# *Exploring talent identification in Australian Rules Football: the nuances of the athlete recruitment process*

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# Exploring Talent Identification in Australian Rules Football: The Nuances of the Athlete Recruitment Process

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## Abstract

The process of talent identification and recruitment is a key element of the elite athlete talent pathway. As such, it is important to understand the information and specific processes used by expert recruiters to inform talent identification decisions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of talent identifiers in relation to their conceptions of talent and the information they collect and interpret to inform their talent identification decisions. Participating in the study were 13 heads of recruitment at elite Australian Football League clubs. They were deemed experts in their field and were responsible for the selection and recruitment of players at their respective clubs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via teleconferencing, with thematic analysis used to identify key themes. Thematic analysis of interview data generated two first order themes: (1) Understanding Talent and (2) Talent Identification Process. Four second order themes emerged from the data: (1a) Defining Talent, (1b) Athlete Attributes, (2a) Talent List Development, and( 2b) Recruiter Tasks. From these second order themes, 12 associated third order themes were produced (e.g., projecting growth/athlete potential, initial identification process, refining the list, and the final decision). In particular, the findings highlight how the recruiters assess talent based on game performance and athlete intent (i.e., “giving 100%”), rather than performance at physical testing sessions, and the psychological profile of the athletes. Overall, the findings emphasize the complexity associated with elite-level talent identification and provide insight for practitioners and researchers aiming to understand and explain the talent identification process.

## Keywords

Elite performance, scouting, talent prediction, talent selection, expertise

## Introduction

Talent identification is the process of making informed decisions regarding the selection of the most promising athletes with the potential to excel as an elite senior athlete (Baker, et al., 2019; Larkin & O’Connor, 2017; Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Miller et al., 2015). From a theoretical perspective, talent may be defined as an individual with a special, natural ability, with the capacity for success (Brown, 2002). Talent is expressed through a combination of natural and task-specific abilities in

a particular domain, whereby the individual is seen as among the top 10% of their age-related peers (Gagné, 2000). More recently, researchers have extended the definition of talent to be more multi-faceted, whereby talent is not only innate but involves a multitude of skills (i.e., technical, tactical, physical and psychological). Furthermore, these skills evolve in a non-linear manner over time, and can vary for individuals due to biological (e.g., gene expression) and environmental (e.g., cultural; social) factors (Baker et al., 2019; Den Hartigh et al., 2018). While these perspectives provide some indication of the academic knowledge related to talent, there is still limited understanding of how practitioners working within the talent identification and talent development process understand, conceptualize, and define talent.

Due to the interactions among multidimensional performance factors including physical, physiological, technical, tactical, psychological, and sociological influences, talent identification decision-making is a complex process (Güllich, 2014; Hoare & Warr, 2000; Reeves et al., 2018; Unnithan et al., 2012). Adding to this complexity is how talent identifiers (i.e., coaches, scouts, recruiters) are required to observe and analyze youth athletes' current levels of performance. These opinions are then used to predict the athletes' potential growth and future domain-specific levels of performance (Johansson & Fahlén, 2017). Previous investigations in Australian Rules Football (i.e., Australian Football) (Burgess et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2015) and other invasion sports (Höner & Votteler, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2016) have assessed factors that contribute to the talent identification process. A key step in developing our understanding of the process is engaging key stakeholders, such as recruitment staff, responsible for identifying and selecting talented athletes (Bergkamp et al., 2021; Johansson, & Fahlén, 2017; Larkin & O'Connor, 2017; MacMahon et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2019). This perspective has been called for in the literature, with Larkin and Reeves (2018) highlighting the need for talent identification research to understand the processes, observations, and perceptions of recruiters when making talent identification decisions. Therefore, this study aimed to understand the specific processes associated with the collection and interpretation of information to inform talent identification decisions.

To understand talent identification in Australian Football, Larkin and colleagues (2020) sought to describe the role of recruiters and what information they use when making recruitment decisions. Their findings demonstrated that to make an informed talent identification decision elite-level Australian Football recruiters consider a variety of interdependent attributes, such as technical, tactical, physiological, psychological, perceptual-cognitive, and game-related performance. Further, these decisions are underpinned by personal talent identification philosophy, club philosophy, player needs and previous experience of making recruitment decisions on players (either positive, selecting an exceptional talent; or negative, selecting a player who did not reach the recruiters perceived potential). While the results improve our understanding of the information used in the talent identification decision-making process of elite Australian Football recruiters, it is still (relatively) unclear how this information is gathered and how the specific processes are used by recruiters to inform these decisions.

As the identification and development of talent in any sport is significant (Reeves & Roberts, 2020), Australian Football researchers have attempted to bridge the gap between research knowledge and recruiters' applied practice. For example, MacMahon and colleagues (2019) developed a preliminary model for understanding factors that influence recruitment in the Australian Football League (AFL). The model identified four key factors: (1) recruiter background, (2) recruiter attributes (i.e., passion, patience, work ethic, adaptability), (3) recruiter understanding of team needs, and (4) recruiter-coach relationship. Their findings highlighted that the athlete recruitment decision-making process is based on intuition and deliberation and is influenced by the recruiter's relationship with the head coach. Such findings are similar to those from investigations in other sports (e.g., Lath et al., 2021; Reeves et al., 2019). Nevertheless, while previous studies have identified the decision-making process of recruiters

as being crucial to understand (Bergkamp et al., 2021; Larkin & O'Connor, 2017; Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Reeves et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2019), there remains limited understanding of how expert Australian Football recruiters make talent identification decisions, including how they gather, interpret, and process talent information. Further, there has been limited to no detailed descriptions of the tasks expert recruiters undertake during the talent identification process.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a more detailed understanding of the practices and processes associated with elite level Australian Football talent identification and potentially to inform both theoretical and applied talent identification practices. This will be achieved by engaging with expert Australian Football recruiters responsible for the talent identification of elite youth AFL players. Discussions with expert recruiters will be used in an attempt to determine what the recruiters perceive as talent, the specific information they gather, and how they collect and interpret this information to inform their talent identification decisions. It is believed this will provide a more detailed understanding of the practices and processes associated with elite level Australian Football talent identification, and potentially inform both theoretical and applied talent identification practices.

## Methods

### Design

This was a qualitative study, with data collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study protocol was approved by Victoria University's Human Research Ethics Committee (REF: HRE20-211). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

### Setting

The study was conducted across 13 elite AFL clubs, the highest level of professional Australian Football competition in the world. Teams were distributed across all five Australian states with professional Australian Football teams.

### Sampling and Participants

We adopted a non-probability purposive sampling strategy that focused on the 18 Heads of Recruitment (HOR) at all AFL clubs. These individuals lead the selection and recruitment process of players during the player draft. Consequently, these individuals fulfil an integral role in the talent selection and recruitment process.

All potential participants (n = 18) were contacted via email regarding involvement in the study. In total, 14 responded and agreed to participate, though one participant withdrew prior to data collection commencing. Participants were male, aged 36 to 64 years old ($M = 47.8 \pm 10.3$), with 3 to 15 years of experience in their current role ($M = 8.6 \pm 4.3$), and 11 to 50 years of experience ($M = 23.6 \pm 10.5$) being involved in Australian Football at the elite level.

### Procedure

The authors contacted all potential participants via email. Following a returned response, an interview time was scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Due to the geographical spread of participants and the impact of COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions, it was necessary for data collection to be conducted via teleconferencing rather than face-to-face. As such, the videoconferencing platform, Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc., San Jose, California) was selected for use as this platform offers benefits to both researchers and participants (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019).

The interview schedule was created inductively, providing clarity on the topics to be covered while also offering flexibility in the questioning (Patton, 2002). The interview had three main foci, which emanated from previous literature in the talent identification area (Larkin et al., 2020; MacMahon et al., 2019). The three areas of focus were (1) understanding talent (e.g., how would you define talent from an AFL perspective?); (2) recruiting processes (e.g., when identifying talented players, what was the general process you and the recruiting team did to monitor the players?); and (3) factors which influence talent identification decisions (e.g., if two players are of similar abilities/potential, what are the key factors in selecting one player over another?). All participants were provided with the interview schedule prior to

the interview and encouraged to review the questions and make notes that might help them respond to the interview questions. All interview audio was recorded using the record function available on the Zoom platform. This recording was automatically saved to a secure server and was available only to the lead researcher. Interviews lasted between 38 and 62 minutes (M = 50.5 ± 6.5).

### Data Analysis

All data were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for Mac (Release 1.3.2) and subjected to constant comparative analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Data analysis began, adopting open and axial coding, while data collection was ongoing.

Open coding was adopted to make sense of concepts and their associated properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with data disassembled, during this process, enabling consideration of similarities and differences and for concept development to begin. Open coding was undertaken by two researchers (NB and AK) independently of each other. Once each had completely analyzed the data set, they brought their own discrete pieces of data and associated labels together and explored similarities and differences between their interpretations (Mathison, 2005). This peer debriefing process was the first step in ensuring that credibility was constant to our analysis. Following discussion between the two researchers (NB and AK), their agreed-upon interpretation of the data codes was presented to the rest of the research team. This enabled further questioning and expanded discussion of data interpretation through an extended peer-briefing process. In undertaking this step, we sought to ensure credibility further and provide dependability in our analysis while simultaneously allowing the axial coding process to begin. Here connections and relationships between data were established (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The axial coding process enabled data reassembly and allowed for better, more meaningful, and stronger descriptions of the talent pathway in the AFL. In undertaking such a comprehensive data analysis process, involving all members of the research team, it was possible to ensure a high degree of rigor.

## Findings & Discussion

Data analysis generated two higher order themes (HOTs): (1) Understanding Talent and (2) Talent Identification Process. Four second order themes emerged from the data: (1a) Defining Talent, (1b) Athlete Attributes, (2a) Talent List Development, and (2b) Recruiter Tasks. From these second order themes, 12 associated lower order themes were produced (see Figure 1). Findings and discussion are structured to provide an integrated and detailed description of the HOTs by incorporating the second- and third order themes into this discussion.

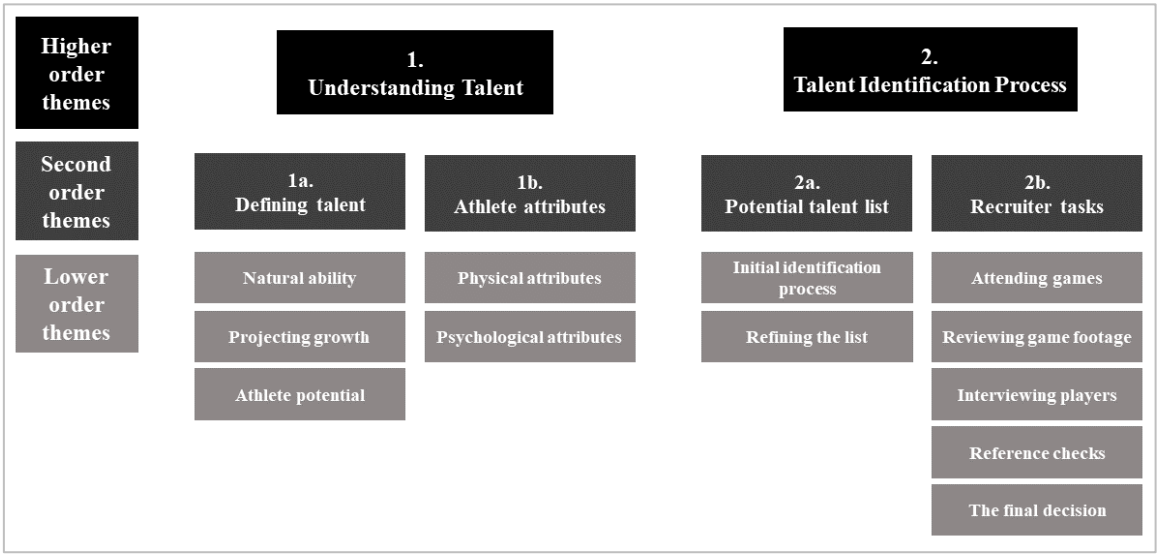


**Figure 1.** Schematic of the higher order, second order. and lower order themes

## Understanding Talent

There have long been contentious issues surrounding the terminology associated with talent in sport (McAuley et al., 2021). The second order theme Defining Talent (1a) was generated from the data and highlighted how participants understood, made sense of, and then operationalized the term talent. This theme outlined expert recruiters' perceptions, beliefs, and personal definition for talent, and in particular elite Australian Football talent. There was a high level of consistency between the participants, with all of them aligning their definitions with the key terms from the traditional academic definition of talent (Brown, 2002, Gagné, 2000; Howe et al., 1998). This was explored through the third order theme Natural Ability, whereby the participants highlighted that they believed talent was a *"*natural, innate ability to have an impact on the game*"* (Participant 6), with the "ability to perform skills naturally through practice and time in the game*"* (Participant 5). Furthermore, participants built on this by acknowledging an athletes' need to be competent in domain-specific skills, requiring *"*specific skills and being able to execute those skills under the pressure of a game situation*"* (Participant 1). While this may form the foundation of their knowledge and provide an example of a more traditional definition of talent, the participants did acknowledge, while not specifically, the more modern definitions, suggesting "[T]alent is a multi-faceted thing. Because you're not only talking about physical, you're talking about mental and the ability to be able to persevere and have grit and determination" (Participant 12). It should be highlighted though, that the more modern definitions of talent do not consider natural ability as a key element of talent (Davids & Baker, 2007). While the expert recruiters within our study understand the definitions of talent (Baker et al., 2019; Brown, 2002, Den Hartigh et al., 2018; Gagné, 2000; Howe et al., 1998), they have manipulated these definitions to generate their personal understanding of the talent identification process.

A key role, identified by the recruiters, was to understand the athletes and make informed decisions on their potential ability. This process has been defined in the literature as the process where individuals with domain-specific expertise (i.e., coaches, scouts, recruiters) view and interpret youth athlete's current levels of performance to make predictions on their future domain-specific levels of performance (Johansson & Fahlén, 2017). The participants in the current study acknowledged their perceived importance of this process, which is described in the third order themes Projecting Growth/Athlete Potential. Participants highlighted how a key function of their role is to understand the athletes and making informed predictions on their potential ability; e.g., *"*I always believe that the first thing you have to identify is are they good enough? Can you see them making it in the AFL? Whether it's superstar or whether it's role player, do they have the tools that you can see them forging a career? If they hit that baseline, then they're on a [watch] list" (Participant 6). However, evidentially, this decision-making appears to be largely reliant on subjective opinion and philosophy (Den Harigh et al., 2018; Johnston & Baker, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019).

From this point, the participants also considered the potential for growth based on the athlete's previous experiences and opportunities; e.g., "We treat each player based on their own set of circumstances, trying to take into account what sort of development they have had already" (Participant 5). However, all participants acknowledged that while they are making predictions on player's potential, they need to be pragmatic and consider how their development may track if they are put within an elite high-performance training system; e.g., "There's no perfect players, and let's think about what they can do and what we can fix, or at least what we can work around, in terms of their flaws or their gaps" (Participant 2). This supports the commonly accepted notions of talent identification suggested as being the process of making informed decisions based on current levels of performance in order to select the most promising athletes with the potential to excel as an elite senior athlete (Baker et al., 2019; Larkin & O'Connor, 2017; Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Miller et al., 2015).

With respect to talent, participants discussed some of the key attributes they consider important when identifying and understanding talent within the second order theme Athlete Attributes (1b). The third order theme Physical Attributes highlighted this, with the participants indicating elite players need to have the right physical attributes to step up to the AFL level; e.g., "You've got to have the right physical attributes. There's plenty of kids running around the South Australian National Football League and the West Australian Football League and the NAB Leagues (Victorian Youth state league) that are multiple possession winners and all these sorts of things, but they just physically won't have the attributes to be able to get to the next level" (Participant 8). This has been highlighted by a recent longitudinal study examining AFL Draft combine performance data where it was found players selected to attend this combine are of a homogenous body-type group (Larkin et al., 2021). However, while physical attributes are identified as an important consideration by the recruiters, all participants indicated this information comes from game performance rather than isolated testing conducted at the AFL Draft combine; e.g., "I am going with someone who plays quick, not tests quick" (Participant 10). While the "coach's eye" has been advocated as instrumental within talent identification (Grossmann & Lames, 2015; Musculus & Lobinger, 2018), previous reports have supported the potential error associated with using this method in isolation. Instead, they highlight the benefit of using both objective and subjective data in conjunction throughout the talent identification process (Dugdale et al., 2020; Höner et al., 2021).

This finding also highlights that, within an applied setting, practitioners are more likely to value information gathered from representative assessments, such as field-based assessments and match-play, compared to isolated testing (Bonney et al., 2019). This aligns with an ecological dynamic perspective whereby representative assessments are tasks which are closely linked to the performance context, the skills, or actions that take place (Krause et al., 2019). The benefit of more representative assessments is the ability to couple perception and action processes with the important informational characteristics and constraints on movement characteristics synonymous with the competitive environment (Pinder et al., 2011; Pinder et al., 2015). Therefore, for recruiters, there is the ability to observe and assess athlete performance as there is an associated functionality (i.e., the degree to which a player can use the same informational sources present during competition) and action fidelity (i.e., the degree to which a player's movements replicate competition) of the assessment environment (Pinder et al., 2011; Stoffregen et al., 2003).

While the expert recruiters highlighted the importance of more representative assessments, they did highlight what information they can gather from isolated physical testing performance data. In these assessments, the recruiters indicated they are looking more at the intent of the athlete, rather than the specific performance value; e.g., "When they're doing the two-kilometre time trial, how did they go about it? Do they get up the front and have a real crack at it, or do they immediately drop to the back and cruise around and then sprint the last 200 meters? Yeah, good on you champ, you had plenty in the tank, but why didn't you have a crack much earlier?" (Participant 3). This highlights that while the physical performance is important, a key aspect the recruiters are interested in is the intent and desire of the athletes. This is further demonstrated in the third order theme Psychological Attributes. When reflecting on the selection of athletes for AFL clubs lists, a key element for non-selections (players not picked to play at the elite level) was the perceived psychological make-up of the athlete, rather than the physical or technical performance; e.g., *"*Look, why didn't this player make it (onto an elite team list)?" It's very rarely because he wasn't athletic enough or he wasn't talented enough... It purely came down to the mind-set, the character of the player. Not every time, but in the vast majority this is the case" (Participant 12). This is further reinforced when the elite recruiters indicated that their personal psychological assessment of the athletes can influence marginal selection decisions; e.g., "If

you're splitting hairs between one or the other, for me, it's who's the most driven and the most resilient, because they're the ones who'll make it" (Participant 6), with the recruiters highlighting "competitiveness and the courage side is vital" (Participant 4) for a player to be selected for an AFL club. In addition to the commitment of the athletes, the recruiters emphasized the need to understand the athlete's psychological profile to determine whether they can adjust to the demands placed on them in a senior professional sporting environment; e.g., "Will he be able to adapt in a professional environment? Because there's so many elite players out there that are capable of playing AFL, but to be able to come into the system and survive in the system, that cuts the wheat from the chaff" (Participant 9). To inform these decisions, recruiters use the interview process and the psychological assessments on the athletes that the AFL conducts and provides them with; e.g., "The interviews and psych assessments provide us with information as a bit of a predictor to how a player might behave or need to be treated in our environment" (Participant 13). These findings are of interest as the participants acknowledge the importance of athlete psychological attributes in the talent identification process.

While a vast majority of researchers have emphasized the importance of technical, tactical, and physical skills for predicting athlete performance within the talent identification process (Johnston et al., 2018; Joseph et al.,, 2021; Tredrea et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2020), the current findings appear to prioritize the importance of player interviews and psychological assessments. A focus on the psychological attributes of talented and potentially talented athletes has been posited as important and typically undertaken within elite and development environments (e.g., Dohme et al., 2019). Within the talent identification process, psychological attributes have also been emphasized as important in studies within soccer (Reeves et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019), though exactly how psychological attributes are assessed, typically through "the coaches' eye," remains unknown. Moreover, the adoption and focus on using individual interviews may suggest there is a difference between research and applied practice in relation to talent identification.

Overall, the key messages from the higher order theme, Understanding Talent, is how Australian Football recruiters comprehend and assess talent. While they consider talent as a natural ability, a key component for them is understanding athlete growth and potential and using this to inform talent identification decisions. The information to inform these decisions is based on representative assessments coupled with understanding the individuals' psychological attributes. Therefore, there is scope for researchers to investigate and consider what specific attributes and assessment techniques expert recruiters and scouts value from a talent identification perspective to understand whether the specific attributes and methods are accurate enough to assess these skills.

### Talent Identification Process

While researchers have developed an understanding for the factors that may influence talent identification and development (Den Hartigh et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2018; Murr et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016), there has been limited exploration of the specific identification process in relation to the tasks undertaken by talent identifiers. Building upon the understanding of talent, recruiters highlighted the processes associated with identifying Australian Football talent and how they developed the list of players under consideration of being selected in the second order theme, Potential Talent List (2a). During the talent identification process, the recruiters highlighted how they develop a list of athletes, with the third order theme, Initial Identification Process, highlighting when players are initially scouted as potential senior Australian Football League players. The initial identification highlights how the players are identified and how the recruiters over time build a profile of the player to inform their decisions; e.g., "First part is we'll work out can the kid play? Has he got the physical attributes to play? Then we will

build more of a profile. What are his mental attributes like? Background?" (Participant 1). The initial stages of seeing whether a player can play or not is during the Under 16 National Championships, with recruiters highlighting the importance of this competition in the identification process; e.g., "Under 16 National Championships is the first main competition where you just see the best. It is our first real look at a lot of the talent" (Participant 5). Interestingly, this highlights how the identification of potential talent in Australian Football begins much later (i.e., U16) when compared to other sports, such as soccer, where identification often begins before adolescence (Larkin & Reeves, 2018). The reason for this later scouting process is due to the AFL age restrictions on players entering the elite senior competition, which is currently set at 18 years of age (Haycraft et al., 2018). While participants indicated they could start monitoring players earlier in their development, all acknowledged that this may not be the best use of their resources.

From the Under 16 National Championships, players at the age of 17 enter a state-based U19 competition. In this competition, players are labeled as top (i.e., U19 & U18 players) and bottom (i.e., U17 players) age players. Therefore, heading into the state-based competition, recruiters develop a talent board, which includes the names of players identified as talented at the National Championships, and continually monitor them throughout their bottom ages; e.g., "From their bottom age in, we have a list of players, just naturally that we would have because you've got one of the staff who is looking at players at 16 and 17 years of age. So we'd already have a list of those big initial names" (Participant 8).

Once the list of talent is identified, there is the continual process of Refining the List. Therefore, as these players transition through the pathway into the U19 age group more scrutiny and attention was given to each potential recruit on a range of different assessments. Participants described the identification process as a data gathering procedure; e.g., "We have a database of player strengths and weaknesses then start to crunch the list and identify players. We then interview players, home interviews, psychological profiles, medicals, character, and background" (Participant 4). This profile building and refining occurs throughout the players development with the recruiters mainly wanting to see the players' in-game performance; e.g., "Just watching them play live across the year, watching all their tapes every week, talking to all those types of people around them. You get to a point where you feel like, "Oh, this kid's a pretty good chance to get drafted, and we need to go and interview him." So, you'd go and interview him" (Participant 11). Therefore, over the course of the player's development, there is a range of reports and data on their performance to build their athlete profile; e.g., "As the year goes on, you just assess their talents and their performances, and all that kind of stuff in different grades and national championships. Their testing data, their GPS, their statistics and just try to pull all that information together, and then come up with a bit of a list of who you liked, and your board in terms of one to 50, just in pure rankings, and then also by position" (Participant 7). These examples demonstrate the recruiters' early process and how they develop an initial list of players and refine this list as they monitor the player's development. This is done prior to the National Draft, with the goal to have potential players ranked according to ability. This approach aligns with contemporary talent literature, advocating for a perpetual evaluation of ability across the development pathway (Baker et al., 2018; Den Hartigh et al., 2018).

Building on the ability to develop and refine a list of potentially talented players, the second order theme, Recruiter Tasks (2b), emerged from the data. It underlined the specific tasks Australian Football recruiters do on a weekly basis during the talent identification process to help refine this list of players. This theme outlined several third order themes, which depict the recruiter's general role and weekly working structure from their perspective. Considering the weekly tasks, the third order theme, Attending Games, was seen as one of the

most time consuming, but important aspects of a recruiter's job; e.g., "You try and get to six or seven live games over the course of a weekend, and that could be anywhere in the country" (Participant 3). Therefore, over the course of a regular season the recruiters indicated they would see "Probably 150 games live for me. Somewhere over 100 flights. A lot of travel" (Participant 12). Despite the extensive travel across the country, both in flights and car journeys, the recruiters indicated there is a strong desire and importance to seeing the players live in action; e.g., "You need to see them live, watching them live will give you a lot of that attitudinal stuff (compared to video footage). Do they chase? Do they harass? How do they go when things aren't going well? What's their mental state if they stuff up? Do they get on with the game quickly?" (Participant 2). Watching players live provided a holistic understanding of the player's in-game performance to the expert recruiters. This method provided information on both on- and off-the-ball game situations allowing evaluation of potentially otherwise "hidden" behaviors. Evaluation of in-situ performance is widely advocated in team-sport talent literature due to the contextually appropriate information provided by in-game observations (Bergkamp et al., 2021; Unnithan et al., 2012).

While the recruiters acknowledged the importance of watching the players in person, they also indicated there is still the need for Reviewing Game Footage. The process of watching recorded game footage of a player was seen as an additional task to the in person viewing; e.g., "Everyone is expected to watch four or five games of vision (i.e., recorded video footage) each week, to add onto the three or four live games that they'd watch" (Participant 7). The reason for viewing this footage was to confirm some of the recruiters' perceptions from the game or identify some aspects they may have missed while watching the game in person; e.g., "I quite like the vision, because it doesn't lie, so what you see is always the truth. But then there's things that it doesn't tell you because there's things that are happening off the ball, and that's why the live stuff's important" (Participant 5). This highlights that recruiters value video footage but acknowledge the limitations of using this medium in isolation to make informed player judgements.

After watching live and video footage of games and players in whom they are interested, the recruiters hold Team Meetings. The recruiters highlighted the importance of collaborative teamwork and discussions in relation to the athletes they are monitoring, to ensure the whole team is updated on the individual players and assist in the decision-making process; e.g., "The watch list is something that every week we would get together and update and say, 'Okay, I saw this guy on the weekend, he's a no, so you knock him off, but this guy did something, let's add him back on.' It'd just be a rolling watch list as the year went along" (Participant 9). While meetings provide the staff with an understanding of the current levels of performance of the player, they also provide the time for constructive conversations and presentation of different opinions and perspectives. Therefore, the process is not a top-down model whereby the National Recruiting Manager's decision is final, but rather the process provides an environment where everyone is expected to share their opinion and challenge other's opinions; e.g., "You've got two or three full-time people who know these kids inside out, but they've always got slightly different opinions, which is good, because it challenges your thinking, and it stimulates discussion" (Participant 4).

In addition to the assessment of the players' in-game performance, the recruiters would also conduct extensive interviews with the potential players. Interviewing Players was seen as a vital source of information and one they would place a high value on; e.g., "Interviews probably take up 50% of our time. We would do between 80-100 home interviews over the course of a year and interview some players up to 6-7 times" (Participant 10). Generally, these interviews were conducted in the players home, with the players immediate family; e.g., "We love and value the home interviews. We just think there's nothing better than two hours in the lounge

room with mom, dad, and siblings" (Participant 3). However, the recruiters did acknowledge the extensive time and travel commitment required to conduct interviews in this manner; e.g., "You can be in Toorak (inner city Melbourne), or you can be in the outback doing these interviews. That takes up a huge amount of time and resources" (Participant 1).

To gain a holistic understanding of the player, the recruiters also undertake extensive Reference Checks on the player by interviewing a range of individuals close to the athletes. Usually early in the season when there is less pressure to attend games, recruiters try to speak to individuals close to the player; e.g., "February and March, not a lot of footy is being played so it's a great time to do a lot of interviews. We'd be talking to his coach, his teachers, talent manager, and employer. We get generally on average, 10-12 references per player. Might be a previous teammate, as well. Junior coaches. Right through various different schoolteachers" (Participant 9). Various individuals are interviewed to gain an understanding of the player; e.g., "We'll talk to team managers. Talk to schoolteachers, principals. So, you try to get a variety of different people." (Participant 12); and "We've got a reference check in four or five different points. Coach, manager, player manager, or it might even be a staffer that works for the footy club. Not necessarily in that senior role. It could be one of the physio or a trainer or a team manager" (Participant 6). The rationale behind these reference checks is to understand the players; e.g., "For me it's you use all those things to understand the person so as you understand the athlete" and a variety of people are interviewed as each may have a different perspective on the athlete" (Participant 8)*;* "If they're at the footy club and they're a good player, the coaches are going to talk highly of them. Just because they're a good player. The team manager will see some things that the coach mightn't see. Like, he might see that he doesn't treat his teammates well. Or when no one's around, he's picking up and tidying up the change rooms" (Participant 1). Therefore, this information provides a holistic understanding of the individual—in particular, their character and personality that may help inform recruitment decisions.

Finally, the key element of the recruitment process is collating all the appropriate information to assist in making an informed talent identification decision. The third order theme, The Final Decision, highlights the need to collate and interpret the data on the potential player in order to decide on their acceptance, or nonacceptance, into the development program. This is emphasized with the amount of data and reports coming in from different members of staff that must be interpreted and assessed; e.g., "It is my role to interpret whatever the staff are saying. If we send 10 people to watch a game and do a report on five blokes, you have 10 different reports that need interpreting" (Participant 2). However, a key part of the process is knowing how to interpret the different types of data that are collected, meaning the participants have to have a broad knowledge of a range of different areas; e.g., "We are amateur psychologists, and we are amateur high-performance assessors" (Participant 9). However, the end goal is to develop an overall profile of the player; e.g., "We feel as though a lot of that, the amount of work we do on interviews, investigations, character checking, all that sort of stuff gives us a great picture of where they sit (i.e., in relation to their peers)" (Participant 11). The information was used to ensure the participants are understanding the athletes and all elements of the athlete's life to help with the decision; e.g., "You're trying to piece together what's going on in this kid's life that may prevent him from ultimately reaching his potential" (Participant 13). In the end, however, all the participants acknowledged the responsibility of collating the information and working with the staff to inform the final player selection decision at the National Draft; e.g., "We take all the information from all the sources—so school, data analytics, performance, recruiting, medical, the whole lot—and then the final decision is mine on draft night" (Participant 3). Therefore, while it is a team effort, the final decision during the heat of the moment at the National Draft, is generally

the responsibility of the Head of Recruitment. Despite contemporary literature suggesting that this approach to decision-making may be biased and largely relies on subjective opinion and philosophy (Den Harigh et al., 2018; Johnston & Baker, 2020), our data demonstrate a uniformity in approach for the expert recruiters within our study. While both the present study and previous research within Australian Football (Larkin et al., 2020; MacMahon et al., 2019) advocate for the addition of objective data to strengthen the evaluation of talented players, this study suggests that despite recruiters trying to gain an advantage in the talent identification process, there is still a uniform approach to the identification of young players in Australian Football.

In summary, the findings highlight that in order to form their decision on the player, recruiters consider all the information collected over the course of the athlete monitoring period. However, in contrast to some talent selection decision-making practices (den Hartigh et al., 2018), it is clear that Australian Football recruiters collect vast and wide-ranging athlete data, using this to inform their objective clinical judgments on the athletes. Despite the objective nature of the decision-making process, the recruiters are confident in the decisions they make, yet there is a constant reflection on their decisions, with all previous recruitment decisions informing future recruitment decisions (Larkin et al., 2020).

### Limitations

We believe this study adds value not only to the literature specific to Australian Football, but also to the broader talent identification literature. However, several issues must be considered in relation the above study. First is the sport- and country-specific nature of the activity that occurs. While we have identified connections between the broader talent literature, Australian Football as a sport is largely limited to Australia and those involved in talent identification are bound by geographical factors, such as significant distance between states. Second, the participants in the study were senior individuals from within their respective organizations and, unlike many of their colleagues not at the absolute coalface—the place where the work is actually done. This, perhaps, represents the age groups with which our participants are more commonly involved in identifying and recruiting. Indeed, responses typically discussed U16 players and older. Given these considerations, we suggest that future studies within this sport should investigate the factors we have identified above within an applied context.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the study highlight the complexity associated with talent identification. Talent identification is a multidimensional process that does not consider one specific element of performance, but rather the athlete as a whole with all interacting factors contributing to athlete performance. By acknowledging this holistic perspective, talent identification is not only important for practitioners, but also researchers aiming to understand and explain the talent identification process. The findings of this study highlight that recruiters assess talent based upon game performance, intent at physical testing sessions, and a players' psychological profile. In Australian Football, the talent identification process includes developing a list of talented players, which starts at approximately the U16 National Championships and is continually refined until the final decisions at the National Draft. Overall, the selection of talent in the Australian Football system is multifaceted with consideration of players from a holistic approach including estimation of their ability to play at the highest level. By understanding the roles and processes recruiters use to inform their decisions, the research community can further enhance the talent identification process. This may be done through development of more specific research programs aiming to assess or monitor the key attributes and processes recruiters value when making talent identification decisions. This would extend the current talent identification research knowledge and practices, whereby researchers focus on a single attribute or performance indicator and

attempt to make formal predictions. While this singular focus may offer some insights into potential variables associated with talent identification, more holistic procedures should be explored.

## Authors' Declarations

The authors declare that there are no personal or financial conflicts of interest regarding the research in this article.

The authors declare that they conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the Journal of Expertise.

The authors declare that they are not able to make the dataset publicly available but are able to provide it upon request.

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