

# Talent Development Environment in Nigeria: Athletes' Perceptions of Barriers, Opportunities and Facilitators

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**Abstract:** Environmental factors have been considered as critical to successful talent development in sports. The entire backgrounds of development including the home, school, community and the organizational culture in sport should provide consistent and coherent support for the developing champions if the goal of effective talent development is to be realised. This study explored the nature of talent development environment in Nigerian in order to uncover the barriers, opportunities and facilitators of effective talent development in the country. Eight successful national athletes were interviewed. Inductive analysis revealed the barriers (e.g. family barriers, finance, facilities, lack of regular competitions, issues with injury/rehabilitation), opportunities (e.g. luck, school sport, early senior participation) and facilitators of development (e.g. hard work, peer influence, coach-athlete relationship). It was suggested that the barriers be mitigated by encouraging the relevant parties (e.g. parents, governments) to promote an enabling environment for talent development in sport. Recommendation was made for further studies.

**Keywords:** Talent Development Environment, Barriers, Opportunities, Facilitators

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## 1. Introduction

Talent Development Environment (TDE) refers to the entire milieu from which young talented athletes mature to elite athletes including the athletes' immediate surroundings where both personal and athletic development evolve; the inter-relationship between these surroundings; the larger background in which the surroundings are embedded; and the organizational culture of the sports club [1]. [2] suggested that this type of environment comprises of three components a) milieu; b) individuals; and c) provisions. TDEs are directly linked to the achievement of expertise in sports [3], [4] and can be refined to aid the evolution of sporting potentials to elite success [5]. TDEs do not only relate with the sport environment such as training sessions and or sport clubs but also include the entire settings in which the child lives and grows [1]. For example, the influence of the family on talent development (TD) has been previously reported [6], [7], in fact, the home is deemed the access road to TD. According to

[8], parents build the foundation for TD by recognizing the natural abilities of the child, providing for early start, serving as talent scouts among other roles they play to bring the goal of TD to fruition.

Similarly, the role of the coach in talent development has been emphasized by previous studies [6], [9], [5]. Effective development requires quality coaching predicated on the right coach-athlete relationship, with clear understanding of personal characteristics [10], development related challenges [11] and environmental factors [12], [5] associated with TD. Also, the coach in collaboration with other key stakeholders (e.g. parents) should engender a holistic environment that provides a network of consistent and coherent support throughout the development process [5].

In terms of what constitutes an effective model for TDE, [13] underscored the importance of an integrated, holistic and systematic model involving long term aims and methods;

wide ranging coherent messages and support; emphasis on appropriate development as against focus on early success; as well as individualized and ongoing development. The final feature presented is particularly important in light of the dynamic and multidimensional nature of talent [14], [15], and thus, the need to provide every child with the opportunity to develop at his or her space without the risk of premature deselection.

It is important to mention that TDEs do not alone determine development outcomes, but that effective TDEs are capable of facilitating other factors of successful development. For example, [8] highlighted that environmental factors (e.g. the family) play central role in facilitating other factors of development. The 'other' factors have been highlighted in previous studies and include psychological characteristics [16], access to quality coaching [6], [17], deliberate practice [18], and motivation [19] among crucial factors of successful TD. Furthermore, research has emphasized that talent and talent development is culturally specific [20], and as such, understanding the socio-cultural context within which TD is pursued becomes an important factor of effective development.

To date, very little is known about the nature and process of TD in Nigeria [21]. Indications from sport related research (not TD/TDE) in the Nigerian context suggest that certain challenges exist that are capable of inhibiting the TD process. For example, it has been noted that sport development in Nigeria is challenged by a number of socio-cultural and economic issues including poverty, poor economy and corruption [22] [23]. Similarly, there is yet to be a formal pathway for TD in Nigeria [24], and so much is still to be done to engender a sustainable TD process in the country. Other problems identified with the Nigerian environment include lack of facilities, inconsistent government policies and poor implementation of policies [21].

However, Nigerian athletes and teams have regularly taken part in major international competitions including the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, World Championships and the FIFA World Cup with some success. Thus, the aim of the current study is to explore the nature of TDEs in the Nigerian context through qualitative investigation. Specifically, this exploratory investigation will examine the perceptions of successful Nigerian athletes' experiences of the barriers, opportunities and facilitators of TD development in Nigeria.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The criteria for inclusion in this study was that prospective participants have successfully developed their athletic career within the Nigerian environment, while to be "successful" in this case, athletes will have represented Nigeria in at least one Olympics and or the Commonwealth Games. Therefore, the sample included eight athletes who were part of the Nigerian national team at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in

Glasgow. Apart from taking part in the 2014 Commonwealth Games, three of the participants had also attended at least one Olympics while an additional two have taken part in the World Championships in Athletics. The sample comprised of five males and three females. Participants were aged between 18 and 35 years with the average age being 27 years.

### 2.2. Design

A qualitative methodology was adopted to gain in depth insight into the features of TDEs in Nigeria [25]. Semi-structured interviews made up of seven main questions were used to probe into personal experiences of national athletes on the subject matter. The interview guide explored features of TDEs and the process of TD in Nigeria, with focus on challenges and barriers to development, opportunities for TD as well as facilitators of successful TD. Questions were designed to extract open-ended responses from participants [26]. Two pilot interviews were conducted with national athletes, feedback from the pilot interviews were used to moderate the interview guide. Also, the researcher ensured that personal opinions did not bias responses from the interviewee [26] by making sure that questions were truly open-ended. Thus, the interviewer built rapport with participants to create comfort, and maintained impartial stance while probing responses from the athletes [27].

### 2.3. Procedures

An ethical approval was granted for the study by the Research Ethics and Governance Committee of Edinburgh Napier University, School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences. The researcher obtained email addresses of prospective participants from the Nigerian National Sports Council. Recruiting emails were sent to the athletes containing an information sheet that explained the nature and objective of the study, with assurance to protect their privacy and confidentiality through anonymization of data. Athletes who agreed to take part in the study signed a written informed consent form before they were interviewed. The main interview guide was sent to participants prior to the actual interviews to allow them familiarize themselves with the interview guide, and have enough time to ruminate on their responses to the questions [28]. All Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet waiting room (to avoid distractions) at the athletes' accommodation in the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. To ensure that the study did not interfere with the competitions, athletes were only interviewed after they have completed their events. All interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, all participants were asked the same questions to establish consistency with the study's objectives [26], however, probing questions were asked when necessary to enrich responses from participants.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Inductive analysis was adopted for the study including coding experience, inductive inference, and similarity

processes [29], following the procedures outlined by [30]. The results were sent to the athletes for stakeholders' check [26] so as to establish credibility of findings. Also, to ascertain the reliability of findings [31] other members of the research group were asked to code raw data quotes into raw data themes in 25% of the interviews, and then all the sub-themes were matched to the general-dimension themes. This process was followed independently by two members of the research group and later reviewed their analysis till full agreement was reached. Throughout the data analysis process, memos were written to document the thought process [32] and ensure that the most accurate conclusions were arrived at.

### 3. Results

Emerging themes from the inductive data analysis are discussed in this section. Quotes are used to allow the reader have an understanding of the milieu from which the themes emerged from the data.

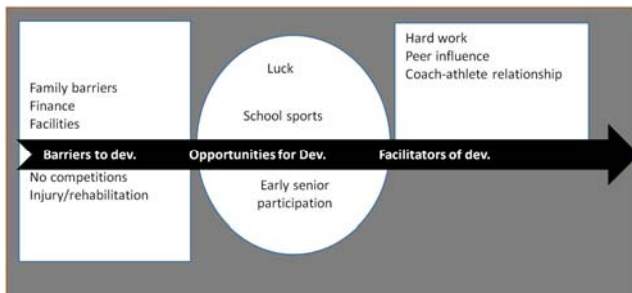


Figure 1. Barriers, opportunities and facilitators of talent dev. in Nigeria.

#### 3.1. Barriers to Talent Development

##### Family barrier

The data revealed that many Nigerian families placed barriers against participation in sports and talent development rather than being a source of support and encouragement to athletic development. Parents disallowed their children the chances to develop sporting careers for the fear that such engagement may reduce the child's commitment to his or her education. Thus, many potential athletes never got the opportunity to develop their potential. The few who fulfilled their athletic dreams had to find a way through the family barrier including taking part in sport without the consent of their parents.

*When my father continued to say no, I made up my mind that I was going to proceed without his consent. So I started dodging him to play, I would sneak out of the house on many occasions; when I returned home, I would lie about where I was and what I was doing.*

Participant 4

*...My dad wanted me to go to school and be serious with my studies. He considered sport as a distraction to education. But because I love the sport, I was going behind him to play.*

Participant 1

##### Financial barrier

Similarly, the data showed lack of financial support among setbacks to talent development in Nigeria. Since parents were not in support of talent development, athletes lacked financial backing from the family to pursue their development goals. Apart from the family, the sport establishment did not seem to provide enough financial support for developing athletes. Thus, athletes had funding issues including transportation, kits, feeding and accommodation both during training and sometimes in competitions.

*I was walking between three to four kilometres to training every day.... It was hard for me coping with the challenge of poverty, but there was nowhere I could go for help. My parents must not hear that I was doing sport in the first place, so there is no way I could seek financial assistance from them.*

Participant 5

*That competition was very bad; we spent about two months in camp, and when we came back there was no money, they only gave us \$150 which could not take me anywhere. After I transported myself from Lagos to Benin I was not having anything left on me.*

Participant 8

##### Lack of facilities

Also, participants revealed that there were no facilities to support talent development in Nigeria. Athletes trained on the streets without access to standard tracks, stadium, gym and other facilities to support effective development. Participants felt that athletes from other countries where these facilities are available have an advantage over them during international competitions.

*We also need to develop our facilities and we need supports for athletes, we don't have good stadium, no tracks, no gym, and yet we compete against athletes from other countries where these facilities are available.*

Participant 1

##### Lack of regular competitions

Furthermore, participants reported that there were no enough opportunities to compete. The lack of competition was espoused by poor organisation and administration of sport in Nigeria. For example, there was no club structure that would allow athletes from different clubs compete among themselves to benchmark achievement. One athlete described the lack of regular competition as a hindrance to effective development.

*We don't have good organisation in our sport, there is need for regular competitions so that developing athletes will have the opportunity to try their achievement as they grow. Like I said earlier, training without the opportunity to compete is discouraging.*

Participant 3

##### Lack of proper care for injured athletes

Likewise, the data indicated that athletes who get injured lacked the support they needed during treatment, and as such, many injured athletes did not make full recovery. Athletes who 'survived' injury were reported to have faced rehabilitation all alone, while many dropped out because they

did not receive proper attention during injury rehabilitation.

*The system does not care about injured athletes; they believe it is the responsibility of athletes to take care of their injuries. So, you are left alone to deal with the injury.*

*Participant 2*

*I'm grateful to God because many athletes have been led out of their sports through injuries because they could not make a full recovery*

*Participant 5*

### 3.2. Opportunities for Talent Development

*Luck*

The findings of this study attributed successful talent development in Nigeria (to some extent) to luck. The data revealed that athletes got access to a coach by luck, and so, many athletes who were not so lucky to get a coach played for fun till they eventually dropped out. The problem of lack of coaches is associated with the absence of a club structure and poor organisation in Nigerian sport. Also, athletes believed that it took luck to find support and encouragement, finance, and facilities for continuous training, otherwise, the dream of talent development would be a mirage. Therefore, luck was considered among the rare opportunities for talent development in the Nigerian context.

*I was lucky that a coach contacted me at the end of one annual inter-house sport competition and said I have the talents for running and that he was ready to help me develop my talent.*

*Participant 1*

*Except an athlete is lucky to find someone who is ready to support him/her, it will be tough to develop as an athlete. There are no facilities, not even stadium, no funding, and the government doesn't care.*

*Participant 3*

*School sports*

Also, the school offered an opportunity for talent development in sport through annual inter-house sports competition, which is a tradition in most Nigerian schools. All participants reported that they took part in school sport and that participation in school formed the foundation for their eventual development. For Nigerian athletes, the school is the only place where some semblance of organised sport was available.

*I began taking part in athletics since my time in primary school and secondary school. I represented my primary school in inter-school competitions and I also represented my secondary school in inter-school competitions. I have been running 4/4m and 4/1m since I was young and develop the love for athletics right from then.*

*Participant 1*

*I started while I was in the secondary school, we went to school sport festival where I won a silver medal, and from there I took part in the national trials where I qualified for the African Junior championship.*

*Participant 5*

*Early senior participation*

The data revealed that athletes who were lucky to be

identified by a coach through their participation in school sport had access to formal coaching and continuous development. Such athletes were exposed to national trials by their coaches where some got recruited to national teams based on good performance. And thus, they have early (after being identified) breakthrough to senior participation. For example, some of the participants reported that they began to participate in international competitions including world championship and the Commonwealth Games within two years of talent development.

*My progress to the national team happened within a short period. I did not have the kind of progression that you would expect; I did not run at the junior level, before I became a national athlete.*

*Participants 1*

*I began to focus on athletics in 2013, I made the world championship but unfortunately I was having an injury, which threw me out. I only returned early this year, so I can say I just focused on athletics this year (2014), and now I'm here for the Commonwealth.*

*Participant 5*

### 3.3. Facilitators of Talent Development

*Hard work*

The third general theme revealed by the data relate to the facilitators of successful talent development in sport in Nigeria. To start with, participants reported that hard work played a significant role on their development. Hard work ethics among Nigerian athletes was driven by the goal of becoming a champion in their chosen sport, with this goal, developing athletes were dedicated to training and determined to pursue the goal of successful development.

*I work very hard in my trainings, I have been dedicated and determined so that I can attain my goals. I believe there is a purpose for whatever I'm doing so I always put in my best.*

*Participant 1*

*Peer support*

Similarly, the findings revealed peer support among facilitators of successful talent development. Athletes who suffered neglect from the family compensated the lack of support from home with the relationship and support from fellow athletes. Apart from fellow developing athletes, participants also drew inspiration from successful athletes who had passed through the same experience to become successful in sports. Thus, peer support was seen as an important factor of development in the Nigerian context.

*I was already having friends around me who were doing the same thing as me, and are also passing through the same experience (i.e. lack of supports) and the feeling that I am not alone, kind of helped me. So, I had high hope that one day it would be better for me.*

*Participant 2*

*I listen to most of the successful athletes at the time and found out they had gone through similar experience growing up, and that nobody supported them until they broke through to the stage.*

*Participant 5**Coach-athlete relationship*

Findings of this study revealed a strong relationship between athletes and their coaches. Beyond the normal coach-athlete relationship where the coach provides technical and tactical support for development, participants reported that coaches played other roles including offering the support that family should have provided. Thus, the coach was seen as a father away from home.

*I have a father-and-son relationship with the coach, so he took interest in me and would always tell me what I was doing right or wrong.*

*Participant 6*

*...My coach would support me at all times and he was filling that gap that my parents' disapproval caused. My coach gave me money, buy me kits and at some points he accommodated me.*

*Participant 1*

*I see my coach as a friend, because he is very interested in whatever I'm going through. If there is any issue bothering me, he is always sharing it with me, and that is why he understands me so well...my coach would put my training on hold to allow me deal with personal issues and not compound them with hard training sessions.*

*Participant 2*

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to appraise the nature of talent development environments in Nigeria by exploring athletes' experiences of the barriers, opportunities and facilitators of talent development in sports. The findings of this study are in agreement with the extant literature on the importance of TDEs, and influence of environmental as well as socio-cultural factors on TD [6], [7], [13]. Many of the key issues on TD such as the role of the family [7], coach [6], [33], [17], and environmental factors [13] were buttressed by the current findings. The findings were divergent from previous research on the crucial roles of parents in creating opportunities for children's involvement in sport [34], [8] because participants did not get support from their parents but still became successful in their sports. However, the current findings revealed a unique trend in the Nigeria context in which parents were reported to constitute a barrier to TD. Most Nigerian parents disallowed their children from taking part in TD due to fears that such engagement would negatively impact education of the child. Perhaps, poor organisation of sport [35] and lack of formal pathway for TD as well as the conspicuous absence of club structure may have created unimpressive outlook for athletic development to parents. If these issues are addressed, parent may develop confidence in the TD process.

Other barriers identified with TDEs in Nigeria are connected to the fact that parents do not support TD and the lack of adequate government investment in sport [22], [36], [37], [38]. For instance, the findings showed that athletes suffered lack of financial support and access to facilities

required for effective development. In both cases, parental support and adequate government investments would reduce the challenges faced by developing athletes.

Furthermore, the effect of luck on TD has been previously reported e.g. [39]. Research has described four categories of luck which are relevant to this discussion including resultant luck-where the outcome of one's actions are affected by luck; circumstantial luck-where luck results from the circumstances of one's action; constitutive luck- where the personality of an individual is affected by luck; and antecedent causal luck-where antecedent circumstances produce luck [40], [41]. The current findings showed that luck played a key role in TDEs in the Nigerian context, especially, resultant luck, circumstantial luck and antecedent causal luck were reported by Nigerian athletes. Also, schools provided an opportunity for athletes to engage in sporting activities. For many athletes, school sport provided a semblance of organised sport and strengthened athletes' love for sport. However, certain issues affect the effectiveness of school sport including poor infrastructure, lack of physical education teachers and implementation of school sport policies [42], [43], [44], that need to be addressed before school sport can reliably provide a safe haven for TD in Nigeria.

Another revelation from the current study is that Nigerian athletes achieved elite performance earlier than previously stipulated in other cultures. For instance, research has specified that it took ten years or more of deliberate practice to achieve elite performance [18], [45], whereas, participants in the current study reported that it took about two years of 'formal training' to reach elite level performance (i.e. The Commonwealth Games). However, it is important to note that many Nigerian athletes engaged in their sports informally before they got noticed by a coach, so it may be that such informal engagement coupled with the formal training to aid elite performance, in which case, there is support for deliberate play [46]. Nonetheless, this finding supports previous suggestion that due attention be given to the culturally specific nature of talent development [20] because TDEs differ from one to another.

Finally, the current finding agreed with previous studies that hard work, peer influence and coaches' support were facilitators of successful talent development [47], [13], [7], [48]. However, certain functions were ascribed to the coach besides coaches' professional responsibilities [49], for instance, Nigerian coaches were reported to assume parental responsibilities because athletes' parents would not provide the support needed for development. Therefore, the coach is one of the most critical factors of successful development in Nigeria.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has unearthed some of the characteristics of TDEs in Nigeria, which hitherto have been scarce in the talent development literature. However, readers are advised to exercise caution in the interpretation of the findings in the

light of some limitations inherent in the study. For example, the sample size is small (as would be expected of a qualitative investigation) and so there is need for retrains in generalising the results. Also, the study only presents the account of one of the stakeholders' group (i.e. athletes), thus it is important to consider the opinions of others such as coaches and parents, because triangulating method have reportedly added value to previous TID studies [50], [13], [51]. Therefore, there is need for further studies, particularly those considering the roles of coaches and parents in TD from the Nigerian environment.

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