

Recognition of talented children

Recommendations for Coaches



Background

The TALENT project emerges from a strategic collaboration between seven European countries, including Croatia, Italy, Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Spearheaded by the Centre of Excellence of Split-Dalmatia County (CI SDZ), this project brings together a diverse consortium of universities, non-governmental organisations, and network organisations. This partnership leverages the unique strengths and experiences of each member to address the multifaceted challenges faced by young athletes pursuing dual careers in sports and academics.

Initiated on December 1st, 2022, and set to span over 30 months, the TALENT project is designed to foster a comprehensive approach to talent identification and development. By incorporating advanced educational techniques and innovative sports science technologies, the project aims to create a supportive ecosystem that facilitates the harmonious growth of young talents in both their educational pursuits and athletic endeavours.

This multinational collaboration is not just a pooling of resources but a fusion of cultural perspectives and expertise, which enriches the project's approach and enhances its applicability across different socio-economic contexts. The synergy of this diverse consortium is anticipated to set new standards in the detection and nurturing of sports talents, offering a model that can be adapted by other regions around the world.

Purpose of the project

The primary goal of the TALENT project is to seamlessly integrate sports and education to support young athletes in managing dual careers effectively. This integration is crucial as the demands of maintaining high performance in both academics and athletics can place significant stress on young individuals, often leading to burnout or early dropout from one or both fields.

Objectives of the project

- **Development** of methodologies for early talent identification
- **Adaptation** of educational programmes to meet the needs of athletes
- **Establishment** of a supportive environment that involves coaches, educators, and families.

Purpose of the TALENT Recommendations

Through the developed online platform, these recommendations are targeting teachers, parents, coaches, sports clubs and decision makers to better understand what the needs of talented children are, in order to support their development and prevent drop-out from school or from sports.



Introduction

As a coach, you shape young athletes' athletic, personal and academic growth. Your support can make a significant difference in supporting children to balance their training with their education. This booklet provides insights on how to collaborate with teachers and parents, adjust training loads during critical academic periods, and encourage a long-term perspective on education and sports. By adopting a holistic approach, you can help young athletes achieve their full potential while preventing early dropout from either school or sport.

The TALENT project acknowledges that coaches are not just instructors but mentors who help young athletes navigate the pressures of competitive sports and academic commitments. This booklet provides evidence-based recommendations for recognising and nurturing young talent, building inclusive coaching environments, and fostering collaboration with schools, families, and policymakers. By implementing these approaches, you can contribute significantly to the holistic development of your athletes and ensure their success in both education and sports.

The role of coaches in the talent development process

Coaches are often the first to recognise an athlete's potential. Their observations during training sessions, matches, and informal interactions provide valuable insights into a player's abilities, mindset, and adaptability. Talent in sports does not merely refer to technical skill or physical attributes but includes cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, and a strong work ethic. A coach's role is to nurture these aspects holistically.

An athlete's potential is not always immediately evident. Some may show early signs of technical brilliance, while others display resilience, problem-solving skills, or leadership traits. Identifying and nurturing these qualities requires patience and a keen eye. Coaches must go beyond assessing immediate performance and consider an athlete's long-term development. This involves designing training sessions appropriate to individual needs, fostering intrinsic motivation, and encouraging self-reflection among athletes. In the talent identification process, biological age refers to the level of physical and physiological maturity of an individual, which can vary significantly among athletes of the same chronological age (the actual number of years since birth). Biological age is influenced by factors such as growth rate, hormonal development, and skeletal maturation, meaning that two athletes of the same chronological age can differ in strength, speed, endurance, and overall physical performance. Recognizing these differences is crucial in talent identification, as early or late maturers may have temporary advantages or disadvantages that do not necessarily reflect their long-term potential. A well-structured identification process considers biological age to ensure fair evaluation and long-term development strategies for young athletes.

Moreover, coaches play a crucial role in managing dual-career pathways, ensuring that talented young athletes do not have to choose between education and sports. A well-structured training regimen should support academic commitments rather than hinder them. Successful talent development requires a collaborative effort between coaches, educators, and parents. This means that a coach must actively engage with these stakeholders, ensuring that young athletes receive well-rounded support.

Identifying and supporting talent

Recognising talent requires a structured approach. A talented athlete does not only exhibit outstanding physical capabilities but also demonstrates strong cognitive and emotional attributes. These include quick decision-making under pressure, adaptability to different tactical situations, and perseverance in overcoming setbacks. Coaches must assess these aspects systematically and by doing so, understand that talent identification is a process and it can not be done at one point in time.

Some key methods for identifying and supporting talent include:

- A. Observation during training and competition:** Watch how athletes react under pressure, how they adapt to different tactical situations, and their ability to solve problems in the field.
- B. Assessing cognitive and emotional attributes:** Talent is not just physical. Athletes who show high resilience, motivation, and leadership qualities often have long-term potential.
- C. Encouraging self-reflection and goal setting:** Give athletes opportunities to evaluate their own performances and set improvement goals. This fosters independence and accountability.
- D. Using individualised assessments:** Every athlete has unique strengths. Regular one-on-one discussions and performance evaluations help tailor training to their needs.

- E. Providing structured feedback:** Feedback should be clear, constructive, and focus on both strengths and areas for improvement. Encouraging a growth mindset is key.

Feedback should be clear, constructive, and focused on both strengths and areas for improvement. Encouraging a growth mindset is key to helping talented students maximize their potential. According to Dweck (2014)¹, a growth mindset is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, learning, and persistence. When providing feedback, it is essential to emphasize progress and effort rather than just innate talent.

For example, instead of saying, "You are naturally talented at dribbling," a more effective approach would be, "Your dribbling skills have improved significantly because you've been practicing different techniques and applying them in game situations." This type of feedback reinforces the idea that ability is not fixed but can grow through dedication and effort.

Additionally, structured feedback should be specific and actionable. Instead of general praise like "Good job!", educators and coaches should provide targeted guidance, such as "Your passing accuracy has improved because you're positioning your body better before making a pass. Keep working on quick decision-making under pressure."

- F. Monitoring consistency and commitment:** Talent alone is not enough; the ability to consistently train, improve, and handle setbacks is equally important.

¹ A growth mindset is when students understand that their abilities can be developed," (Dweck, 2014).

A key aspect of talent recognition is individualised assessment. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all training method, coaches should take the time to evaluate each athlete's unique strengths and areas for improvement. This can be achieved through ongoing observation, one-on-one discussions, and performance analysis. Encouraging self-reflection is equally important. Athletes should be given opportunities to assess their own performances and set personal development goals. This fosters a growth mindset and encourages accountability.

Once talent is identified, the next step is structured talent development. Training should be designed in a way that nurtures both technical and mental skills. For instance, integrating game-based learning allows athletes to develop their tactical awareness naturally in a competitive setting. Providing regular, constructive feedback ensures that young athletes understand their progress and areas for improvement without feeling overwhelmed. Moreover, game-based learning aligns with self-determination theory, as it fosters intrinsic motivation by making training more enjoyable and meaningful. Athletes learn best when they are engaged in realistic and context-rich environments that promote decision-making under pressure. Studies have also suggested that game-based training leads to better retention of tactical concepts compared to traditional, drill-based methods. To ensure continuous improvement, game-based training should be complemented with regular, constructive feedback that helps young athletes understand their progress without feeling overwhelmed. This approach creates a positive learning environment that not only enhances technical skills but also fosters resilience, confidence, and game intelligence—key attributes for long-term talent development.

However, talent alone is not enough. Without proper support, young athletes may struggle with motivation, confidence, or balancing their dual careers. Coaches should implement goal-setting strategies to help athletes stay focused and motivated. This involves setting short-term, achievable goals that build towards larger milestones. Recognising and celebrating progress, no matter how small, keeps young athletes engaged and motivated.



Coaching for dual careers

The dual-career pathway is an essential aspect of a young athlete's development. A major challenge athletes face is time management, as they juggle academic responsibilities with demanding training schedules. Coaches must acknowledge these challenges and provide flexible training solutions that do not compromise an athlete's education.

Maintaining open communication with teachers and school administrators is key to successfully managing dual careers. Schools and sports clubs should work together to ensure that student-athletes receive the support they need. Coaches can advocate for flexible academic arrangements, such as rescheduling tests or allowing additional time for assignments. When athletes feel supported academically, they are more likely to perform well in both areas.

Another critical aspect of dual careers is psychological support. Many young athletes experience stress and anxiety due to high expectations from both their coaches and academic institutions. Coaches should encourage a healthy work-life balance, ensuring that athletes have time for recovery, social activities, and personal growth. Psychological resilience is just as important as physical endurance in sports.

Building an inclusive coaching environment

Inclusion in sports is vital for ensuring that every athlete, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background, or ability level, has the opportunity to thrive. Coaches must actively foster an environment where diversity is celebrated, and every athlete feels valued.

Creating an inclusive environment begins with adapting coaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse athletes. This may involve modifying training drills to accommodate different learning styles, ensuring that all team members are given equal opportunities to participate, and fostering a culture of mutual respect. Gender inclusivity is particularly important, as girls often face additional barriers in sports participation. Encouraging mixed gender training sessions and promoting female role models in coaching can help bridge this gap.

Another important aspect of inclusion is addressing discrimination and bullying. Coaches should set clear expectations regarding team conduct and enforce a zero-tolerance policy for any form of exclusion or mistreatment. Creating a safe space where athletes can express concerns without fear of repercussion is essential.



Supporting athletes' well-being

Athletes' well-being extends beyond physical fitness. Young athletes often experience significant pressure from competition, academics, and personal expectations. Coaches must adopt a holistic approach to well-being that includes mental health support, proper recovery protocols, and fostering a positive team culture. The positive development of athletes in general is influenced, implicitly by example and explicitly, for example, by organizing workshops in which skills in recognizing and managing emotions, communication skills, empathy, problem solving, teamwork and cohesiveness can be developed.

Some key aspects of supporting athletes' well-being include:

- A. Preventing burnout and overtraining:** Coaches must monitor athletes for signs of physical and mental exhaustion, ensuring that rest and recovery are integrated into training schedules.
- B. Providing mental health support:** Encouraging open discussions about mental health and creating a safe space for athletes to express concerns helps break stigmas and promotes emotional resilience.
- C. Balancing training and personal life:** Supporting young athletes in managing time for school, social activities, and rest is crucial for long-term success and personal development.

Collaboration with schools and parents

The role of a coach extends beyond the training ground. To ensure the success of young athletes, collaboration with schools and parents is essential. Establishing strong partnerships between schools and sports clubs allows for better scheduling coordination, ensures academic support, and creates an environment where athletes are not forced to choose between education and sports.

Communication with schools

Coaches should establish direct communication channels with schoolteachers and administrators to keep track of an athlete's academic progress and any challenges they may face. By understanding school expectations, coaches can adjust training schedules accordingly, ensuring that student-athletes do not fall behind academically.

It is also beneficial to arrange regular meetings between school representatives and club staff to discuss support strategies for dual-career athletes. This could involve adapting exam schedules for athletes participating in competitions or providing additional academic resources for student-athletes.



Engaging parents in the process

Parents play a significant role in shaping an athlete's mindset and balancing sports commitments with school responsibilities. Coaches should organise workshops or meetings to educate parents about the demands of a dual career and how they can best support their child. Parents should be encouraged to foster open communication with their children, helping them manage stress and maintain motivation in both sports and academics.

Implementing a support network

A structured support network consisting of coaches, teachers, and parents ensures that the athlete does not feel isolated. This network should:

- Provide mentorship opportunities, where experienced student-athletes or former athletes offer guidance.
- Offer academic support programmes, such as tutoring or flexible school timetables.
- Encourage mental well-being initiatives, where athletes are educated on stress management and self-care techniques.

If these partnerships are strongly developed, the likelihood of student-athletes thriving in both their academic and sporting careers increases. An integrated approach helps ensure that young athletes receive emotional, academic, and career support, allowing them to reach their full potential without compromising one aspect for another.

Conclusion

Coaches play an indispensable role in shaping young athletes' futures. They contribute to the holistic development of athletes by fostering talent, supporting dual careers, promoting inclusivity, and prioritizing well-being. Implementing structured training methodologies, collaborating with schools and parents, and ensuring mental resilience will empower young athletes to succeed in both sports and academics.

Further information can be found on the project's website

www.talent-edu.eu



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