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Understanding the Elite Youth Soccer Athlete: A Case Study Approach to the Environment of the U.S. Olympic Development Program at the State Level

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Understanding the Elite Youth Soccer Athlete: A Case Study Approach to the Environment of the U.S. Olympic Development Program at the State Level

by

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Dedication

To my family-This is an accomplishment for all of us as I would have never had any

chance of success without you. I love you very much.

Acknowledgements

Understanding the Elite Youth Soccer Athlete: A Case Study Approach to the

Environment of the U.S. Olympic Development Program at the State Level

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Contemporary work on talent development has mostly focused on the individual athlete and their micro environment. This research uses a holistic ecological approach to examine a specific soccer Olympic Development Program (ODP) at state level. ODP has historically been successful in developing elite youth athletes that transition to senior level sport. The approach highlights the central role of the environment as it affects the development of athletes and brings forth the complexity of talent development in the U.S. context.

The athletic talent development environment (ATDE) is considered holistically, using a framework that analyzes micro and macro levels, athletic and non-athletic domains, and a set of factors that help explain the factors that lead to success. Specifically, the ATDE model and the ESF model, provide a framework that leads to heavy description of the environment and helps in summarizing the factors that contribute to success. One of the main objectives of this study was situating results within the previously found common and unique features of other successful ATDE's.

To further test the holistic ecological approach to ATDE's, this study chose a research setting vastly different to previously studied environments and focused on a single case study to provide more depth to the overall understanding of the environment.

Principal methods of data collection included interviews, participant observation, and analysis of data and documents pertinent to the environment.

Using the results as a basis, empirical versions of the working models were created for ODP that captured the specific features of the environment. Results revealed that the ODP environment shared a number of characteristics with past ATDE's examined but also had numerous unique factors. This study represents a step forward in this research area as it varied from past studies by presenting an ATDE in a vastly different setting, focused on a team sport, and it examined a system that has not been analyzed through in-depth qualitative methods. A major objective of this research was to also produce information that can currently be applied to the ODP system in order to improve the talent development system. The holistic ecological approach proved to be a valuable approach to revealing central factors and challenges associated with recruitment, retention, and transition of athletes in ODP as well as the overall U.S. soccer system.

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Glossary of Terms

Athlete Talent Development Environment (ATDE) model: research model used to study all factors that affect the development of elite athletes.

Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF): is the continental governing body for association football in North America, that includes Central America and Caribbean regions.

US Soccer Developmental Academy (DA): elite youth academy program of US Soccer that was created to provide top level competition and setting for recruitment of top athletes.

Director of Coaching (DOC): the head of coaching for a soccer organization who is usually involved in administration.

Elite Clubs National League (ECNL): is a non-profit member based organization founded in 2009 to enhance the developmental experience of female youth soccer players through a competitive training environment and an improved scouting network.

Environment Success Factors (ESF) model: research model used to explain factors that lead to success in a athlete talent development environment.

Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA): international governing body of soccer.

Major League Soccer (MLS): is a men's professional soccer league, sanctioned by US Soccer, that represents the sport's highest level in both the US and Canada.

National American Soccer League (NASL): is a professional men's soccer league sanctioned by US Soccer as the Division II league in the American system under the MLS and the United Soccer League.

National Coaches Association of America (NSCAA): currently the world's largest soccer coaches' organization that serves coaches and trainers at all levels of the game and is focused on improving coaching education.

National Women's Soccer League (NWSL): is the current professional women's league run by US Soccer.

Olympic Development Program (ODP): US Youth Soccer program used to identify and develop the highest caliber athletes for the US National Team programs.

Relative Age Effect (RAE): is used to describe a bias, evident in the upper echelons of youth sport and academia, where participation is higher amongst those born early in the

relevant selection period (and correspondingly lower amongst those born late in the selection period) than would be expected from the normalised distribution of live births.

Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ): The questionnaire measures the experiences of developing athletes in relation to empirically identified "key features" of effective talent development environments.

United States Club Soccer (USCS): is a national organization and member of the United States Soccer Federation that aims to advance soccer in the United States through the development and support of soccer clubs for all ages and genders. The organization sanctions clubs, leagues and tournaments for youth and adults, with a focus on high-level competitive play.

United States Club Soccer id2 National and Identification Program: program that provides an opportunity for the country's elite youth soccer players to be identified and developed, and scouted for inclusion in US Soccer's National Team programs.

United States Soccer Federation (USSF): Commonly referred to as US Soccer, is the official governing body of soccer in the US. Is a FIFA member and governs US amateur and professional soccer including men's, women's, youth, beach soccer, fustal, and Paralympic national teams.

United States Soccer Foundation: founded in 1994 and serves as the major charitable arm of soccer in the US.

United States Soccer (US Soccer): Same as United States Soccer Federation.

United States Youth Soccer Association (USYSA): is the youth affiliate and member of US Soccer. It includes 55 state youth soccer associations.

Women's Professional Soccer (WPS): was a top level professional women's soccer league in the US. Suspended operations in 2012.

Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA): was the world's first women's soccer league in which all the athletes were paid as professionals. Suspended operations in 2003.

Prologue

Soccer has always been a central focal point of my life and has afforded me unforgettable experiences and memories. I have been able to travel from coast to coast and work with coaches, athletes, and parents that still remain influential in my daily life. One of my great adventures in soccer has been working with the US Soccer Olympic Development Program (ODP). I have been fortunate enough to experience ODP from the perspective of both a player and a coach. I consider my experiences in ODP to have greatly affected my philosophies toward soccer development and teaching in my professional coaching career. While the objectives of ODP remain the same, the structure and organization of ODP has changed dramatically since my time as an athlete. The quality of coaches and training is much higher now and there have been several well-structured initiatives throughout the years to change the identified problem areas of the program. Despite many warranted criticisms and program components that need improvement, ODP still remains one of the top recruiting environments and a direct pathway for national team selections in both the men and women's game.

As an athlete, I was involved in state association ODP tryouts for 3 years. During my third year, I was selected through two rounds of trials and progressed into the state team level of ODP. While I was intelligent, skilled, and athletic, my sixteen year-old peers were far more physically developed than I was. I was a late bloomer and struggled with the physicality of playing with mature players. I began to feel the system did not fit my style as a player. Although I trained with the state team for several sessions, I was not selected to progress to the region level of ODP. Nonetheless, I would say that my experience was mostly positive as I learned that I had to alter my playing style to fit in

with the physicality and fast paced nature of the elite game. I also benefitted from training and competing with the best players in the state on several occasions. To my advantage, I had a supportive family that focused on the learning aspect of my experience and as a result I never dwelled on the fact that I did not progress further in the ODP system. Instead, the experiences as an athlete in ODP undoubtedly helped me on the path to eventually being recruited to play at the college level. It is important to note that during my time in ODP there was little reference to athlete development or sport science in the ODP program. It was then an underdeveloped talent identification system where coaches subjectively chose players on how they performed in match settings after watching them play once or at most twice. There was no real structure to the evaluation process and all coaches made determinations based on their own viewing and opinions. The result was a highly disjointed talent identification and selection system. In response to feedback and criticism through the years, the ODP system has made many changes to try to enhance the effectiveness of the program. To the benefit of the athletes, players are now selected after being evaluated in both training and matches.

As an ODP coach now for three years, I have become intimately acquainted with the strengths and areas for improvement in the current ODP system. The system has been completely restructured compared to when I participated as a player and the new curriculum clearly demonstrates the influence of sport science research from the past decade. There is also much more vertical integration and communication between the state, region, and national levels of ODP. Specific to training, US Soccer has communicated specific playing style guidelines and topics to address with ODP players in the hope of improving the level of American youth soccer athlete. The overall system

has improved greatly and while it has areas for improvement, it is still viewed as a premier environment to identify and recruit top youth soccer athletes. One of the unique aspects of ODP is that every state association has the freedom to run and execute their state ODP program to their own specifications. This leads to diversity between different state ODP programs and is also a reason that it is valuable to analyze the systems individually. While many components of the ODP state systems are similar, they have unique characteristics and cultures that merit review.

This research is driven by the desire to improve ODP and aid in the continued improvements we are making with soccer athlete development in the US. My journey from athlete to coach in ODP has shown me there is a collective desire to improve the system of identifying/developing the most talented youth soccer athletes and with my research I hope to further address this need. In my professional coaching career apart from ODP, I am the owner/chief-operating officer of an elite soccer development company that focuses on progressing top youth soccer athletes to senior systems. One of my professional goals is to continue to improve the methods for developing US soccer athletes. This research will seek to bridge the gap between academic and practitioner work so that we can see tangible improvements in soccer development. The hope is that similar research shines the spotlight on current development systems specifically in the US so that we can continue to advance the quality of our development and the caliber of youth soccer athletes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Soccer has become a global phenomenon and claims the undisputed title of the world's most popular sport (Collins, 2006). While it has been a sport of great significance for several decades in terms of fanship and participation around the world (Metzl & Micheli, 1998), a wave of popularity has recently engulfed the US. From ESPN's Top Ten Plays to coverage on our local new channels, soccer is now highly visible in the American media. It is a sport that has entered the heart and psyche of Americans and its growth shows no signs of slowing down (Collins, 2006). Since the 1994 FIFA World Cup where world soccer took center stage in the US, soccer has expanded at all levels with youth soccer experiencing an exponential growth rate (Metzl & Micheli, 1998). In a 2014 ESPN poll, it was reported that professional soccer ranked as the number two most popular sport, only after professional football, amongst twelve- to seventeen-year olds (Reddy, 2015). An even more astonishing statistic is that participation in soccer is thirty times higher now than it was just forty years ago (Reddy, 2015). In 1974, in the US, there were 103,432 children registered to play, 1.6 million registered to play in 1990, and more than 4 million registered to play in 2014 (US Youth Soccer). Youth soccer has become a mainstay in the American sports scene as youth soccer participation is double that of tackle football and larger than baseball by one million participants (Webb, 2009).

Soccer, similar to other sports, suffers from major problems in vital areas of development such as recruitment, retention, and athlete transitions (Green, 2005). Paralleling the growth of youth soccer, there has been an explosion of research in areas of youth soccer development and elite athlete development systems. The advancement of soccer research has created an interesting relationship between researchers and

practitioners. The motivation and impetus for wanting to conduct research on elite athlete development in academia seems to often result in problematic outcomes. Specifically, academic researchers often lack the experience or access to truly engage and thoroughly explore the soccer systems they study. On the other hand, most practitioners (e.g., professional trainers, small soccer business owners) are driven by the most basic of business and career motives. Practitioners seek to provide a differentiated product that works better than the competition so that their product is in higher demand by the public. Specifically in this case, the product is a development system/program that successfully takes youth athletes and helps them progress to elite levels. For practitioners, successful transitioning of elite youth athletes to senior levels can result in numerous social and financial rewards so the pressure to succeed is high. The practitioners that function within the soccer business world rarely have the time or other resources/skills necessary to dedicate to researching development topics. This general dichotomy is seen in the literature as much of the research is conducted by academics that are interested in soccer as a research topic and not necessarily by individuals who are deeply embedded in youth development systems. This is not to discredit the large portion of academic research that helps further talent identification and development practices but rather to highlight that there is a disconnect between the majority of academic research and on-field practitioner work. In other words, the available soccer development research still has a substantial divide between theory and practice. One of our main goals in soccer development research must be to bridge this gap and strive for research that is geared toward improving the talent identification and development of elite athletes while also building and testing theoretical ideas. This divide between theory and practice can be lessened by

having researcher practitioners that are more intimately involved in talent and identification systems and function as participants within that environment. Soccer development practitioners have a thorough understanding of the complexities of development environments and can help make theory more relevant and applicable. This problem can also be addressed by breaking away from the trend of talent identification research and examining the overall environment in which an elite athlete develops rather than to focus on solitary components of the development system.

While the growth of soccer in the US has been historic in the past decades, the emergence of soccer development research specifically within the US soccer development system has been lacking. Primarily, most research has been conducted in environments that do not resemble the development structure of the US or its participants. Most work on elite youth athletes relates to European contexts. In the US, a limited number of studies that can be grouped into the areas of soccer talent identification and development, and often researchers extrapolate from European research when trying to discern America. While a few studies have attempted to understand the elite youth soccer athlete in the US, there has been insufficient attention to examining the overall environment of development. This research aims to fill that gap and seeks to create a better understanding of the US elite youth soccer athlete and the environment in which the athlete develops.

The US soccer development model has various unique characteristics that differentiate it from other more traditional talent identification systems and as such merits thorough and consistent investigation. First, the infrastructure of US soccer has developed abnormally compared to the most often seen hierarchical sport development

pyramid models and there exists no single, fluid pathway for an elite youth soccer athlete. Rather, there are several overlapping organizations, such as US Youth Soccer (USYS) and US Club Soccer (USCS), which do not share resources and often perform similar functions. The result is a multi-layered development system that does not present a clear pathway for recruitment, retention, and transition in the sport. Smolianov, Murphy, McMahon, and Naylor (2015) conclude in their analysis of the US soccer model that there needs to be a push for US Soccer to lead all other NGBs in an effort to improve overall program efficiency and effectiveness. Further, the US system presents different playing levels, specifically high school and college soccer, which are not present or as emphasized in other systems. Whatever recommendations from theory and research are made for US soccer must take into consideration the unique cultural and development issues presented by high school and college soccer (Ziemer, 2011). The push for collegiate scholarships seems to have exacerbated another major issue of US youth soccer—the pay-for-play format used at the highest levels of competition. This is the practice that athletes who are privileged and can support the costs of elite sport hold a large advantage over their counterparts in the current system. This system has created many problems including limited access to programs and facilities and the disenfranchisement of potentially elite athletes from specific sectors (e.g., Hispanic community). Culturally, the US also presents a vastly different landscape to its European counterparts. The support and growth of the US women's game has been unmatched worldwide. As Markovits and Hellerman (2003) explain, the success of the women's game grew namely in part to the absence of soccer as a major part of America's hegemonic sports culture. Along with specific legislation to aid women's sport, women's

soccer has a unique standing in the US compared to other developed nations. These three

unique characteristics of US soccer will be further explained in the following literature

review. Undoubtedly, the US soccer model is unique and warrants specific investigation

in research especially if we are seeking to improve the quality of soccer athlete developed

here.

Objectives of the Research

`   This research will seek to address the structure, components, and relationships

that exist in talent identification and development specifically within the context of a top

development system in US soccer. First, the focus will be on elite youth athletes within

the environment of the soccer Olympic Development Program (ODP). This is needed as

the majority of studies have extrapolated findings from adult professionals or from a

European elite youth context and applied findings to US youth athletes. Making practical

applications and recommendation become easier when you are examining the exact

program that you seek to improve. It is also vital to study athletic environments within

the US as the soccer system presents unique characteristics that are not necessarily

present in other contexts. Further, this research will apply a holistic ecological approach

in which the full development environment is examined. This is a departure from the

majority of previous research that focuses on the individual athlete and their micro-

environment. A focus on the overall environment will help bring attention to the main

successes and challenges of this specific development context and help inform practical

recommendations for improvement of ODP. This is in line with an explorative integrative

approach that focuses on the constant cycle between theory, data, and analysis to bring

practical changes to the studied context. So while building and testing talent

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identification and development theory as it applies to this environment, a main objective of the research will be to bring improvement to ODP identification and development processes.

Using the Athlete Talent Development Environment (ATDE) and Environment Success Factors (ESF) working models (Henriksen, 2010), this research will explore the environment of elite youth soccer athletes at the state level of ODP. These models serve to bring a deep understanding of the environment and allow for analysis of the factors that help lead to environmental success. The study should result in a working model of ODP as an ATDE and bring attention to the processes and interrelationships between factors that lead to success. This analysis of ODP will also further the framework of ATDE research, as these models are new and have been applied in few contexts. The overall approach should have major implications for our understanding of the ODP environment and provide a framework for improving the environment of developing successful elite youth soccer athletes.

The objectives of this study are (a) to provide a holistic description of the ATDE-ODP environment at the state level. The environment is unique so empirical versions of the ATDE and ESF working models will be presented that reflect the ODP environment; (b) to investigate factors influencing success of developing elite athletes in the ODP state environment; (c) to situate research findings with themes found in athletic talent development environment research; and (d) to utilize the empirical models to reveal information that can lead to actual improvements to the talent development process in ODP and thus be a step forward in lessening the gap between theory and practice in youth soccer development research.

Significance of Research

This research addresses several gaps that are evident in talent development research and seeks to result in specific, applicable information that can be used to improve the current ODP system. First, this type of participant research helps bridge some of the gap between researcher and practitioner issues and also allows for testing of theory in order to create tangible applications and recommendations. This project is stepping beyond past ATDE work in that it is focusing on a single environment in order to examine it thoroughly and produce a comprehensive picture of all the successful factors, areas for improvement, and future challenges. This is line with Henriksen (2010) suggesting that the ATDE framework can be used beyond description and explaining and move to program intervention.

Second, this research extends work on athlete environments and specifically the use of ATDE framework in several ways. This framework was used in the past to examine athlete environments in Scandinavian nations with similar national and sport cultures. This work answers the call of Henriksen (2010) to extend ATDE work to other successful environments in different contexts. The US in contrast to Scandinavian nations presents a culture that values individualism over collectivism and can have cultural components that impact ATDE's here differently than in other contexts (Triandis, 2004). This study also addresses a gap in ATDE research that exists in studying the environment of team sports and more uniquely soccer. Mostly individual sports have been examined through this framework and applying it to team sports will only serve to improve and strengthen the working models. As mentioned before, the ATDE can also be used for aid in sport program intervention and this work lays the foundation for entering

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that arena. Using this analysis to help improve ODP is one of the most significant motivations behind the research. As the research was being conducted, steps were already being taken to implement ideas from the research. Information from this study can be used to improve this ODP program but also can inform similar problems/inefficiencies that are affecting other state programs. Improving other state programs can have a domino effect and in turn improve the status of the national ODP program.

Lastly, soccer development research has been dominated by European researchers and as a result a lot of information we apply to US athletes comes from findings in vastly different national, sporting, and youth cultures. This study is focused on a US elite soccer development system and focuses on US youth athletes. The closer the research is to the actual participants for which we seek to apply findings, the more likely that we will find how to deal with specific nuances that might impede athlete development. The US soccer system provides many unique characteristics that favor the notion that it needs specific investigations into the programs and participants that currently function within the system. This research is an exciting endeavor into a deep understanding of issues that relate not only to ODP but to the general climate of US soccer.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Talent Development Research Landscape

The growth of soccer-specific research has advanced the field of talent identification and development dramatically in recent years. There has been an intense push to formulate programs and strategies for maximizing the development of athletes because the rewards and recognition associated with success in athlete development are as high as they have ever been. As a result, talent identification and the development of elite athletes has become a central challenge to many sport systems and has demanded increased attention from researchers and practitioners alike (Abbott, Collins, Martindale & Sowerby, 2002). Because the field of talent identification and development is so vast and diverse, the focus here remains largely on soccer-specific work. Soccer-specific research has mirrored the trends found in general talent research and serves as a valuable launching point for the examination of a specific elite soccer development system. This review of talent research will examine major trends in the field and conclude with the current status of the field. Specific focus will be given to contemporary trends in soccer development research.

Talent Detection, Selection, Identification, and Development

"Talent" itself remains a controversial concept as it is often misunderstood and misapplied in research and practitioner work (Williams & Reilly, 2000). In research, talent refers both to the innate ability of an individual and to their potential ability to develop to some level of elite status (Williams & Reilly, 2000). In practitioner settings, talent is used interchangeably to describe both individuals who have an innate ability to perform well in sport and individuals who have trained and developed over years to

become elite athletes. This imprecision in language adds to some of the confusion that is present regarding talent discussions.

Historically attached to ideas and discussions of talent is the nurture-nature debate. The foundation of this debate is whether athletes are predisposed to be successful or if their training/environment is the more instrumental factor in long-term elite development. While researchers agree that genetic predisposition can play a role (Guth & Roth, 2014), most contemporary talent research is inclined to examine the development process and has moved away from the simplistic view of talent discovery (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). Henriksen (2010) in his seminal dissertation on athlete talent development environments suggests that both trends place the athlete as the primary focal point of research.

The talent discovery and selection approach is predicated on the idea that there are individuals who innately possess talent. In this school of thought, researchers and practitioners attempt to set up detailed assessment techniques for identifying individuals who are talented and likely to excel in a given sport (Holt & Dunn, 2004). In this approach, having rigorous, detailed systematic detection methods of talent is an essential component of sport programs. William and Reilly (2000) provide a valuable distinction between talent detection and talent identification that sets up further discussion into soccer research. They argue that talent detection is the discovery of potential performers currently not involved in sport while talent identification refers to the process of recognizing current sport participants with the potential to become elite athletes. Talent identification entails tracking and analyzing performance over periods of time by examining a multitude of interrelating factors such as physical, physiological,

psychological, and sociological components mixed with technical ability and skills (Regnier, Salmela, & Russell, 1993). Talent identification is closely related to talent development as identification of athletes can occur through various stages of the development process. The majority of talent research has transitioned to focusing on talent development that is geared toward providing a long-term suitable training environment for athletes so they can maximize their potential. The transition from talent detection and identification to talent guidance and development is apparent in the research and is also the trend in the practitioner world (Durand & Salmela, 2001). However, some would argue that development is simply a buzzword in many practitioner settings rather than a comprehensive strategy driving daily programs and training. Lastly, the concept of talent selection involves choosing the most appropriate participants to carry out a specific task (Borms, 1996). This is vital to soccer, where only eleven players per team can be on the field at a one specific moment (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

Even though early investigations focusing on athletic talent were mostly unidimensional, the trend in general talent development and soccer research has been to treat talent as a multidimensional and complex, dynamic construct (e.g., Morris, 2000; Vaeyens et al., 2006; Williams & Reilly, 2000). The multidimensional approach is summarized well by William and Reilly (2000) who examine predictors of talent in soccer including physical (e.g., body composition), physiological (e.g., VO2 max), psychological (e.g., self-confidence), and cognitive factors (e.g., anticipation) that affect athlete development. Further, they go on to review sociological considerations in soccer talent identification and development including familial influences, facilities, the role of the coach, and injury (Williams & Reilly, 2000). The multidimensional approach is more

in line with the complex nature of development and the numerous factors that affect work in talent development. It is important to note that there have been numerous thorough reviews on talent research (e.g., Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Regnier et al., 1993) and a few important reviews on soccer talent research (e.g., Meylan, Cronin, Oliver, & Hughes, 2010; Williams & Reilly, 2000). These reviews clearly demonstrate how the focus has shifted from models built on factors associated with anthropometric, physiological, and fundamental motor skills to psychological and sociological variables that take into account the role of the environment. This proposed research will deal with those contemporary trends in talent research that highlight the complexities of development by examining psychological and environmental factors. The goal here is not to thoroughly review those studies but rather to inject information in areas where there has been new developments and focus on the status of US soccer research.

Even though much focus has turned to the multidimensional nature of talent and to understanding talent as a complex construct, there is still a desire to stay within the mindset of detecting and identifying athletes based on certain characteristics or predictors. Many sport programs and specifically US soccer programs rely on this method despite constant advertisement and marketing of long-term development objectives. This results usually from lack of resources to properly implement programs or from lack of education in appropriate development (Smolianov et al., 2005). There are numerous concerning issues with talent identification and selection that are prevalent in many contemporary sport programs and are relevant to the soccer program being investigated.

Problems with Talent Selection and Identification

Despite the prevalence and, in some sport programs, the continued attempt to systematically select athletes based on their talent (or on predictors of talent), research has shown this approach to be problematic (Lidor, Cote, & Hackfort, 2009; Williams & Reilly, 2000). The main problem is that the complex, dynamic nature of talent makes it difficult to precisely measure or quantify potential athletic talent and skills. In research and practitioner work, we know that athletes sometimes defy the odds despite all indications that they will not be successful in a given sport. In soccer, an open skill decision-making, ball invasion sport, this is even more complex because the game is dynamic and free flowing. Elite soccer athletes possess many different characteristics and are better (or worse) than many other elite athletes on certain characteristics. Soccer might lay claim to the most notable case exemplifying the problems associated with talent detection and selection. Lionel Messi, arguably the best player of all time, was a slight child with a growth deficiency. Despite his limitations in what are often treated as important predictors (e.g., size, weight), Messi is probably the most successful soccer athlete of all time. He recently won the FIFA Balon D'Or, being recognized as the best soccer athlete in the world, for a record fifth time. Many argue that Messi would have likely not been selected in most systems and continued in elite youth development because of his small stature. Researchers suggest that assessment of athletes due to characteristics and predictors is challenging (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001) and the risk of mismanaged selection and detection is high (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

Henriksen (2010) identifies several of the main issues stemming from sport program frameworks that rely on talent detection and identification. First, these program

assessments are based on past knowledge and research and do not take into account the dynamic, always changing nature of athlete environments. The static view of athletes is likely to not be completely valid in assessing current athletes or future changes in a sports program. We need to examine environments in situ to gain a deep understanding of the dynamics in play between the environment and its participants. Second, there is an abundance of research that identifies factors affecting athlete success that are not necessarily related to talent (e.g., Willams & Reilly, 2000). One of the main factors is age and there is significant research on the relative age effect (RAE) that shows that older athletes seem to do better in elite programs. The earlier an athlete is born in the calendar year, the more likely they are to make it to senior levels compared to athletes born later in the year (Helsen, Hodges, Winckel, & Starkes, 2000; Helsen, Winckel, & Williams, 2005). This problem is highly visible in soccer where 40% of athletes in the 2013 FIFA Male U17 World Cup were born in the first quarter of the year, while only 16% were born in the last three months of the same year (Williams, 2010). The RAE will be discussed later in more detail. Other factors not related to talent that affect athletic success are the location of birth (Cote, MacDonald, Baker, & Abernethy 2006), effects of subjective evaluation by coaches (Williams & Reilly, 2000), and early identification (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998). All this research reveals major concerns with the current methods for detecting and selecting elite youth athletes and the problems associated when implementing an innate talent approach.

Talent research has answered these critiques and concerns by shifting the focus from talent detection and selection to talent development (Durand-Bush & Salmela,

2001). A further exploration of the talent development approach will help set the path for the focus of this current research.

Talent Development Approach

Probably the most discussed approach to soccer programming, in both research and practitioner work, is the talent development approach where the focus turns to training athletes in appropriate environments over long periods of time in order to achieve excellence. This approach emphasizes motor skills, psychological components and the quality and quantity of training received by athletes (Côté, Lidor & Hackfort, 2009). The main underlying philosophy of the talent development approach is that an individual cannot reach excellence in a given field without years of nurturing and training in appropriate environments (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002).

The talent development approach entails two main pathways for achievement of athletic excellence. The first is the idea of early specialization accompanied with deliberate practice to achieve elite levels in a given sport (Ericsson, 2005). Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) suggest 10,000 hours of intensive training in a given area to achieve excellence and introduced the concept of deliberate practice, which is highly structured and focused training that requires cognitive and physical effort in order to improve performance. This line of research promotes the notion that the number of hours spent training is a main determinant of whether an individual will reach elite athletic status. The importance of deliberate practice is well documented in soccer research as elite performers consistently report more hours of training, both in formal and informal settings (Ford, Ward, Hodges, & Williams, 2009; Ford & Williams, 2013). The critiques of this approach are numerous as specialization at an early age comes at the cost

of sampling and experimentation with other activities that can be beneficial in development. Early specialization has also been linked to issues such as burnout, increased psychological stress, higher rates of injury, and quitting sports at an early age (Neeru, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBella, 2013) that can be detrimental to long-term athletic success. Despite the concerns and critiques of early specialization, deliberate practice is shown to be an important part of sport and specifically soccer development (Cote et al., 2007).

Cote et al. (2007) presented a critique of early specialization and highlighted several of the fundamental flaws in the approach. First, research literature does not support the idea that quantity and quality of training at early stages of development is an appropriate predictor of elite athletic success. Secondly, deliberate practice is not necessarily the best means to achieving expertise especially at young ages. Several studies demonstrate that the quantity and quality of training at early ages might not affect long-term athletic success as much as previously thought (Baker, 2003) and that elite performers have diverse backgrounds with involvement in many sports and training programs (Cote et al, 2007). Specific to soccer in the US, Ozyurtcu (2011) found that parents of adolescent soccer athletes were drawn to specialization because of perceived benefits despite plentiful information regarding the negative outcomes of early specialization.

The response to critics of the early specialization, deliberate practice pathway has been the idea of sampling many activities at an early age with focus on deliberate play. In this approach, as the athlete progresses, they gradually move away from deliberate play (focused on enjoyment rather than structure) and to deliberate practice to achieve elite

performance. The benefits of deliberate play in regards to development are well documented with benefits ranging from improved creativity (Pepler & Ross, 1981) to increased math skills (Wolfgang, Stannard, & Jones, 2001). One of the principal arguments in favor of sampling is that this pathway minimizes the negative outcomes associated (e.g., burnout, increased injury rates) with early specialization. Despite the support for deliberate play in research, in US soccer we still see that most youth programs have a highly structured format (Ozyurtcu, 2011). The culture of playing pick-up soccer and other forms of informal soccer is growing but the majority of youth soccer played in the US is in formal leagues.

The two main development pathways presented, elite performance through early specialization and elite performance through sampling, are a central debate both within the academic and practitioner soccer world. As Henriksen (2010) points out, the pathway chosen is often dependent on the specific sport and the specific socio-cultural context of the athletic environment. Important to note, Cote et al. (2007) contend that while some sports allow for greater flexibility during early years and others might require early specialization, all elite athletes must at some point be in a training program that focuses on deliberate practice. In soccer, the debate rages as there are signs that both pathways can lead to the production of elite performers (Ford et al., 2012). The emergence of the early engagement pathway as a third option helps lessen the tension between advocates of early specialization and early diversification.

The early engagement pathway calls for high participation in deliberate play of a specific sport (Ford et al., 2012). This differs from the early diversification pathway that is based on sampling and play in multiple activities and sports during early years. It also

differs from early specialization in that the time-spent training in the sport is mostly in informal settings rather than structured environments. Specifically in soccer, early engagement has been shown to be a successful pathway to elite status. In Brazil, early engagement seems to be the most common and culturally accepted pathway for elite soccer athletes (Salmela, Marques, & Machado, 2004; Salmela & Moraes, 2003). Further, large amounts of time spent in deliberate play during childhood has been shown to be correlated with high decision making ability in elite soccer players (Williams, Bell-Walker, Ward, & Ford, 2011). Ford and Williams (2012) also found that large amounts of time spent in deliberate play was a determinant for achieving elite status in youth English athletes. The early engagement pathway seems to satisfy the unaddressed areas (i.e., deliberate play in a specific sport) that do not fit into either early specialization or early diversification frameworks. The examination of the three different athlete development pathways shows the complexity involved in sport development systems. Not only can pathways vary from country to country, but also in the case of US soccer where the overall development system is fragmented, athletic pathways can vary greatly from athlete to athlete. This is pertinent to the current soccer discussion where there is no single pathway for youth athletes transitioning to elite senior soccer levels. Since there is so much variance between athletes in terms of pathways selected, it might be beneficial to move research attention away from the individual athletes and rather to the greater landscape of development in which the athlete functions.

Having examined the major trends found in talent research with specific examination of talent detection/identification and talent development literature, we move to a discussion of the whole person approach which will set up a review of the role of

environment in athletic development. The whole person approach is vital for this research, as it takes into account environmental factors that extend beyond the individual's athletic domain.

Whole Person Approach

Talent development literature has traditionally examined athletic development only on the athletic level. More recently, however, athletic careers have been investigated from a whole career or whole person approach that focuses on different athletic career stages and on non-athletic domains throughout the lifespan of an individual (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). The whole person approach examines athletic careers as an interaction between factors in the athletic domain and other domains (e.g., social) (Henriksen, 2010). This approach allows for a broader examination of factors that can affect the success of a youth athlete attempting to transition to elite level sport. As mentioned earlier, the success of a youth athlete is influenced by many factors such as peer support, schooling experience, and early childhood experiences that often fall outside the athletic domain (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Pertinent to this research is the notion that the success of an elite youth athlete in transitioning to senior level sport is dependent on many factors both from the athletic domain and other life domains. This means that in the development of elite youth athletes the focus cannot be solely on their athletic experience but rather on the overall environment in which they develop. Recent research in talent development demonstrates that social and cultural circumstances play important roles in athletic development (Cote et al., 2009). Further, obtaining athletic excellence requires skills outside of the athletic domain and individuals who successfully transition from elite youth sport to senior levels adequately manage challenges of

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everyday life (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Elite youth athletes that manage transitions well, possess the necessary psychosocial and psychological skills, and have adequate resources are more likely to make it to senior levels (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Henriksen et al., 2010a).

Contemporary training programs and development research strongly suggest that we approach development from a more holistic perspective in which individuals are developed with the necessary athletic skills and with life skills that will help them manage life challenges (Stambulova, 2009). The last important piece of the talent research review is the role and importance of the environment in which an athlete develops.

Environment

In recent literature, there has been significant attention paid to the role of environment in talent development (Henriksen, 2010; Larsen et al., 2012). If we are to move away from the trends of talent detection and selection and move toward a talent development approach, which focuses on how to train and provide appropriate environments for athletes, then we must focus on research that aims to inform the planning and organization of athletic environments (Martindale, Collins, & Daubey, 2005). Since athletic development is seen as such a long-term process, it becomes vital to focus on research that extends our understanding of talent development environments in order to improve the success of youth athletes transitioning to senior levels.

There is research that highlights the importance and role of the talent development environment in athlete development (Araujo & Davids, 2011; Henriksen et al., 2010a, 2010b). In general developmental psychology, research shows that acquisition of knowledge and expertise involves complex interactions between the learner and environment (Barab & Plucker, 2002). Gaining sport expertise requires the managing of numerous environmental constraints or factors (Davids & Baker, 2007). Even in soccer research, the environment has been identified as a key component in the development of elite youth athletes (Larsen et al., 2012). Martindale, Collins, and Abraham (2007) show that talent development environments have controllable factors significant to the process of developing athletes. Overall, the literature reveals that in the process of developing athletes, environmental factors should be identified and improved in order to effectively and efficiently develop athletes over the long-term (Bailey et al., 2011).

The term "talent development environment" has appeared frequently in recent literature (Martindale et al., 2007; Martindale et al., 2005; Li, Wang, Pyun, & Martindale, 2015). The talent development environment includes all contextual factors that play a role in the development of the athlete. For example, coaching relationships, resources and support during transitions, daily training practices, and communication are all included within the talent development environment. Henriksen (2010) furthers research into environmental effects on development and provides a working definition for the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE). Henriksen (2010) describes an ATDE as "a system of an athlete's interactions inside and outside sport on the micro level and how these interactions are influenced by the macro-level" (p. 30). This working definition will be used for the current research and is line with an ecological approach that encompasses

micro and macro levels and sporting and non-sporting domains. Henriksen (2010) examined three different successful ATDEs and refined knowledge on factors and interrelationships that lead to successful development environments.

In recent years, research attention has been paid to the role of environment in talent development. Larsen et al. (2012) specifically examines the development of elite youth soccer athletes in Denmark and advocates for future research with the holistic ecological approach to extend our understanding beyond the development of the athlete and to the overall talent development environment. Furthering this line of inquiry, there has been the creation of the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ), a multidimensional self-report scale that assesses talented athletes' environmental experiences (Martindale et al., 2010). Several subsequent studies using the TDEQ have helped to increase the validity of the scale in real sport settings (Chi, Wang, Pyun, & Martindale, 2015; Wang, Sproule, McNeill, Martindale, & Lee, 2011). The creation of the TDEQ scale and its refinement in research further validates the importance of environment in athlete development.

Soccer programs have different objectives and components and as such there can be large variance between ATDE's in the same sport. This study will specifically examine an ATDE that is proven to develop soccer athletes to senior levels with the hope that information can be shared to other state levels of ODP and potentially to regional and national levels. The aim is to improve ODP as an ATDE and increase the likelihood of elite youth athletes transitioning to senior levels.

Theoretical Framework

Before we move to the working models that will be used for this research, it is important to lay the theoretical groundwork. Specifically, tenets of systems theory, ecology psychology, and cultural literature that are pertinent to the proposed research will be reviewed.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory rather than a specific theory is a research tradition found across many academic disciplines. Systems Theory asserts that most phenomena must be considered in systems, that is to say examined as a whole rather than separated into parts where validity and important qualities of the system can be lost (Lewin, 1936). There are several tenets of Systems Theory that are pertinent to this research. First, and probably most importantly, is the notion that the whole is different than the sum of its parts. This is not to say that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, but rather that the whole when examined has different properties than its parts and as such should be examined in its totality (Lewin, 1939). While the parts of the system are important, especially in regard to how they function with each other, the focus remains on examining the whole. This connects to the notion of ecological validity where we seek to investigate phenomena in their natural context. In this research, the environment examined is complex and focusing on parts of the system would affect the interpretation of the researcher (Bertalanffy, 1968). Another important tenet of Systems Theory is that interactions between parts in the system represent themselves in patterns. For example, specific to this ATDE, participants are bound by rules, regulations, and cultural

understandings. Systems Theory focuses on the cyclical nature of development and how interactions and behavior from the environment are affected by the past, present, and future. In understanding a system, it is not possible to describe and examine it without attention to the environment.

Ecological Model of Human Psychology

In studying child development, Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979) created an Ecological Systems Theory that depicts the environment as a series of nested structures. Bronfenbrenner goes on to describe in detail the *micro system* made up of contexts where an individual spends significant time such as home and school; the *meso system* which entails the relationships between microsystems; the *ecosystem* which consists of contexts in which the individual is not situated but has direct influence on their development; and the *macro system* which includes larger contexts of society such as NGBs. Ecology, in this line of research, refers to the interrelatedness and interactions between individuals and the environment. As Bronfenbrenner refined his research, he developed an ecological framework for the study of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This research stresses how development is affected by the complex interrelationship between process, person, context, and time (PPCT model). As vital to human development, this model focuses on the interactions between the individual and context (e.g., objects, symbols, and people on the micro, meso, eco, and macro level) over a period of time (Henriksen, 2010). This model accepts that over time the individual and the context are both affected by their interactions.

Despite some sport work that has applied the ecological framework, the ecological approach has been largely missing in talent development research. Several calls have been made for more application of the ecological framework in talent development research (Araujo, 2009; Araujo & Davids, 2009; Henriksen, 2010; Larsen et. al, 2012). Even with the new attention to the ecological approach in relation to talent development, there is still acknowledgement that work in the field is at an early stage and there needs to be further inquiry into how to apply an ecological framework scientifically to talent development systems (Beek, 2009; Krebs, 2009).

Role of Culture

Culture is a topic well discussed in soccer development practice and in talent development research. The culture of a system, organization, or development program has effects on whether participants will be successful in that given environment. Important to take from the cultural perspective is the notion that there is no meaningful boundary between individual and context but rather that both are in constant negotiation with each other in creating a reality (Greenfield & Keller, 2004; Tudge, 2008). Specific to the working models used, Schein (1992) contends that organizational culture consists of three layers: cultural artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. Schein's (1992) research approach to culture emphasizes that an organization's culture is created and maintained by the environment members and their interaction with the context. This specific research will include the influence of national culture, youth culture, and specific soccer culture and seek understanding of the uniqueness of ODP's organizational culture.

Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE): Descriptive Working Model

This research will use the ATDE working model presented by Henriksen (2010) as a framework for describing the ODP environment and for explaining the roles and functions of different environmental components and relationships in the talent development process (for illustrated model see Appendix A). The environment is defined as a system with functions, a structure, and components (Henriksen, 2010). As stated earlier, an underlying notion is that the ATDE is a system with the objective of successfully transitioning elite youth athletes to senior levels. The elite youth athletes are found as the central focal point of the ATDE model. The other components of the model are structured into micro and macro levels and athletic and non-athletic domains. The micro level is the setting where the athlete spends the most time and includes activities and communication found in their daily life. The macro level refers to the social settings affecting the ATDE, which the athlete is not a part of, and the norms and practices of the cultures the athlete belongs to. The athletic domain covers all aspects related to the athlete's sport environment and the non-athletic domain represents all other aspects of an athlete's life (e.g., school).

The micro level includes the environment of the training/development program. This is an environment that includes coaches, administrators, and supporting personnel. The micro level also includes younger and older athletes in the environment who can have significant effects on the athlete's development experience. Beyond the specific sport program environment, the micro level also includes school, family, peers, and other sport entities or organizations that might affect daily life. The macro level refers to the

overall environment affecting an athlete's development. Included at this level are sport federations, governing bodies, the educational system, reference groups, and media (Henriksen, 2010). Various cultural contexts such as national sporting culture, general sporting culture, the specific sport culture, and youth culture are included at this level (Henriksen, 2010). Some components of the model clearly fall within one level and domain while others can transcend levels and domains. For example, coaches are specific to the athletic domain and micro level while families might be suitable for inclusion at both levels and domains. The model takes into account the interdependence of components and their possible operation in both levels and domains by including a dotted line in the illustrated model. The outer layer of the model represents the timeline and illustrates that the environment is dynamic and always changing. Components of the environment and participants are affected by the past, present, future of the ATDE. The working model takes into account the past, present, and future of environment as it affects participants and experiences within the environment. The model is ecological because it focuses on the context of development and how the environment affects athlete development processes. As Henrinksen (2010) summarizes, the model is holistic because it includes micro and macro levels, athletic and non-athletic domains, and the development (past, present, and future) of the environment.

Environment Success Factors (ESF): Explanatory Working Model

The ATDE provides a working model for a description of the environment, while the Environment Success Factors (ESF) model sets a framework for analyzing why the environment is successful. Specifically, the ESF provides a framework for structuring the

factors that contribute to the environment's success (see Appendix B for ESF working model illustration). At its starting point, the ESF explores the preconditions of the environment being examined. *Preconditions* are environmental resources including human, material, and financial resources. Human resources include quantity and quality of coaches, administrators, and personnel. Material resources can include training facilities and training equipment. Preconditions are all the factors necessary for the talent development process but not sufficient in isolation to lead to success. *Process* in the model refers to common activities in the given environment such as training and competitions. These activities can be specific to the environment and can include social events. Further, the model illustrates that the process in the form of daily routines can lead to three outcomes: the athlete's individual development and achievement, team development and achievements, and organizational development and culture. *Individual development and achievements* refers to the athletes acquiring of athletic skills and psychosocial competencies and how the interrelationship of these components leads to athletic success. *Team development and achievements* refers to the team's athletic success. Individual and team development and achievements are mostly a product of process but are also affected by organizational culture development and culture (Henriksen, 2010). The *organizational culture* of the environment is a focal point of the ESF model. Schein's (1992) theory is incorporated to provide a framework for analyzing the culture of the environment. The following three levels of the culture are described: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The ESF working model predicts that the ATDE's success is based on the interrelationship between preconditions,

process, individual development and achievements, and team development and achievements all being integrated by the organizational culture.

Moving to Empirical Models

Both the ATDE and ESF models are general working models based on research findings and theory. The comparative study of ATDEs (Henriksen, 2010), which was the basis of the working models, revealed a number of common features and characteristics that may explain the environment's success in developing elite athletes: (1) training groups with supportive relationships, (2) proximal role models, (3) support of sporting goals by the wider environment, (4) support for the development of psycho-social skills, (5) training that allows for diversification, (6) focus on long term development, (7) strong and coherent organizational culture, and (8) integration of efforts. These findings were consistent and comparable with suggestions by Martindale and colleagues (Martindale et al., 2007; Martindale et al., 2005) regarding effective talent development environments in a British context.

Both models will be used to guide the research including the creation of the interview and observation guides and the overall data collection process. After analysis, results will be used to create empirical models that are specific to the ODP environment. Empirical versions of the ATDE and ESF models will be presented that are specific to the ODP environment being examined and will provide the basis for important implications for youth soccer talent development in the US.

Research as Praxis

It is a main objective of this study to engage in action research meant to yield analysis and discussion in order to improve the ODP system. With the researcher and environment participants, the goal will be to work together to bring better understanding of the elite youth athlete within the state level ODP process. While the participants of the ODP environment and specifically the elite athletes are not a marginalized group per se, the goal still remains social transformation. In this case, a better understanding of the elite youth athlete in the ODP system can help bring dramatic changes to the overall program structure and talent identification and development processes. This type of praxis research seeks to understand, analyze, and critique the environment and in the process affect both theory and practice (Ryba & Wright 2010). Henriksen (2010) explains that the ATDE framework must be extended by not only looking at factors that lead to success but by also addressing problems in the environment. This study will aim to bring attention to factors leading to success in ODP and problematic components that need attention, while helping bridge gaps between theory and practice in soccer development (Jarvis, 1999). The holistic ecological approach can help practitioners be more sensitive to context and the working models provide a framework for practitioners to structure their interventions when aiming to improve ATDEs.

Chapter 3: US Soccer Development System

The US soccer model differs greatly from what is found in Europe and what most practitioners consider to be favorable conditions for elite soccer athlete development. The presence of high school and collegiate soccer add components that make the US model structurally different than the traditional European models. We must understand that as result we need to investigate how to improve talent identification and development specifically within the parameters presented by US soccer. US soccer also presents unique problems stemming from culture, geography, and socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics. For example, identifying and selecting players under a single national "umbrella" system becomes significantly more difficult when you have states that are hundreds of miles apart. These unique challenges add strength to the argument for more research that focuses on the US soccer athlete in his/her environment.

History and Landscape

The current structure of US youth soccer is complex and warrants a discussion here in order to situate the importance and relevance of the current research. With the emergence of the National American Soccer League (NASL) in the 1970s, soccer began to take a strong hold in certain geographic areas of the US. The result was the emergence of many clubs and leagues that provided playing opportunities for youth athletes all the way up to the professional level athletes. The rapid growth of the sport for children and early adolescents eventually led to the emergence of high school and collegiate competition across the entire country (Metzl & Micheli, 1998). For the most part, these clubs still control the landscape of youth soccer in the US with many of these clubs consolidating and forming super youth clubs (e.g., Austin Lonestar Soccer Club). The

growth of soccer in terms of participation numbers, facilities, and organizations is
undeniable. By all accounts and measures, soccer in this country is booming. The
USYSA claims to have over 3.1 million participants and numbers have consistently
grown over the years (US Youth Soccer, 2015). The game also continues to grow at the
collegiate and professional level. Major League Soccer (MLS) continues to expand with
the use of soccer-specific stadiums and new franchises and college soccer remains the
most popular sport for women on NCAA teams (Collins, 2006). The National Women's
Soccer League (NWSL) has also been able to remain functioning, which is a huge
success in light of the recent failings of the Women's United Soccer Association
(WUSA) and the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). Accompanying the participation
growth of soccer, there has been a parallel growth of corporate support and media
attention in soccer. In light of the participation and consumer growth at the youth and
professional levels, increased facilities, major corporate sponsorship, and national
television exposure (Oputu, 2014), it becomes evident that soccer in the US has become
ingrained within the national psyche and culture. However, the major downside of the
rapid growth is that US soccer has expanded without a centralized infrastructure or
framework. This disorganized growth has led to many of the problems that we confront
today. The US Soccer Federation (USSF), which serves as the national governing body,
has been tasked with organizing a sport development model that has grown too many
limbs and subsidiary organizations. The result is that US soccer now has a badly mis-
shaped development model where some organizations exist outside of the system and
many others overlap and perform similar responsibilities (Ziemer, 2011). US Soccer,
despite being recognized as the national governing body of soccer, often has little

organizational control of the different youth soccer entities. The overarching outcome is that the US has a soccer development model that is largely inefficient and in most regards failing at its most important task: identifying and developing young talent. The disjointed nature of the development system makes it difficult to implement a national program that can share resources and information in hopes of identifying and developing top talent. Figure 3.1 is a good representation of the complexity and multiple levels of structure in the US system. While the chart shows all the way to the FIFA and regional governing body level, focus should be on the multiple organizations at the youth level and important affiliates such as the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA). While this graphic efficiently shows the multiple layers of youth soccer, it is still missing other important soccer organizations such as ODP, the Developmental Academy, and the Elite Clubs National League (ECNL). Adding all the organizations would add any more branches and make this chart difficult to decipher. The main issue is that many of these organizations perform similar tasks and complicate the athlete pathway for youth athletes in the US.

Figure 3.1 US Soccer Organizations Chart

Unique Features

Apart from the structure of US soccer, there are unique features of the system that stand in stark contrast to the more traditional European models where most soccer development research has taken place (Collins, 2006). In the European context, most labeled and identified elite youth soccer athletes participate in clubs that are filled with professional coaches and staff that are committed to player development and helping athletes advance to top levels of the game. One of the most used measures for success of these professional academies is the number of youth athletes who are developed that enter the top European leagues (England, France, Germany, Spain, Holland, and Italy) (Piani & Sartini, 2005). The US system, on the other hand, is mostly based on the objective of progressing athletes to high school or college soccer (Ziemer, 2011). While the introduction of professional academies (e.g., MLS academies, independent academies) and some elite youth clubs has changed this focus a bit to player advancement to senior levels, the majority of soccer programs in the US do not have the ultimate objective of advancing players to senior levels (Smolianov et al., 2005). In most US youth contexts, the ultimate goal is to progress athletes to play at the college level. High school and college soccer provide unique playing contexts that are usually not seen in other development models. For example, in both these environments, it is not uncommon for there to be four-year age gaps between competing players. This is contrary to most models where players usually play their own age group or play up a year or two for ability purposes. In Europe, players at these ages (13-18 years) are training almost double the hours of their American counterparts and in environments where the main objective is to progress to senior levels (Ziemer, 2011). High school soccer especially provides an

uneven playing ability environment that is rarely seen in other contexts. This is due to the fact that at that age range, most players have voluntarily left the pathway to elite systems or have not been selected to continue. High school soccer can create situations in which top-level ODP players compete against beginner athletes on the same field.

The focus on college soccer and athletic scholarships seems to have exacerbated another major issue in US soccer, the pay-for-play format (Ozyurtcu, 2011). This issue is not unique to youth soccer but serves as a major access deterrent as it is estimated that playing on a competitive youth soccer travel team can cost between four to eight thousand dollars a year (Ziemer, 2011). Even involvement in ODP comes at a cost. To register and tryout at the ODP state level, the cost is between $100-$150 a player (Woitalla, 2007). This does not include the travel and accommodation costs that come with traveling to the selected tryout location. If an athlete is selected for state ODP pool training, then they are required to travel to about 5-6 events at different locations across the state over the course of several months. Costs associated with this travel can easily accumulate into the thousands of dollars and stands as a major deterrent for some athletes participating at this level (Woitalla, 2007). After state pool training and competitions, a player selected for the state team is required to attend at least two events and then travel to another state for participation in ODP Region Camp. Registration for Region Camp is approximately one thousand dollars and does not include travel costs. Just this superficial examination of costs shows that the system is built to favor individuals who have the financial resources to pay for all associated costs in elite soccer. For a system such as ODP that is focused on identifying and developing top talent, the pay-for-play structure prevents many athletes from entering this important elite athlete pathway and

disenfranchises athletes stemming from underprivileged backgrounds. Recently, the

Hispanic community has been a major focus for US Soccer because it has been identified

as an underrepresented population in ODP programs (Woitalla, 2007). In response, ODP

has implemented a scholarship program for top athletes, but the program is still in its

infancy and the athletes that benefit are very few. Once an athlete has been invited to

region pool/team level of ODP, then all costs with registration, uniforms, and lodging are

paid for by US Soccer. However, even one step away from national pool, athletes and

their families are still responsible for travel costs. In contrast, most elite athletes at

comparable ages in the European development system pay nothing for their participation

in clubs. Most of these athletes play for youth professional clubs, where the club has a

major interest in developing talent, or in programs that are subsidized by

community/government funds. In discussing and analyzing US soccer, it is vital to

include the issues and problems associated with the ingrained pay-for-play format.

Another unique aspect of US soccer is the popularity and growth of the women's

game. Markovits and Hellerman (2003) argue that the growth and success of women's

soccer is due in large part to an American sports "exceptionalism." Women's soccer

grew namely in part to the absence of soccer as a major part of America's hegemonic

sports culture that includes American football, basketball, baseball, and hockey.

Essentially, there was pubic space available because the men's game did not dominate

soccer space in this country. This falls in line with the growth of women's soccer in

other countries such as China and Norway where the soccer domain was not completely

occupied by men. The result has been large participation numbers and interest in

women's soccer all the way from the recreational level to the collegiate and professional

ranks (Kristiansen, Broch, & Pedersen, 2014; Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2012; Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Markovits and Hellerman (2003) identify two key milestones responsible for the proliferation of participation and spectatorship in women's soccer. The first of these was the implementation of Title IX of the 1972 Federal Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (further strengthened by Congressional legislation in 1988) which mandated more equitable distribution of resources for women's athletics. The second was the success of the 1999 US Women's National Team on home soil during the FIFA World Cup. The 1999 team still holds a special place in US soccer history and in the growth of the women's game. This remains a unique feature of the US soccer landscape, as there are numerous opportunities for girls and young women that are absent in most developed countries. The success of the women's game stands in direct contrast to the struggles of the women's game in Latin American and Asia where women have found little space to participate or enjoy similar opportunities afforded to their male counterparts (Metzl & Micheli, 1998). Further, US women's soccer has been a world powerhouse for many years while the men have struggled to compete with world powers such as Spain and Germany. Over 8.5 million women participants in the US is at or near the top of FIFA's list of countries with women athletes (U.S. Soccer Foundation). Nowhere else is the women's game the cultural equivalent to the men's game or anything nearly as close. Superstar players like Abby Wambach and Alex Morgan have become further ingrained in American sports history, as they were recently crowned world champions at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada. Women's soccer holds a unique space in America's larger sports culture and makes the US soccer landscape a different one compared to other soccer models.

Lastly, the geography of the US presents a unique challenge for a federation that is attempting to implement an overarching development philosophy, playing style, and identify the best American talent. The distance between major cities and soccer clubs is vast and causes logistical problems that are not present in other national development models. The problems and issues associated with travel distances and overall geographic sprawling are well documented at both the professional and youth levels of US soccer (Stewart & Meyers, 2004). For example, Region 3 of US Soccer and ODP includes a large geographic region of the South that includes state associations from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas (US Youth Soccer Region III, 2015). The vast amount of land to be covered in scouting and identification presents major problems for US soccer. The other main negative outcome stemming from this geographical sprawl is the difficulty US Soccer has controlling grassroots programs and the ability to implement a consistent development philosophy across the entire country. This is a product of both the mis-shaped structure of US soccer development and the difficulties brought forth by geography. Just with a review of college/high school soccer, the valuable cultural positioning of the women's game, and the issues brought forth by geography, it is clear that US soccer is a unique development context that merits its own thorough analysis both from researchers and practitioners.

Effects on Talent Identification and Development

The mis-shaped and decentralized structure of the US soccer system has had costly implications for talent identification and development. While the USSF (US Soccer) stands at the top of the soccer pyramid, it does not have full control or even

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contact with many of the smaller components of the system (e.g., smaller clubs in non-major cities). Most of the development initiatives set forth by US Soccer follow a top-down approach with the problem being that smaller soccer organizations often do not reap any tangible benefits. This creates a disjointed pathway for some athletes trying to gain promotion to the elite levels of the game. The youth soccer athlete pathway is disconnected at many points with lack of vertical integration and few entry points for athletes who do not enter the system early. One of the most troubling consequences is seen in the areas of talent identification and development. With the system being so disconnected, large numbers of athletes could potentially be left behind rather than developed into the next Messi or Ronaldo. The most severe level of failure in the system is that thousands of talented players probably never even enter onto the radar of US Soccer. More pertinent to this research though is the argument that we are failing the athletes that are currently in the system and trying to reach elite levels. It seems we need the critical lens turned toward the talent identification and development systems in place so we can at least begin to remedy one of the major problems in the system.

Olympic Development Program

The Olympic Development Program (ODP) was founded in 1977 to help "identify players of the highest caliber on a continuing and consistent basis" in order to improve the success of U.S. National teams in the international arena (US Youth Soccer, 2015). ODP is organized by the US Youth Soccer Association (USYSA) to identify and train the most talented youth soccer athletes in the country. The ultimate objective of ODP is to provide an identification/development system for youth national teams and senior national teams in FIFA and Olympic competitions. While there are now programs that

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compete with USYSA ODP, mainly the id2 program of US Club Soccer, ODP still

remains one of the most prestigious and recognized talent identification and development

program in the US. A majority of players currently on both the women and men's senior

US national teams were youth participants in ODP.

Organizationally, ODP is structured at three hierarchical levels: state, regional,

and national. Across the US, state associations hold tryouts for males and females in five

segmented age groups (under-13 through under-17). At all tryouts and training sessions,

athletes are evaluated by nationally licensed coaches in regard to the following four

development pillars of the game: technique, tactics, fitness and athletic ability, and

psychological component (U.S. Youth Soccer, 2015). Athletes selected are then invited to

join the state pool in their respective age group and then after several training sessions

with the state staff selections are made for state teams. State team selections are then

invited to attend their corresponding Region Camp where they will represent their state

(e.g., South Texas, North Texas). At the region level, ODP is segmented into four

regions: East, West, Midwest/North and South. Each region holds an annual camp where

each state association ODP team trains and competes against other state teams in their

age group. While players train and compete in games, regional and national coaches

identify players for participation in regional pools/teams. Athletes selected for their

region pool/team are considered to be the top players in their respective age group and

are invited to several inter-regional events where they are evaluated for participation in

national camp, pool, or team participation. This ODP identification and development

process has been the main feeder for male and female Under 14, Under 15, Under 16,

Under 17, Under 18, Under 19, Under 20, and Under 23 national teams and senior

national teams. ODP uses January 1 to December 31 for its selection calendar in order to comply with international FIFA youth competitions (Vincent & Glasmer, 2006). This research will specifically examine athletes at the state level and their selection process and experiences within the ODP environment. Participants are from the southern region of the US.

State Level

Since each state association operates ODP tryouts at their discretion, it is important to explain the tryout process specific to the environment examined. The researcher has intimate knowledge of this environment, as he has been a state staff ODP coach for the past three years. The state association examined has tryouts at six different cities within its geographical region. Locations are chosen from cities found in central areas of the state to allow for easier access for out of town participants. Athletes are only allowed to tryout at one location where they are evaluated over a two-day period by nationally licensed coaches that are part of the state ODP staff. Coaches then select the most able players from each age group (male and female) and invite them to train as part of the state pool. State pool training consists of approximately four separate training sessions arranged throughout the spring. State pool athletes also participate in friendly games against other state teams (e.g., Oklahoma, Louisiana). At the end of state pool training and friendly games, coaches select state team rosters of approximately 15-18 athletes. It is possible that a specific age group might have one, two, or three state teams selected. These are typical practices when the talent pool is considered deep in a specific age group. For example, the 02 boys might have two state teams while the 01 boys will only have one state team. State team selections will participate in one or two more

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training sessions before they head off to participate in Region Camp against other state teams. Athletes on these state teams are considered to be the best soccer players in their specific age group.

It is at the state level of ODP where coaches have the most contact and training time with players. It is evident that ODP at the state level plays a crucial part in the overall success of national level ODP since at the state level is where the majority of athletes try out for entry into the system. The state level is also where the majority of the screening and evaluation process occurs in ODP and therefore merits specific examination. It is important to further clarify the experience of athletes at the state level since it so integral to the overall success of ODP. This is one of the reasons why the current research chose to focus on the selection and identification of athletes at the state level. In order to improve the effectiveness of ODP at the region and national levels in selecting the best athletes, we must ensure that ODP is being effective at the state levels.

Specific ODP Research

The importance of ODP is evident in the literature as it has been one of the few sites where specific academic research on US soccer athletes has been conducted. Much of the research in the ODP environment has mirrored trends that are found in the greater talent literature and is focused on the physical and psychological characteristics of elite youth athletes. Further, while the literature into elite youth soccer athletes in the US is in its infancy, the emergence of ODP specific research demonstrates that we are starting to pay more attention to the elite athlete, specifically within the environment of their development system.

One of the trends of ODP research has been an examination of the relative age effect (RAE), which is a hot topic both amongst researchers and practitioners. Children in sports are usually segmented by age in order to control for developmental differences (Vincent & Glasmer, 2006). Even when team groupings are limited to one-year categories, research has still shown that there can be vast intellectual, physiological, and psychological differences between athletes (DeMeis & Stearns, 1992). In the training environment, these differences are seen daily as athletes competing in the same age bracket can almost be a year older than their competitors and often physical (e.g., height, weight) and psychological (e.g., maturity, focus) advantages are visibly apparent and significantly affect evaluation processes. The advantage of being born early within a cohort has been termed the "relative age effect". Vincent and Glasmer (2004; 2006) found in two large research studies, in an analysis of state, region, and national level ODP, that while there is only a marginal RAE for female players the male athletes showed a strong RAE at all levels. These findings are consistent with RAE research in regard to elite youth soccer athletes from different countries (Williams, 2010). This research suggests that there are major gender differences in the RAE of ODP athletes but also has implications for ODP identification and development processes in regard to evaluation processes. In line with the proposed research, we need a better understanding of how athletes are getting selected and what characteristics coaches and administrators are focusing on. Vincent and Glasmer's (2006) work suggests that there is still a large focus on physiological and psychological components and there might be a systemic failure in identifying late bloomers who might prove to be the best future senior players. There is also research focused on physiological components that has extended to try to

understand sport specific-skills of elite youth athletes. In an ambitious effort, Vanderford, Meyers, Skelly, Stewart, and Hamilton (2004) set out to quantify the physiological and sport-specific skill characteristics of ODP athletes by age and game experience. Their work is significant to the proposed research as they revealed information that is pertinent to the specific athletes and environment being examined and are one of the few studies aimed at addressing knowledge gaps with the US elite youth soccer athlete. While they provide an extensive profile of physiological (e.g., body composition, VO2 max) and sport specific skills (e.g., juggling, volleying) for the ODP athletes, their research is focused on individual athletes rather than the development environment and the soccer skills examined were tested in laboratory settings.

This study sought to understand development issues within the natural environment of the athlete. The goal was to turn the lens away from individual athletes and to examine their overall environment to provide a better understanding of talent identification and development processes.

Most ODP research has also followed the major trend of general talent research in deemphasizing the physiological components of elite youth athletes and turning the focus on psychological components of development. As Stewart and Meyers (2004) argue, one of the most overlooked components of development is examination of psychological traits in elite youth soccer athletes. They argue that a better psychological understanding of athletes is needed in order to improve how we treat and develop youth athletes. This lines up well with the holistic ecological approach that has a focus on psychology and how an athlete functions relative to all factors in an environment. They furthered their examination of the ODP environment in 2008 by specifically examining the coping skills

of athletes at the region level of ODP (Meyers, Stewart, Laurent, LeUnes, & Bourgeois, 2008). The study found that older, more experienced athletes revealed more athletic and pain coping skills than younger, less experienced athletes. This research is significant as it shows a move to understanding how certain outcomes created by the environment (e.g., stress) can affect the success and development of the athlete and how the complex nature of development warrants a multifaceted approach that can account for physiological, psychological, and environmental factors that affect an athlete (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Other researchers have also examined specific psychological components of elite youth soccer athletes. Burton, Gillham, and Glenn (2013) brought attention to mental skills and performance with specific attention to self-talk in the performance of elite youth female athletes at the ODP region level. While the scope of their research is a bit removed from the focus here, their research demonstrates the push for a complex understanding of factors affecting athletic development and how contemporary research in talent development is attempting to bridge the theory and practice gap.

As has been shown, there are few studies into the specific environment of ODP and elite youth soccer athletes in the US. Those that do exist are revealing of the research trends and the gaps of understanding that we have in regard to identification and development. All of the ODP studies still remain focused on the individual athlete even though they seek to understand development issues in a more multidimensional format. Despite the attention paid to interrelationships and factors that deal with the development environment, the focus remains on characteristics of the individual athlete. Further, the majority of studies focus on region level ODP, where subjects are very elite athletes who have already progressed through the beginning levels of ODP. This research contends

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that more focus needs to be put on the state level of ODP, as this is where the majority of athletes are cut and is the context where there is the most contact with athletes in terms of training and education. Lastly, the proposed research will look at the natural environment of ODP and not examine the athletes outside of their normal context. Examining them in situ will bring forth different concepts and themes that can be lost in other research approaches based on retrospective collection methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Problems with Current ODP

While ODP is credited by many as the main factor in bringing the national team programs to their current state (Woitalla, 2007), it has many problems and issues that mirror greater problems found throughout the US development system. As mentioned earlier, the pay-for-play format affects access to ODP tryouts and prevents many athletes from participating in state level tryouts. Specifically, US Soccer has identified that there is not a sufficient Hispanic representation in the overall ODP system. Several initiatives have been enacted to try to reach out to Latin communities to make the system more inclusive. However, entry and access into ODP still remains one of its major barriers to becoming a full-fledged successful athlete talent development environment. Further, there has been criticism in regards to the unnatural environment of ODP tryouts. Athletes are expected to travel to out of town locations and train/play with other players that are strangers. The concern here is that an athlete is unlikely to perform at his/her best when playing in unfamiliar contexts. Other identification programs have tried to address this problem by evaluating athletes in their club contexts where they are performing with athletes they know and in systems they are comfortable in (Woitalla, 2007). In terms of organization and structure, ODP has similar problems to US youth soccer clubs. Athletes

are required to travel extensively and can play upward of a 100 games a year (which well exceeds the recommended number of 30 games a year). There also exist major conflicts of interest as college coaches still heavily infiltrate ODP. College coaches are predominantly concerned with the recruitment of athletes for their own programs, which contradicts ODP's main mission of identifying and developing players for senior level success.

ODP, while being successful on many levels, needs to be revamped and altered to address these major concerns. Specific research into the environment of ODP will help bring attention to contemporary issues and help reveal models for overall program improvement. As Henriksen (2010) describes, the ATDE model needs to be further refined by using as it a framework to also reveal problematic areas in the talent development environment and to help structure intervention programs.

Competing Programs

There have been several soccer programs/systems that have emerged as competitors to ODP and are relevant to the environment of this research. Specifically, US Club Soccer's id2 program and the US Soccer Development Academy (DA). It is important to have an understanding of these programs as they affect the overall landscape in which ODP is situated and are also mentioned by several of the participants in this research.

USCS's id2 National Identification and Development Program is a unique counterpart to ODP. The aims are strikingly similar as id2 seeks to "provide an opportunity for the country's elite youth soccer player's to be identified and developed, and scouted for inclusion in the U.S. Soccer's National Team programs" (US Club

Soccer). The id2 is also given the status of an ODP program and is approved by the US

Olympic Committee and USSF. While the aims of id2 program are very similar to ODP,

there are some important structural and organizational differences between the two. First,

in contrast to ODP, there are no costs to be paid by athletes who are identified and invited

to participate in the id2 program. For athletes selected to id2 training camps, lodging,

meals, and training gear are provided at no cost by USCS and Nike (US Club Soccer). If

an athlete is selected for national team programming, all associated costs are also

covered, including any travel. This answers one of the critiques of the ODP program

about being too expensive for many athletes and families. Second, the id2 program is

centered on the idea of initially identifying athletes from their natural training

environments. For most of these elite youth athletes, these means they are identified from

their club environment and competitions. The rationale behind this structure is that clubs

have the most contact and impact on player development and as such club coaches and

competitions must be central to the id2 program. This program component was created to

counter the unnatural setting of athletes trying out with athletes and coaches with whom

they are unfamiliar. The id2 program also uses scouting information from the athlete's

regular club coaches and trainers as part of the evaluation process. Information provided

by club coaches is then compared with other independent scouting information. Third, the

id2 program targets only one specific age group annually for boys and girls. Currently,

the id2 program cycle is focused on boys born in 2003 and girls born in 2002. The age

groups are determined every year in consultation with US Soccer in order to align with

scouting priorities for the Under 14 National Teams. This is a much different set up than

ODP that targets five age groups every year. Overall, the id2 program seems to be

addressing some of the past critiques of the ODP program and could prove to have components that could later be integrated in the ODP program. Similar to ODP, the id2 program, after initial evaluation, involves inviting athletes to camps, competitions, and tours in order to identify top talent for US Soccer National Team programs. It is important to note that the reach of the id2 program still remains far less than ODP as there are only 4 training camps held throughout the calendar year. Based on performance at these training camps, athletes are selected for national selection programming.

Another more threatening competitor to the current format of ODP is the US Developmental Academy. The DA was created in 2007 to address many of the perceived elite player development issues in youth soccer. Overall, the DA mirrors the trends in the world's soccer academies as they promote a philosophy based on increased training, less total games, and more meaningful games using international rules of competition (ussoccerda.com). The DA currently has 96 participating clubs, comprised of teams in the Under 13/14, Under 15/16, and Under 17/18 age groups. The DA is seen as the most elite competition for youth males in the US with all MLS professional teams having teams that participate. Overall, the DA has provided a system that parallels the competition of European youth academies. The DA also serves as a valuable identification landscape for US Soccer with most league games attended by scouts and all major events observed by national team staff. One of the more interesting components of the DA is that academy players and teams do not participate in any outside competitions without the written consent of US Soccer DA staff. DA athletes must choose to participate full time and are excluded from participation in other leagues, tournaments, ODP, or all-star events. Full time athletes can only participate in DA events or in US Soccer training centers or Youth

National Team duty. While targeting similar elite youth athletes to ODP, the DA serves as a more permanent environment than ODP where athletes can train year round in a professional club training environment. With the continued emphasis on the DA from US Soccer, it is likely to continue to grow and as a result might change the future objectives of programs like ODP. US Soccer even plans to expand the DA program for girl's club teams starting in 2017.

Both the id2 program and the DA are pertinent to this discussion as they are competitors of ODP and affect the overall environment in which ODP operates. The growth of these programs could potentially alter the program objectives of ODP and the way it currently is structured and operates. In discussing the general environment of soccer in the US, many participants referred to the id2 program and the DA so it was vital to provide information on these programs.

Chapter 4: Methods

Research Design

The research design used for this dissertation project is a case study analysis based on an explorative integrative approach. It is an investigation of the ODP talent development environment at state level and how the athlete fits and experiences that environment with attention focused on the talent development process. This is a fairly new field where models and model components are still being refined so qualitative methods were chosen for the main components of the study (Henriksen, 2010). Qualitative research is valuable in that it can be used to examine complex phenomena such as organizational processes, process changes over time, and social interactions that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Patton, 2002). The research takes a holistic ecological perspective in examining the functioning of the athlete talent development environment (ODP) in a specific time and place.

Case Study Method

Case studies are a valuable research method as they allow for understanding of environmental complexities, retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events, and produce analysis that can be used directly to improve the environment (Yin, 2009). In other words, a case study approach can be effective in both testing and building theory while producing results that will be beneficial to a practitioner as findings will be valid to the specific environment (Maaloe, 1996; Yin 1989). Scarce athlete development studies have attempted to understand the overall environment in which an elite athlete develops and a case study approach allows understanding of all the factors that affect a specific development system (Kruuse, 2008). For these reasons, the case study was an

appropriate methodological choice as it allows the researcher to work in and with the environment.

Case study research stems from the constructivist paradigm, which claims that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). Constructivism is based on the premise of a social construction of reality (Searle, 1995) and is an approach that allows for close collaboration between researcher and participants with the main objective of allowing the participants' actions, experiences, and reality to be at the forefront of the research (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Lather, 1992). The case study approach recognizes the role of the researcher as co-constructor of the reality that is being studied. Case studies are widely used in research and several benefits of using case study research have been identified in the literature. Because of the in-depth and multi-natured approach of case studies, results usually shed light on aspects of human thinking and behavior that are difficult to reveal or impractical to study in other ways (McLeod, 2008). Case studies are often used in exploratory research because of their ability to unmask new phenomena and explain difficult interrelationships between environmental components. The main identified benefits of case study research are the ability to provide rich qualitative information, insight for future research, and the revealing and understanding of phenomena that are difficult to study in other methods (McLeod, 2008). Because case studies often deal with a specific environment or phenomena, one of its main critiques as a research approach is that findings are not necessarily generalizable to a wider population. Since case studies are based on the analysis of mostly qualitative data, there is opportunity for observer/researcher bias that could affect data interpretation. In this approach, it is important that the researcher does not distort data to fit within

predetermined categories or theories. Other critiques of case study research are that studies are often difficult to replicate and more time-consuming compared to other methods. Flyvbjerg (2006) combats several common misunderstandings, including that single case studies are not generalizable and that they gravitate toward research bias, and concludes that better executed case studies are needed in a variety of scientific disciplines. Specifically, Flyvbjerg (2006) explains that the generalizability of a case to a wider environment is fully dependent on how the case is selected. A carefully chosen case can be used to generalize and contribute to the development of scientific knowledge in a specific field. Further, Campbell (1975) answers the critique regarding researcher bias and says it is fallacious, as case study research requires its own, and different rigor from what is used in quantitative research. It is expected that findings of this single case study can contribute to knowledge to be used in the overall ODP system.

Explorative Integrative Approach

The overall approach used in the case study is the explorative integrative perspective. Maaloe (1996) outlines three different traditions in case study research, a theory test approach, a theory building approach, and an explorative integrative approach. First, a test theory approach (Yin, 1989, Popper, 1934, 1968), also referred to as a top-down approach, begins research with clear predetermined categories and then uses the investigation to either accept or reject the hypothesis being tested. In this tradition, the origin of the theory is not important but rather the ability to have other researchers test it looking for acceptance or rejection of specific hypotheses. Second, in a theory building approach (Glauser & Strauss, 1967), also called a bottom-up approach, the researcher gathers unbiased data with the aim of inductively forming theory. This form of grounded

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theory relies on the researcher entering the field without preconceived notions or categories and letting the theory evolve from the gathered data. Henriksen (2010) aptly points to two major limitations found in the testing theory and theory building approaches. Entering the field with preconceived notions and categories can lead a researcher to miss important data while believing a researcher can enter a field without bias is a naïve ideal (Maaloe, 1996). As Maaloe (2004) explains, the primary purpose of both approaches is explanation. Despite the differences between the approaches, the common feature and principle of case studies is that the researcher cannot control the environment (Larsen, 2013). While a researcher's own preconceptions, awareness, and sensitivity to the environment is pivotal to the study, it is vital for the experiences of the environment participants to emerge as the most important data.

Maaloe (2004) suggests a third approach that extends past searching for explanatory evidence. The explorative integrative approach addresses the main limitations of the two approaches. Maaloe (2004) describes explorative integration as "a cyclical approach of continuous dialogue between pre-chosen theories, generated data, our interpretation and feedback from the informants, which will hopefully lead us to a more inclusive theory building or even understanding" (p. 8). This integrates the methods of theory testing and theory building into one framework. Malooe (2004) further describes the beauty of case studies in being able to explore links between events, reactions (including decisions, emotions, and reflections) and behaviors as they emerge in real life. It is important to note that this is a departure from the majority of talent research that relies on past examinations of athletes and their environments and provides snapshots of contexts and not in situ information. Case study research, with this approach, has been

used previously in youth soccer development by examining an overall ATDE in Denmark (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013) and player's psychosocial skills in an academy environment (Larsen et al., 2012).

This study uses the explorative integrative approach. Before field entry occurs, the researcher thoroughly reviewed pertinent theories and empirical studies on talent development and specifically researched elite youth athletes in soccer with the objective of framing and informing concepts driven by collected data from the ODP environment. The ATDE model and ESF working models were used to design the instruments for data collection that will be adapted and refined throughout the research process in order to ensure that the experiences of the participants are guiding the research. The results were analyzed in a format that brings forth the unique characteristics of the research environment, highlights components that lead to success in the environment, and informs on areas for improvement. In other words, a major research objective was to produce an analysis that leads to improvement of the athlete's experience in the ODP environment with specific focus on the talent development process. The results of the case study are summarized and presented in empirical models of the ATDE and ESF.

Holistic Ecological Perspective

As examined in the earlier literature review, the majority of talent development research has focused on individual athletes or on other factors such as parents and coaches in the micro-environment (Henriksen, 2010). The ecological perspective helps shift the focus away from the individual athlete and on to the complex environment in which they develop (Araujo & Davids, 2009). Ecological systems theory suggests that development is an interplay of many factors across a variety of settings (Bronfenbrenner,

1999). This approach allows not only for an examination of a wider development context and focus on the interplay between factors but also allows for in vivo analysis of the system. This is counter to much research that examines specific parts of athletic development systems in isolation and relies on retrospective analysis as it applies to future processes (Bloom, 1985; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). The holistic ecological approach will bring a new perspective to the development of the US elite youth soccer athlete as it will add depth to previous analyses by focusing attention on both micro and macro environmental factors and the interplay between them and factors from athletic and non-athletic domains. The ATDE examined is considered holistically examining micro and macro level factors in both athletic and non-athletic domains. Using this approach will bring forth the perspectives and experiences of several environmental participants including athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents. This research takes a contemporary view of the functioning environment with an eye for improving talent processes for future ODP athletes. However, the model presented also takes into account the development of the environment and how history, present time, and the future all affect functioning of the environment.

Research Process

Procedure

In order to proceed with the research, permission was obtained from the Director of Coaching (DOC) of the state soccer organization who also serves as the head ODP coordinator. This DOC obtained permission from his superior who is a direct representative of US Soccer. Permission was obtained to both observe the environment of ODP during tryouts, training, and games as well as during breaks where informal

conversations took place. The DOC also provided access to important program information from past years. It was agreed that identities of participants including athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents would all be held confidential and not disclosed outside the research team. Findings will be shown to environment coordinators before publication. When the research is complete, the principal researcher will present findings to stakeholders in ODP in order to open dialogue about results and seek improvement to the current system.

Preliminary acceptance from the athletes was gained through their parents/guardians. Before field observation and interviews began, parents and athletes were informed about the aims of the study, confidentiality issues, and that participation was voluntary. Participation observation was carried out during tryouts, training sessions, state pool friendly games, state team training sessions/games, and at Region Camp. The observation period lasted approximately six months and during that time the principal researcher engaged in informal conversations with athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents.

Procedure for Interviews

The principal researcher selected interviewees who could provide rich information about the environment. All interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes and were audio recorded and then transcribed later. Interviews took place as often as possible in the natural setting of the participant or an agreed upon location where the participant was comfortable. Before interviews, the researcher reviewed all basic study information and reiterated that participation was voluntary at all times. All consent was obtained before interviews began. The researcher carefully selected six ODP coaches, six ODP

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athletes, two ODP administrators (including the Director of state ODP), and four parents to participate in interviews. Interviews with the athletes were intimate, caring, and open in hopes of better understanding their subjective life world and with special attention paid in order to not question the experiences of the athletes (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005: Henriksen, 2010). Interviews with coaches and administrators were more confrontational using contradictions between data in order to explore a deeper understanding of the environment. In the confrontational style, the researcher actively questions and challenges ideas of the interviewee in order to make the interviewee reflect on their thinking and experiences within the environment (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). This process results in a negotiation of meaning where the researcher and interviewee contribute to the production of new knowledge during the context of the interview itself.

Procedure for Observations

The duration and organization of the observations varied depending on the situation. The times of observation included training sessions, competition, and social events. Observations also included informal talks with participants in the environment. Observations often lasted from ten minutes to an hour and notes on approximately twenty observations were included in analysis. These conversations were not audio recorded but were included in the field notes and research diary. It is important to note that the principal researcher was an active participant in the environment.

Environment and Participants

Selection of Research Setting

The ODP program at the state level was selected because it is the main entry point for athletes attempting to be identified through ODP into youth and senior US Soccer national teams. It is at the state level where there are the largest player cuts and where the majority of players who participate are not selected to continue in the ODP development system. This environment was chosen because it fulfills certain criteria of a successful ATDE. ODP has a long history of producing players that enter the highest levels of the game. As Henriksen (2010) describes, one of the main criterion of a successful ATDE is a consistent record of producing elite senior athletes. ODP serves as an environment that develops athletes that play at international levels and is a development system that produces a large number of athletes that make successful transitions to senior levels of soccer. ODP also satisfies a second condition of a successful ATDE, which is that it produces a large number of senior athletes, compared to other soccer development programs. For example, at the FIFA 2014 World Cup in Brazil, 14 of the players on the final 23-man U.S. roster were members of the ODP system during their youth careers (USyouthsoccer.org). On the women's side, the success of ODP in developing senior players is even more staggering. Of the 23-woman roster, who eventually won the Canada 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, 22 were alumni of the ODP system (USyouthsoccer.org). The nation's original player identification program has demonstrated its ability to produce top senior talent.

It is important to note at this juncture that the main criterion for considering an ATDE successful is its ability to produce to assist prospective youth athletes in making

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successful transitions to senior levels. The objective is not to produce high-level youth

results or healthy young athletes. This research will utilize a paradigmatic case selection

method that aims to maximize information from a single case and analysis of that case to

inform a greater area of concern (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This dissertation will aim to provide

new and insightful information to holistic ecological perspectives in talent development.

In researching one case, the aim remains theoretical or analytical generalization rather

than statistical generalization. Specific to this research, examination of the ODP state

level environment and its participants can have implications for other ODP state systems

and the national ODP system. Overall, the dissertation should provide information to

enrich understanding of development theory, talent development environments,

characteristics of successful soccer environments, and provide applicable knowledge to

current issues in US soccer development.

Participants

The key members of the environment are the youth athletes that have participated

in the ODP selection process and have at least been selected to the state pool level for

their age group. This means they have been through the state selection process and have

at least advanced to state pool training (extended over several months). It is important to

note that the pool of athletes who tryout for ODP are usually athletes who are already

considered elite by their local club team or high school. This means the pool is comprised

of a select group of young, highly skilled elite athletes. The target group for the study was

13-16 year olds involved in the ODP state selection and development process. According

to the development models used by US Soccer, athletes in these age groups find

themselves in Zone 2 of their development. In Zone 2 of development, the emphasis

should be on their training culture and daily training environment. Matches should be

limited at this age at an appropriate level of competition but the main focus should

remain on the player's training. During these stages, players are either in their *training to*

train or *training to compete* stage. In the *training to train* stage, much focus is on the

building of physiological aspects and skill building for future success. In the *training to*

compete stage, the focus shifts to optimizing sport and fitness preparation with specific

attention to functional training that will aid in performance (USyouthsoccer.org). Both of

these stages, which encompass the specializing and investment years, are fundamental to

long term athlete success and set the foundation for entry into senior levels. Besides the

youth athletes, the environment has a number of other participants such as coaches,

administrators, parents and other athletes. Since this research is applying a holistic

ecological approach, all participants will be included in the study either as interviewees

or during observation.

Instruments and Data Collection

A case study allows for the use of multiple data sources. In this research, data will

be collected via interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The overall

purpose is to understand the complexities and interrelationship between factors and

components in the ODP environment as they pertain to talent development processes.

Interviews

Since the ODP environment is made up of various participants, it was necessary

to construct separate interview guides for athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents

(for sample interview guides see Appendix C, D, and E). The created interview guides

were made to specifically provide a rich description of the ODP environment and

examine factors dealing with success in the environment. The interview guides allow for interviewee reflection and perspective to be at the core of the data but also helped guide participants to comment on core themes of talent identification research and pre-selected issues that are derived from the ATDE and the ESF working models (Kvale, 1983; 1996). While the interview guides followed a similar structure, they allowed each participant group to expand on their specific perspectives and experiences (Kvale, 1983). Athletes were interviewed about environmental facilitators and barriers that were encountered during their experiences and about the environment's perceived effects on their development. Focus was on the micro-environment with attention to experiences in tryouts, training, ODP games and their general soccer. Coaches were interviewed about how they ensure that the ODP environment is conducive to talent development. Focus was on how the environment affects the athletes and factors/conditions that help optimize success. This section also included questions regarding factors/conditions that inhibit success. ODP administrators were asked to focus on macro environmental factors including influences, historic dimensions, resources, and program initiatives pertinent to the environment. The overall focus remained on the experiences of the elite youth athlete in the environment and how the environment affects their developmental process bringing understanding to the athlete in the context and the context in general.

Each interview guide was divided into four parts to follow themes and factors discussed in the ATDE and ESF working models. The introductory part allowed participants to get comfortable answering background questions and to provide overall impressions of the environment. Questions include: "Tell me about yourself and your role in the environment?", "How do you feel as a participant in this environment?", "Do

you consider ODP to be a successful talent development environment?", "How do you

know the environment is successful?", "What do you consider to be the factors that lead

to success?" In the descriptive part, participants were asked about the role and functions

of specific environmental components. Focus was on the interrelationship between the

components with specific attention to micro and macro factors presented in the working

models. Questions that were asked to coaches include: "What are important resources

available to you to aid in the development process? And what are barriers to better

development?" Athletes were asked questions that include: "Who helps you in your

process of making to an elite level?" Who hinders you?" Questions were also asked about

the relationship between micro and macro components of the environment such as "What

does ODP do to maintain relationship with the athletes' families?" Based on the ESF

model, in the explanatory section, participants were asked about factors contributing to

the environment's success with specific questions about preconditions, process,

individual and team development and achievement, and organizational culture. Questions

for coaches about preconditions included "How would you describe ODP's main

resources?" Questions to athletes about process included "Describe a typical training

session?" This was followed with specific questions about training, competitions, and

social events in environment. Questions about group culture included "What

characterizes the culture in the environment?" This was followed by more specific

questions like "What do you do to maintain the culture?" Questions for athletes, coaches,

and parents about individual development included: "How does being part of this

environment affect athlete development?" In the final section, participants were asked

about their perspective on the history and future of the ODP environment. Questions

about the current, past, and future state of the environment included "What can be done to make this environment more successful?" and "What are important program components to keep?"

Participant Observation

In line with Systems Theory, to achieve contextual sensitivity, it is necessary to examine a phenomenon within its natural context. As a result, emphasis was placed on participant observation in the natural setting of ODP. Participant observation has been shown to be a good research strategy to examine contexts that involve complex social relations (Spradley, 1980). As mentioned before, participant observation allows for in situ observations of social practices under study (Tanggaard, 2006). Being able to examine natural situations and normal life occurrences within the environment allows for a deeper understanding of the social practices and culture. Being involved and immersed with participants in the culture allowed for insight into cultural artifacts (e.g., clothing, customs) that revealed nuances of how the environment creates and maintains the culture. Getting a feel for the culture and being involved with participants gave the researcher special access to themes that interviewees might have failed to reveal. These discovered themes helped in refining the proposed interview and observation guides. Participant observation is also valuable in that it allows observation of the participants across several contexts. Examining the athlete across different contexts such as training, competition and meetings helped reveal insights into the elite athlete that have not been addressed by past research.

The observation guide was loosely structured on predetermined categories and themes from pertinent theory. The goal was to adapt and refine observations as the

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environment was analyzed and as is called for in the explorative integrative approach. Several themes from the ATDE and ESF working models were used. Questions formed from the ATDE model included "Who do athletes interact with and what characterizes these interactions?", "What characterizes interactions, not including the athletes themselves, that promote the development of the elite athlete?" Areas of inquiry derived from the ESF model included preconditions, process, individual development, and organizational culture. The observations included a variety of informal conversations that took place with athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents during the process of the research. One of the main advantages of informal conversations is that it allows the researcher to ask about participant experiences in situ rather than having to wait and discuss the event from memory (Tanggard, 2006). Questions that were asked in these informal conversations included "What is good about this environment?", "What do you think is working to improve the athlete development in this environment?" and "What is different here from most soccer environments?" During observations, the researcher kept two main forms of records. Field notes were utilized to write down quick notes and observations to help assist the researcher in later analysis (Patton, 2002). Field notes refers to notes created by the researcher during fieldwork to remember and record the behaviors, activities, events, and special occurrences in the environment (Schwandt, 2015.) The field notes, which were both descriptive and reflective, helped produce meaning and an understanding of the culture, social phenomena, and environment being studied (Schwandt, 2015). The researcher also kept a diary with more extensive notes, thoughts, questions, and observed environmental patterns. The research diary was instrumental in helping to refine research questions and interview/observation guides.

Analysis of field notes and the research diary occurred during and immediately following observations. This preliminary analysis fostered self-reflection that is crucial for understanding and meaning interpretation in qualitative research. This type of analysis also revealed emergent themes that aided in shifting researcher attention to foster a more developed analysis (Wolfinger, 2002).

It is important to remember that the principal researcher has been involved in the state ODP staff for approximately three years. During this time period, the researcher has been involved in the selection and development of numerous athletes across different age groups. Main responsibilities for an ODP staff coach are to aid in the selection and identification of athletes during the tryout process and then train athletes that have been selected into the state pool. Training sessions and friendlies take place over several months and conclude with the coaches selecting athletes to participate on their respective state teams. The researcher has also traveled to Region 3 ODP Camp where state teams train and compete against other state teams in the region. The researcher also participated in the ODP process as a player and was a participant on the state team so he has intimate knowledge of the system. Participant observation was valuable for this research as it allowed for in situ observation of the environment and allowed the researcher to further understanding of the environment and culture. Further, participant observation allowed the researcher to examine the athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents in different contexts of the environment such as training, games, and informal settings, which extends knowledge of soccer ATDEs.

Analysis of Documents

The research also examined a diverse group of documents that relate to ODP including ODP state, region and national websites, ODP training sessions and training programs, and other documents describing the mission, process and objectives of ODP. The document analysis provided another layer for informing about the overall ATDE and provided substantial data (Ramian, 2007). An important part of this document analysis was the evaluation system used for participants that have tried out for ODP. This current evaluation system has been in place for two years at the state level of ODP in this context. During tryout sessions, usually a two-day process with both morning and afternoon sessions, coaches are expected to evaluate all players attending that specific tryout. Coaches have been educated in the selection process and are expected to evaluate players on a spectrum of 30 criteria (see Appendix G for ODP evaluation guide). These criteria stem from the four major development groups used for evaluation: technique, tactics, fitness and athletic ability and psychological component. Criteria under technique include receiving, shooting, technical ability under pressure, and dribbling. Criteria under tactics include identifying attacking opportunities, making decisions without the ball, reading the game, and making decisions with the ball. Criteria under fitness and athletic ability include speed, strength, endurance, and balance. Criteria under psychological components include creativity, work rate/intensity, and ability to play under pressure. From these 30 criteria, coaches are expected to select three strengths and three weaknesses for every player trying out. These evaluation scores along with discussions with coaches lead to final selection results. All athletes are then ranked within their age group with top ranking athletes (e.g., 1-26) being invited to state pool training. Having

access to these evaluation scores added another layer of analysis to the ODP environment. There are few studies on athlete development that link the development environment to how athletes are actually being selected and evaluated in that environment. Since one of the ultimate objectives of this research is to improve the effectiveness of ODP selection and development processes, it is valuable to know which athletes and with what characteristics are being selected. This data also provides insight into the culture of selection and identification that has been created in the ODP system. Data from documents was compared to observations and interviews and other data obtained from the environment.

A hallmark of case study research is the use of multiple data sources-- a strategy that helps enhance data credibility (Patton, 1990). Principal methods of data collection included semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, analysis of documents, and evaluation of ODP tryout results. Unique in comparison to other qualitative methods, case study research allows researchers to integrate quantitative data, which can facilitate in bringing a more holistic understanding to the environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This research uses quantitative data regarding player evaluations to add strength to the findings.

Data Treatment and Interpretations

As is the case in qualitative research, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. As noted earlier, the approach to the case study was explorative integration. All interview audio recordings and observation notes were transcribed and coded. The transcripts were coded using a two-step deductive-inductive approach. First, there was a deductive categorization of data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to describe the ODP

environment by means of the ATDE working model. This analysis resulted in an empirical version of the ATDE model that described the ODP environment. The second step of analysis was a theoretical reading of the data where the purpose was to generate explanatory themes in the ESF working model (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This analysis resulted in an empirical version of the ESF model with aims of explaining the talent development success of ODP at state level. These two steps of analysis combined in what is called systematic combining where theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously as is consistent in the explorative integration approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The ATDE and ESF working models, explained in detail earlier, were used as the framework but as new ideas and categories emerged in analysis they were included in the coding. Specifically, a node tree based on the working models was used and then expanded on with the emergence of new ideas and categories (see Appendix F for beginning coding tree). Previously coded data was then rechecked for any relation to the new emergent categories. The deductive part of the analysis primarily used higher order themes derived from the working models (e.g., elite athletes, coaches, experts, family), while low order themes were inductively derived from the data (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b). Overall, the research used the "constant comparison method" advocated by Glauser and Strauss (1967) to reveal the themes of the research. This approach allows a constant comparison of data and emergent themes to ask the difficult "how?" and "why" questions of the research and reveal the overall themes that are most pertinent to the environment being examined. Further, interviews and observations were subjected to meaning condensation where statements were shortened to allow for more precise phrases that made analysis easier (Kvale, 1996).

After each node was read and analyzed, the emerging main themes were listed with a corresponding summary. The interpretive approach attempted to bring forth the realities and experiences of participants in the environment.

One of the main objectives of using a case study is to allow for analytic generalization. Analytical generalization has been defined by Maaloe (2004) as a "tentative conjoining of fresh observations in order to create new and more comprehensive wholes (induction) with previously identified connections – expressed as theories – which are believed to be relevant to the present case (deduction)..." (p. 21). That is the purpose of the research is to add to already existing knowledge in the working models and help refine theories and the overall theoretical framework (Maaloe, 2004). To help capture the complexity and details of the interactions in the environment, the data is presentation is a combination of in-depth interviews, observations (e.g., informal talks, meetings) and analysis of documents which all together should provide an in-depth and thick description of the ODP environment (Larsen, 2013).

The research also resulted in empirical models of the ATDE and ESF that are specific to the ODP environment and will help further research into athletic talent development environments. Analysis was done with specific attention to components and structure of the environment and the factors that make it successful. It is a primary objective of the research that the empirical models of the ODP environment be translated into guidelines and recommendations for improving the ATDE. All analysis was situated within contemporary findings in talent development and specific soccer research with focus on environment and development processes.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In the case study approach, several steps can be taken in the design and implementation of the research to improve overall study quality and trustworthiness. In the data collection phase, all interview guides were designed using open-ended questions to allow the experiences and perspectives of the participants to take center stage. As is recommended in semi-structured interviews, inquiry moved from general questions to more specific probing. Similarly, the observation guides were loosely structured around predetermined theoretical themes but the objective was to allow the participant experiences and the nuances of the environment to emerge. All data treatment was handled by the principal researcher but there was discussion with the research team regarding data categories and interpretation to establish the accuracy of the interpretations . These discussions with the research team helped improve reliability of coding and overall analysis of data. A combination of data sources and data collection techniques, which will ensure that the phenomena is being viewed and explored from multiple perspectives, was used to increase validity of interpretations and aided in the confirmation of findings (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989, Patton, 2002). Further, the researcher has been immersed in this specific environment for several years and has established rapport with a majority of the environmental participants. This familiarity with the environment helped in understanding the perspectives of participants and helped reduce the potential for social desirability responses in interviews (Krefting, 1991). During data collection and analysis, communicative validity was established by continuously doing stakeholder checks where results of the case study were presented to environment participants (Patton, 2002). This continual conversation with participants

allowed them to discuss and clarify researcher interpretations and contribute new or

additional perspectives relating to the environment being studied. This member checking

throughout the research also helped ensure accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Gruba,

1985). This process altered some data interpretation and adjustments were made

accordingly.

Chapter 5: Results

Athlete Talent Development Environment Working Model

The following section will provide a description of the ODP environment at state

level and result in an empirical version of the ATDE. This section will provide the thick

description of the ODP environment and examine the most important components and

structure of the environment. This empirical version of the ATDE will set the foundation

for examining the factors that contribute in ODP's success in developing elite soccer

athletes.

Introduction to the ODP Environment

United States Youth Soccer Association (USYSA) ODP was formed in 1977 to

help identify a pool of players in each youth age group from which a national team could

be selected for international competition. ODP also serves to provide high-level training

to benefit and enhance the development of athletes at all levels. The program has the

mission of using and carefully selecting nationally licensed coaches that can exchange

ideas and curriculum to improve all levels of coaching and training in the US. The

overarching philosophy of ODP is to identify players of the highest caliber on a

continuing and consistent basis in order to lead to increased success for the US National

Teams in the international arena.

In 1979, the ODP program expanded and plans were made that resulted in a more

efficient program with strategies and multi-year development plans. At this point, state

associations were encouraged to develop programs that supported and worked in

cooperation with regional and national programs. In 1982, ODP added a girls program

and implemented a full committee that allowed member representation from every

region. From 1982 until the present time, international events for youth national teams have increased significantly and ODP now hosts trials and player pools for five age groups both in the boys' and girls' program.

ODP has a state association in each of the fifty states that holds tryouts on an annual basis. Age groups and tryouts can differ from state to state based on seasonal and state considerations. Since tryouts throughout the state associations have many similar characteristics, it is important to understand the general protocol for state ODP tryouts. In most states, athletes are selected on the basis of open tryouts. Open tryouts are when an athlete that fits the general age requirements can participate without an invitation. Tryouts are conducted by state association coaches who are recognized for their ability to identify and train elite athletes. Some state associations combine scouting techniques and invitations to certain players with the open tryouts. In most cases, the state association coach or state director of coaching will be assisted in the selection process by several other qualified coaches from clubs, colleges, or professional settings. All ODP athletes are selected on the four components that make up a soccer player: technique, tactics, fitness and athletic ability, and psychological component (attitude). After athletes are selected to state pools/teams, they begin the process of attempting to be selected for regional camps/teams.

USYSA is divided into four geographical regions, each which offers a regional camp for state association ODP teams in each eligible age group. Region Camps are designed to provide high-level competition and training for attending athletes. During training and competition, athletes who are capable of performing at a higher level of play are identified for possible national team camp, pool, or team participation. Each region

varies in the way they identify and select athletes. Athletes that progress past the region level have the opportunity to participate in National Camp and Interregional events held throughout various locations in the US and abroad. A national team staff coach is present at these events to observe, train, and identify players for placement in the national pool or national team.

Description of the Environment

Micro-environment: Athletic domain. For this study, the target group was athletes 13-16 years old that had at least progressed to the state level pool of ODP in this particular state association. For this seasonal year, ODP was comprised of athletes born in 2004, 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000, and 1999 in both boys and girls categories. On the boy's side, athletes born in 2005 were allowed to participate if they had received a special recommendation from a coach. Participants in ODP this year ranged from 11 to17 years old. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on athletes between 13-16 years of age. Athletes at this age are considered to be in prime development years.

Elite athletes. While participation numbers have greatly increased for girls in the past years, the boys' side of ODP has consistently had higher participation numbers and thus a higher number of athletes selected into state pools/teams. A coach explained the growth in participation numbers:

> The boy's side has grown tremendously. With more numbers, we can give the opportunity for more athletes to be on the state team and then travel to Region Camp.

The athletes are comprised of young men and women that participate in high-level club competition in the region. There are some athletes that do not participate in club soccer

and tryout for ODP but that is uncommon. These club environments are where the athletes spend a large portion of their soccer time and receive the majority of their training. Many of the athletes have club teammates that are trying out or are familiar with opponents from different clubs they play throughout the seasonal year. The general environment of tryouts and training is friendly with most athletes understanding that they are individually trying out and that ODP is an environment where many aspects of a player's attitude (e.g., willingness to work with teammates) is being evaluated. A player explained how they perceive the ODP environment:

> It is obviously competitive out there but there is respect and its healthy
>
> competition. You also have to work together so it can't be all about you.

This area of the US is a highly developed soccer region where there is top national talent and an extremely structured youth soccer system. Most of the ODP athletes come from top-level youth clubs and are exposed to professional training in their daily routines. This region also has three major cities that all have some form of college level and professional soccer. This contributes to the soccer environment and shows people that there are extended soccer opportunities for the elite soccer athletes. A coach discussed his opinion on soccer talent in the region:

> I firmly believe we have some of the top talent in the country…we have a
>
> lot of opportunities for players and have top youth clubs with top coaches.
>
> I think we've shown that our players can play with anyone.

The athletes are seen as the most important participants in the environment. The calendar for ODP is built around dates when athletes are available. The identification and development of these athletes is the main focus of the ODP environment at state level.

Coaches. The ODP program in this state association has two coaches that serve as the main administrators for the program. The DOC is directly connected to US Soccer and has been at his current position for approximately five years. He serves as a national instructor for US Soccer and also works with the Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF). He has vast experience in youth player development, college soccer, and holds the highest available US Soccer certification-A license. He is academically trained and motivates all coaches to be proactive in applying proper development philosophies and in continuing their coaching/development education. The Assistant DOC of ODP is a female who has been identified by US Soccer as one of the most influential young coaches in the country. She has vast experience from club soccer all the way to college level where she coached for several years. She also holds an A license from US Soccer and had significant experience playing professional soccer. She serves as the main contact for the ODP staff coaches and is in charge of organizing state association ODP events. Both directors of coaching are in constant communication with the staff coaches and have vast experience coaching and playing the game at the highest levels. A staff coach explained the effect of these administrators on the ODP program:

> The (DOC) has changed a lot and has developed the program to where it is today. Year to year you can see the changes and ideas to improve the program…they are very busy and still find time to focus on the program.

Below the directors of coaching, there are two tiers of coaching staff. The first tier of coaches is a senior coaching staff of approximately 20 coaches that are the main trainers for the ODP events. Most of these coaches serve as the head coaches or assistant coaches

for the individual age groups and are the coaches who in the end make the final call on athletes selected for the state pool/team. These coaches have been with ODP for years and come from a variety of backgrounds and represent several countries including Colombia, England, Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, and the US. Most of these staff coaches work as professional soccer trainers for clubs, college, and professional teams. All coaches are nationally licensed through US Soccer and receive compensation from the federation for their work with ODP. Below this top tier of senior staff there is also a group of approximately 60 coaches that also work with ODP and help in training and selection of players. These coaches are usually assigned to a senior staff coach and work with a specific age group as an assistant coach. These coaches are also nationally licensed but usually have significantly less coaching experience and education than the senior staff. These staff coaches are sometimes responsible for assisting in training sessions and serve as evaluators during the tryout process. The DOC described that the main role of these coaches is to help with the evaluation of athletes during the tryout and selection process:

> We use the young coaches to help evaluate the large numbers of players at tryouts. They help the head coaches and also get experience with the whole process.

The number of coaches in ODP has grown in line with the overall growth of athlete participation numbers. In 2015, there were 54 coaches in ODP, in 2016, there were 62 coaches at the beginning of the year and a 86 coaches by the end of the year. One of the administrators referred to these two coaching tiers as the leader coaches and the young coaches. The leader coaches are more experienced in ODP and general soccer education,

while the younger coaches possess less experience but are seeking to improve in their coaching education. One younger coach described his experience working with more experienced coaches:

> I am learning the whole time…lots of these coaches are very good and have been working in soccer for many years…I take information and then try to apply it to my training.

Coaches fulfill many roles during the ODP program. Primarily, the coaches are responsible for evaluating and selecting athletes and organizing and running sessions. Training is most commonly informally coordinated by the coaches even though they follow guidelines and topics set by US Soccer and the state association directors of coaching. So while the specific training for each group might look slightly different, all staff are following predetermined guidelines. The head coaches for each group set the curriculum and the specific training programs are often a reflection of the philosophies of each individual head coach. Each head coach organizes the training and topics for their age group to their specifications. Some coaches are highly structured and organized in the topics and concepts that are addressed during training sessions and other coaches take a more flexible approach and allow assistant coaches to prepare and run sessions. One coached explained his experience with training:

> I like the coaches that are very structured and delegate specific roles to the coaches. Everything seems to run smoother and there isn't any confusion on what to do… every coach does it different but I think organization matters.

The coaches also serve different roles during the many activities of the ODP calendar. During competition and games, the coaches organize the lineups for the games and often have a voice in selecting which players will be placed on which team. During games, the coaches are with the athletes on the sidelines and perform normal the functions of a coach during a game. Often during down periods or trips where athletes are separated from their parents, coaches must also serve as chaperones to the athletes. This is specifically applicable to Region Camp where coaches are responsible for the behavior of athletes and ensuring that they are being appropriate representatives of the state association. Because there is so much contact between coaches and athletes, these two participant groups usually have the closest bond in the environment. The athletes expressed that ODP coaches have the most effect on their overall ODP experience. One athlete discussed his experience with ODP coaches:

> Some of the coaches are great…they talk to you and help you all the time. They teach you a lot about the game and how to play at this level. It's important to have a good relationship with the coaches.

Elite athletes-prospects-younger athletes. The soccer environment in this region is well developed and structured. There are hundreds of elite soccer athletes who train in professional programs throughout the year and play on top-level youth club teams. There are numerous resources for these youth athletes seeking to advance in the system including private clubs, professional academies, and private training organizations.

Within ODP, there is a lot of interaction between younger and older athletes. Several of the older athletes have been involved in ODP before and often have valuable knowledge to share with the younger athletes. Even though they are separated by age

groups in training, there are numerous opportunities for the athletes to interact and

socialize. Even within the age groups, the more experienced athletes help by leading the

warm ups and guiding the less experienced athletes during the training sessions. The

athletes that have been selected to the state team and traveled to Region Camp or even

been selected past region level are treated as the most experienced athletes. Several of the

older athletes serve as proximal role models for the younger athletes despite there being

no formal obligation to do so. Most experienced athletes and coaches in the environment

emphasize the importance of having a role model or using other athletes to gain

knowledge in the environment. There is also an emphasis on using past athletes that have

had success in ODP as a reference point for the current ODP athletes. A coach explained

why ODP uses past stories of successful athletes:

> We show the athletes past success stories because it is motivating to them.
>
> It is important to show them that ODP can lead to a big opportunity.

Further, there is repeated emphasis on working together with other athletes to achieve the

goal of ODP, which is to be selected to progress in the system. Both coaches and athletes

reiterate the constant narrative that by "working together" the chances of being selected

and progressing in the system are improved. The general feel is that all athletes here

have a common objective and should aid each other in achieving personal goals. An

experienced ODP athlete talked about the importance of working as a team:

> As you get older, it is hard to just take over a game…you might be able to
>
> do it when younger…now you have to be a good teammate and work
>
> together. Usually the best teams have the best players.

ODP as a program highly emphasizes past athletes who are now national teams stars who have been involved in the same process as the current athletes. Specifically, coaches and administrators list players from both the men's and women's national team who were involved and progressed through the ODP system. An athlete that has attended Region Camp several times explains:

> They always show the same slide about US national team stars. All those players went through ODP… I think it works on the younger players.

The relationship between the more experienced (usually older) and less experienced athletes is central to the environment. The culture is maintained by the experienced athletes promoting the values of the environment including an ethic of hard work and focus, and working together. Most of the coaches understand the value of the more experienced athlete and utilize them to maintain the consistency and standards of the environment. The experienced athletes affect the development of the younger athletes and help guide them toward success in the environment. A coach explains how the older athletes help some of the younger athletes:

> The older athletes definitely serve as role models. They teach younger athletes little bits of information that help them perform better in training and games.

Experts. This state association has a main objective of improving the overall education surrounding athlete development education and coaching in the local region. Part of the strategy to improve education is to use experts to come speak to athletes and parents. At several events, experts on nutrition and sport psychology were brought in to speak with athletes and parents. These events are usually a one-hour lecture type (or

shorter) format where the expert speaks to a large group of people. Despite the lecture presentations, there is no real use of these experts beyond the designated talks. The athletes have very little personal interaction with the experts and there is no systematic format set up for the athletes to utilize the experts. An administrator explained how ODP needs to improve the use of experts:

> We need to figure out how to make their impact more long-term.
>
> Right now, the athletes and parents listen to them but there is no real way
>
> to affect them over the long-term…I think most players forget about it.

There are also many staff coaches that have advanced education in these topics and often impart the knowledge on athletes during training or down periods. One ODP administrator explained that the purpose of bringing in experts was to further education and complement education that the athletes receive in their club environments. She explained that often clubs do not have the resources or forget to integrate information outside of soccer into their athlete development curriculums. For some athletes, this is the only place where they will receive information regarding nutrition, periodization, and sport psychology. The administrator explained:

> We want to provide information they don't get at their clubs. Part of our
>
> goals is to overall improve the quality of player development in the whole
>
> area.

Related teams and clubs. The ODP program, for the most part, has a friendly and cooperative relationship with clubs, college and professional teams within the region. It is prestigious for a club or training organization to have athletes selected into the ODP program. Even the college or professional teams try to lend resources (e.g., attendance of

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athletes, giveaway of merchandise) to help promote the objectives of ODP. A positive

relationship between ODP and youth clubs is important as these youth clubs help host

ODP events and ODP relies on these clubs to promote ODP tryouts. An administrator

explained the importance of relationships with local clubs:

> We rely on the local clubs and help them out as well. Partnerships are key
>
> for the ODP program to work. Creating a relationship with smaller clubs is
>
> important…we interact and cooperate with local clubs and leagues all year
>
> long. The closer the partnerships the better off we are.

There is however tension with other soccer organizations that share similar objectives to

ODP. For example, some of the youth soccer clubs in the region try to dissuade players

from attending ODP as they would rather have their top athletes solely in their own elite

system. This has proven a challenge for ODP as the athlete's club often has more

influence on their decisions than the ODP program. This seems logical as athletes spend

significantly more time with their club and coaches than they do with the ODP program.

At the very worst, it is true that certain clubs and organizations work actively against

ODP either by dissuading players from attending or by talking negatively about the

opportunities in ODP. Ironic is the fact that some of these clubs that try to dissuade

athletes from attending ODP will market news of their athletes being selected for ODP

region or national levels. A coach vented their frustration regarding tension between

clubs and ODP:

> I don't get it. Why prevent kids from getting opportunities to train and get
>
> better as soccer players?

Micro-environment: Non-athletic domain.

Family. The importance of family varies greatly from athlete to athlete. In line with development literature, most athletes mention the importance of their family as their main support system. The athletes continuously reference family when they talk about the resources and opportunities they have to play and participate in ODP. One athlete stated:

> My parents do a lot for me. They always travel and attend my soccer
>
> games…we are gone every weekend and we miss a lot of events.

Several of the athletes mentioned having parents who were involved in some type of elite sport and understand the demands of the environment. Several other athletes mentioned that their families do not fully grasp the importance of ODP or the opportunity it presents for the player. This might be due to lack of proper parent education from the ODP program. One athlete explained how her parents view the ODP process:

> I'm not sure my parents get the whole process or really understand what
>
> ODP does…They understand it's an opportunity for me but probably don't
>
> get it.

Common to all athletes was the fact they rely on their parents for financial support in order to be able to participate in ODP. These include fees associated with registration, travel, equipment, lodging, and food. One athlete discussed parental support:

> My parents pay for everything. They are extremely supportive of my
>
> soccer.

There are limited opportunities for parents to interact with coaches or administrators. Usually these interactions are about asking questions related to schedule, practice sessions, or general ODP questions. There is usually a table set up where an ODP

administrator can be located during events or parents often interact with coaches on the field during/after sessions or competitions.

Despite their critical role as support for the athletes in many ways, the parents are not too integrated into the processes of ODP. Their main participation takes place while attending ODP educational talks given by experts and attending training sessions/games as spectators. Parents are allowed in designated areas during training/games but are asked not to interact with athletes and coaches. Parents seem to want more interaction or involvement in the ODP process. One parent discussed their involvement during the ODP process:

> I had almost zero interactions with the coaches. They are always on the field with the players. I think parents would like to know more about ODP…especially the process.

Peers. All the athletes report having friends from inside and outside the world of elite sport. Most of the athletes say they have formed very close friendships with other athletes that participate in ODP or on their club teams. The athletes claim that that their fellow athlete friends are more understanding of their taxing training schedules and conversations often have to do with sport or issues related to sport. One older athlete explained:

> Most of my close friends play soccer…a lot of my friends play on my club team. We travel together…we know that we have no free time and that's part of playing soccer.

All the athletes also report having friends outside the circle of sports. While the athletes value these friendships, they claim there is some friction as these individuals are less

understanding of the rigors involved from participation in elite sport. Athletes spoke of having to negotiate the membership of these friend groups more as they often cannot be involved in the activities such as parties, social events that these groups often participate in. One athlete discussed missing social events:

> I never go to dances or parties…because I'm traveling and playing soccer…I have some social life but I miss a lot of stuff and that's what I have to do.

The coaches and some of the athletes mentioned that they are more comfortable in their friendships with fellow peers that are involved in elite soccer. However, athletes did mention that friends outside of soccer help them get away from thinking about soccer and often their interactions are fun and relaxing. One athlete stated:

> You know most of my close friends also play soccer but I do enjoy times with my school friends…It's good to get away sometimes

Several of the athletes also mentioned friendships stemming from participation in ODP. This was mostly true for the athletes who have participated in ODP for several years and have progressed to higher levels of the system. This can be partly due to the fact that at the regional level, athletes live, train, and eat together for extended periods of time allowing for more opportunity to cultivate friendships. There is little rivalry between the athletes as they are able to separate their own club allegiances while participating in ODP. One athlete explained:

> You make a lot of friends because you spend all day together. I have friends now that I have known for a couple of years…and whenever we have ODP I get to see them.

School. All athletes mentioned school to be a central part of their lives since this is where they spend the majority of their time. While ODP is separate from any school, the athletes commonly discussed the time constraints school places on their athletic lives and vice-versa. Homework or general school work were often referenced as reasons why soccer training time suffered. One athlete discussed the tension between school and soccer:

> I have no time because we are always traveling. I have to do school work on the car drives or late at night when I get home.

Athletes also said that school is a place where they can socialize and is a venue where they can strengthen friendships that are often hard to maintain. There is a lack of free time for these athletes so school is the most common place for socialization with their peers. One athlete discussed socializing at school:

> I like going to school because I see a lot of friends and talk to them…especially during lunch we can talk and have a good time…sometimes I don't see them (outside of school).

Athletes mentioned repeatedly how other peers look at their lives and dedication to sport. They are seen to have an "athlete mentality" and are associated with sport by their peers. Coaches and administrators understand the time consuming nature of being an elite soccer athlete and see these top athletes as individuals who have time management skills and are motivated to be successful. One coach described a top ODP athlete:

> The best athletes are usually good students and manage time well. The most disciplined athletes are the successful ones.

Parents also view top athletes similarly to coaches and view them as individuals who

manage their time well. One parent discussed their view on the top ODP athletes:

> They are young kids who have it together…the best players seem very
>
> mature and have to handle school, social life and other things…but it
>
> always seems they are focused on being the best or at least one of the best.

Macro-environment and related contexts.

Federation. The assistant ODP DOC mentioned that at a recent US Soccer event

focused on player development the officials spoke of the important role ODP serves in

identifying top talent, specifically, that the federation fully supports ODP, and views the

system as a direct route to identification for national teams. The administrator explained:

> It was a main point to say that ODP still is really important to the national
>
> program. ODP still has an important role to play…that made me feel good.

The federation also serves as a means for financial support to ODP athletes. Once an

athlete enters region and national levels of the ODP program, most fees are covered by

the federation except for travel costs. The federation is an important connection between

interested parties/current participants and ODP information. The USYS website provides

a detailed summary of the role and objectives of ODP and connects any user with

information on specific state associations and/or region information. The site also has

information on articles and news related to ODP. For example, currently there is a

featured article presented titled, "What It Takes to be Successful in the US Youth Soccer

Olympic Development Program."

Youth culture. For most participants, certain trends of the youth culture are seen

as incompatible with the objectives of ODP and the demands of being an elite athlete.

Coaches and parents see many of the youth as having problems focusing their attention and working hard in a specific area or sport like soccer. There was specific reference to technology as a negative aspect of youth lives that takes up unnecessary time and affects the attention span of young people. One coach explained the issue with youth culture:

> I definitely feel it (youth culture) is incompatible. I just feel like it's hard for them to stay focused and on one thing…that's not good for soccer.

National sport culture. National culture was only mentioned by participants when probed by the researcher. Athletes, coaches, and administrators cited the acceptance of soccer in the mainstream sports culture. Several participants spoke of soccer being on television and on the news and how that differed than just a couple of years ago. Participants view soccer as being accepted in the mainstream and feel the overall environment is one that is conducive to individuals who seek becoming elite soccer athletes as a long-term goal. Soccer is viewed as major American sport and one that continues to grow at a rapid pace. One coach explained the difference of when he grew up:

> Soccer is on all the time…these athletes have YouTube and soccer on TV all the time…they think that's how its been but 20 years ago you couldn't watch soccer.

Sport culture. Many participants spoke of the pay-for-play system present in many competitive youth sports including soccer. An ODP administrator mentioned that the issue is that athletes and parents are being forced to choose where they participate very carefully because they do not have the resources to participate in multiple sport settings. The end result is that those athletes are not able to participate in programs such

as ODP because of financial constraints and their chances of being identified are
significantly reduced. The administrator explained:

> They have to choose because it's so expensive…many parents don't have
> kids in different sports because they can't afford it…they have to pick and
> choose what they will participate in.

While ODP was identified as probably the most affordable venue for identification into
the US system, it was admitted that for athletes already playing club soccer (this is the
majority of athletes), paying for participation in ODP is simply not an option.

Participants also spoke of the lack of school support for physical education and
sport opportunities. Specifically, the decrease in physical education opportunities, access
to sport or facilities, will negatively impact the goals of developing elite soccer athletes.
This was view expressed by coaches and administrators. One coach discussed the lack of
physical education opportunities:

> You can see that there is less funding for PE and sport programs…that's
> probably bad for trying to develop soccer players…some of these kids
> don't play any sports.

ODP culture. Coaches and administrators when prompted had several views on
ODP culture. First, it was agreed that the overall program had more of an identity now
with pushing a specific style of play and tactics. When examining ODP documents, it
becomes apparent the federation is trying to mandate a specific style of play and
philosophy amongst all participants. One ODP document explains, "the US Youth Soccer
ODP playing style will be a patient possession game, building from the back and using a
possession rhythm similar to high level international play, within the 1-4-3-3 formation"

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(ODP Coaching Manual, p. 4). This one playing style and philosophy is to be implemented by all state associations and at all region/national events. Along with the implementation of style goes the idea that the whole program is set up for long-term development of players and coaches. So overall ODP is seen from its administrators, coaches, and athletes as a venue where long-term individual development is the main concern. This can be seen as different compared to a lot of youth soccer clubs where the main objective is to win. Several ODP documents specifically address how this style can be implemented, how to address problem areas, and also illustrates exercises to address the concepts. One coach explained the style of play:

> I think as a state you can see that we're trying to possess and play out of the back…some states do it more than others…it's important to teach these players how to play the game with these tactics.

Second, the idea of developing a more technical, intelligent player was mentioned on several occasions. This is further substantiated by the ODP Coaching Manual, which states that the motto of USYSA is: Work Hard-Play Smart (p. 5). Many coaches referenced the notion that the culture has shifted to finding athletes that are more technical and understand the tactics of the game. This theme was not uniform throughout participants but is also supported by several documents that state that the goal of ODP is to find more technically and tactically savvy athletes. One coach explained the type of player that ODP seeks:

> They need to be technically good and know how to play the game …a lot of players don't understand how to play a system or a position…we need to teach them as much as we can and hope that they learn.

The Environment in the Time-Frame

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Several participants spoke of the fact that this specific state association has been constantly adapting to address problems in the system. All participants accepted that the general landscape of elite soccer athlete development is rapidly changing and that ODP must be proactive in order to maintain status as a prestigious development system. While the general environment of sport and soccer seems to be conducive to the development of top youth soccer athletes, there was constant mention of the competition ODP faces from programs that target similar athletes. The general theme was that the program must be constantly changing in order to stay relevant and fill a useful role in the development of top US soccer athletes. One administrator explained:

> We must be proactive to the changes. If ODP is to stay relevant, we have to make sure we stay ahead of the curve.

From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model of ODP at State Level

Figure (5.1) presents the empirical model of the ODP program at this specific state association. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

<center>**Environment Success Factor Working Model**</center>

Factors Influencing Success of Environment

       The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the ODP

environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors

that contribute to the success of the environment are analyzed following the logic of the

ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

       Preconditions.

       Financial. The state association ODP program is funded almost exclusively by

the registration fees of participating athletes. The higher the registration, the bigger the

budget the ODP program has to work with. This is why increasing athlete participation

numbers is vital for program growth and is one of the main objectives of the state

association. An administrator explains the focus on increasing participation as part of a

long-term strategy:

              It has been a focus to increase participation numbers and increase the

              funding of the program…we have been pretty successful and continue to

              look at how to improve.

Registration to tryout at a selected venue costs $90. This affords the athlete the

opportunity to tryout over a two-day weekend. Every athlete must tryout in order to be a

candidate for selection for the state team/pool. There are also other ODP state

opportunities that come with an extra fee. For example, athletes are encouraged to attend

ODP Friendlies, an event where the state pool/teams play competitive games against

other states or professional academies. The fee for attendance to these friendlies is

approximately $85 per player. For the coming year, ODP state players are being offered

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the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica with their respective team for a fee of $2450. The fees associated with ODP participation remains one of the biggest critiques of the program as athletes that participate are usually those who have financial support provided by their parents. While ODP does have a player scholarship program, the process is difficult and time consuming in order to secure funding. A coach explains:

> There is a scholarship program but very few athletes get it…you also have to fill out a ton of paperwork and go through a long process.

Athletes have minimal equipment costs as they already own all the equipment necessary for participation (i.e., cleats, shin guards, soccer attire). ODP shirts and uniforms are provided upon registration for tryouts. On top of registration costs, athletes and parents are also responsible for lodging and food costs associated with attending ODP events. One parent spoke about ODP costs:

> The travel is what gets expensive…staying at hotels and eating out get very expensive when you travel for soccer all the time…we travel almost every weekend during the season.

Human. The state association has the financial means to employ top quality coaches for the ODP program. It is important to note that the majority of coaches see the compensation as insignificant compared to what they earn in their daily jobs. Most of the coaches are full-time trainers with only a few coaches that have professional lives outside of soccer. Most coaches view participation in ODP as prestigious and as a career boosting opportunity. One coach explained the experience of working for ODP:

> Its been a great experience working with a lot of great coaches…some of the best I have seen…I want to learn and it's a privilege to be involved with these athletes and ODP.

Coaches are compensated $75 a day plus a $35 per diem and reimbursement of .55 cents a mile for any driving associated with ODP. So for a coach that has to travel 200 miles to ODP events, they would be given $110 on top of daily pay and per diem. When the budget seems less (e.g., because of fewer registrations), then coaches are asked to provide dual duties of being a coach and administrator. As an administrator, individuals are responsible for tracking players, knowing player health and contact information, and handling any extra administrative duties. Several coaches expressed some discontent with having to multi task and often perform duties outside of their coaching responsibilities. Coaches most often have to serve as chaperones when the teams travel to Region Camp and athletes need supervision at all times throughout the day. One coach discussed the experience of serving as a coach and administrator:

> I love the coaching part but sometimes you have to also help with paperwork and taking care of the players…at Region Camp there is little time to do anything else because you are always with players…all day until they go to sleep.

At all ODP events, there is also support staff that ensures the smoothness of operations. There is a main administrator at all events that handles registration or parent/athlete inquiries. The state association also provides a medical trainer on site that can help with any injuries or health related issues.

Several participants stated that coaches and administrators are the core reason for the environment's success. They are perceived as individuals who are highly interested in the success of the athletes and give all their effort in this environment. During interviews, one of the administrators said that the recent success of this ODP state association program was directly related to the quality of coaches and type of people who have joined the program in the past years. One administrator talked about the coaches:

> We have added a lot of new, good coaches in the past few years…definitely the quality of coaching and training has improved in the program.

These coaches have extremely experienced careers and bring diverse perspectives to the program. For example, currently the program has coaches that are college coaches, professional academy directors, private soccer organization owners, youth club directors, and high school coaches. One coach stated that the coaches are the main strength of the ODP program:

> The main resource of the program is definitely the coaches.

Parents also view coaches as the main resource of the ODP environment. One parent explained:

> The coaches are much more professional than what we are used to…I think all the players respect the coaches and learn a lot from them .

Material. The ODP program has top quality facilities/venues at its disposal. The program uses venues that are used by the state association for regular youth league games and events. Usually, tryouts, training, or friendlies take place at top quality youth soccer venues throughout the state. For example, during tryouts, each age group is given a full

regulation soccer field to perform any activities or games. During friendlies, venues are usually top-level soccer fields, whether they be city sport venues or private club venues. The venues of ODP tryouts, training, and friendlies are designated at cities that are geographically central to allow for easy driving access. ODP provides most of the basic equipment needs for events. For example, for a proper training session a coach would need player rosters, cones, colored vests, and possibly agility poles. Athletes are required to provide their own ball. When ODP provides an insufficient number of a specific equipment, then coaches often use their own equipment. Most coaches feel that it is inappropriate to have to provide their own equipment. One coach complained about equipment issues:

> We shouldn't have to bring our own equipment. The program should give us everything we need.

Process. The major categories of activities/routines, identified by coaches and athletes, were tryouts, training, meetings, competitions, and camps. Social events were also mentioned.

Tryouts. Tryouts are the first part of the ODP process and the one that contains the most athletes participating. For this state association, tryouts are offered at five different venues throughout the state. Each tryout is a two-day process that involves both morning and afternoon sessions on both days. For example, girls are planned from 8:00-9:30 AM and 1:00-2:30 PM, while the boys are scheduled for 10:00-11:30AM and 3:00-4:30 PM. Saturday sessions are usually dedicated to becoming familiar with athletes during training activities and then usually on Sundays athletes are grouped into different groups and analyzed while playing competitive games. Athletes are only allowed to

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tryout at one venue and are in essence trying out against all other athletes in their age group who attend the tryouts at different venues. The age groups allowed to tryout during the 2015-2016 year were male and female athletes born in 2005, 2004, 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000, and 1999. The 2005 age group was only open to special athletes that were seen as advanced and could compete with the 2004 age group.

The purpose of tryouts is to select the top pool of athletes for a specific age group. During and after tryouts at a specific venue, coaches are tasked with selecting athletes to enter the state pool. Since coaches are not seeing all athletes at the same time at one specific venue, they must rank players at each venue and then select the top group of 60-80 athletes from all venues to enter the state pool for the respective age group. This is a complicated process since not all coaches are present at every ODP tryout and uniform evaluation becomes difficult. One coach discussed the difficulty in selecting the player pool:

> I find it very hard to select players from different venues without seeing them play each other…at some point you just have to make a decision about what you saw…sometimes we do make mistakes.

The process of selection requires many meetings and communication between the head coaches and their assistants. The majority of coaches and administrators recognize the current problems associated with the process. While selecting the athletes and eliminating the worst players is relatively easy, coaches mention that separating athletes in the middle group is a difficult task that can lead to overlooking or misevaluating athletes. This is one of the most commonly identified areas for improvement in the ODP process. One coach specifically addresses this problem:

The good players and the worst players we know right away…it gets

harder to evaluate the middle of the road players that have some good

moments and some bad moments.

After final state pool roster selections are made, head coaches for each age group turn in

results to a head ODP administrator. The head ODP administrator creates state pool lists

for every age group and then posts results to the state association website. Athletes and

parents are instructed to navigate to the state association website to view lists and are not

notified in any other format. Athletes that want to continue in the ODP system must then

attend state pool training sessions spread throughout the spring of the seasonal year.

The participation numbers for tryouts have grown significantly in the last five

years and as a result have strengthened the overall program resources. It is important to

note that growing participation numbers was a specific objective of the current ODP

DOC. On the girl's side, the climb in participation has been consistent in tryouts. In 2011,

265 athletes; in 2012, 350 athletes; in 2013, 502; in 2014, 473; in 2015, 496; and in 2016,

a staggering 738. On the boy's side, the participation numbers have also had a healthy

climb in the past five years. In 2011, 228 athletes; in 2012, 279 athletes; in 2013, 378

athletes; in 2014, 535 athletes; in 2015, 537 athletes; and in 2016, a record 885 athletes.

To further illustrate the growth of the program, in 2011, there were 493 total participants

in tryouts including both boys and girls representing 67 different cities and in 2016, there

were 1623 total participants representing 158 different cities. Not only has participation

grown in ODP but so has the ability of the program to reach athletes in more cities and

more importantly in cities that are not major soccer hot beds. Table 1.1 shows all ODP

participation numbers for this state association from 2011to 2016. Presented is the

distribution of participants for each age group and gender as well as total participation

numbers and the number of cities represented by the athletes who participated.

	2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
Gender	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Total	265	228	350	279	502	378	473	535	496	537	738	885
Per Age Group	*94G* 12		*95G* 36	*95B* 9	*96G* 49	*96B* 32	*97G* 47	*97B* 75	*98G* 59	*98B* 74	*99G* 67	*99B* 98
	95G 45	*95B* 33	*96G* 47	*96B* 36	*97G* 58	*97B* 41	*98G* 49	*98B* 88	*99G* 54	*99B* 69	*00G* 81	*00B* 131
	96G 56	*96B* 48	*97G* 49	*97B* 53	*98G* 97	*98B* 81	*99G* 70	*99B* 109	*00G* 84	*00B* 83	*01G* 150	*01B* 140
	97G 56	*97B* 64	*98G* 66	*98B* 54	*99G* 129	*99B* 104	*00G* 97	*00B* 71	*01G* 101	*01B* 100	*02G* 149	*02B* 171
	98G 96	*98B* 83	*99G* 122	*99B* 97	*00G* 118	*00B* 79	*01G* 115	*01B* 95	*02G* 106	*02B* 109	*03G* 157	*03B* 178
			00G 30	*00B* 30	*01G* 51	*01B* 41	*02G* 95	*02B* 97	*03G* 92	*03B* 102	*04G* 134	*04B* 167
Total # of Cities	67		101		131		116		128		158	

Note: 97G stands for girls born in 1997. 97B stands for boys born in 1997. This is format for year player was born and gender.

Table 5.1: ODP Tryout Participation Numbers Per Age Group 2011-2016

Training. Athletes selected into the state pool are expected to attend state pool

training on several different weekends. If a player wishes to continue, they must register

online for state pool training sessions. State pool training occurs during the spring

(usually January, February, and March) where athletes are offered five training sessions

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at different venues throughout the state. Athletes are expected to attend as many training

sessions as they can. The more training sessions an athlete attends, the more

comprehensive the evaluation and familiarity with coaches. Training sessions occur over

weekends with a similar schedule to the one used at tryouts. Saturdays are divided into

morning and afternoon sessions and Sundays are only morning sessions. The main

objective of training sessions is to evaluate athletes in training and in competition against

the best athletes in the age group. A secondary objective of training sessions is to

familiarize athletes with the philosophy and demands of ODP soccer. For example, the

DOC can designate a specific topic (i.e., playing out of the back) for a training weekend.

All coaches then design sessions dealing with a main ODP topic and all age groups

perform similar activities related to the topic. Head coaches have discretion in what

activities they perform and the format of their training sessions. All ODP coaches are

provided a US ODP Coaching Manual that provides program objectives, ODP Youth

Soccer philosophy, methodology, playing style information, and specific training

exercises. Coaches use this manual as reference and do not necessarily follow the exact

exercises presented.

During Saturday training sessions, morning and afternoon sessions are usually

devoted to a specific playing concept (e.g., playing out of the back). Other example topics

that are covered in training sessions include peeling off from defenders, peeling off and

making bending runs, penetration into the attacking third, and interchanging runs and

overlapping. Sunday sessions are usually reserved for 11v11 competitions so athletes can

be evaluated while performing in game like scenarios. Evaluation of athletes takes place

over all training sessions and playing competitions. One coach explained the importance

of evaluating the athletes during full-field competition:

> Sundays are important because we get to see the players play in 11v11
>
> games…a lot of the players are good in tight spaces and then don't know
>
> how to move or translate that to the game.

Similar to tryouts, coaches are asked to evaluate athletes and rank them in order of best to

worst in the age group. The first couple of training sessions are usually used to evaluate

the top and bottom athletes while the later sessions are used to make the more difficult

decisions on athletes that fall in the middle of the player ranks. The goal at the end of

training sessions and competitions is to select the top athletes from the pool into the state

teams. Depending on the depth in the talent pool, coaches select more or less athletes. An

age group that is seen as having a deep talent pool, usually selects about 60 athletes into

the state team. An age group that is seen as having a shallow talent pool, usually selects

about 30 athletes into the state team. The process of selecting athletes into the state team

requires constant and detailed communication between head coaches and assistant

coaches. Most notes are stored online where all coaches in the age group can add

comments or suggest rankings. While all coaches have a voice in the selection and

evaluation of athletes, in the end, the head coach makes final decisions on state team

rosters. While there can be disagreement with coaches at times, the majority of the time

there is consensus and no issue with the selection of athletes. In instances where there is

disagreement with a specific athlete, the head coach will ask for viewpoints from

assistant coaches and then make a final decision on the athlete. One coach explained an

experience where there was disagreement regarding a certain player:

> I gave the head coach my comments and recommended the player get
>
> selected…in the end, the player didn't make it…I'm ok with it because
>
> that's how it works.

It is possible that the process fails at times in identifying all the top athletes as it is a difficult task to evaluate large groups of athletes properly. Coaches and administrators openly admit that the evaluation process requires constant refinement. One coach discussed the problems in evaluating large groups of players:

> We have a lot of issues with evaluating the large group of players. It is
>
> impossible to properly watch and evaluate such large numbers. Mostly the
>
> players in the middle suffer the most.

Once each age group head coach finalizes selections for athletes to make the state team, they turn in final rosters to the main ODP administrator. The ODP administrator then makes the final rosters for each age group and posts them on the state association website. Athletes selected are official members of the state team and are eligible for further ODP events including Friendlies and ODP Region Camp.

Coaches are seen as the key figures in the training process. They are seen as the key facilitators of learning and development and are the individuals who have the most contact with the athletes. Coaches and athletes explain that the role of coaches extends past soccer and they serve as mentors and role models for the athletes. One administrator discussed how vital the coach is in regard the athlete's experience:

> The coaches are the biggest resource as they have the most contact with
>
> players and really determine whether the player has a positive or negative
>
> experience…players with positive experiences come back the next year.

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During training, the main focus remains on the process of developing and improving

athletes under ODP philosophy rather than the result of competitions. It is constantly

reiterated that results are not important in this environment and the main focus is the

quality of individual performances. There is an understanding that results do hold some

value as athletes and coaches take pride when they beat another age group team or

another state team. One athlete explained how athletes view winning in ODP

competition:

> We take a lot of pride in winning. The coaches say it doesn't matter but as
>
> a player you always want to win.

Competitions. Competitions are seen as a valuable part of US Soccer developing

top international talent. In order to achieve long-term success, athletes must be exposed

to top level competition and learn to perform in high-pressure environments. There are

two main ODP Friendly events that are used for evaluation and selection of athletes. The

first ODP friendly event is open to all athletes that were selected into the state pool.

Athletes must register separately for this event and a fee of $115 is associated with

registration. Registration is not mandatory but is highly encouraged and athletes that do

not attend might be affected negatively in the final selections. One coach explained why

it is important to attend the ODP Friendlies:

> Players that make it to the friendlies get more experience and get more
>
> direction from the coaches…they seem more comfortable with the tactics.

Athletes that register for the Friendlies are provided with extra ODP uniforms specifically

designed for the event. This first friendly event usually takes place after two state pool

training events. At the ODP Friendlies, athletes are divided into A,B, and C teams (if

necessary) and then compete against other state teams or top professional academies. Two games are played on Saturday and then one game is played on Sunday for each team. Coaches are asked to evaluate athletes on how they apply training concepts and their overall performance. Main areas of focus are ability to keep team shape in the given formation, ability to know when to and how to move off the ball, and then finally decision making when in possession of the ball. Whatever notes are taken from this event are added to the athlete database available to all coaches.

The second ODP Friendly event is only available to athletes that have been selected into the state team roster. This event is used as a final training session before the state teams travel to train and compete in Region Camp. The format of the event is similar to the previous ODP Friendlies. On Saturday, athletes are asked to compete in two competitive games against other state teams or professional academies. On Sunday, athletes are asked to play in one competitive game. At this event, the objective of the coaches changes drastically as all state team athletes have already been selected. Now coaches are tasked with ranking athletes into specific first, second, and third teams (if necessary) for participation at Region Camp. Coaches must consider many factors in making team selections. For example, a coach must ensure that all teams contain the appropriate number of goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders, and forwards. Making a mistake in selection at this point can lead to negative outcomes during Region Camp. One coach described a past experience of making mistakes in the final state team selections:

> We arrived at Region Camp and only had midfielders…a lot of good
> players but we had no players that were defenders and it really showed

when we were playing in the games…you have to make sure and pick

players for all the positions…especially defenders.

Athletes can be shifted from team to team at Region Camp but it is not ideal as it can

affect the team and the individual athlete. After coaches have discussed and made final

team selections, they turn in team rosters to the head ODP administrator. Final team lists

are not available to parents or athletes until they arrive at Region Camp.

Camps and social events. All athletes selected to the state team are afforded the

opportunity to attend Region ODP Camp. A main barrier for athletes attending ODP

Region Camp is the fee associated with registration and travel. The registration fee for

Region Camp is approximately $800 and travel expenses can range from $400-800 per

athlete. One parent explained the frustration of dealing with extra costs:

I want to give my son every opportunity but its very expensive…we can't

spend $1000 without a serious discussion…most of our money goes to

soccer and travel.

At Region Camp, the goal is to evaluate the best athletes in each age group and select

them into US Region ODP pool/team. This state association for the 2016 Region 3 Camp

sent 201 girl athletes and 247 male athletes in the 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004,

and 2005 age groups. Region Camp has a strict schedule for five days where coaches,

administrators, and athletes are immersed in soccer all day long. In the mornings, state

teams play full games against other state teams in front of regional and national US

Soccer staff. Athletes are evaluated during the games by a specific region coach who is

assigned to the state team. Region coaches have varied approaches and relationships with

state coaches with some asking for a lot of feedback on athletes and others choosing to

110

interact very little with the state coaches. In the end, the region coach assigned to the state team has a lot of power in the process of selecting athletes for regional opportunities. One coach discussed an experience with a region coach:

> He barely talked to me or the players…I feel like he should talk to me to get my take on players and how they're playing…I've had other coaches that interact and talk to me the whole time.

After game competitions, athletes head to lunch and have a small break before they must attend athlete only seminars in the early afternoon. Athletes usually spend this down time resting or interacting with teammates in the dormitories. Seminars are given by experts on topics such as nutrition, mental conditioning, style of play, and college planning. Athletes often view these seminars as tedious due to their physical exhaustion from waking up early and playing full games. Usually after seminars, the pool lists are published with the athletes that have been selected to participate in the region pool games at night. The region pool games are the best athletes in each age group selected to play in front of all the present regional and national staff at night after all training has concluded. If an athlete is selected for the region pool game, they are separated from their state team and invited to a team lecture before the games. The athletes not selected for the region pool games train at night with their state team and assigned region coach. These training sessions are another opportunity for further evaluation from the region coach. After state team training sessions are completed, most teams stay and watch some of the night region pool games. Usually two or three athletes from a given state team age group are selected for participation in the region pool games. There is a region pool game for every age

group represented at camp. Athletes selected into regional pool games are often the ones that have the best opportunity to be selected for the region pool/teams.

This basic schedule continues for four days with the only variation being on the last day of camp when events end at noon. On the last day, state teams play their last games earlier in the morning and then head to the dormitories to prepare for travel. In the past years, there was a ceremony where athletes selected into the region pool/team for each age group were announced in front of all the attending state teams. Now, for purposes of efficiency, region pool/team results are posted online the day following the conclusion of camp. For this specific state association, 2016 was the most successful year in terms of placing athletes in the region pool/team. In 2011, from this state association 7 female athletes from 93 attending were selected for the region pool/team. In 2016, 17 female athletes from 201 attending were selected for the region pool/team. On the boy's side, the improvement has been even more staggering. In 2011, 0 male athletes were selected to region pool/team from 75 attending. In 2016, 47 males athletes were selected to region pool/team from 247 attending. Between boys and girls, 64 from this state association were selected to the region pool/team, which is the most from any year where data is available. Table 5.2 shows Region Camp attendees and selections for every age group and the number of cities represented by attendees.

	2011		**2012**		**2013**		**2014**		**2015**		**2016**	
Gender	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Total Attendees	93	75	129	127	176	150	149	172	213	225	201	247
# Selected Per Gender	7	0	11	16	11	29	10	39	19	31	17	47
# Per Age Group	*94G* 10(0)	*94B* 0 (0)	*95G* 9(2)	*95B* 2(0)	*96G* 17(5)	*96B* 15(4)	*97G* 15(3)	*97B* 19(10)	*98G* 28(4)	*98B* 29(10)	*99G* 23(3)	*99B* 31(10)
	95G 17(3)	*95B* 19(0)	*96G* 16(2)	*96B* 18(2)	*97G* 21(1)	*97B* 16(7)	*98G* 15(0)	*98B* 33 (7)	*99G* 30(3)	*99B* 22 (6)	*00G* 30(3)	*00B* 34(9)
	96G 18(2)	*96B* 18(0)	*97G* 16(1)	*97B* 18(1)	*98G* 18(1)	*98B* 20(3)	*99G* 18(2)	*99B* 21(5)	*00G* 39(4)	*00B* 32(5)	*01G* 35(1)	*01B* 38(8)
	97G 18(2)	*97B* 20(0)	*98G* 34(1)	*98B* 36(5)	*99G* 46(0)	*99B* 36(6)	*00G* 49(1)	*00B* 27(8)	*01G* 47(3)	*01B* 56 (4)	*02G* 43(4)	*02B* 46(4)
	98G 30(0)	*98B* 18(0)	*99G* 36(5)	*99B* 35(8)	*00G* 56(4)	*00B* 40(9)	*01G* 32(4)	*01B* 36 (9)	*02G* 37(5)	*02B* 52(6)	*03G* 32(5)	*03B* 48(16)
			00G 18(0)	*00B* 18(0)	*01G* 18(0)	*01B* 23(0)	*02G* 20(0)	*02B* 36(0)	*03G* 32(0)	*03B* 34(0)	*04G* 38(1)	*04B* 50(0)
Total # of Cities Represented	45		65		76		66		79		84	
Total # Players Selected	7		27		38		49		50		64	

Note: 97G stands for girls born in 1997. 97B stands for boys born in 1997. This is format for year player
was born and gender. Number in () shows athletes in that group that were selected for region pool/team.
Number outside () shows athletes in that group that attended Region Camp.

Table 5.2: Region Camp Attendees and Selections 2011-2016

Athletes and coaches view Region Camp as a valuable experience for any athlete that is seeking to play in elite systems. For many, this is an event where they will not succeed in terms of selection and thus experience adversity (or failure) for the first time in their soccer career. Competing against top athletes in an environment where selection is the main goal can be stressful for athletes. One ODP administrator mentioned that this experience is valuable for an athlete whether they succeed or not:

> It is valuable for these athletes to experience failure. Often on their club and high school teams they are the best player…here they might be on the third team.

The ODP Coaching Manual describes in detail the advantages of playing and experiencing high-level competition during ODP:

> These tournaments expose our players and coaches to a variety of high level, sophisticated teams full of future professionals from all over the world. We compete against teams who train year round so our challenge is greater than most. However, in virtually every event our teams go through a learning curve where they figure out pace, gamesmanship and collective defending all of which allows our strengths to come out and forces the lesser qualities to quickly improve (p. 5).

Group development and organizational culture.

Artefacts. Artefacts represent the visible tokens of the culture and help give insight into what is important in this environment. One of the most visible markers of the environment is the top quality soccer venues. At ODP, it is obvious that the facilities used for tryouts, sessions, and competitions are some of the best available for youth soccer.

Most of the venues used are either top youth soccer club complexes or college facilities.

For example, one of the venues used for tryouts and training sessions is a soccer-specific

complex that contains 12 full-sized soccer fields with natural grass, properly lined

dimensions, and FIFA regulation goals. The complex contains two different concession

areas, a covered spectator area, clean bathrooms located in a building, and two large

parking lots. Another venue used for ODP competitions is a top of the line soccer

complex that contains ten artificial grass fields, bathrooms located in a building, a

concession area, and three large parking lots. These venues are available to ODP through

their association with these youth soccer clubs. When asked about the quality of venues

used by this state association, one ODP administrator answered that the facilities are on

par or better than most facilities used by other state associations in the region. Having top

venues gives participants and spectators the feeling that ODP is well organized and gives

prestige to the program. The administrator remarked:

> I feel our resources are about as good any of the top states. Maybe two
>
> states might have better resources than us.

Parents also feel the resources of this state association are top of the line. One parent

discussed ODP resources:

> The kids are all in nice uniforms and all events are always at nice
>
> complexes…we have seen every kind of soccer complex…these are good.

There are a lot of interactions between athletes, coaches, and administrators in the ODP

environment. Verbal artefacts, stories told in the environment, dominate the

organizational culture and give insight into the values of ODP. Anecdotes and stories are

told by coaches, athletes, and administrators at almost at every ODP session. Presented

here are the most common stories and themes presented by participants. These anecdotes help highlight the key values of the environment.

- Hard work narrative. This theme is stressed in many different forms and mediums in the ODP environment. In initial meetings with athletes and parents, program administrators and coaches highlight the importance of discipline and hard work in this elite environment. Stories are told about how the most successful athletes are often the ones that commit themselves the most and out work their peers. For example, a nutrition expert was brought in to present to athletes and parents and one of her main messages was about discipline in eating habits and rest in order to achieve maximum performance. This is a narrative that is further established by the coaches during tryouts, training sessions, games, and any other competitions. When speaking with groups of athletes, coaches reiterate the importance of hard work and the fact that the most successful athletes in this environment are often the ones that are more disciplined and hard working than their counterparts. This theme is so prevalent in the environment that there are even instances of athletes communicating with each other where they stress the importance of hard work. Hard work and discipline in this environment is seen as a high rate work on the field, attention to detail such as tactics and coaching instruction, proper care of body (e.g., nutrition) to maximize performance, and a growth mindset where the goal is to always be improving individually. Hard work is valued almost as much as talent in this environment. To further understand the depth of the this narrative, an excerpt about hard work in the ODP Coaching Manual:

The American youth player is continuously improving both technically

and tactically. Our player's strengths have always been their attitude and

hard work ethic (p. 5).

The narrative is further transmitted by the phrase "Work Hard" appearing at the bottom

of all pages of the manual. Working hard is seen as part of the DNA of an American

soccer athlete and something that separates US players from their international

counterparts. One coach explained the importance of working hard in this environment:

A lot of the good players aren't used to doing hard work all game long…at

the highest levels you have to be willing to run and play defense even if

you are a forward.

- Success stories of past ODP athletes (e.g., Clint Dempsey). This is probably the

  most common narrative heard in the ODP environment. Not only is this

  established verbally but also there are several ODP documents that present past

  athletes that went through ODP and now are having success at the national team

  level. The narrative differs slightly depending on the environment of where it is

  being told. For example, when speaking with female athletes, coaches cater the

  story to them by talking about past ODP athletes like Alex Morgan and Carli

  Lloyd that now have become international superstars. The hope is that using

  female examples will make the story more relatable to the athletes and therefore

  hold more significance for them. The same story is told to the male athletes but

  most commonly male role models such Clint Dempsey and Landon Donovan are

  used as the examples. One of the most impactful claims of ODP success is the

  number of current national team athletes who went through the ODP process. At

Region Camp, the head region ODP coach, in his presentation to incoming

athletes, spends time recounting past athletes who attended Region Camp and

now are full-time members of US Senior National Teams. This narrative creates

excitement in coaches and athletes and gives prestige to the program. One coach

discussed the use of athlete success stories:

> It is exciting for athletes to be in a program that has hosted some of
>
> the top US soccer athletes…we use that to motivate them…these
>
> are the players they see on TV.

- ODP process as a journey. This is one of the most common narratives and is in

  line with the overall long-term development philosophy of ODP. The narrative

  shared by coaches and administrators is that athlete involvement in ODP is a

  journey and there is much to be individually gained from participation in the

  journey. This is a common narrative heard from all individuals in positions of

  power in the ODP program and by the more experienced athletes. This relates

  very closely to topics of long term development that are stressed in the

  environment. Coaches are consistently telling players that the purpose of

  participation in ODP is to progress further in the system but that the journey is

  different for every individual athlete. Participation in ODP should be seen as a

  time for personal growth and development. ODP coaches do a very good job of

  communicating with individual athletes that whether they progress in the system

  or not, there is much benefit to be obtained from participation. Coaches stress that

  being in an elite training environment will help athletes in the future when they

  participate again in elite soccer. One ODP administrator mentioned that failure

and struggle in this environment could be a turning point for many athletes. These types of experiences are needed in development in order to produce athletes that can play at the highest levels. Stressful environments will in the end produce better athletes. A coach explains part of the process of player development:

> I would say ODP makes every player better in some way. Struggling is a key part of becoming better…adversity is important.

Espoused values. Key values of the environment are expressed by participants in many different forms including stories and ODP documents. As stated in the previous section, many of these values are expressed through narratives. The following are the main values expressed by participants:

- Culture of elite sport. The most salient value espoused in the ODP environment is the philosophy of elite sport. Most environmental factors in ODP help contribute to the value of this being an elite sporting environment. The philosophy of the state association ODP clearly states that the objective of the program is to work with top youth soccer athletes and train them in an elite environment. The ODP philosophy states:

> It is the responsibility and function of ODP to identify, select, and develop the state's elite players to compete with and against each other in preparation for regional, national, collegiate, or professional opportunities.

The elite sport mentality is clearly visible in all of the daily activities and processes in ODP. From the introductory parent/athlete meetings with ODP administrators, it is established that the goal of the program is to identify, select, and develop the most elite

athletes. Parents/athletes are reminded that athletes are being constantly evaluated by the coaches and staff. This extends to the message sent by coaches that athletes are being evaluated on criteria that extends past the soccer field. For example, athletes are evaluated on their behavior outside of the field, interactions with coaches/ other players, and their general attitude outside of sessions. An important topic highlighted by ODP is the ability for athletes to be responsible and autonomous. Even for the younger age groups, athletes are held to a standard where they are responsible for their equipment, behavior, and actions. This is highly stressed as the environment intensifies and athletes progress further in the system. One coach explained how evaluation of athletes extends beyond the playing field:

> We are always watching and seeing how the players behave outside of the field…you don't make it to region or national levels unless you can take care of yourself and behave at all times.

For the athletes in the environment, most understand the importance of these values and strive to exhibit them on a consistent basis. The older athletes have a very elite mindset while the younger athletes demonstrate that they are trying to adapt to the requirements of the environment. In the end, the athletes that are selected for state pool/team levels or further usually display a disciplined and organized mindset. One athlete explained how involvement in ODP has changed his mindset:

> I try to be as disciplined as I can…once you get to region you are dealing with a different type of player and for me I had to learn to act there…now I am one of the more experienced players and I know all the coaches.

Process-culture-outcomes.

In accordance with the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organizational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and success of the environment.

Individual development. The most common development referenced by athletes and coaches usually deals with individual soccer development. Participants spoke of the idea of athletes adapting to play at this level of soccer. For example, athletes referenced adapting to the speed of play of ODP soccer. Because overall compared to most soccer environments the athletes are usually more skilled, better athletes, and have higher understanding of game tactics at ODP, the sessions and competitions are usually at a faster pace than the athlete's normal playing environments. Athletes stated that as they participated more and more in the environment, they felt increasingly comfortable with the speed and overall demands of the environment. One athlete discussed the speed of play:

> Especially at Region Camp, the speed of play is very, very high…you can't dribble too much and have to be constantly running…you learn very fast.

Other soccer-specific skills that were mentioned as being further developed were understanding of high level game tactics, improved decision making, and improvement of physical play. The athletes highly value the environment as a place where they are learning and becoming better soccer players. One athlete described how he improved as a player:

You get better playing with better players and coaching. The game gets

very fast and physical and you have to be ready at all times.

Besides development in soccer, athletes develop a variety of other characteristics in the

environment that can help them in sport and in general life. Analysis of data revealed that

social skills, autonomy and responsibility, time management, and strong work ethic were

main areas of individual development.

Psychosocial skills are important to success in this environment as athletes are

continually asked to interact with teammates, coaches, and administrators who they have

previously interacted with on a limited basis. The ability to communicate with coaches

and peers is highly valued and the ability to function independently is highly regarded by

coaches and administrators. Athletes who are self-sufficient are seen to be good

candidates for progression in the system. Because the athletes are asked to perform many

activities on their own, autonomy and responsibility are developed consistently

throughout ODP participation. For example, in training sessions, athletes are often asked

to warm up and organize themselves without the supervision of a coach. While coaches

are present, the athletes direct all aspects of their warm ups. Another valuable example is

when there is conflict between athletes. Athletes are asked to handle these situations

between themselves and to try to find resolution without the intervention of coaches.

While the older, more experienced athletes are more successful at handling this

responsibility, it is clear to the younger athletes that the expectations are to be

individually responsible and to be able to function without constant supervision. One

younger athlete explained what he has learned from the older athletes:

> You watch how they act and I try to do the same stuff…the coaches expect
> you to perform right away and you have to be ready…I have some friends
> that have given me good advice.

The idea of developing more discipline as an athlete was constantly referenced by environment participants. Athletes mentioned the demanding nature of the environment and understand that adapting to the expectations is likely the only way to succeed. Throughout participation, athletes learn that discipline, hard work, and time management are important for success. This development might be more salient for the younger athletes as the older athletes have often already experienced the ODP process or are already in soccer environments that have similar demands. The idea of discipline also extends to time management. Specifically, athletes are expected to eat at the right times, warm up properly, rest when needed, and be able to be responsible for any meetings. This is mostly put to the test when athletes are at Region Camp where groups of twenty athletes are supervised by one coach and athletes are expected to handle themselves. Athlete discipline also extends to other areas such as eating correctly for optimal performance, understanding your body to rest and handle injuries, and managing mental processes to maximize performance. One coach discussed the mistakes that younger athletes make at Region Camp:

> You see them eating pizza, burgers, and fries…they learn when their
> stomachs are hurting or when they have problems getting up the next
> morning…the smart ones rest when they can.

Further, many participants reiterated the importance of the overall experience of being in a competitive environment where athletes were mainly selected on performance. Most of

these athletes function daily in environments where they are successful and are often the stars of their local program. ODP can bring the experience of being unsuccessful and often the first taste of failure for many of these elite youth athletes. Coaches and administrators agreed that this is positive for an athlete as it gives them the experience of competing in a stressful situation and failure can serve as a motivator for success over the long term. One coach discussed the importance of the ODP experience:

> You have to be able to perform under the pressure…and that's difficult for the younger players…but they learn and get less nervous…even in the region games some players don't do well but hopefully they learn.

Team development. Even though athletes are trying out individually for progression in the ODP system, soccer remains a team sport and team success does affect athlete opportunities. One of the biggest objectives of ODP is to engrain a possession style in the youth athletes. Inherently, a possession game requires the coordination and execution of tactics of all eleven players. This excerpt from the ODP Manual highlights the importance of players learning to play a possession game:

> For our players, learning the international style of possession soccer is like learning a new language…The process of teaching our players the language of possession must start at state association training and continue at region trials and additional US Youth Soccer ODP events (p. 5-6).

While winning and losing is deemphasized in official ODP teaching philosophy, it plays a significant role in the experience of athletes. When athletes are selected for the state pool, they start to be separated by age groups to compete in 11v11 matches to play against other age groups. Athletes take pride in their own age group teams and speak

positively about having a team and beating the other age groups. The feeling of belonging

to a team is further intensified when athletes are separated into specific teams for ODP

Friendlies to compete against other state association ODP teams or youth professional

academy teams. When athletes are finally selected into their specific state teams, there is

a lot of pride associated with being selected. Athletes and coaches recognize the

importance of representing the state and the privilege of being able to compete against

other states. One coach explained:

> One of the most important aspects of ODP is representing the state.
>
> Players and coaches take a lot of pride in representing their state.

The pinnacle of team involvement takes place at Region ODP camp. During this phase of

the selection process, athletes are rostered to age specific teams representing their state.

This is the team that they will participate with for the entirety of Region Camp. Before

Region Camp, it is likely that the specific teams have trained together so there is

familiarity with the athletes and the style of soccer being played. The athletes all wear

uniforms and training shirts representing their state association, which solidifies the

feeling of team and uniformity. While success is not measured by wins and losses, the

idea of winning is valued and provides benefits to athletes and coaches. First, when a

state team beats another state team there is great pride in the fact that your state beat the

other state. Among Region Camp participants, your team and athletes are seen as higher

level if they are successfully beating other teams at Region Camp. Second, winning the

matches against other states at Region Camp is viewed positively by the region and

national US Soccer Staff. Simply, a team that is winning is likely playing well and that

attracts the attention of the evaluating coaches. Since the ultimate objective is for

individual athletes to be selected, any extra attention to the team improves the chances of

an athlete being watched by region and national staff. Third, winning makes the overall

process and experience of ODP easier on the athletes. There is a lot of learning in terms

of discipline, self-management, and autonomy that takes place during the ODP process.

Further, athletes are asked to learn and apply advanced soccer concepts. Winning during

competitions helps keep the athletes engaged and up beat during the overall process.

Athletes that are not winning consistently during the process seem to struggle more and

feel the whole experience is tougher than their counterparts. While the idea of winning is

deemphasized by the ODP program, examination of the environment demonstrates that

winning does play a role in both the opportunities presented to the athletes and the overall

experience of athletes. One athlete discussed why winning was important to him:

> Winning is fun and winning with your friends make it more fun. The
>
> games are tough so winning those games is cool.

In terms of soccer, the ODP teams go through a major development process that

hopefully culminates in optimal performance at Region Camp. After tryouts, training, and

competitions, athletes and coaches become familiar with each other and the feeling of a

team culture is developed. Athletes view each other as teammates and understand that the

success of the team can help the process of being selected individually. From first contact

until the conclusion of Region Camp, the athletes are exposed to the playing philosophy

of ODP. This includes a specific playing style (i.e., possession-oriented), training

sessions with specific concepts teaching the playing style, and documents explaining

major themes and situational information. The overall goal is that when at Region Camp,

the teams are playing soccer under the style mandated by US Soccer. This integration

with US Soccer is important as an athlete that shows success and understanding in the system can be selected to immediately participate with Region or National teams. For coaches and athletes, the soccer improvement from beginning to end in the process is easily noticeable. However, many coaches and athletes spoke of the need for more time (e.g., training, competitions) in order to further solidify the style of play. One coach discussed the importance of training in order to solidify the style of play:

> Of course we want more training time. The more we train, the more likely we will play better. Playing possession soccer is difficult and takes a lot of work

The environment's success. When the ODP state program evaluates success, the primary indicators used are selection of athletes to region and national level ODP, providing opportunities for athletes to progress to other elite systems, developing athletes and coaches, recognition of the state's talent, results, and improvement of the program. The most important objective of the state association ODP program is to help identify, select, and develop athletes that will progress into region and national levels of the US Soccer system. Since 2011, which is when the current state association director took over ODP, the program has extensive statistics on athletes who tried out, were selected for the state team, and were selected for region pool/team. In regard to this objective, 2016 was a successful year as 64 athletes from this state association were selected for participation in the region pool/team. One ODP administrator reiterated that the program, in its current form, is mostly set up to identify and select athletes. Even though development was stressed as important, it remains secondary to the objective of identifying and selecting the best athletes. The administrator explained:

Our main responsibility is still finding the best players. Yes we want to develop but we are searching for the best players.

Interestingly, ODP has also become a venue for identification of athletes into other elite youth soccer systems. Some of these systems have objectives that counter some of the most important goals of ODP. For example, ODP is often a venue where athletes are identified for participation in the US DA. Following a review of elite player development in the US and around the world in 2007, US Soccer created the DA as an elite youth league where there is increased training, less total games, more meaningful focus on games dictated by international rules of competition, and focus on individual development. The DA has 96 total clubs, comprised of teams in three age groups: Under 13/14, Under 15/16, and Under 17/U18. The main conflict between ODP and the DA is that once a player chooses to participate with a DA club they forfeit eligibility for the ODP system at any level below the national team. So while a DA player may be selected for national team participation, they cannot participate in other levels of ODP. It is common that at the younger age groups, ODP is used by DA clubs to identify athletes and invite them to their club. Many criticized that the introduction of the DA has weakened the player pool of ODP, while others argue that it has afforded more opportunities for different players in ODP. ODP also serves as a prime venue for college and professional recruiting. Contrary to the DA, ODP has embraced its identity as a ground for college and professional recruiting. Since it is recognized that very few athletes will progress to regional and national levels, ODP promotes the idea that it can be used for college/professional recruiting. Under the state association philosophy, they

directly promote the idea that ODP is a venue to prepare and help athletes get selected for college and professional opportunities. One coach discussed the many objectives of ODP:

> Yes we are trying to find the best athletes but a lot of them have gone to the DA…so we can provide opportunities for a lot of other players and help them make connections and get seen.

One of the biggest goals of ODP is to develop the athletes that participate in the process. This development was highlighted in the individual and team development section. ODP also emphasizes the development of its coaching staff. By providing the opportunity to train the best athletes in the state and work with other top coaches, ODP is an environment where coaches can further their education. Also direct contact with the state association DOC provides many opportunities for career advancement. For example, state association ODP coaches are often selected to serve as instructors for US Soccer Coaching Education Courses. These opportunities are valuable for coaches seeking professional education and advancement. The DOC also serves as a valuable reference for coaches when they are seeking employment or in consideration for participation in advanced coaching courses. One younger coach explained:

> You learn a lot from other coaches and get a lot of knowledge. The overall environment makes you a better coach.

Selection of athletes from this state association to the region level brings recognition to the state association and the talent of the state and is seen as a sign of success. States that produce the most number of athletes progressing to region/national levels are recognized as hot beds for soccer talent. This goes hand in hand with competition results from ODP Friendlies and at Region Camp. State teams that are consistently winning are viewed as

having the best players and overall the most talent. The teams that win the most at Region

ODP camp often have the most athletes selected for progression to region pool/team.

While competition results are deemphasized overall especially when compared to

development, ODP Friendly and Region Camp match results are all posted and visible to

athletes, parents, and coaches. One coach explained why results matter at Region Camp:

> Really it's about how the kids are playing individually…but it's important
>
> for the team to play well because you can turn heads if you're all of a
>
> sudden beating the best states.

Another important measure for success in this state association is continued development

of the ODP program itself. This is calculated by several different measures. First, this

state association seeks to increase the number of athletes that participate in the ODP

tryouts. The rationale is that the more athletes at tryouts means that the ODP program is

reaching more athletes which results in increased player opportunities. In 2011, at state

level tryouts, 265 girls participated in ODP. In 2016, a total of 738 girls participated in

tryouts, the highest recorded attendance for this state association. On the boy's side, in

2011, 228 boys participated in state association tryouts. Setting another record

attendance number, in 2016, 885 boys attended state tryouts. It is apparent that more

athletes are attending ODP tryouts and that the program has a farther reach than it did in

the past years. This is further validated by that the fact that athletes attending tryouts this

past year represented 158 cities in the state. This is a sign that the program is reaching

beyond metropolitan areas and suburbs and into more rural areas that been underserved

by soccer development systems. This is often cited as one of the strengths of the current

ODP system as it relates to other elite systems where the focus is mostly on metropolitan,

highly populated areas. An ODP coach explained how the program targets athletes from smaller cities:

> Some of these kids have no chance at getting seen so ODP is a good opportunity…we now have a lot more contact with smaller clubs and players from the smaller cities…this state has a lot of talent that doesn't play for the top clubs.

Another important indicator of program success is the number of athletes that are selected for region level ODP. In 2011, out of 97 girls that attended Region Camp, 7 were selected for region pool/team. In 2016, 17 girls were selected for region pool/team from 201 that attended Region Camp. On the boy's side, the improvements are even more staggering. In 2011, out of 127 athletes attending Region Camp, 16 were selected for region pool/team. In 2016, 47 boys were selected for region pool/team out of 247 who attended. It is seen as a great success that the state association ODP is producing more athletes that are being selected for region pool/team. The increase in selections is attributed not only to the overall number of athletes participating in ODP but also to the quality of coaches involved in ODP.

The last major program development has been the number and quality of coaches involved in ODP. This current state association employs ODP coaches from the following countries Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica, Liberia, Mexico, Honduras, Brazil, and the United States. As player participation in the program has increased, so has the number of coaches involved in ODP. While the exact coach staff numbers have not been tracked through the years, we do know that at the beginning of 2015 there were 54 coaches on staff and at the end of 2016, there were 85 coaches on this state association staff. More

important than the number of coaches is the improvement in quality and experience of coaches. Probably the most common theme throughout the participant interviews was the notion that the coaches are the most important resource of the ODP program. The coaches are credited with improving the quality of training, creating a learning environment, improving the experience of athletes, and implementing the philosophy and style of play promoted by US Soccer. A coach aptly summarizes the importance of the coaching staff:

> They keep the program running and have been the most important part of ODP's success.

In addition to their role with the athletes, the coaches have also been responsible for improving the environment of learning for coaching development and education within the program. The DOC explains that the current senior staff has been in place for several years now and has established a culture of cooperative learning where criticism and feedback is welcome between the coaches. This is most apparent during and after sessions when coaches give feedback to each other about training sessions and teaching moments. The intent of coaches is always to help improve the environment and give different perspectives on how to teach the game. This is also seen when the directors of coaching give feedback on how to improve sessions or how to better teach important playing concepts. The consistency, professionalism, and overall attitude of the staff is seen as one of the major factors as to why the program continues to grow and be successful.

The Empirical Model Explaining the Success of the ODP Environment

The following figure (5.2) presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarizing the most important factors influencing the success of the ODP environment as a context for helping talented youth athletes to develop their potential. It is important to note that the environment studied is complex and development processes are dynamic so certain key elements have been highlighted to provide a summary of the case.

A summary of the ODP environment provides the following characteristics:

a) dynamic and constantly changing but stable and improving

b) almost fully focused on the athletic domain but does provide support for other areas of athlete's life

c) hierarchical structure but a culture of cooperation between directors, administrators and coaches

d) highly demanding environment in terms of performance but a lot of support given to athletes

e) limited parent involvement with overall culture of promoting autonomous athletes who develop skills that will serve them well in sport development but also outside of athletic domain

f) aware of its current success in talent development but lots of attention given to future and adaptability to improve areas of improvement

Chapter 6: Discussion

Features and Themes of Successful ATDEs

Despite several different sports and environments that have been investigated under the ATDE and ESF frameworks, there are common themes found in the ODP environment that overlap with previous findings. The main point of differentiation of this analysis is that ODP is part of a national culture much different from those of previous studies. The use of the ATDE/ESF framework has mostly been applied to Scandinavian contexts. This section discusses the findings of the ODP environment as it relates to common themes found in previous ATDE research with the objective of finding commonalities but also with a focus on extending understanding of the frameworks in a vastly different sport context.

Although ODP has a number of components and factors that make it unique as compared to other researched ATDEs, it also shared a number of features and similar principles to the other environments. Situating this current research within past research findings will help add understanding to the ODP environment and more in depth analysis to the themes that emerged.

Research Setting

The study of ODP extends the use of the ATDE framework well beyond the parameters of previous research. While previous studies have focused on different sports (e.g., track and field, kayaking) in different cultural contexts, all the programs were situated within Scandinavian countries where there are high similarities between the cultures. As Henriksen (2010) points out, the national cultures in Scandinavian countries are alike. Further, contrary to the previous contexts, which focused on more individual or

small team sports, soccer presents a sport where there are 11 team players on the field and where there can be over 20 people rostered to a team. While the focus is still on the individual development of the athlete, the presence of so many team members and coaches adds different dynamics and relationships to the environment. Lastly, athletes examined in previous research, while of varied ages, were all in the important step of transition from junior to elite senior athlete. The athletes examined in the ODP context are likely to be considered to be in a development phase slightly before that transition to senior athlete. However, it is apparent that the ODP athletes (especially the older athletes) are in full preparation for this transition that many consider to be the most difficult and important transition of an athlete's life (Stambulova et al., 2009). In terms of context alone, the ODP environment presents many stark differences to previous athletic environments studied under this framework.

Despite many differences in context, ODP also holds a lot of similarities with previous athletic environments examined. First, all the environments have a successful track record of developing prospective elite athletes into elite athletes in their chosen sport. In the US, ODP still holds a prestigious presence in regard to producing top soccer talent to elite systems. Second, all the sports examined under the ATDE framework are Olympic sports. Henriksen (2010) explains that the international competition in Olympic sports is very strong and athletes must be highly skilled in order to succeed. The brief analysis of research settings used in past ATDE research as it relates to ODP sets the table for discussing similar themes found in ATDE work as well as identifying where this study is unique and participant experiences might have diverged from past findings.

Group Organization and Proximal Role Models

Similar to other environments, group organization and structure in the ODP environment was highly valued. Although there are athletes of different age groups and levels, being a member of ODP is valued and holds important meaning for the athletes. This finding overlaps with common themes described by Henriksen (2010) in his seminal work on ATDEs. The teams and other ODP participants offer individual's friendship, motivation, fun, a sense of belonging, and challenging competition. For ODP, it was important for athletes to feel part of the group and part of an elite community. In most ODP activities, the athletes felt a high degree of group cohesion and connection to the group. Literature emphasizes that cohesion involves the individual member's attraction to the group and involves both task and social orientations (Paskevich, Estabrooks, Brawley, & Carron, 1998). This was apparent in the ODP athletes as they related to their team members not only on the field where they often must in order to succeed, but also off the field during activities (e.g., eating, ping pong) where they were not forced. Cohesion in team sports has been a common research area and findings show that team cohesion can have many positive impacts on participants including improved individual and team performance (Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2010). Specifically in soccer, team cohesion has been correlated with individual and team performance success (Tziner, Nicola, & Rizac, 2003).

Yalom (2005) describes the importance and dynamics of cohesion in small groups in which members have their own individual goals. This is applicable to ODP, where despite the team and focus on team, individuals are being selected on their own merits and the goal remains individual selection of players. In these settings, higher group

cohesion leads to greater impressionability of the members. Similar to past ATDE's studied, high cohesion and impressionability were key characteristics of the learning environment. This was mostly seen between older (often more experienced athletes) and younger (often less experienced athletes). It is important to note that at times even younger athletes had experience and served as influences to less experienced athletes. The relationship between experienced and less experienced athletes was a key characteristic of this environment and past contexts studied. Since the ODP environment forces constant interaction between these sets of athletes, learning and transference of knowledge took place in many settings. Younger athletes learned topics related to soccer specifically technique, field positioning, and possession tactics but also learned valuable information related to how to succeed in ODP. For example, more experienced athletes would constantly reiterate ideas that hard work and discipline were valued in this environment and that it could make a difference in being selected or not. Whether formally or informally, more experienced athletes would serve as role model for younger athletes where they helped them learn the rules of this culture and set standards on what to expect and how to succeed. The relationship between experienced and less experienced athletes is key to the success of the ODP environment.

In the ODP environment, older athletes also served the role as knowledge providers to the younger athletes. The older athletes help younger players acclimate to the environment and teach them tools to be more successful. Even in training, older athletes are used to demonstrate technical and tactical aspects of the game. Coaches are aware of this dynamic and use the older athletes as role models and examples. The older athletes give the younger players a visible role model to aspire to and younger athletes of often try

to mimic their behavior. This finding supports the concepts of community learning and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Barab & Plucker, 2002). Teaching and knowing in this environment is not solely dominated by coaches but rather is a responsibility that is shared among participants in the community. Interacting on and off the field with these more experienced athletes can be valuable for younger athletes in preparing them for important transitions in their athletic career.

Similar to other ATDEs, it is apparent that ODP should encourage more experienced athletes to play an active role in the development of the younger talented athletes. While coaches already promote this relationship, ODP can find more standard and formal avenues for ensuring that the more experienced athletes shape and help the experience of younger athletes.

As found in previous ATDEs, the community organization and culture of learning in ODP also applied to the coaches, who have created a culture of knowledge exchange and cooperation. The director of coaching described this change in culture as one of the reasons why ODP is currently successful. In this environment, coaches are asked to work in groups and cooperate in preparing sessions and evaluating athletes when in normal soccer settings they are usually tasked to doing this by themselves. Coaches are willing to cooperate and exchange knowledge on game tactics, player development issues, administrative duties, and team management. It was a distinctive characteristic of the ODP environment that coaches were willingly learning from each other and trying to actively seek new knowledge. This was found to a degree in some of the environments studied by Henriksen (2010), but it is apparent that in ODP this is a highly valued characteristic of the culture. As Henriksen (2010) states, while communities of practice

might be a rare sight in competitive sport because often coaches are reluctant to share knowledge, such communities hold the potential to develop coaches (Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009). The development of coaches is a main objective of this ODP program and might be a marker of successful ATDE's.

Weighted Environments

Examination of past empirical versions of the ATDE models demonstrates that the environments were highly weighted towards the athletic domain. This is true for ODP as well where more importance is attributed to the components in the athletic domain than the non-athletic domain. Henriksen (2010) argues that this skew can be related to examining the environment through a "talent development" lens or that the skew is an indicator that successful elite development environments must be weighted toward the athletic domain.

In the ODP environment as in others examined, the weighted structure meant that the environment stimulated a high degree of athletic identity in the participants. This held most true for the athletes, coaches, and administrators. All these participants take great pride in being involved in the state ODP program. The director of coaching mentioned the great pride taken in representing one's state and the pride of winning against other states. Further, there was also mention of pride taken in being selected as one of the best athletes in the state and also one of the best athletes in the region. Coaches in ODP also spoke with great pride of being a representative of the state and being able to associate and work with some of the nation's best talent. For the athletes, other parts of their athletic identity included being disciplined, ambitious, and serious about their soccer. These qualities were identified by participants as being not only useful in the athletic

domain but outside in their normal daily life. Overall, all participants took much pride in their role and participation within ODP.

Although important for a sports career, literature has identified that a predominantly athletic identity can put athletes at risk of jeopardizing a successful transition away from sport, whether the end of the sport career is abrupt or planned (Lavalle & Robinson, 2007). Similar to other ATDEs, ODP understands that the program is only a part of an athlete's development and only a small portion of their overall life. ODP works their schedule specifically around the school and the soccer club calendars of these athletes and has implemented program components to aid athletes in other life skills (e.g., nutrition). ODP definitely is skewed toward the development of athletic skills but understands that many sport skills (i.e., autonomy, discipline) are transferable and useful outside of the athletic domain. It was constantly repeated in the environment that ODP was only a portion of these athlete's development and that it is built to be an aid to athletic and life development.

Athletes in the ODP environment spoke of conflicts that exist between their athletic lives and other demands on them including social interaction and school demands. They most commonly referred to this tension as a pull between time needed for athletic success and success in social and school lives. Skewed environments have been criticized for preventing youth athletes from leading a normal adolescent life (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Similar to other environments, ODP athletes spoke of having most friends involved in their sport and mentioned having less time for interactions with friends outside of soccer. In this regard, athletes spoke of

school as a context where they can actually have time to interact and socialize with friends/peers outside of sport.

Linked to the weighting of individual profiles toward sport, most athletes situated family as important but periphery to their athletic development. This is in line with findings in other ATDE's. Sport research has clearly demonstrated that family/support systems play an important role in athlete's career and that roles change (often diminishes) as the child progresses through their career (Bloom, 1985; Cote, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Wylleman et al., 2007). All athletes in this environment and past environments valued the importance of emotional and financial support from parents but in all these environments parents do not play a direct role in the daily routines of the athletes. In ODP, the program is set up to minimize contact with parents as the most valued relationships are between coach and athlete and between athletes. For example, there is significant interaction between administrators/coaches before the process begins but during and after most interaction is between coaches and athletes. It is a significant marker of the environment that parents are almost excluded from many ODP activities. This is most apparent at ODP Region Camp where parents are only allowed minimal contact with athletes after games/training or during brief down periods during the day. Parents are not allowed into athlete dormitories and are not allowed interaction with athletes during any of the events.

The finding that parents are on the periphery of the athlete's lives in regard to the athletic domain is consistent with past ATDE research and in line with the athletes being in their investment and specialization phases of development (Cote et al., 2007). During this phase of development, parents are not actively involved in coaching or giving

instruction but can fill a variety of other roles that help facilitate their athlete's sport development (Cote, 1999). In the ODP environment, parents were important for financial and emotional support of the athlete. Most participants were aware that the success or failure of the athlete would be largely dependent on his/her own actions and parents did not have any direct control over outcomes.

The finding of ODP being a heavily weighted environment toward the athletic domain is compatible with past research into ATDE's. While there were specific nuances in this environment, findings were highly consistent with past ATDE research. ODP was unique to other examined environments as it specifically functions as an auxiliary development context for these athletes and not a primary venue for development. As a result, it is not surprising that ODP is heavily weighted toward the athletic domain as its main purpose is to select and develop elite youth athletes. While the program allows for time and promotes the idea of well-rounded athletes and people outside of sport, when in the environment, the majority of the focus and resources are targeted on soccer development.

Amount of Resources

Contrary to the environments examined by Henriksen (2010), in ODP there was not a prevailing perception of limited resources. While coaches and administrators were aware that there were limited resources in some aspects (i.e., equipment, coaching staff), it was not a central theme that emerged from the participants. From coaches and administrators, it was understood that the amount and quality of resources in ODP was directly related to the amount of participants in the program and that as the program grew the resources were kept proportional. Instead of viewing resources as limited or lesser

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than other ODP programs, coaches and administrators expressed that while there was room for improvement, the current resources were adequate. In terms of uniforms and playing venues, coaches and administrators viewed their resources as comparable to the top state ODP programs. Athletes and parents in the environment viewed ODP resources as either adequate or above average. This could be skewed by the strong belief by athletes and parents that the ODP coaches are high level and a better level than their regular soccer environments.

ODP varied from several of the previous studied contexts as all administrators and coaches are compensated for their work. This changes the feel of the program for athletes and parents who are all aware that the coaches have been selected or identified as being top coaches in the region. At Region Camp, accommodations are top class for athletes, coaches, and administrators and the consensus is that the resources used during camp are top of the line.

Training Programs

This is an important area for analysis as ODP, while presenting many similarities to other ATDE environments, has a vastly different overall structure and purpose. Similar to other environments, the routines of the athletes and the focus of the environment revolved around training. In all settings, athletes participated in training, competitions, camps, and social events. Further, athletes in these ATDE settings all had heavy training loads which is well apparent in ODP where the program is built around having multiple sessions a day and often playing 2 games a day. These heavy training regimens support the notion that heavy hours of training and investment are necessary preconditions for elite performance (Ericsson, 1996). Due to the structure of ODP, however, the

organization of ODP training is in stark contrast to other environments previously studied.

Most of the other environments studied under the ATDE framework allow for athletes to have training integrated into their daily lives or weekly schedules with camps/training on the weekends. ODP does not have the luxury to have its athletes so consistently in training and the event schedule must be tailored around several constraining factors. First, these athletes belong to elite club teams (and some to high school teams) that are playing on an almost full time calendar schedule. This leaves little time for outside soccer and for any activities not dealing with their soccer development. ODP carefully selects dates that do not conflict with these schedules and allows for the greatest number of athletes to attend events. In line with this same constraint, coaches are often full time club, high school, or professional coaches also engaged in soccer for the full calendar year. ODP must select dates where the most coaches are available and this is one of the reasons the ODP staff has grown in order to the ease process of staffing events. Second, this specific region presents problems because of the geographical distance between cities in the state. Athletes and coaches often have to travel between 2-12 hours to attend venues that are hosting ODP events. Geography adds more time constraints but also presents cost barriers to many participants. Lastly, ODP is not a program that is supported by all state clubs and soccer organizations. On the contrary, several entities promote actively against ODP, making some ODP logistics more difficult. For example, there are powerhouse youth clubs in major cities in this state that promote against ODP and encourage their top athletes not to participate. The motives behind these actions vary but the result is that ODP has to at times convince or market the program to athletes that

could potentially benefit and athletes that could make significant impacts in the ODP region and national systems. The overall result of these constraints is that ODP has a small window to actually train its athletes and prepare them for the ODP process.

Contrary to the other systems studied under the ATDE framework, ODP stands as a supplemental and not primary training environment for these youth athletes. Because of these constraints the time and opportunities to train are very limited. An athlete that attends Region Camp is likely to attend only 3-4 training sessions and one competition event before having to compete with their state team. This makes the acquisition of concepts and training philosophy difficult and makes training time a valuable commodity. As a result of this current structure, ODP does not have the resources including time to allow for diversification or deliberate play. As Henriksen describes in previously examined environments, "while the athletes were all in their investment years and already specialized within their sport, training was still organized to allow for some measure of diversification" (p. 149). All these other environments had some form of structured diversification and deliberate play like mountain biking and surfing as a formal component of the program for their elite athletes. This is simply not the case in ODP due to the previously discussed constraints. This might be one of the major limitations of ODP and a dangerous path to continue to follow. The only ODP event that allowed for time for deliberate play or some form of diversification was Region Camp. Athletes sometime engage in leisure activities like table tennis or soccer tennis during their down time. This is not structured into the Region Camp schedule but occurs during the few periods of time where athletes are away from soccer activities.

The benefits of engaging in early diversification and deliberate activities has been thoroughly noted in research. Benefits can include longer sport careers, positive youth development, and the building of a solid foundation for intrinsic motivation (Cote at al., 2009). Henriksen (2010) explains that even though these athletes are specialized in their sports and participate in elite environments it is possible that diversification and deliberate play activities may support their development even during the specializing and investment years. In this regard, ODP is setting a dangerous precedent in a structure that instead of promoting diversification and play actually limits opportunities for these athletes to engage in activities that might be beneficial to them over the long term. Most of the athletes in this environment have already specialized in soccer and have almost full time soccer schedules that include club, high school soccer and ODP. With its current format, ODP is taking athletes already limited for time and engaging them in events that are filled with soccer training and activities and no diversification or free play. This is a dangerous route and one that merits further review as we know from literature that environments with no diversification or free play can lead to negative outcomes including burnout and loss of motivation over the span of an athletic career (Stambulova, 2009). This stands as one of the main differentiation points of ODP in regards to previously analyzed ATDE's and an area that might need amending if the goal is to make a positive impact over the long term development of youth soccer athletes.

Psychosocial Skills and Competencies for Life

Similar to other environments studied, athletes, coaches and administrators in the ODP environment were aware of the sport's potential to foster positive youth development and individual attributes that will be helpful for individuals in life outside of

sport. In order to link the fields of talent development and career development, researchers have suggested that the purpose of talent development is to build up an athletes' resources in order to overcome the demands of career stages and transitions, most relevant here is the transition from junior to senior sport (Stambulova, 2009). These resources includes skills beyond sport-specific skills such as psychosocial skills and organization skills to structure life as an athlete and make the sport career a capital for the life career (Henriksen, 2010). Specifically, the Life Development Intervention perspective (Lavalle, 2005), which focuses on athletes in their transition out of sport, emphasizes the importance of the athlete's acquisition of life skills during their athletic careers, which will hold life long value and ease transition out of sport. In all previous environments studied, participants were aware of the sport's potential to foster positive youth development that will lead to good athletes and people.

As mentioned before, athletes in the ODP environment have the potential to develop psychosocial skills that will aid them both in sport and non-sport domains. Common to other ATDE's, ODP stressed the importance of autonomy and highly valued the more autonomous athletes. Athletes in ODP are continually pushed to be autonomous both in training activities and in responsibilities outside the pitch. Region Camp is the best example as athletes were expected to be responsible for themselves for most periods of the day. This includes waking up on time, arriving to meetings on time, being prepared with equipment, eating nutritiously to optimize performance, and sleeping the appropriate number of hours. As the athletes get older, they are given more responsibility and the consequences for not following rules are more severe. Younger athletes are slowly introduced to these responsibilities by being given small tasks (e.g., warming up without

a coach) to more important tasks (e.g., arriving to meetings on time). Throughout ODP events, the expectations from the coaches' increases and athletes are expected to be more autonomous and more responsible as the process moves forward. Athletes that are selected into region pool/team are usually highly autonomous and can function in their daily lives without supervision from coaches and parents. Autonomy is highly valued in the group culture. Contrary to other ATDE environments, the value on autonomy does not stem from lack of resources but rather is seen as a skill that is necessary for advancement in the ODP system. This goes contrary to Henriksen's (2010) thought that the emphasis on autonomy could be explained by the nature of the sport and the lack of coaching resources in the environments. Rather, this might lend evidence to support that autonomy is one of the most valuable skills held by successful youth athletes.

Important to all ATDE's is the development of individual social skills in order to be able to successfully operate and contribute in these elite environments. Athletes are expected to communicate with their peers, coaches, and administrators and be able to address any problem issues that arise. Athletes that have a high degree of structure in their approach to sport, school and their life are seen as role models and expected to be successful in the sport. This was common to other ATDE's examined where social and interpersonal skills were needed for success and highlights the overall importance of developing life skills that serve the athlete in functions outside of sport. The psychosocial skills valued and developed in the ODP environment are in line with research comparing elite and sub-elite athletes. Research shows that discipline, commitment, ability to actively search for social support as important intra-personal determinants for successful development (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006). In ODP, the relationship

between coach and athlete is vital, and athletes that possess good social and communication skills often foster better relationships with their coaches. These better relationships often lead to more support, feedback and communication from the coach that in the end improves the athlete's opportunity for success.

Group's Organizational Culture

The culture of ODP emerged as one of the main factors explaining success in the environment. In this framework, the culture is central to the ESF model and past research confirmed that organizational culture was pervasive and affected all levels of the model in the studied environments. The ODP culture affected different components and relationships in the environment including athlete development, the structure of training, and what skills and psychosocial competencies were most valued. In line with past ATDE work, using a functionalist approach to organizational culture, organizations have a culture that is created and maintained by its members and especially by administrators/management (Schein, 1990; 2004). Culture is measurable and leads to the possibility of distinguishing between more or less functional cultures in relation to the objectives of the organization. In this study, the ODP culture emerged as a vital factor contributing to success in the environment and was deliberately maintained by coaches and administrators and on lesser scale by athletes.

Similar to past ATDE research, ODP promotes and maintains cooperation, teamwork, and openness as important features of the environmental culture. Group organization from both athletes and coach/administrators stimulated a critical learning environment, social support from people within the sport, and peer learning and instruction. For athletes in ODP, many who are near the same skill level as each other,

the ability to adapt to the environment and work within a team framework is vital to success. Evaluating coaches value athletes who help their teammates and help the overall cohesiveness of the group. The relationship between more experienced and younger athletes is central to maintaining the culture and expectations of the environment. The importance of this relationship is understood in ODP and as the program moves forward they might want to focus on implementing formal avenues for this relationship to be further exploited and to be built into the structure of the program. For coaches, it is necessary to operate with a growth mindset and be open to suggestions and critiques from peers. The coaches spoke fondly of the camaraderie between the coaching staff and the knowledge is gained from working and sharing ideas with fellow coaches. Administrators understand the value of this environment and see ODP as prime venue for coaching development that will not only increase the quality of coaches in the program but in the general soccer region as well.

As addressed earlier, ODP, contrary to past ATDE environments, has less effect on athlete decisions to specialize in a specific sport or engage in different sport activities. Due to the structure and organization of ODP, athletes in this environment are mostly encouraged to engage in activities that will help their soccer directly. This is in contrast to the other environments that promoted athletes to specialize late in sport and often provided formal opportunities within the program to engage in other sport activities. This is a dangerous route for ODP as these youth soccer athletes are already mostly engaged in full time soccer activities and have little time for other activities. The negative outcomes of early specialization have been well documented and the current format of ODP might not be doing anything to combat these dangers.

Similar to past environments, coaches, administrators, and athletes are aware that ODP has success in talent development and that the current system is valuable in giving athletes opportunities to enter senior elite sport. All participants were aware of the historical prestige and value of the program to the current US soccer system. Athletes are a little less in tune with the past success of the environment but after participation for a couple months begin to be taught the objectives and talent development success of the program. All participants understood that while currently successful, ODP must remain flexible and adaptable, in terms of objectives and structure, to keep up with the rapidly changing environment of soccer in this country. Coaches and administrators were more aware of the trends in soccer that might affect the current format of ODP. Specifically, the competing programs of the id2 program and the DA might change the role ODP plays in the development of top youth soccer athletes. One of the administrators spoke of how ODP has already adapted to some of these challenges and how he expects ODP to continue to evolve to "stay relevant." This administrator suggested that the DA will take over as the primary method of athlete identification for US national teams and ODP will likely fill the gap of finding the best talent that is not scouted or connected to the DA system. In this format, ODP would occupy a more supplemental role but still be vital to selecting and training talented youth athletes. Further, there was mention of ODP partnering with professional clubs and soccer entities to provide more support to the system. This would help create a better scouting network and provide a direct route for these youth athletes to be connected to senior elite opportunities. This would be in line with most European soccer models that rely on regional centers and professional clubs to identify talent. It is apparent that this state association is preparing for the future and

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understands that part of the challenges ahead will be to maintain the relevance of ODP. Overall, the participants feel safe in the current state of ODP but also understand the issues at hand for continuing success to occur.

Similar to other ATDE environments, ODP showed a high level of coordination and consistency amongst the three layers of organizational culture: cultural artefacts, values espoused and expressed, and basic assumptions. Henriksen (2010) explains that the high degree of coherence between the different levels results in consistency between organizational objectives, observed behavior and analysis and what participants said. For example, one of the main mottos of ODP is "Work Hard, Play Smart" and this attitude and value was seen in the attitude of athletes in training and games but was also a pervasive theme in communication between athletes and athletes-coaches. As addressed earlier, the culture of these ATDE's seems to be one of the main factors that leads to success. In ODP, the culture served as a tie between all participants and helped shape the standards and expectations of the program.

Contextual Embedment and the Dynamic Nature of ATDEs

As Henrikesen (2010) notes, a final common feature of all the environments examined was that they were situated in a socio-cultural context as well as a time frame, as was predicted in the ATDE working model. Similar to past ATDE research, it was rare for participants in this environment to initiate talks about the broader cultural layers including youth culture, national culture, general and specific sport cultures. While participants found it difficult to address these issues on their own, when prompted they provided valuable insight into how ODP is situated within these cultures. In terms of national culture, almost unanimously ODP participants view soccer as being in some type

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of golden age in the US. Participants spoke of how the general public has become accepting of soccer as a major sport and that it is now intimately linked with the sports culture of this country. To these participants, soccer is no longer seen as a foreign sport but rather as one of the major American sports alongside football, baseball, and basketball. There was great optimism about the growth of the game in the US and the opportunities that will arise for these youth athletes as the sport continues to develop and grow.

Contemporary youth culture was seen as incompatible with the demands and life of an elite youth athlete. Youth culture was described as one where individuals are not hard working and where most young people choose to take easy paths. Participants spoke about how the elite athletes in ODP are likely exceptions within the broader culture and that their ability to succeed as athletes is likely due to their family support and the environment of their specific training program. This finding was consistent with that of other ATDE's and the strong nature of their athletic cultures was regarded as one of the main factors as to why these youth athletes were not seduced by the temptations of youth culture. Further, in ODP, athletes create strong friendships and relationships with peers and coaches in their sport so they surround themselves with individuals who are accepting of their elite sport lifestyle.

Like past environments, the ODP environment is situated in a time frame and is dynamic and in a state of constant change. During the study, changes to the structure and organization of the program occurred. Most evident was the constant push by coaches and administrators to address areas for improvement in the program. Specific areas that were addressed were making tryouts more efficient, improving athlete evaluation

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methods, expanding the use of experts in the program, improving parent education, and integrating smaller clubs and cities into the selection process. Overall, this state association seems highly proactive in guaranteeing that ODP continues to grow and adapts to the ever changing environment of US soccer. Further, throughout the process, there is a noticeable change in the athletes themselves. At Region Camp, some athletes that were new to the environment this year begin to show a level of autonomy, maturity, and responsibility that is seen in the more experienced athletes. These athletes show major development throughout the ODP process and begin to emulate the characteristics and profile of athletes selected to region and national pool/teams. As the level of competition rose, the athletes seemed to rise to the challenge and adapt to any new demands. Watching the athletes develop and show success in the environment was a great point of satisfaction for athletes, coaches, and administrators.

Similar to past ATDE environments, while participants were aware of the need to change and adapt with environmental changes, most felt confident in the status quo and current state of affairs of the system. Coaches and administrators specifically understand the future challenges that might present themselves but also understand that certain core values and structural components of the program must remain the same. Specifically, participants were excited about the direction of implementing a specific playing style in the US and selecting and developing athletes who can play this more international type system. Participants understand that change in such a large, structured program must be gradual and that participants in the environment will be the most important agents in ensuring the system continues to improve.

Chapter 7: Reflections and Applications

Moving Forward in ODP

This study has been a tremendous journey but has also revealed the uniqueness of ODP as an ATDE. While many of the findings and themes of past ATDE research were relevant here, it was apparent that ODP did not exactly fit the mold of previous environments. The ATDE working model framework was beneficial in revealing the components, relationships, processes, and values in the environment that allow the program to be successful. And further, the working models revealed areas of ODP, despite being a successful talent development environment, that need addressing or improving. This study will also be beneficial to ATDE work as it extended beyond the environments of past research and examined a talent system in a vastly different national and sport culture. This current research leads to several discussion points about the future of ODP and implications for further ATDE work and research in elite soccer environments.

US Soccer Uniqueness

Examining ODP within the ATDE framework truly highlighted the uniqueness of the US soccer system. Because the culture, organization, and structure of US soccer is in a state of constant change, ODP must confront many challenges moving forward. Some of these are easily predictable and others will only be known only as time passes. It is important to return to several concepts discussed earlier in order to better frame future challenges of ODP.

First, it is accepted that the US provides for a unique space, in relation to other countries, in regard to the development of the women's game and opportunities for

female soccer athletes. Participants are aware that here there are more opportunities for female athletes in soccer including increased training at youth levels, access to facilities, opportunities for participation in college sport, and now more professional opportunities. While it was acknowledged that the world is making gains on the resources of US women's soccer, the US is still seen as the most conducive environment for female soccer athletes to develop and pursue elite opportunities. The women's soccer system has experienced major change in the past couple of years with the introduction of the Elite Clubs National League (ECNL), an organization focused on enhancing opportunities for youth female soccer athletes and increasing the quality of daily training environments and competitions. In the past seven years, ECNL has established itself as a major feeder to both collegiate women's programs and US Soccer youth national teams. Further, US Soccer plans the introduction of the Girl's Developmental Academy (DA) in 2017. The objective of the Girls DA will be similar to the boys, which is to overall enhance the daily training environments of youth athletes and continue to improve the level of player and coach development. ECNL and the DA will have many overlapping objectives and philosophies and it is yet to be determined how they can function together or if they will continue the US soccer trend of complicating the player development pathway. ODP on the girl's side has not dealt with this sort of direct program competition in the past and will have to be adaptable to remain as a premier avenue for female athlete development. What is apparent is that the US continues to be a global leader in the women's game and with these strategic programs will come a lot of change to the overall environment of women's soccer.

The notion of competing soccer organizations and soccer entities is a continued

problem and was readily identified by participants as one of the challenges of not only

ODP but general US soccer. Participants spoke of the tension that exists between

competing soccer organization in the US (e.g., DA and ODP). An ODP administrator

explained that athletes are getting pulled in many directions by organizations that might

not all be interested in the well-being and development of the player. Ulterior motives of

soccer organizations that were mentioned were financial profit, organizational growth,

and prestige. With all the conflicting information athletes and parents receive from

different organizations, it becomes more difficult to market and persuade individuals to

participate in ODP. One participant mentioned that there is a certain possessiveness

involved in player development in the US where clubs feel they own players and want to

single handedly guide their decisions. These clubs and administrators are often successful

and dissuade athletes from participating in ODP. The overlapping reach and duties of

soccer organizations continues to be identified as a hindrance to the identification and

development of athletes for national team programs. This is a problem area that warrants

specific investigation and similar to this research should take the approach of connecting

the researcher-practitioner distance in order to conclude with realistic solutions.

Examining these other soccer programs (e.g., ID2 program, DA) under the ATDE

framework can help reveal how to minimize overlapping objectives between

organizations and help us move toward an identification/selection system that is more

efficient. While this could cause serious tension in the short term while programs

possibly adjust to new overall objectives, the benefits of having a more clearly

cooperative development and identification system could pay major dividends in the

future. As it currently operates, programs like ODP and id2, USYS and USCS, are so alike that participants in the US soccer system are confused and unsure about the best route. To maximize talent development and identification, we have to move toward a system that instead of having competing organizations has complementary organizations with objectives of enhancing the level of US athlete, improving coach and player development, enhancing parent education, and developing better talent for national programs. At least at this state association, they are preparing for the changes and the eventual clash that will occur between organizations. The long term plan is move ODP to be a supplemental program that helps develop and identify talent in areas where the DA and professional academies do not reach. The administrators and coaches of this state association have analyzed the trends and are fully aware that ODP will have to take a secondary role to the DA but that this change might be the best for US soccer.

Further, the geography of the US continues to be a significant barrier to the goal of a more connected and cooperative athlete development system. Participants in this region spoke of this as a major barrier to their specific region but also as one of the main barriers of US soccer. One of the possible solutions to this issue is what was described earlier in terms of organizations that currently have overlapping objectives. Certain programs such as ODP might have to strategically reposition themselves while at the same time helping to fix one of the main problems we have in talent development and identification. For example, ODP could focus on marketing itself to athletes that exist outside of major metropolitan areas. It could be a specific goal of ODP state associations to seek talent that is not already involved in the DA or ECNL. Every state already has an association and the infrastructure for these objectives is already in place. This would

mean that ODP would no longer be the main developer of national talent but it would serve a major role in identifying any talent that has not been already identified by other programs. While this state association seems to be willing to make that transition, it would have to be an organizational strategic shift from the top down. Such a shift would be a big step forward in minimizing geographic areas of the country where talent goes unidentified and as a result not developed in long term development systems.

Lastly, the pay-for-play system in soccer seems to be getting worse rather than showing signs of improvement. This is a frightening trend as more and more athletes will never gain access to elite systems of talent development and identification. The problem even manifests itself in ODP where many athletes from this region do not attend tryouts because of costs associated with enrollment and travel. While the costs of ODP are relatively low compared to most comparable elite soccer systems, the overall cost is substantial enough to eliminate a large percentage of potential athletes. One of the ODP administrators highlighted that this targeting and accessing of under privileged populations remains one of the major objectives of this association. In this association, the problem of targeting and integrating other populations has been partially addressed by employing minority coaches from smaller clubs and cities in order motivate their local populations to attend ODP. This state association also has a policy, which states that if an athlete is under scholarship at his current local club then he/she will also receive a scholarship for ODP as long as the proper paperwork is processed. Overall, from administrators and coaches there was an understanding that to in order to fully be able to have a thorough and effective scouting network that ODP will likely need funding from another more reliable source. At the moment, the ODP state program fully relies on

registration fees from participating athletes, which is an unstable source. In stark contrast to what we see in the US, most European soccer models have their national identification programs funded (either by professional teams or national program funds) so as to eliminate costs for athletes and families. Most participants felt that in order to resolve some of the identification issues currently present it would have to secure funding from either the USSF, which looks unlikely in light of the DA's success, or possibly from local professional clubs that have high interest in scouting talent that is proximally close. If ODP moves to get funded by professional entities then it will move the US system closer to the European models, which would have an unpredictable outcome. What is clear is that ODP will likely have to fill the gap of identifying talent in smaller cities and geographic regions untapped by the DA and ECNL and those areas are often largely comprised of under served populations that are blocked to most elite soccer systems because the pay for play system. ODP will have to strategically plan programs that minimize costs for athletes so that we can integrate these athletes into the elite systems. Including these athletes into the US system could be a potential recipe for high level success as one of these underserved populations is Hispanic communities. Many of these communities have soccer weaved into their culture and traditions and have high participation numbers for youth soccer and unstructured soccer (e.g., pick up soccer). As soccer has been shown to be a sport that requires high total hours for practice, including unstructured play, these communities that value soccer so highly have young athletes playing substantial amounts of soccer during their formative development years. Among these athletes, there will be athletes that can transition into successful careers in the formal US system. The key remains how and how effectively ODP is able to minimize

participation costs including travel. These holds true for athletes already in the system too that often to progress to regional levels and cannot continue due to the high level of travel costs. This state association is already strategizing to address this potential future and try to stay ahead of the curve. So a specific challenge as we move forward is how does ODP stay sustainable and improve in the face of so many changes in the environment of US soccer.

Areas of Improvement

One of the advantages of using the two working models is that it results in a deep description of how the environment functions. This reveals areas of the environment that lead to overall success but also gives insight into areas that need improvement if the program is to remain a successful ATDE. While the ATDE approach has not been used in the past to examine areas for improvement in ATDE's, for this research, one of the main objectives was to result in applicable recommendations for the improvement of ODP. This approach also is a step forward in linking the gap that exists between researchers and practitioners in sport development work.

Evaluation system. A constant area brought up for discussion by many of the participants was the current evaluation system in place for ODP tryouts and the selection process for inclusion into state teams after pool training. Most of the issues were brought forth by the coaches as they are the ones charged with using the system. Athletes, however, also brought forth concerns about how players were being selected. One of the ODP administrators explained that the current evaluation guide (see Appendix G) and system were changed a few years ago with the intent of providing a common language for coaches, athletes, and parents in the evaluation. The evaluation guide contains 30-

criteria that are deemed as major characteristics of an elite soccer athlete (e.g., technical ability-dribbling, making decisions with the ball, and maintaining possession individually). The characteristics used are supposed to address the four major pillars of soccer athlete development-technical, tactical, psychosocial, and physical. The system has been in place for several years and while seen as an improvement from past evaluation methods has proven to have its own set of problems. During evaluation at tryouts and state pool training, using the evaluation guide, coaches are supposed to select three characteristics that are strengths for an athlete and three characteristics that are areas for improvement for the athlete. This data is then stored for coaches to view and is the main criteria used for selection with additional help of descriptive notes taken by the coaches.

Three major areas of critique arose in regard to the current evaluation system. First, coaches spoke of the difficulty in using a thirty criteria evaluation guide when tasked with evaluation at times of between 60-80 athletes. Coaches said that looking up and down at the evaluation guide during sessions and competitions causes them to lose valuable time in actually watching the athletes play. Also, selecting six characteristics for each athlete is difficult when evaluating so many athletes. For example, over two days of sessions, the coach might have to select 360 characteristics for their pool of athletes. This challenge was often addressed by head coaches by breaking up their player pools for their evaluating coaches. So instead of having to evaluate 60 athletes, a coach was tasked with evaluating 20 athletes, which still was viewed as difficult by some staff. Second, coaches felt that while the evaluation guide allows for relatively easy evaluation of top and bottom athletes, it becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate players that fall into the

middle tier. One coach noted that the evaluation system provides little reference when coaches look back and try to analyze which athletes are in and which ones are out. All coaches noted that selecting the middle tier athletes is the hardest task and one that is not made easier by the current evaluation system. Lastly, coaches and analysis of evaluation reports from the past year show that there is a disparity in the type of athletes that are being selected by the coaches. For example, some coaches are mostly evaluating athletes on physical characteristics while other coaches are focusing on technical characteristics. This leads to major bias in the selection process and is a solid indicator that all coaches are not selecting the same profile of athlete. This issue was also revealed in coaching and athlete interviews where participants mentioned an inconsistency between selections at different ages. At some age groups, participants feel athletes are being selected for their technical and tactical ability and at other age groups participants feel that physical attributes are being emphasized more. This is a major concern as the state association wants to select athletes on the same criteria but also wants to align its selection methods with the mandates of the national ODP program. Overall, the goal should be to create less bias in selection and uniform the type/profile of athlete that is being selected.

To the credit of this state association, the administrators and coaches are open to changes and understand that the current evaluation system needs updating. Information gathered from this research has partly been responsible for initiating a revitalization of the evaluation system. Also, the administrators have held informal focus group with coaches to try to identify problematic areas and allow coaches to offer solutions. Here we will present several ideas that could help resolve some of the current problems. First, it seems that the 30 criteria format is not practical for on field work evaluation. Rather,

coaches need a more concise evaluation guide that does not result in major time being taken away from actually observing athletes. One recommendation is that the criteria in place be condensed to approximately 10 major categories that will be used in on-field observation. To supplement these 10 major categories, coaches will have an expanded version of the evaluation guide that will provide a more in depth description of important criteria for each of the 10 categories. This process will be further explained in the coaching education section. Further, there needs to be a formal organization and structure to the responsibilities of the coaches during the evaluation process. At the moment, head coaches select which staff coaches are evaluating and which coaches are running sessions but a more formal process could help eliminate some of the present problems. For example, head coaches could delegate running sessions to one assistant coach and free themselves up for evaluation as they are the more experienced evaluator/coach. Further, each other assistant coach can be tasked with evaluating a certain group of athletes only. Some of this is already done but a more uniform system and process for all age groups could alleviate some of the problems. Lastly, there needs to be a minimizing of selection bias between the coaches. This can be accomplished by formalizing some of the processes involved in evaluation but also by implementing a standard idea of the type/profile of athlete that will be selected from this state association. While this takes some agency away from the coaches, it will ensure that the disparity in selection standards between the age groups is minimized. How to apply this new selection method will be described further in the next section on coaching education.

  Coaching education. One of the main objectives of national ODP and this specific state association is to enhance the quality of coaches not only involved in ODP

but in the general geographic area. As described in earlier sections, ODP provides a learning environment where coaches can improve their knowledge and learn to work with other top coaches and athletes. The idea of improving the evaluation system is directly linked with components of how to improve coaching education. One of the major concerns of evaluation is the inconsistency in selection criteria by the coaches. The recommendation here is to address this problem by instituting more formal education for coaches on how to use and apply the evaluation system and to implement formal guidelines in regard to the type of athlete that is to be selected. For instance, coaches should enter tryouts with a clear understanding of how to use the evaluation guide in place and not have to wait for on field direction or learning. Coaches will become familiar with the characteristics well before tryouts and when they enter tryouts they will understand which criteria are valued above others. For example, as we move forward we want to value game intelligence from an athlete above any physical characteristics. This can largely be accomplished by providing coaches with a clear education on evaluation practices either through group meetings (which is unlikely due to time constraints), presentations, or worksheets. Presentations and worksheets seem the more likely route as these coaches are often tight on time. Within these presentations and/or worksheets, the coaches will be presented with a breakdown of the most important values and characteristics during the selection process. In the end, this education should lead to a clear, defined picture of what the ideal ODP athlete looks like. For example, this information would detail that decision making is the primary characteristic being sought followed by technical ability under pressure. This information would also detail the importance of not primarily selecting athletes based on athleticism. While this will take

some power away from head coaches, it will go a long way in stabilizing and making the evaluation process more consistent and reliable. This information can even be broken down further into what this type of athlete looks like at specific ages and stages of their development. The idea of creating a player profile for each age group that is consistent with the type of overall athlete being sought after will help eliminate a lot of the bias that is taking place.

This state association is already firmly in the process of making substantial changes in the direction of ideas that are presented above. The main impetus is to make sure that we are not eliminating youth athletes based on athleticism at younger ages when in reality they might develop into the most elite players at ages 16-18. These steps will also ensure that this ODP program stays in line with mandates of US Soccer with the goal that all ODP programs are on the same page and developing/identifying athletes that will succeed in senior systems. For a coach currently in the system, these changes are exciting and well in line with evidence presented in talent research. It seems most soccer programs are eventually headed in this direction and this state association is active in staying ahead of the curve. Linking research evidence with actual evaluation methods is a significant step in linking gaps between academic work and practitioner application.

Use of experts. While mentioned during the interviews, the use of experts emerged an important area of development for the ODP program. Currently, the state association has used experts to come speak with athletes and parents before tryouts or state pool training sessions. Experts that were brought in during this ODP cycle were a sports psychologist and a nutritionist. Both spoke to athletes and parents about specific topics within their expert discipline. For example, the nutritionist discussed the

importance of treating food as fuel as these athletes are competing under extreme conditions and nutrition can make a significant impact on performance. An ODP administrator admitted that the use of experts is currently just an introduction and that there are plans to expand their role within the program.

As currently structured, the experts speak with parents and athletes in a large group setting but then have no further meaningful contact with the athletes. So there is no long term effect on the athletes or more opportunities to influence their decisions. One of the points of differentiation for this state program is to offer an experience that is different than the athlete's regular club environment and fully focused on player development. At Region Camp, there is some integration of sport science concepts with the athletes as they have to fill out player journals about their experience and development at camp. The importance of the journal varies depending on the respective region coach. This state association could implement a program where athletes must do exercises and follow programs as detailed by the experts. This could give the ODP program another attribute that it could market and could potentially help attract more athletes. The biggest obstacle will be identifying how to further implement the expert information without too much more time constraints on the coaches and athletes. Both coaches and athletes constantly recognized that functioning in the elite soccer world leads to very little free time. Another potential barrier could be the costs associated with an expanded role for the experts. Currently, most of the experts participate voluntarily and do not charge fees. Expanding their role could lead to more costs for a program that already functions with budget constraints. To grow certain program components that

would make ODP more marketable and attractive to potential athletes would likely require a restructuring of how the ODP program is funded.

      Peer Relationships. Contrary to other areas for program improvement, formalizing the interaction between more experienced and younger athletes could be done at little cost. The relationship between experienced and younger athletes was central to the success of the environment as the older athletes often serve as teachers and helped set the expectations and values of the environment's culture. While the coaches utilize the power of this relationship to help acclimate the younger athletes, there is no formal program component that increases these interactions or provides further opportunities for strengthening of this relationship. One easy step is to make the older athletes aware of the importance of this relationship and emphasize that in ODP the relationship between athletes is highly valued. Encouraging the older athletes to take leadership roles with the young athletes will empower some of them to make contact with younger athletes and discuss the experience of ODP. This could also be accomplished by creating some type of athlete only events where athletes can get to interact with each other outside of competition and socialize. This could also be used as an event where parents could interact with athletes and coaches. Such an event could help create more of feeling of communitas and connect the different ages and teams. This would help on capitalizing on the already held feeling that being part of ODP is special and prestigious. The relationship between athletes can also be used directly to improve player development. There can be more emphasis on using older athletes to demonstrate the style of play and specific concepts such as playing out the back. This is done a bit informally at Region Camp where younger athletes are encouraged to watch the older region pool athletes play

but it could become part of the process of integrating and teaching younger athletes what the expectations are in terms of technique and tactics. ODP must capitalize on this relationship as it will help improve the program in many areas including increased sense of community and belonging for all participants as well a cost effective method to formalize and integrate a style of play and specific tactical concepts. The foundation is set for this relationship to be one of the most valuable factors contributing to success in ODP.

Targeting specific sectors. As stated throughout, it is well accepted that the future of ODP will be set with challenges that will force the program to adapt and perhaps change large portions of its overall focus. With these changes, there will likely be a shift in the type of athlete ODP seeks to attract. Currently, the program works with an open enrollment where any athlete (as long as they are not part of the DA) can tryout and progress through the program. The emphasis on the DA as a main feeder to the national team programs and the growth of elite leagues such as ECNL make it likely that in the future ODP will not be the main development system for selecting top elite youth athletes. It will, however, still remain as vital to identifying talent outside of the DA and programs such as ECNL. The DA and ECNL are mostly comprised of clubs that exist near major metropolitan areas and the cost of participation in these programs is very high. While these programs are demonstrating to be environments that develop top soccer talent, they do not cover major geographical areas of the US. Due to costs, they are also hard to access by many sectors of the US population that might struggle with the demands of registration, training, and travel fees. In a preemptive approach, ODP should begin to focus strategy on how to market to and attract this talent that is left outside of the

main development systems. This state association has already initiated an interesting approach of employing top coaches from smaller clubs and cities in order to create contact with often overlooked talent in those areas. This seems to be working as the participation numbers continue to rise yearly and the number of cities from where athletes are selected has also risen. These coaches have created enthusiasm with local athlete bases and this has translated into ODP integrating talent that has traditionally been left outside the system. As this region has high Hispanic populations, the director of coaching stated that hiring Latin and Hispanic coaches has also been a priority. The result has been a coaching staff with diverse cultural and coaching backgrounds but more importantly a staff that has a cultural connection and understanding with many of its athletes of Hispanic backgrounds. The objective of integrating Hispanic populations into US Soccer systems has been on the table for many years and it seems that we are beginning to see a change in the development landscape as more Hispanic athletes are finding their ways to elite clubs, MLS academies, youth national teams, and senior national teams. The surge of immigration to the US from Latin countries has redesigned the landscape of the player pool. Not only are there immigrants that can play in the US system but many of these athletes are already second and third generation Americans. For many of these Latin families, soccer is a part of their culture and their children are often deeply ingrained in the sport starting at early ages. This falls in line with the idea of early engagement in soccer, which has shown to be one of the major pathways for development to be an elite athlete. Since this state association finds itself in an area with a high Hispanic population, one of its main objectives should be to try to integrate athletes from this sector into the US system. This can be accomplished by having events in cities that

were previously not served (which is already happening) but also by making sure the ODP program is appealing to these athletes. Having coaches that are bilingual and are culturally in tune with these athletes is helpful but the overall the program can also make sure to provide information in English and Spanish so that language is no barrier for potential athletes and their families. This state association can implement specific objectives to ensure that ODP is a welcoming environment for these Hispanic athletes and in turn can become a major development area for US Soccer. The foundation to accomplish this is already set but ODP needs to tackle specific problems like cost and language barriers that might be preventing some of these athletes from participating in ODP.

Talent Development in Sport

This research has vast implications for work in talent development and specifically topics related to soccer athlete development. This section will specifically focus on issues related to the ATDE framework used, methods, and the support and contributions this research offers the field of talent development. The section will conclude with areas for future research.

Framework: Working Models

This research served to extend the work done on ATDE and ESF working models and apply the models in a context much different than done in previous research. Henriksen's (2010) work in studying existing ATDE's was uncharted research territory at the time and proved to be a valuable approach in leading to understanding athlete development environments. Using both the ATDE and ESF models helped bring forth a

deep description of the ODP environment and insight into the factors and interrelationships that lead to environment success.

As with past research, the ATDE model by itself was not sufficient in explaining why this environment was and is successful. In complement, the ESF working model provides a valuable summary of the factors that influence environmental effectiveness and makes the resulting data more complete and easy to apply. In data collection, the models helped focus attention when creating instruments and when working in the field. In this type of dynamic environment and in this method of qualitative research, the amount of data can often be overwhelming for the researcher both during observation and analysis. The framework was valuable in helping to structure overall observation and in coding some of the emergent themes. In analysis, the two working models were helpful in creating empirical models that captured the uniqueness of the environment and also aided in presenting the information in a concise manner. Using the ATDE and ESF frameworks also allows for comparison in findings with past research into ATDE's and sets a valuable point for further cultural comparisons between ATDE's in different contexts. One of the overall strengths of the framework is that it provides structure in summarizing ATDE's in different contexts. While this research was a departure from the past research on ATDE's, comparing results was streamlined by the efficient presentation of data themes.

While the frameworks have not been used in the past to identify areas of improvement for the ATDE's, this research extended into that area because a main research objective was to provide applicable information for the ODP program. The ATDE and ESF models are thorough and through the interviews and informal talks with

participants, these frameworks opened avenues for talking about how the program needed to improve. This data was included in the discussion section and provides a spring board for strategies to improving the current ODP state program. Specifically, when probing about factors that lead to success in the environment, participants often share opinions on how specific problem areas or how program components can be improved. The researcher integrated key questions into the interview guides to prompt answers about future challenges for ODP and the changing nature of the overall US soccer environment. Several of the participants provided valuable insight in how ODP can maintain its prestige and relevancy with specific examples on program improvement. So beyond describing an environment and explaining factors leading to success, these frameworks can also be useful in producing information on specific areas for improvement in these environments and specific strategies to address these areas. The use of qualitative methods allowed participants to suggest many unique solutions to the presented problems.

Talent Research

The present study supports several findings of talent development research about the importance of context in athlete development. Several of the findings of this research are line with important concepts discussed in the literature. This study supports the approach of closely linking talent development and career development research. One of the main themes was the resources available and the skills developed by athletes to cope with the demands of transitions and adversity in and out of sport. Dealing with adversity within sport was seen as useful tool for developing skills and experiences on how to deal with adversity in life. In ODP, developing athlete autonomy was highly valued and seen

as a major development step for the athletes in both their athletic and non-athletic domains. Similar to past environments studied, athletes in ODP must learn to carefully structure their approach to sport and life and balance their time and energy. Contrary to other ATDE's, in ODP there was less coordination with outside entities to perhaps minimize stress caused by emphasis on athletic development. For example, ODP has no formal relationship with athlete schools resulting in little coordination between two major factors in the athlete's life. Similar to the other ATDEs, in ODP, maintaining friendships within the environment was important and no rivalry was seen between teams/athletes preventing the establishing of meaningful relationships.

Contrary to past ATDE's studied, ODP did not formally structure room for diversification and deliberate play. Rather, in ODP, these events happened during socialization time when athletes were free from athletic activities. This is not to say that these athletes did not engage in many sports and play during development, but rather that because of the time constraints and nature of the ODP environment there is no formal programming for other sports or play time. This is relevant to the debate regarding sampling versus early specialization as many of these athletes are at development stages where research might support their engagement in other activities. The majority of the athletes in ODP are already specialized in soccer and have mostly full calendar years of soccer training and competition. Most of these athletes do not fall into the early engagement category as the majority of their soccer has taken place in structured settings. ODP might want to examine how to add program components that might help balance all the focus that is placed on the athletic domain. This might lead to less soccer time during ODP but could help provide experiences that might be more beneficial in the long term to

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the athletes. It could also potentially lessen the opportunity of negative outcomes such as burnout and loss of motivation.

This study helped improve and extend many areas of the talent development environment approach. From the work of Martindale and colleagues (Martindale et al., 2007; Martindale et al., 2005) that uses an ecological perspective to talent development, this research went well beyond the experiences and perspectives of the coach and included other participants including administrators, coaches, athletes, and parents. Further, this research examined actual experiences and practices in the environment rather than factors that were ideals and not currently practiced. This research did give some opportunity for participants to speak of program improvements and future plans as long as they related directly to the current state of affairs. Lastly, Martindale and colleagues focused only on the athletic and coaching domain and did not take a holistic take of the athlete's life and environment. This study, as past ATDE work has also shown, revealed that many factors outside of the athletic domain are vital to the success of the environment and a study that ignores those factors is not providing a complete picture.

In relation to past ATDE work, this study stepped outside the general context of where previous work had been done. All past ATDE work was in Scandinavian contexts and of systems that shared a lot of cultural similarities. This study was a significant step forward as it showed that the ATDE and ESF frameworks can be useful in different national contexts. While there were some stark differences between this ATDE and past environments studied, there were many similarities in the values and cultures of the environment. This is a valuable finding that shows that while athletic environments might

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be structured differently and have diverse values in different contexts, the focus of developing elite athletes leads to many shared core values. This also lends credence to the belief that there are many common and overlapping components and factors of successful organizations. Successful ATDE's might be more in line with globalization trends than with specific cultural components.

Methodological Reflections

This research was motivated in large part to answer concerns about the applicability of ecological approaches to talent development. Specifically, the ability to conduct theory-driven research that is also applicable to the actual world of sports was a main motivator. As Henriksen (2010) describes, this research is engaging in a relatively new research field and the approaches should follow more of an exploratory than confirmatory design. This was heeded by this research approach as it was the beginning steps to applying the ATDE framework to a whole new context. This study, following the precedent set in other ATDE work, aimed to develop and test a concrete version of a theory-driven framework (with little past applications) for the holistic ecological study of ATDE's in sport. The research followed Henriksen's (2010) recommendation for methodological approach as it used a case study design, qualitative methods, focused on real-time functioning of the environment and used multiple data sources. Since work in this area is new, this study did not want to stray too much from the framework and methods that proved successful for Henriksen (2010). However, it does lead room for discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the method used.

In contrast to Henriksen (2010), this research focused on a single case study, rather that multiple case approach, and as a result probably led to a more in-depth

perspective on environment. This study probably provided a deeper focus on the development of the ODP program through the years and resulted in valuable knowledge about how to be preemptive with many future challenges. More than past research, the functioning of the environment was deeply situated with past trends in US soccer and with the current climate of soccer in the US. While Henriksen (2010) also revealed the importance of history and future challenges, there was more focus and detail provided in this single case study and as a result a good foundation has been set for addressing areas of improvement and future challenges. Interviews (formal and informal), observation of the participants and environment, and analysis of documents all complemented each other in mapping the history, current status, and future of ODP. Because of the single case study approach, more attention was given to document analysis and the result was a deeper understanding of how written values and philosophies manifested themselves in the environment. The documents also helped establish a framework for interpreting the rationale behind certain program structure and components.

Further, it was apparent that qualitative methods were a successful form of gaining in-depth knowledge of the environment and its participants. In this research, participant observation was vital to connecting some of the themes that emerged and the researcher truly was immersed in "living the culture" (Ryba, Schinke, and Stambulova, 2010). The researcher in this study was even more involved in cultural activities alongside administrators, athletes, and coaches than previous research and as a result the project radiates a uniqueness that will be difficult to replicate. There was little difficulty in understanding the important assumptions and values of the environment and the insider perspective allowed the researcher to grasp deep program issues that would have been

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difficult to reveal from an outsider vantage point or even an insider who previously was not engaged in the environment. Participants were also extremely candid with the researcher and shared experiences and feelings that are not often shared outside of the athletic circles in which they function. This held true with the administrators as the researcher already had established trust with them well before this research began.

One of the limitations of the qualitative methodology used in this study is the inability to establish a rigorous casual relationship in regard to the factors influencing the environment's success. The created empirical models were driven by the casual relationships mentioned by participants in combination with analysis of observational data, interviews, and relevant documents. As Henriksen (2010) observed, this should not been seen merely as a weakness in design but rather a natural consequence of the complexity and difficulty of athletic environments. While future work in ATDEs might venture to establish causal relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the dynamic nature of such complex environments might make that difficult.

In terms of researcher participation, this study proved to be challenging in many facets. First, the researcher had to take a careful approach to information revealed by participants as the researcher is a current employee of US Soccer through the ODP program. This limits the researcher in how the program can be critiqued and what information can be released. The ODP administrators agreed to the research with the explicit understanding that it would be used to improve the environment and development of athletes. There was constant tension between what information could be released and how to present themes that contained sensitive information. In these cases, the researcher made sure to discuss with the research team and prevent any future issues. All

information including recommendations for program improvement are presented with a positive tone and with the objective of improving the current system. Second, the researcher had to carefully navigate topics where he had previous conceptions and experiences and allow the perspectives of the participants to emerge. This is not to say that the researcher's viewpoints did not affect the data, as the researcher was the primary person involved in data collection and analysis, but rather that the themes presented are only those that were confirmed by participants and observation. There were themes that were relevant to the researcher but did not fully emerge from participant experiences and observations. In those cases, that information was not included in the study. Third, the researcher had to navigate tension between what to talk about and not talk about with participants during informal interactions. Many participants were aware that research was being conducted (which did not affect the data) but would often probe the researcher in regards to topics on athlete development and environments. In these cases, the researcher opted to only provide a generic diatribe about the purpose and goals of the research without revealing too much about specific concepts and themes to be studied. This was mostly done so that the researcher would not affect the information shared by participants but also that participants would not affect future participants that were going to be interviewed. This is a difficult dilemma to handle especially when the researcher is simultaneously functioning as a work colleague or coach to current participants. To address this issue, the researcher also kept most informal interactions about the research in small group settings usually to just one other individual. Always during the research, it was important for the researcher to stay focused on the quality and validity of the participant's experiences.

Future Research and Applied Perspectives

A large motivation for this research was to provide a deep understanding of the ODP environment at state level in order to bring improvements to the current overall ODP program. Following completion of research, findings and analysis will be presented to representatives of US Soccer both at this specific state association and to officials outside the region. The purpose will be to reveal the successful aspects of this ATDE and also bring attention to the areas that need improvement. While there have been studies focused on aspects of ODP, no research has tried to capture a holistic picture of the environment that takes into account the perspectives of athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents. US Soccer has made a big push to integrate academic research into the strategies and curriculum of the federation and research of this type will continue to demonstrate to stakeholders the value of qualitative investigation.

It is widely accepted that the overall national culture of the US is at the moment conducive to the growth of soccer. With the growth of soccer also comes the tension between competing soccer organizations and entities. One important relationship to track is the coexistence of the DA program and ODP. As the DA program grows, it will continue to attract some of the top national talent that ODP currently serves. With the introduction of the girls DA program in 2017, ODP will have further competition in attracting and retaining the top youth athletes. At the moment, the exact path for the DA is unclear as US Soccer supports both ODP and the DA program as important pathways. The trend, however, seems to be with the expansion of the DA. If the DA continues to grow, it will be likely that ODP will have to alter its overall objectives and possibly take a different role in the development of top senior athletes. One possible solution is that

ODP begins to focus its efforts on areas of the US that are underserved by the DA program. This can ensure that ODP still maintains its main objective of identifying athletes for the national program while addressing a major issue of focusing on underserved areas or communities. For example, ODP could focus more attention on smaller communities outside of major metro areas and zone in on finding talent that is not being identified by other entities. Specifically, ODP could take the lead on the initiative of integrating more talent from Hispanic communities into the US system.

Future research should extend work specifically by addressing contexts in the US. Looking at other ODP state associations will help give an in-depth understanding of the overall state of the ODP program. Such a comparison can reveal many of the factors that are being successful or unsuccessful within the program. Further, the ATDE and ESF frameworks can be used to examine and explain other important elite soccer systems including the DA and the ECNL. Since the US soccer system is so fragmented and diverse, it is vital to get a better overall picture of US soccer as it relates to youth athletes and development. Lastly, as suggested by Henriksen (2010), we must extend this framework to begin formulating intervention programs to improve ATDE's or even to help athlete environments that are currently successful. It is the hope that this research was a beginning step to making improvements to the overall ODP system.
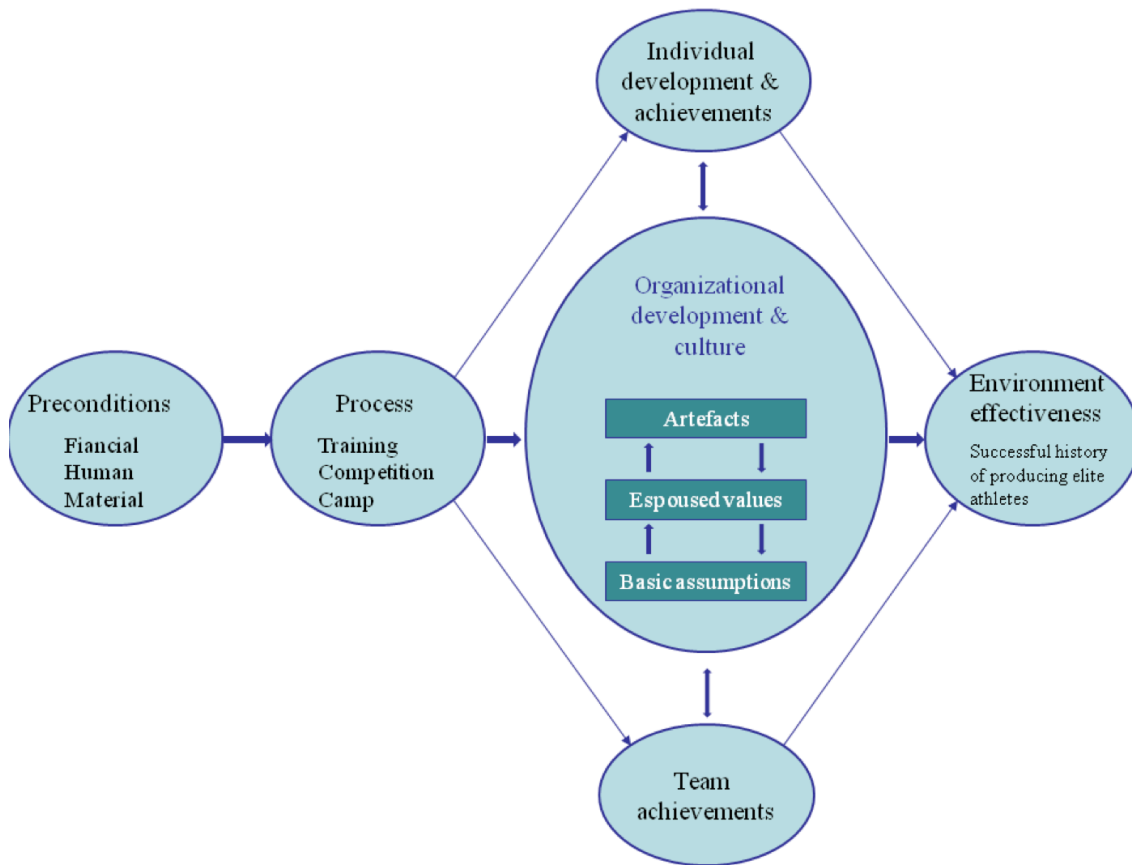
Appendix A

Athlete Talent Development Environment (ATDE) Working Model
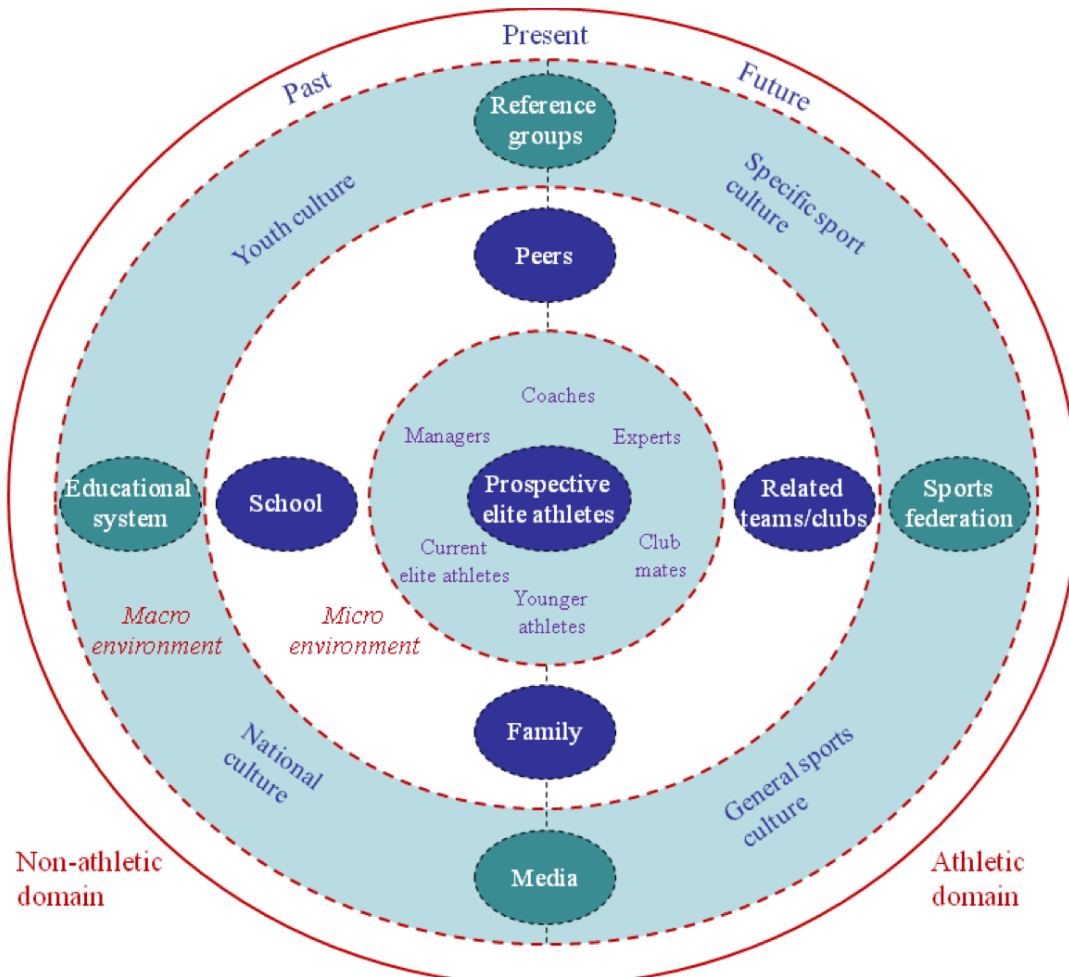
Appendix B

The Environment Success Factor (ESF) Working Model

Appendix C
ODP Athlete Interview Guide

Introduction

The principal researcher will explain the format of the interview and review issues presented in consent form. Participants will be reminded that interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Researcher will review the general objectives of the research project and then begin interview

Soccer Background and History

- What is your experience playing and being involved in soccer?
- Explain what levels you have played in the U.S. system.
- What club do you play for and at what level?
- What are problems you see with current U.S. youth soccer?
- What are problems with youth soccer that you see are specific to this region?
- What is unique about the U.S. youth soccer development system as compared to other parts of the world? What would like to see in U.S. soccer that is seen in other parts of the world?

Introduction to ODP Environment

- Tell me about yourself and your association with the environment
    - How long have you been involved with ODP?
    - How and why did your involvement with ODP come about?
    - How do you feel about being a part of this environment?
- What do you think are the keys to your personal success?
- Do you think the environment is a successful talent development environment?
    - What tells you that it is successful?
    - What do you consider to be the secrets of its success?
    - Do you feel ODP is being successful in identifying the best players in each age group? Why or why not?
- Explain the process of a player trying out for ODP.
- What is the type of player that you think the ODP program is looking for? (psycho-social, cognitive, physical, technical aspects should probed if not expanded on by interviewee)
- What is the highest level of selection you've had in the ODP program?
- How do you explain ODP to people who might not know anything about it?

Description of ODP based on ATDE model

    Micro-environment
- Who helps you in your efforts to make it to the elite level?
- Who hinders you?

- How would you describe your coach?
  - What are his/her role and tasks?
  - What are his/her values?
  - What did you like the most/least about your coach or coaches?
  - What specific things has your coach done to help you the most/least during ODP process?
  - What would you like your ODP coaches to do more/less of?
- What do you think about younger/older athletes in ODP?
  - Do you have contact with them?
  - What characterizes this contact?
- In terms of your daily sporting life, what can be said of the role of:
  - Younger/older athletes in your club?
  - School
  - Your family
  - Experts in the club
  - Your friends inside and outside the sport?

Macro-environment
- Are there persons, inside or outside sport that you look up to?
- How would you describe youth culture?
  - What do you feel are predominant values among youth in general?
  - How do you feel youth culture influences your daily sporting life?
- How would you describe your national culture?
  - Can you put into a few words what it means to be American?
  - How do you feel national culture affects your daily sporting life?

Relations within the environment
- How do you see that ODP interacts with the environment around it?
- Please provide examples of ODP's working relations with:
  - School
  - Your parents
  - Other soccer entities

Success factors based on ESF model

Preconditions
- In your experience, do you feel ODP has sufficient resources in terms of money and coaches, for example?
- What resources are provided to players to help them during the tryout process? What resources are provided to parents?

Process
- Please, describe experiences in ODP
  - Tryouts
    - What is it about selected players that make them stand out from the rest of the group?

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- How are selected and non-selected players informed of tryout results? How do you feel about this process?
- How did you feel during the process of ODP tryouts? Why did you feel this way?
- What did you like the most/least about the tryout process?
- What would keep the same/change regarding your tryout experience?
- How was your experience with other players trying out?
-

- Training-how much do you train? How is it organized?
- Competitions
- Camps
- Do you have events outside organized sport activities? Provide examples
- Other?

Organizational culture
- What characterizes the culture in this environment?
- Please tell me a story about specific episodes that you feel describe ODP values.
- Do you have specific symbols such as logos or styles of clothing that are salient to your team?
  - What do they mean to you?
- Do you have specific traditions? Please provide examples.
- What are your goals for this ODP year?
  - Who sets these goals?
  - How much influence did you have on these goals?
- Does ODP have a specific vision/mission statement?
  - What does it read?
  - How do you experience this vision in your ODP experiences?
- If I were to invite another soccer player from a different environment, what would he/she find most different about this environment?
- How would you describe your overall experience in the ODP selection process? How would you describe the experiences of other athletes that tried out? How can the athlete experience be improved?

Individual Development
- Tell me about what you learn in this environment?
  - What attitudes or values are appreciated in this environment?
  - When is the coach, for example, satisfied with your efforts in training?
  - And in competition?
  - What did you like most about training sessions directed by ODP coaches?
  - What values do you take with you from this environment?

- o What are the main benefits of a player participating in the ODP program?
- o Do you learn anything that could be of use to you outside your sport?

Time Frame
- What can be done to make this environment more successful?
- How would you improve the current ODP program? Specifically, how would you improve processes for identifying and selecting players?
- What traditions should be kept?

Conclusion
- Is there any topic or specific subject area you would like to revisit and elaborate on?
- Do you have any other information that is pertinent to the purpose of this research?

Appendix D
Coaches/Administrator Interview Guide

Introduction

The principal researcher will explain the format of the interview and review issues presented in consent form. Participants will be reminded that interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Researcher will review the general objectives of the research project and then begin interview.

Soccer Background and History

- What is your experience and background working with soccer players aged 13-16 years?
- Explain your coaching education soccer background. How has it aided in your coaching career?
- What are problems you see with U.S. youth soccer?
- What are problems with youth soccer that you see are specific to this region?
- What is unique about the U.S. youth soccer development system as compared to other parts of the world?

Introduction to ODP environment

- Tell me about yourself and your association with the environment
  - How long have you been involved with ODP?
  - How and why did your involvement with ODP come about?
  - How do you feel about being a part of this environment?
- Do you think the environment is a successful talent development environment?
  - What tells you that it is successful?
  - What do you consider to be the secrets of its success?
  - Do you feel ODP is being successful in identifying the best players in each age group? Why or why not?
- Explain the process of a player trying out for ODP.
- What is the type of player that you think the ODP program is looking for? (psycho-social, cognitive, physical, technical aspects should probed if not expanded on by interviewee)
- What is the highest level of involvement you've had in the ODP program?
- How do you explain ODP to people who might not know anything about it?

Description of ODP based on ATDE model

Micro environment
- In terms of persons and institutions around the athletes, what are important resources in your effort to develop the athletes?
- And what are the barriers?

- In terms of the youth athletes' athletic development, what can be said of the role of the:
  - Coaches?
    - What are his/her role and tasks?
    - What are his/her values?
    - What do players like the most/least about their coach or coaches?
    - What specific things do you do as a coach to help you the players during ODP process?
    - What should ODP coaches do more/less of?
  - Other elite athletes?
  - Experts?
  - Friends outside of the sport?
  - Family?
  - School?

Macro environment
- In terms of the wider environment, in relation to the athlete's athletic development and chances of making to an elite level, what can be said of the role of:
  - The educational system-does it support the athletes' sports careers?
  - The federation?
  - The media?
- In terms of being a resource or a barrier to the athletes' athletic development, how would you describe:
  - Your country's national culture?
  - The predominant youth culture?
  - The culture of your specific sport?
  - The general sporting culture?
- Which of these cultures is most visible in the routines in the environment?

Relations with the environment
- How do you see that ODP interacts with the environment around it? Please provide examples of ODP's working relations with:
  - School
  - Parents/family
  - Other soccer entities
  - Federation
- What do you do to maintain good working relations?

Success factors based on ESF model

Preconditions
- Please tell about the history and current structure of ODP
- How would you describe ODP's main resources?
  - Facilities
  - Coach education level

        o Other staff
        o Financial resources
        o Other?

Organizational Culture
- What characterizes the culture (predominant values) in this environment?
- If I was to invite another coach from your sport to be a part of ODP-what would he/she find to be the most different?
- Please tell a story about specific episodes that you feel describe ODP's values?
- Do you have specific symbols such as logos or styles of clothing that are salient to ODP?
    - o What do they symbolize?
- Do you have specific traditions?
- Does ODP have a specific vision or mission statement?
    - o What does it read?
    - o Please describe the efforts you make to act in accordance to this vision?
- What do you do to maintain this culture?
- How would you describe your overall experience in ODP? Experience of other coaches?

Individual Development
- How does being a part of this particular environment affect the talented athletes?
    - o Sport specific skills
    - o Attitude towards training
    - o Skills that could be use for athlete outside sport
    - o What are the main benefits of a player participating in the ODP program?

Time frame
- What future challenges do you foresee for ODP?
- What can be done to make this environment even more successful?
- How would you improve the current ODP program? Specifically, how would you improve processes for identifying and selecting players?
- What traditions should be kept?

Conclusion
- Is there any topic or specific subject area you would like to revisit and elaborate on?
- Do you have any other information that is pertinent to the purpose of this research?

Appendix E
Parent Interview Guide

Introduction

The principal researcher will explain the format of the interview and review issues presented in consent form. Participants will be reminded that interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Researcher will review the general objectives of the research project and then begin interview.

Introduction to ODP environment

- Tell me about yourself and your association with the environment
    - How long have you been involved with ODP?
    - How and why did your involvement with ODP come about?
    - How do you feel about being a part of this environment?
- Do you think the environment is a successful talent development environment?
    - What tells you that it is successful?
    - What do you consider to be the secrets of its success?
    - Do you feel ODP is being successful in identifying the best players in each age group? Why or why not?
- Explain the process of a player trying out for ODP. What is the experience of your athlete?
- What is the type of player that you think the ODP program is looking for? (psycho-social, cognitive, physical, technical aspects should be probed if not expanded on by interviewee)
- How do you explain ODP to people who might not know anything about it?

Description of ODP based on ATDE model

Micro environment
- In terms of persons and institutions around the athletes, what are important resources in the effort to develop the athletes?
- And what are the barriers?
- In terms of the youth athletes' athletic development, what can be said of the role of the:
    - Coaches?
        - What are his/her role and tasks?
        - What are his/her values?
        - What do players like the most/least about their coach or coaches?
        - What should ODP coaches do more/less of?
    - Other elite athletes?
    - Experts?
    - Friends outside of the sport?
    - Family?
    - School?

Macro environment
- In terms of the wider environment, in relation to the athlete's athletic development and chances of making to an elite level, what can be said of the role of:
    - The educational system-does it support the athletes' sports careers?
    - The federation?
    - The media?
- In terms of being a resource or a barrier to the athletes' athletic development, how would you describe:
    - Your country's national culture?
    - The predominant youth culture?
    - The culture of your specific sport?
    - The general sporting culture?
- Which of these cultures is most visible in the routines in the environment?

Relations with the environment
- How do you see that ODP interacts with the environment around it? Please provide examples of ODP's working relations with:
    - School
    - Parents/family
        - How do you support your child during the ODP process?
        - What is the role you play in your child's soccer career?
        - What is your involvement during the ODP process?
    - Other soccer entities
    - Federation

Success factors based on ESF model

Preconditions
- How would you describe ODP's main resources?
    - Facilities
    - Coach education level
    - Other staff
    - Financial resources
    - Other?

Organizational Culture
- What characterizes the culture (predominant values) in this environment?
- Please tell a story about specific episodes that you feel describe ODP's values?
- Does ODP have a specific vision or mission statement?
    - What does it read?
- How would you describe ODP's culture?
- How would you describe your overall experience with ODP? Experience with coaches? Administrators?

Individual Development
- How does being a part of this particular environment affect the talented athletes?
  - o Sport specific skills
  - o Attitude towards training
  - o Skills that could be use for athlete outside sport
  - o What are the main benefits of a player participating in the ODP program?

Time frame
- What future challenges do you foresee for ODP?
- What can be done to make this environment even more successful?
- How would you improve the current ODP program? Specifically, how would you improve processes for identifying and selecting players?
- What traditions should be kept?

Conclusion
- Is there any topic or specific subject area you would like to revisit and elaborate on?
- Do you have any other information that is pertinent to the purpose of this research?

Appendix F
Coding Tree

Background Information

Description of the environment based on ATDE model
       Micro-environment
Coaches
Elite Athletes
Younger Athletes
Experts
Coaches/Trainers
Related teams and clubs
Family
Peers
School
       Macro-environment
Sports federation
Specific sports culture
General sports culture
Reference groups
Educational System
National Culture
Youth Culture
       The environment in the time frame

Success factors based on the ESF model
       Preconditions
Financial
Human
Material

       Process
Training
Competitions
Camps
       Organizational development and culture
Artefacts
Espoused values
       Individual development and achievements
       Team achievements
       Environment success

Appendix G
ODP Evaluation Guide

Field Players	
#	**Description**
1	Ability to Bring Other into the Game
2	Ability to Dribble at Speed
3	Ability to Play Under Pressure
4	Ability to Play with Both Feet
5	Body Shape Def. - Strength, Stance, etc.
6	Decisions - When to Shoot
7	Diving in When Defending
8	Fitness – Agility
9	Fitness – Balance
10	Fitness – Endurance
11	Fitness – Speed
12	Fitness – Strength
13	Identify Attacking Opportunities
14	Creativity
15	Work Rate/Intensity
16	Maintaining Possession Grp
17	Maintaining Possession ind
18	Making Decisions w/Ball
19	Making Decisions w/out Ball
20	Quality of First Touch
21	Reading the Game
22	Striking Flighted Balls
23	Tech Ability – Heading
24	Tech Ability - Passing Short/Accuracy
25	Tech Ability - Passing Flighted
26	Tech Ability - Passing Long
27	Tech Ability – Receiving
28	Tech Ability – Shooting
29	Tech Ability Under Pressure
30	Tech Ability – Dribbling

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