

## From Talent to High Performance: The view of coaches, players and club coordinators on the relevant factors in the development of a Basketball player

### Del Talento al Alto Rendimiento deportivo: El punto de vista de los jugadores, entrenadores y coordinadores del club en los factores relevantes en el desarrollo de un jugador de baloncesto

### Do Talento ao Alto Rendimento: A visão de treinadores, jogadores e coordenadores sobre os fatores relevantes no desenvolvimento de um jogador de basquetebol.

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**Abstract:** The main goal of this study was to identify a set of factors considered relevant by basketball experts in a young player's route to high performance. The impossibility of choosing one as the most preponderant factor comes from the complex interaction between the different areas that influence the long development path of athletes to sport expertise. Our sample consisted of 14 coaches (7 of men's level and 7 of youth level), 7 players and 7 club coordinators who were asked to give their view on the subject by means of an interview.

One of the main conclusions was the decisive influence of environmental factors, especially the family and coaches' influence, both as promoters of the beginning of the activity and as the maintenance in it. Psychological factors – athlete's work ethic and surpassing capacity – were also referred as having a great role on this issue. Technical, tactical and physical factors (in this order of importance) come as an asset to the young athlete.

Finally, we conclude that the training process should be defying and constantly adjusted to the athlete's needs, creating stimulus that allow the young player to develop strategies to read and understand of the game, as well as decision making processes. The context where the athlete is inserted, as well as the psychological aspects and knowledge of the game must be considered the most relevant factors.  
**Key-Words:** Basketball, Talent, High Performance, Performance Factors, Excellence.

**Resumen:** El objetivo principal de este estudio fue identificar un conjunto de factores considerados relevantes por los expertos de baloncesto en la ruta de un joven jugador de alto rendimiento. La imposibilidad de elegir uno como el factor más preponderante proviene de la compleja interacción entre las diferentes áreas que influyen en el camino de desarrollo a largo de los atletas a la experiencia deportiva. Nuestra muestra fue constituida por 14 entrenadores (7 del nivel de los hombres y el 7 de categoría juvenil), 7 jugadores y 7 coordinadores del club que proporcionaran su opinión sobre el tema por medio de una entrevista.

Una de las principales conclusiones fue la decisiva influencia de los factores ambientales, especialmente la influencia de la familia y entrenadores, ambos como promotores de la inicio de la actividad y como el mantenimiento en el mismo. Los factores psicológicos - ética de trabajo del atleta y la capacidad de superación - también fueron referidos como teniendo un gran papel en este tema. Los factores técnicos, tácticos y físicos (en este orden de importancia) son considerados un activo para el joven atleta.

Por último, llegamos a la conclusión de que el proceso de formación debe ser constantemente desafiante y ajustarse a las necesidades del atleta, debe proporcionar la creación de estímulos que permitan al joven jugador desarrollar estrategias para leer y entender del juego, así como los procesos de toma de decisiones. El contexto en el que se inserta el atleta, así como los aspectos psicológicos y conocimiento del juego se deben considerar los factores más relevantes.

**Palabras Clave:** Baloncesto, Talento, Alto Rendimiento, Factores De Rendimiento, Excelencia.

**Resumo:** O principal objetivo deste estudo foi identificar um conjunto de fatores considerados relevantes por especialistas de basquetebol no percurso de um jovem jogador para o alto rendimento. A impossibilidade de escolher um único fator como o mais preponderante advém da complexa interação entre as diversas áreas que influenciam o caminho de desenvolvimento de longo dos atletas à experiência esportiva. A nossa amostra foi constituída por 14 treinadores (7 de nível dos homens e 7 do nível da juventude), 7 jogadores e 7 coordenadores do clube que foram convidados a dar a sua opinião sobre o tema por meio de uma entrevista.

Uma das principais conclusões foi a influência decisiva de fatores ambientais, especialmente a influência da família e treinadores, ambos como promotores do início da atividade e quanto à manutenção na modalidade. Os fatores psicológicos - ética de trabalho do atleta e capacidade de superação - também foram referidos como tendo um grande papel nesta questão. Fatores técnicos, táticos e físicos (por esta ordem de importância) são considerados mais-valias para o jovem atleta.

Finalmente, podemos concluir que o processo de formação deve ser desafiante e constantemente ajustado às necessidades do atleta, criando es-

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tímulos que permitam ao jovem jogador desenvolver estratégias de leitura e compreensão do jogo, bem como os processos de tomada de decisão. O contexto em que o atleta está inserido, bem como os aspetos psicológicos

e conhecimento do jogo devem ser considerados os fatores mais relevantes. **Palavras-Chave:** Basquetebol, Talento, Alto Rendimento, Fatores De Desempenho, Excelência.

## Introduction

Scientific research has constantly been trying to find, in several domains, answers that allow for the improvement of the process of developing young athletes. With our study, we propose ourselves to analyse the complex phenomenon of High Level Sport, focusing on the developing process that allows athletes to reach such standard.

Basketball is a sport characterized by the demand of multiple abilities and physical capabilities, usually labelling a Basketball player as an Athlete. However, the concept of athlete is, many times, limited to the ability of jumping or running, leaving others (not less important) forgotten, like visual acuity or coordination (McCormick, 2008).

With that in mind, and considering the dynamic evolution of the basketball game and the scientific knowledge surrounding it, it was our goal to unveil and discuss which factors are, in today's modern basketball, considered crucial in the long term development of a basketball athlete. Our study was guided by a qualitative approach, with the use of interviews to gather current, specific, and profound knowledge on the theme by several active basketball experts (players, coaches and coordinators).

## Methodology

To gather the opinions of the different sport agents, we have used an in-depth and semi-structured interview, revealed as the most powerful tool for human understanding (Denzin, 2000). The development of the interview was made through different stages. First we consulted with experts in qualitative analysis and basketball experts which provided us with a first interview script. Later using a process of piloting, we applied the interview script to a coach, a player and a coordinator with the purpose of refining the script, understanding if it covered all the aspects considered in our study and if all the terms and questions were intelligible. Small changes were done to the script, and follow up questions were also prepared for some of the themes. The data analysis was conducted manually, and it followed the steps statement by Côté (1993): preparing data; creation of variables that could represent every dimension described on the literature; grouping common factors in categories; coding all the units created previously. Besides the qualitative analysis made of the answers a quantitative analysis was also used, by means of the total frequency by which each factor was mentioned and its percentual weight.

Our sample consisted of 14 coaches (7 of men's level and 7 of youth level), 7 players and 7 club coordinators who were

asked to give their view on the subject by means of an interview.

The subjects were selected accordingly to the non-probabilistic and intentional method (Marconi y Lakatos, 1985). To be part of the study, the individuals were filtered by criteria specific to each one of the groups.

### Men's Level Coaches (MLC):

- a) possess the maximum level of coaching (level III); b) at least 10 years of experience at the highest competitive level; c) having trained international players; d) having trained lower age groups.

### Youth Level Coaches (YLC):

- a) possess at least level II of coaching; b) at least 10 years of experience in youth teams; c) having trained international players;

### Players (PLA):

- a) have gone through the process of formation (10 years); b) at least 3 years of experience as a player at the highest competitive level nationally; c) possess any national title; d) having been an international player at men's level.

### Club coordinators (CCO):

- a) at least, 3 years of experience as a club coordinator; b) possess the maximum level of coaching - level III.

## Variables and Codification

Knowing that performance in Basketball is influenced by the interaction between different categories, it is important to define each one of them:

*Environmental (ENV)* – also defined as context by Sáenz-López, *et al.* (2005). Represent the surroundings where a player is involved and their interactions. According to Puig (1998) this is one of the factors that can influence the course of a player.

*Psychological (PSY)* – individual psychological aspects and interpersonal relationships, developed with sport's practice. To Matsudo (2003), these are important for an athlete's route to High Performance.

*Technical and Tactical skills (TEC / TAC)* – represent all the movements that help a player to solve various challenges of the sport (Sáenz-López et al. 2005.). The literature indicates the technical and tactical skills as the basis for development of sports training and, consequently, of the player.

*Physical attributes (PHY)* – defined as one of the factors with more influence in the development of a player and one that can facilitate the achievement of high levels of performance (Fields, 2003).

*Anthropometric factors (ANT)* – Translated as the data that defines the physical structure of the player they were revealed as the first and most important factors to be analyzed in what concerns to the identification and selection of talents (Sáenz-López, et al 2005, Matsudo, 2003).

## Results

### Main outcomes

As table 1 shows, the largest number of references from all the interviewed groups belongs to the environmental factors, followed by the psychological factors.

**Table 1.** Main outcomes of the study. Percentage by each variable was referred.

CATEGORIES	ENV	PSY	TEC	TAC	PHY	ANT
MLC	38%	20%	14%	12%	10%	6%
YLC	35%	25%	13%	10%	12%	5%
PLA	38%	24%	11%	12%	10%	6%
CCO	36%	18%	14%	9%	17%	6%
TOTAIS	37%	22%	13%	11%	12%	5%

### Analysis of distribution within categories

#### Environmental

As we can observe in table 2: Family, Coach and Team were the three most referred environmental factors by our sample.

**Table 2.** Percentage each environmental factor was referred by our sample.

Environmental Factors	%
Family	15,4
Coach	12,8
Team	11
Competitions	8,7
Club	7,7
Coaches Choices	7,2

Environmental Factors	%
Context	6,2
Work Conditions	5,3
Practice Quality	5,3
Early Specialization	2,9
Internal Completion	1,9
Opportunities	1,9

#### Psychological

As we can observe in table 3, Ambition, spirit of sacrifice and Work ethic, were the three most referred psychological factors by our sample.

**Table 3.** Percentage each psychological factor was referred by our sample.

Psychological Factor	%
Ambition	11,6
Spirit of Sacrifice	11,6
Work ethic	11,6
Willpower	9,2
Self - Confidence	7,9
Motivation	7,3
Compromise	7,3
Passion for the Sport	6,7
Mental Toughness	5,5
Desire to overcome oneself	5
Persistence	5,5
Attitude	4,9
Focus	4,9

#### Technical

As we can observe in table 4, overall technical skills, shooting and passing, were the three most referred technical factors by our sample.

**Table 4.** Percentage each Technical factor was referred by our sample.

Technical Factors	%
Overall Technical Skills	33
Shooting	20,4
Passing	18,1
Dribbling	16,5
Defensive Stance	5,5
Ball Handling	3,9

### Tactical

As we can observe in table 5, knowledge of the game, decision making, and reading the game, were the three most referred tactical factors by our sample.

**Table 5.** Percentage by each Tactical factor was referred by our sample.

Tactical Factors	%
Knowledge of the game	31,3
Decision Making	27,4
Reading the game	17,6
Understanding the game	7,8
Intelligence	6,8
Anticipation	5,8
Playing without the ball	2,9

### Physical

As we can observe in table 6, general physical capacity, coordination and speed, were the three most referred physical factors by our sample.

**Table 6.** Percentage by each physical factor was referred by our sample.

Physical Factors	%
General Physical capacity	15
Coordination	13,3
Speed	13,3
Endurance	13,3
Strength	12,5
Agility	9,1
Vertical Jump	9,1
Reaction Speed	5,8
Flexibility	5
Explosive Power	3,3

### Anthropometric

As we can observe in table 7, height, morphology and wingspan, were the three most referred anthropometric factors by our sample.

**Table 7.** Percentage by each Anthropometric factor was referred by our sample.

Anthropometric Factors	%
Height	43,1
Morphology	34,4
Wingspan	22,4

### Analysis of distribution within experts

Following are the presentation of the main outcomes regarding the factors that were specifically referred to by the different expert groups.

#### Men Level Coaches

As we can observe in table 8, MLC referred Family, Coach and Team as the most important factors in a players development to high performance.

**Table 8.** Percentage by each factor was referred by MLC.

Factors	%
Family	16,4
Coach	15
Team	12,8
Competitions	9,2
Technical Skills	8,5
Knowledge of the game	8,5
Club	7,8
Decision Making	7,1
Context	6,4

#### Youth Level Coaches

As we can observe in table 9, YLC referred the Coaches, Family, and Technical Skills as the most important factors in a players development to high performance.

**Table 9.** Percentage by each factor was referred by YLC.

Factors	%
Coach	14,1
Family	12,8
Technical Skills	11,4
Competitions	9,4
Team	9,4
Club	9,4
Work ethic	8,1
Knowledge of the game	7,4
Coaches choices	6,7
Practice Quality	6,7
Attitude	5,4

### Players

As we can observe in table 10, PLA referred Coaches, Team, and Family as the most important factors in a players development to high performance.

**Table 10.** Percentage by each factor was referred by PLA.

Factors	%
Coach	19,5
Team	14,9
Family	10,3
Friends	9,1
Training Conditions	9,1
Decision Making	9,1
Competitions	6,8
Ambition	6,8
Willpower	6,8

### Club Coordinator

As we can observe in table 11, CCO referred, Coach, Family and Coaches Choices as the most important factors in a players development to high performance.

Percentage by each factor was referred by CCO.

Factors	%
Coach	21,5
Family	13,8
Coaches choices	9,2
Context	7,4
Club	5,9
Willpower	7,4
Technical skills	10,4
Physical Capacities	9,2
Coordination	7,4
Training Conditions	6,1

### Discussion

Accordingly to Rees y Hardy (2000), the environment surrounding a player plays a decisive role in whether a player can or cannot play at high level.

Our study points the family as the major environmental factor in the development of a young basketball player, meeting Côté's study (1999). Even though Platonov (1998) says that high levels of efficiency can only be attained in favourable contexts, it is important to understand that there are some

players coming from less favourable social environments (disrupted or single-parent families or serious economic conditions) that can reach the high level. This is justifiable by the support they get from their coaches or by their ability of overtake obstacles. It is important to enhance that the family is considered one of the most important factor by the MLC as they believe it is the starting point for sports practice. As the athlete grows old and becomes more independent, this influence starts to decrease to give place to the coaches and peers' influence.

The coach's role is also highlighted, supporting studies like the ones from Holt y Dunn (2004) and Santos et al. (2013). It is vital to reinforce that the coach choices, particularly early specialization, can annihilate the player's potential, due to gaps in the development of the different technical fundamentals.

There are other factors highlighted in our results. The relationship with the teammates and homogeneity of the team as well as the internal (within the team) and external (championships) competitions will determine the need of the athlete to develop. Last but not least, the club also has a big impact: first, because it is its responsibility to choose the coaches; second, it is its function to provide the best training conditions possible; and third, because our sample believes that clubs with better quality in formation will create more development opportunities for their players, such as the opportunity to go to regional and national teams.

For Baker y Horton (2004), the psychological factors are also considered extremely important.

Ambition, spirit of sacrifice and work ethic were some of the most referred psychological factors by our sample, meeting Thomas' study (1994). The passion for the sport is vital as it is necessary to persist against all the demands of long term development, as Santos (2013) refers. Other factors as concentration, humbleness, self-confidence and persistency were highlighted by our sample. We found similarity with a study of Rose, Deschamps y Korsakas (2001) when they say that these factors are determinant in the ability of knowing how to handle the competition's stress.

The technical capacity of a player seems to play a big role in the development of a basketball player. As a matter of fact, the higher the technical level of a player is, the easier will be to solve the problems imposed by the game, as his/her repertoire will be bigger. The sample was unanimous in agreeing that the fundamentals (general technical skills – the most referred factor) are preponderant in the pathway to high performance. Some interviews gave us the outcome that the acquisition/perfection of a skill non-characteristic of the player's position can make the difference. Besides the basic fundamentals of the game (shooting, dribbling and passing) – which leads our study to encounter the conclusions of Trninić et al. (1999) - our sample has highlighted other factors like the relationship

with the ball, good defensive stance and ball reception. The triple threat position wasn't referred many times by our sample, but to Vaeyens et al. (2008) it is essential.

Meeting Lorenzo's study (2003), our research revealed that the two most referred factors were the knowledge of the game and decision making skills. To McCormick (2008), it is very important for a player to have a good capacity of decision making. The knowledge of the game includes the reading and understanding of the different situations and these two factors were also mentioned numerous times by our sample. Some of the interviewed coaches consider that reading is more important than understanding or vice-versa. As a matter of fact, when the processes of reading and understanding the game are developed, they take part in the decision making processes, giving the player more chances to reach high levels. Other factor considered by coaches is the capacity of anticipate actions, especially at speed, helping them to be more effective, meeting Abernethy et al. (2002) and Sánchez (2002) in their studies. Like in McCormick's study (2008), playing without the ball is also considered important, especially in what refers to spacing.

Physical qualities are essential for every athlete that wishes to be successful in Basketball. Therefore, the three most highlighted physical qualities were coordination, speed and endurance. It is important to clarify that, even though they are not considered essential in young ages (since it is possible to potentiate them during time through practice), possessing these capacities eases the development of a young player. Strength, agility and flexibility didn't deserve the same attention from our sample, but were mentioned as well. However, jumping wasn't a focus from our sample, which caught us by surprise since in NBA – considered as the Basketball highest level in the World – it is one quality of election. Lastly, explosive strength and reaction speed were also taken as important in the development of a young player, meeting Vaeyens et al. (2008).

It is consensual amongst our sample that anthropometric characteristics are not vital to reach high performance. However, if they are present in a player, they will help him to reach it, as most of our interviewed agents said. Height was the most referred factor.

Regarding the opinions of the experts it is clear that the importance of the Coach and the Family stands out being pointed out by every group of experts. The different roles family provide to athletes had already been highlighted by Côté (1999).

It is interesting to analyse the difference between the first two factors mentioned by MLC and YLC. The first, consider that the family is more important than the coach, while the second think the order of importance is the other way around. For us, this might be easily explained by the fact that Youth Level coaches live the formation process closely and

feel that their multidisciplinary role (friend, "father", instructor) influences the young people massively. On the other hand, MLC, due to the late contact with the players (probably in adulthood), focus their analysis in the importance of the family has during the first years of practice.

## Conclusions and Practical Implications

As previously mentioned, there is a complex interaction between the different factors that, in some way, interfere in the path to high performance. For that reason, we came across the tough task of defining one as the only and most important factor in that same path – common practice in most of the talent detection and selection programmes.

Through the analysis of 22 interviews of different agents, we've reached a group of key factors that should be present and developed in a young player.

The first aspect we can draw from the interviews concerns to the question "Is it possible to predict whether a young player will reach high performance or not?" Curiously, there isn't a consensus amongst our sample. We feel, as most of our interviewed agents do, that given the variety of factors interfering during the course, it is not possible to say with certainty that a player will reach excellence. However, it seems that is possible to predict if a player has favourable sociocultural, psychological, technical, tactical, physical and anthropometric conditions, that if potentiated will lead to excellence levels. Knowing that, it is the coaches' task to find the best way to develop them and adequate the training process to the needs and characteristics of every player.

The environment is, without question, the variable that has more influence in sports: starting with the place of birth, meeting the influences of family and friends and ending in the opportunities that the club or coach provide to the athlete. Regarding the role of parents, it is known that it changes in time: from leader and booster of sporting activity, to spectator and follower of the success (Côté, 1999).

In the psychological strand, it was possible to gather a group of factors that a player must have and develop: work ethic, commitment, willpower, humility, ambition and passion are essential to improve all the technical and tactical skills.

Regarding the technical skills, we've concluded that the most important are, also, the most basic ones – the fundamentals. In the case of Basketball, passing, dribbling and shooting are the main factors, but others like defensive stance are also referred.

The major part of our interviewed agents agrees that, in early stages, teaching the technique should be a priority. Not forgetting the tactic and physical capacities, it doesn't seem logic to teach the "when to do" if there wasn't a previous concern in teaching the "how".

Tactically speaking, we have realised that for our sample, more than memorise a glossary of set-plays, a basketball player needs to know the game, i.e. read it and understand what every situation brings for him/her and for the team. The capacity to make decisions at speed and anticipation are other vital characteristics to develop in a young basketball player.

The major part of our sample also defends that every player should learn how to play as a point-guard. Even though it is possible to predict the height of a player, it is important to develop in every young player abilities that are transferable to every other position in the court.

As previously said, our sample doesn't consider that the physical capacities need to be evident in young players, since it is possible to develop them. However, a Basketball player is, first of all, an athlete, and knowing that the physical capacities are a facilitating factor during formation stages and

a need in competition, it is possible to verify that the evolutionary trend makes the players more athletic every day. Therefore, coordination, vertical jump, speed and explosive strength are determinant to the success of a High Performance Basketball player.

Finally, for our sample, the anthropometric factors ceased to be an excluding factor for players. Being tall and having long limbs facilitates the acquisition of high levels of performance but not meeting these two requirements doesn't exclude any player. However, players who do not have favourable anthropometric levels, must be extraordinary in the other aspects that interfere with sports performance.

With such a broad view of the development of basketball players, it is clearly advisable for clubs and federations to implement a dynamic, systematic, holistic and individual developmental program.

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