emerges as the result of certain assessments, and individuals

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4 The pragmatic maxim can also be applied in coaching strategies and talent development, but a discussion of that is beyond the scope of this article.

may be labeled talented only after the facts, where selection to elite teams is but one practical consequence or means of being identified as talented (cf. Callon et al. 2002).

Qualification is a way to conceptualize the process of identifying talent in talent identification that, in its consequences, can make someone open for selection to perform at more advanced levels of the sport. Qualification is a dual process: a classification to determine the class something belongs to and an evaluation of the standing of this something (whether it is a good something) within this class (Kuipers & Janssen, 2020, p. 143). This qualification presumably entails a player's perceived ability to perform at an exceptional level in the future in accordance with some standard of evaluation. Such an evaluation is carried out by identifying and categorizing valuable qualities, determining how the player's qualities relate to those of other players, and may (or may not) lead to characterizing a player as eligible for selection. However, this is only a partial conception of talent in this context. Talent is something realized as a consequence of an evaluation, and it can, for example, manifest as a discourse in the form of a talent label, accompanied by narratives that evoke emotions regarding players and their achievements (see Kilger, 2017).

Shifting focus from talent to qualification makes a greater sensitivity to talent identification and player selection possible. The emphasis should be on understanding the situations and processes of how players are qualified in different ways and outcomes. This includes examining how the category and label of talent are constructed and empowered as assessment outcomes. In the study of player selection, it is important to investigate the relationship between various qualifications and how they contribute to the process of designating someone as talented and eligible for selection. This methodological approach broadens the scope of analysis to encompass the various factors and dynamics involved in identifying and designating talent, as well as player selection in sports, by considering their practical consequences.

From a pragmatic perspective, examining the qualifications of players for both their "talent" and their "selectability" involves practical "tests" or "trials" (e.g., the outcome of specific exercises, locker room talks, etc.) to demonstrate their qualities (cf. Callon et al., 2002). Moreover, the qualifications of individual players need to be studied for different teams at different levels, in different situations, and over time, and the grounds used to make legitimate selections of players, for example, with the assistance of Bourdieu's field analysis. Qualification is thus articulated within a prag-

matist framework and placed within a more dynamic, sensitive, and broader conceptual and methodological model than those suggested in previous research.

In Heinich's (2020) sociological account of valuation based on pragmatism, there are potentially three ways to qualify players and give them value that aligns with the previously identified talent identification methods. Qualification through "measurement" (and indirectly through comparison), "attachment," and "judgment" can contribute to what constitutes a talented player eligible for selection.

Qualification through comparison involves "translating" a player into something measurable, where quantification and evaluation often become central (cf. Callon et al., 2002). Therefore, it is about reducing the complexity of a player's actions to make them comparable (commensurable) and identifying comparable points (other players, achievements, etc.). Qualification can also make a player comparable by studying past results as a benchmark against which other groups or players are compared.

The qualification through a particular attachment can be linked to resonance (Rosa, 2019), indicating an undifferentiated relation between the assessor and a player's performance. It is about a special harmonious agreement between assessors and a performance that causes them to end up in a synchronous relationship (cf. Fürst, 2018). Drawing on Bourdieu (1996), one could again highlight the subjective experience of a homologous position among players, teams, and coaches (or other evaluators) in their respective fields, where choices and relationships occur naturally and without resistance.

Through judgments, the qualification can occur from common sense and expert opinions. It is important to consider how evaluators rely on their own and others' assessments of a player. Making a judgment about a player does not have to imply an attachment or comparison but be words that formulate an assessment of performance. This statement can come from artificial intelligence, where the assessment is based on opaque criteria but influenced by the trust in the technology and its ability to provide statements.

4. Conclusion

This text argues that much previous research has overlooked the questions of *what* talent is and *when* talent is identified. Answering these questions has implications for the definition and study of talent identification and, by extension, the selection of athletes. The text proposes that talent identification research needs to be broadened to account for the involved agents and their variability in terms of relative positions in social fields and the situational and historical context of qualifications. A broad range of qualifications needs to be considered, where not everyone is deemed talented or even considered in that manner. Furthermore, the natural connection between talent and being selected to perform at a more advanced level of the sport is not always straightforward. Moreover, "talent" is not merely an outcome of evaluation in various situations; it also serves as a label and narrative attached to an individual, used to promote and cultivate moods through stories about a player and their achievements. This article proposes that a potential direction for talent research involves adopting the broad approach suggested, which entails empirically studying situations where players are qualified and recognized as talented. One consequence of this recognition is their selection to perform at more advanced levels of the sport.

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