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Riding the wave: a prospective exploration of the temporal impact of perceived challenges on the development of relatively early high performing national-level youth soccer players

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ABSTRACT

Research investigating the challenges experienced by high-performing athletes throughout development has predominantly used retrospective designs. Consequently, there is limited empirical and prospective data to inform the temporal dimensions of these experiences and their perceived impact on development. Therefore, this investigation sought to prospectively explore the temporal impact of perceived challenges on the development of six national-level youth footballers during their entrance into, and first season in, a selective national talent development environment. Participants engaged in monthly semi-structured interviews over a season, with data analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings demonstrated that each player's experience in the national system was characterised by exposure to significant biopsychosocial challenges. The dynamics of these challenges were highly individualised, with variations in the temporal nature, emotional disturbance, and the psycho-behavioural skills deployed to navigate such challenges. Within the national system, the perceived judgement and the ongoing selection and deselection processes were a pervasive feature of each player's experience, presenting significant challenge across the season. Yet, the temporal impact of this challenge varied among players. In practice, we advocate for talent systems to adopt a personalised approach to managing challenges faced by athletes and to recognise the individualised nature of the temporal impact of such challenges.

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Introduction

The identification and development of young players is a primary objective of professional football academies and associations (Cumming et al., 2018). Professional football clubs annually recruit youth players into academies with the objective of

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nurturing players for developmental, financial, and competitive advantages (Sweeney et al., 2021). Selected academy players typically receive professional coaching, sports science and medical support, access to superior facilities, and are exposed to high levels of competitive challenge relative to their non-selected peers in grassroots clubs (Güllich & Barth, 2024; Hill et al., 2020). The purpose of this provision is to offer players optimal challenge, support, and opportunities for long-term development. The factors that influence Talent Development (TD) are, however, complex, dynamic, and multifaceted, with interacting biological, psychological, and social (biopsychosocial) variables impacting a young player's progression (Abbott et al., 2005; Abbott & Collins, 2004; Bailey et al., 2010). As such, athletes typically follow individualised, unpredictable, and non-linear developmental pathways (Abbott et al., 2005). It is for this reason that the effectiveness of early talent identification and selection has consistently been questioned in the literature (Abbott et al., 2005), with a particular issue being the limited conversion from early selection to the senior elite level (Güllich, 2014; Güllich & Barth, 2024). Yet, the interrelationship between the challenging nature of selective TD environments and the simultaneous development of psycho-behavioural skills to learn from and cope with these challenging experiences, is increasingly recognised as a crucial aspect of long-term development (Collins & MacNamara, 2022; Taylor & Collins, 2019).

In a TD context, sport-related challenge can be considered an individual experience perceived by a performer to have the potential of disrupting development and/or performance in sport (Collins et al., 2019). Crucially, previous literature would suggest that navigation of these challenges requires adequate psycho-behavioural skills and appropriate environmental support, the absence of which can lead athletes to be derailed when subject to sudden increases in challenge that inevitably occur towards the higher echelons of performance (Taylor & Collins, 2019). In contrast, if a range of appropriate challenges can test the development of psycho-behavioural skills, the consequent emotional disturbance, and appropriate support, can encourage refinement of these skills (Taylor & Collins, 2020). Indeed, it appears that successful senior athletes are characterised by adaptive response to challenge throughout development (e.g. deselection, increased technical/tactical/physical demands) (Collins et al., 2016). Thus, providing relatively early high performing athletes with appropriate levels of challenge may be essential for progression (Collins et al., 2016; Taylor & Collins, 2019). For athletes with significant early advantages relative to peers, exposure to selective and formal TD environments may be the only environment perceived as challenging enough to provoke emotional disturbance and subsequent periods of reflection necessary to develop, test and refine the psycho-behavioural skills required in the face of future challenges (Collins et al., 2016; Collins & MacNamara, 2017; Sweeney, MacNamara, et al., 2023).

Whilst early exposure to selective TD environments can provide such experiences, there is also evidence to suggest that youth football players can experience feelings of pressure, worry, anxiety, and fear during their time in, or following release from, the academy system (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Sothorn & O'Gorman, 2021). Similarly, significant social research has investigated the nature of the football academy milieu, tending to characterise the setting as exercising an implicit, authoritarian value system on participants (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Manley et al., 2016). Against this basis,

there have been calls to reconsider the pathway experience of aspiring footballers (Brown & Potrac, 2009) and to consider the challenges associated with selection and deselection within these environments (Sweeney, Taylor, et al., 2023). In respect to the challenges faced by academy footballers specifically, findings from Swainston et al. (2020) suggest that players can report feelings of pressure, difficulties adjusting to increased physical and mental demands, social dynamic concerns, and a lack of first team opportunities as significant challenges. Similarly, evidence in the UK academy context reports that youth players can experience a series of sporting (e.g. injury, fear of selection judgement from coaches, negative parental feedback) and non-sporting challenges (e.g. sacrifices in social life and friendships) (Sothorn & O’Gorman, 2021). The junior to senior transition appears to be a period where players report challenges relating to uncertainty over personal capability, making mistakes, competition, and deselection (Hem et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2017; Reeves et al., 2009). Although these investigations have contributed to our understanding of the challenges experienced by young academy players, the use of cross-sectional designs (e.g. entrance into an academy, transition point, before/after selection/deselection procedures, pre-season) offers limited data to explore temporal changes of these challenge experiences. Thus, there is a dearth of empirical data relating to the combined prospective *and* retrospective impact of these experiences, and how they may fluctuate both within and between individuals. Without such information, recommendations for talent systems and individual coaches for challenge management are necessarily limited. This leaves a gap in our understanding regarding the role and nature of challenge experience in the development of relatively early performing youth athletes.

Given these research and practical concerns, this longitudinal investigation sought to prospectively explore the temporal impact of perceived challenges on the development of early, relatively highest-performing youth football players upon their entrance into, and first season in, a selective national TD environment. In this sense, early, relatively highest performing players, rather than being inappropriately labelled ‘elite’ (McAuley et al., 2022), are those youth athletes who are perceived to be the highest performing players nationally, relative to aged-matched peers.

Methodology

Research context

Aligned to the need for clarity in understanding the context of the investigation (Gavin et al., 2024), this study was conducted in the first national talent selection programme within the Football Association of Ireland’s (FAI) male national TD system; the National Academy (cf. Sweeney, Cumming, et al., 2023). The FAI’s National Academy is a two-year development programme that selects between ~40–60 players per age group (gradually reducing over time) and was created to assist in the development of players in the under 13 and 14 age cohorts. Selection, deselection, and re-selection can occur on a monthly basis with selected players perceived to be the highest current performers in the country within their age group. National Academy players are invited to 1–2 events per month and are exposed to increased training, internal

matches, coaching and developmental support with the aim being preparation for international football (Sweeney, Cumming, et al., 2023). Following the completion of the National Academy, the next selection phase in the FAI's national/international TD system are the (inter)national under 15 and 16 age group teams. This investigation focussed on players at the first step of the national talent system; players enrolled in the under 13 cohort.

Research philosophy

The research investigation was underpinned by a pragmatic research philosophy (Bacon, 2012; Giacobbi et al., 2005). Pragmatism emphasises knowledge construction towards applied research questions and the consequences of inquiry, rather than a distinct epistemological approach (Bacon, 2012). Ontologically, pragmatism is not committed to any single framework of philosophy or reality (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Weaver, 2018). Specifically, the intention for all pragmatic research is to generate knowledge to be applied for the individuals and groups under study (Badley, 2003). Whilst positivism and constructivism are seemingly dichotomous epistemological views, pragmatism rejects the idea that knowledge is objective and universal, or that knowledge is entirely subjective. It instead argues that a continuum exists between objectivity and subjectivity, with the viewpoint adopted dependent upon the contextual nature of inquiry and the specific research question (Giacobbi et al., 2005). In adopting this stance, the pragmatist selects the research design and methodology that are most appropriate to address their specific research question (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This study sought to explore the temporal impact of perceived challenges on the development of early, relatively highest-performing youth football players upon their entrance into, and first season in, a selective national TD environment. Consequently, a qualitative and interpretive research design was deemed most appropriate as a means of understanding participant meaning, their experience of challenge, and the temporal impact of their experiences.

Participants

Six FAI U13 National Academy players were purposefully sampled for this study. Players were aged between 12.7–13.2 years (Mean = 13.0, SD = 0.21 years) at the start of this research investigation. Following ethical approval by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (DCUREC/2022/021), a National Head Coach from the FAI working within the National Academy was asked to shortlist players using three criteria: (a) those regarded as the best *current* performers relative to their peers in the U13 age group (top 25% of the cohort); (b) based on geographic distribution, with a maximum of one player from each region; and (c) a maximum of one participant per playing position. Following nominations process, the list of potential players was passed to an administrative gatekeeper in the FAI. The administrative gatekeeper then contacted the parents/guardians of the potential players with information about the investigation and to seek consent to be contacted about participation. All parents/guardians agreed to be contacted and were contacted by email with information outlining the purpose of the study, procedures involved, and information adapted for

minors. After agreeing to participate, each parent provided informed consent before data collection, and players provided informed assent. Players and their parents were informed that participation in this research was voluntary and that their status in the national squad would not be influenced by their decision to participate. Participants were also informed that none of the information they provided would be shared with the FAI, and that the findings of this study would be presented in a pseudo-anonymised, confidential, and non-specific manner.

Data collection, member reflections and trustworthiness

Each player was interviewed every ~4–6 weeks over the calendar year with at least one parent present for all interviews, reflexively utilising a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions and relevant follow-up prompts. In total, 38 interviews were conducted. The interview process began at the start of the national programme and continued until the end of the club football season (i.e. players' first seven months in the programme). From the start of the investigation and entrance to the national selective environment, all players were registered with their grassroots/local club. At the end of the calendar year, players were eligible to start formal trials with League of Ireland academies. This study focussed on players' experiences during the calendar year in which they were enrolled with their local grassroots clubs, prior to any academy selection. In this sense, the context cannot be considered equivalent to that of a professional football academy (Layton et al., 2023). Interview questions were designed to identify the challenges faced by players, how players reacted, and how they were supported (e.g. 'are you finding training and matches challenging with your club?'; 'did you find anything challenging at the National Academy this month?'; 'is there anything that you didn't enjoy at the National Academy this month?'). Follow-up prompts were used to expand on specific points raised throughout the interview and to ensure relevance to the research question (e.g. 'why was this so challenging?', 'how did that make you feel?', 'was there anyone supporting you?'). Interviews were conducted one-on-one between each player and the first author with parents present throughout all interviews but acting only as observers. The semi-structured interview guide remained consistent for all interviews and is available upon request to the first author.

At the start of each monthly interview, the first author utilised member reflections to enhance the robustness and depth of the findings throughout the data collection process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member reflections encouraged further participant reflection based on previous experience, encouraging players to look back on their experiences and generate additional insight (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The first author recorded personal reflections of discussions in a reflexive journal, with key topics and themes discussed that were relevant to the research questions. As part of the member reflections, the first author presented initial findings (see following section for further detail) from previous interviews back to each participant to elicit further reflections. Thus, players were presented with what were believed to be their most important experiences from the previous interviews, such as their challenges (e.g. injury, trial events, fixture congestion) or notable events (e.g. recent club matches or training events, school). Players often built upon previous discussion points, offering

both a lived and reflective perspective (Kahneman & Riis, 2005). As the first author spent more time engaging with the players, both interviews and member reflections were characterised by increasing trust and rapport. Thus, the depth and quality of member reflections improved with participants speaking more openly about their experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Interviews were conducted electronically over a period of seven months via video interviews using the Zoom video software (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, California, USA), which is recommended as an alternative method to face-to-face interviews to gather rich data whilst facilitating an appropriate participant experience (Gray et al., 2020). Each individual interview lasted between 19 and 59 minutes.

Data analysis

Analysis was conducted using the six-phased approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). In line with a pragmatic research philosophy, RTA was deemed most appropriate as the research focus was on understanding participant experiences and their subjective temporal impact. Each of the first three phases were conducted monthly following each interview. At the first phase of analysis, the first author manually transcribed each interview verbatim. Documents were re-checked against audio recordings to confirm transcription accuracy and facilitate deep immersion in the data.

At the second phase, systematic open coding of data took place using qualitative analysis software (QSR NVIVO-12). Given the reflexive nature of RTA and the monthly data collection process, codes were regularly reviewed, revised, and updated. Acknowledging a continuum, rather than binary distinction between inductive and deductive analysis, data was predominantly coded inductively with a 'bottom-up' focus on producing semantic and latent codes (e.g. Difficulties adjusting to new tactical demands, Confusing and contradictory messaging across environments). Deductive coding was subsequently used to ensure that the codes and subsequent themes produced were relevant to the research questions (e.g. Factors evoking the challenge experience). At the third phase, initial themes were generated (e.g. 'high standards', 'difficulty adjusting to new tactical demands') according to the shared meaning across codes. These initial themes (e.g. 'high standards', 'difficulty adjusting to new tactical demands') were then developed and structured into a framework of sub-themes all sharing an underlying concept (e.g. 'sharp increase in technical-tactical challenge'). Thus, the generation and refining of themes and codes took place following each individual monthly interview.

Once data collection was completed, phase four saw potential themes being reviewed in relation to coded data items and the entire dataset. To enhance trustworthiness, at this stage the second and third authors audited the analytical process by sense-checking and challenging the first author's generation of themes and sub-themes. This critical friend approach to the generation of themes and sub-themes encouraged and deepened reflexivity by providing possible alternative interpretations of data in a way that was collaborative and flexible, thus achieving richer interpretations of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, the thematic label 'physical challenges in football' did not fully represent the experiences of participants; the main

challenge being the volume of football being played and was renamed 'high physical loading'. The cause of this challenge being a lack of structural integration in the overall system, and thus, was subsequently merged into the theme: 'lack of coherence, expectations and processes'. Phase five involved the defining and naming of themes, with each individual theme re-reviewed to ensure relevance to the dataset. This led to the final naming of sub-themes, themes, overarching themes and candidate quotations identified (Table 1). The final, recursive phase was the write up of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Results and discussion


This study aimed to explore the temporal impact of perceived challenges on the development of early, relatively highest performing youth football players during their first season in a selective national TD environment. Following data analysis, three overarching themes were generated ('Factors Evoking the Challenge Experience', 'Fear of Losing Your Spot', and 'I'm Loving It – an Adaptive Developmental Experience'), which are displayed with their associated themes and sub-themes in Table 1. Reflecting the individual differences in themes, throughout the results examples from across participants are presented to show similarities and contrasting experiences. Demonstrating the temporal dimensions of lived and reflected upon challenge experiences, exemplar quotations from players are labelled using a timestamp (Q1: first three months; Q2: middle two months; Q3: final two months of the study, respectively). These themes are shown in Table 1, with exemplar quotations to evidence temporal differences. When reading quotes from players, readers are encouraged to compare the timestamp labelled on quotes (i.e. Q1, Q2, Q3) to contrast temporal (or not) differences throughout the season.

Factors provoking the challenge experience

High technical-tactical challenge in the national TD system


A key factor initiating the challenge experience for players were the increased technical-tactical demands associated with the step up to national-level football, despite all players having different playing positions. For some, this initial increase in technical-tactical challenge was an unpleasant experience at the start of the programme: 'It wasn't the most enjoyable experience ... I didn't really know what I was doing' (player 3, Q1), but this perception changed quickly within a few months: 'I quite like the role of the way the eight [position] functions in that system; the way they get to pretty much be the box-to-box and the way they get to slip in and out of that attacking eight and defensive eight position, I like that as well' (player 3, Q2). For others, such as player 6, this initial step change in technical-tactical challenge was experienced at the start of the transition to the National Academy: 'it's just completely different, going from a club where the quality is not great to going to the nationals where the quality is very high is a massive jump' (Q1), but also persisted after months in the programme: '[the players are] just moving the ball around very fast and at the club it's not really like that. It's just a massive step...a massive one' (Q2). For some players, this was the first time they had not perceived themselves to

Table 1. The nature and temporal impact of perceived challenges.

| Overarching theme | Theme | Sub-theme | Raw data examples | |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| | | | Temporal differences  | |
| Factors evoking the challenge experience | Sharp increase in technical-tactical challenge | High standards | [the standards were] surprising, they're [the players] as good as me and some might be better (Player 5, Q1) | I'm looking forward to it anyway. I'm excited and I just want to play good. You get a chance to play and show people how good you are (Player 5, Q3) |
| | | Difficulties adjusting to new tactical demands | It wasn't the most enjoyable experience (...) I didn't really know what I was doing (Player 3, Q1) | I quite like the roll of the way the eight functions in that system; the way they get to pretty much be box-to-box and the way they get to slip in and out of that attacking and defensive eight position, I like that as well (Player 3, Q2) |
| | Low levels of challenge outside the national context | Levels of consistent challenge in the community context | The standard of play is not as good [at the club]. Playing out from the back and stuff like that, we don't really do that (Player 5, Q1) | Everything really; technically, tactically, physically, mentally. Everything's better than where I'm playing at right now. It's just the jump; you're not expecting the players to be as good as they are [at the national level] because you're playing at a low level (Player 5, Q3) |
| | | Lack of coherence, expectations and processes | Confusing and contradictory messaging across environments | You're so used to doing one thing but then you remember that you're not actually supposed to be doing it. It can be a bit challenging (Player 4, Q1) |
| | High physical loading | | Well, it's almost been even worse for the last four weeks or so. It's nearly been four games a week (Player 3, Q1) | Some of the games, especially at the end of the season, you were going out there and you didn't feel 100% because you had a game two days ago. Your body just hasn't recovered (Player 3, Q3) |
| | Injury and illness | I was devastated. It's a very big thing for me now; that's the build-up at the end of the month and the time to show what you're made of each month, and you get to train for that. It was weird (Player 1, Q1) | The experience I've gained from it though, I'll know what to do the next time I have an injury (Player 1, Q1) | |

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

| Overarching theme | Theme | Sub-theme | Raw data examples | |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|--|
| | | | Temporal differences  | |
| Fear of losing your spot | Pressures of judgement | Performance concerns | The most nervous is probably the night before and there are a little bit of nerves driving to it (Player 3, Q1) | On each one, I don't think I ever said that I wasn't nervous (Player 3, Q3) |
| | | Sustained competition for places | I'm happy to still be here, but the pressures on because people are still getting dropped every month (Player 5, Q2) | People that are there are good players and if you don't perform, they [coaches] won't think you're as good as people said. If you make a mistake, you also don't feel great. I want to stay in the programme for as long as I can (Player 5, Q3) |
| 'I'm loving it' – An adaptive developmental experience | Learning and development experience | Sense of pride | I love to represent my country; it would make me so proud, and I'd take any chance I have (Player 2, Q1) | I just think it's a privilege to be called up to train with Ireland. I think you need to take in every moment and perform to the best of your ability because you don't get them chances all the time (Player 2, Q3) |
| | | Enjoyment of the experience | I thought it was a brilliant experience...In the games, they were very tough and I enjoyed it, that's the main thing. I enjoyed the training and the matches (Player 2, Q1) | There's no bad parts. I've enjoyed every minute of it (Player 2, Q3) |

be one of the best players in their peer group. All the outfield players reported being required to play in new and different positions at some point in the National Academy. Whilst all players perceived this as challenging, the emotional impact of this challenge, and the temporal nature, was highly individualised (Taylor, Ashford, et al., 2022a; Williams & MacNamara, 2022). This is particularly noteworthy, given that the sample of players were perceived as being amongst the top 25% performers within the cohort by their coaches. Take, for example, player 4's experience of being moved to a new playing position in the National Academy mid-way through the season:

I found it quite hard to go back and play it [new playing position] because I was used to going forward and dribbling round a lot ... I found it a little bit difficult as well because I was playing [position] and I'm just not used to it (Q2)

Although perceived as a significant tactical challenge, after a couple of training days, this positional change was no longer viewed as challenging by player 4: 'I found it a bit hard at first, but I'm kind of used to it again after playing there for a while again. I'm not really finding it too bad anymore' (Q2). This positional change was subsequently reflected on as a positive experience: 'I think it's [National Academy]

been good for me as a player because I've played in quite a few positions' (player 4, Q2). In contrast, player 2 immediately embraced the challenge of being played in a new playing position, recognising the learning opportunities that it presented: '[being played in a new position] there is a benefit because you can learn how to get forward and the positions you can make, like the crosses and where to be. Then when you're centre back, you can see the passes that as a left back you might not see' (player 2, Q1). Several months later, player 2 reflected on the benefits of his early experiences of being exposed to different positions:

They played me left back again, but I didn't mind it because I had to push forward more ... [Coach] wanted me to be up the pitch a bit more, so I kind of knew what to expect and I've played left back quite a bit, so I had a good experience, and I knew what was needed by me (Q2)

In contrast, player 3 found the experience of being played in a new position early in the programme as unenjoyable: 'I played [position] in one of the games. I don't know how I managed to get there...It was a pretty average day for me' (Q1). In contrast to player 2 and 4, this perspective remained stable. At the end of the year, months later, he reflected on his frustration of being moved out of his favoured position:

It was very annoying [being moved out of favourite position]. When I was out of [preferred position] it felt like they were breaking the midfield so much easier. I think when they did have a big threat going forward, I think I personally would have made it harder for them (player 3, Q2)

Despite being exposed to the same event (moved out of favoured position and exposed to new tactical demands), there was individual variation in temporal perception of challenge (Williams & MacNamara, 2022). Players did not experience the challenge of being moved out of their favoured position in the same way, with both the extent of emotional disturbance and temporal impact being highly individualised. The degree to which challenges were adaptive or maladaptive, was dependent on the individual.

Due to the increased technical and tactical challenge, players perceived themselves as making more mistakes, and occasionally, underperforming. Players were often critical of their performances: 'they're more physical and I felt that I should have dealt with it better' (player 2, Q2). Player 6 had similar reflections: 'just a few times I played it over the top and I really shouldn't have played it over the top' (Q2). For many, this first experience of this sense of underperformance provoked emotional disturbance: 'if they score a goal and it was my fault, I wouldn't feel great. That would last a few hours' (player 5, Q1). Whereas for others, alternative responses were described following the same experiences: 'if you make a mistake, just move on ... I don't dwell on them' (player 1, Q1). For some players, mistakes induced significant negative affect at the time of the event but were later re-evaluated as being developmentally useful. As an example, Player 2 described his initial response after perceived underperformance in the early months of the programme: 'I was disappointed to lose the games in my head...I'm used to playing out passes and then teams are used to playing out different ways, so it's kind of hard to adapt to playing as other teams play. That's

what I found hard' (Q1). Several months later, when describing the same event, player 2's perception had changed; the experience was now retrospectively perceived to offer the opportunity to refine weaknesses following interactions with his coaches:

I needed to do better. The coaches are brilliant, and they've always been honest. [Referring to the last national training event] I felt that it was a lesson to learn, so next time I can do even better because I know what things I need to improve on, and I know what I could have done better on the day (Q2)

All players discussed the perceived benefits of significant technical-tactical challenge throughout the season at the National Academy, describing it as something to embrace: 'every time I go to a training session in soccer it always pushes me, but that's a good thing to be honest, I need a challenge because if I'm competing with other players up there in the national academy, I need a challenge and I need to keep up at that level' (player 1, Q1). Such findings demonstrate how interactions with the broader social environment (i.e. coaches, peers) can also influence perceptions of challenge and the development and deployment of subsequent psycho-behavioural skills (Camiré, 2022; Skrubbyeltrang et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022).

Low levels of regular challenge outside the national context

Whilst national-level training was perceived to generate increased challenge, players also reported a simultaneous and significant drop in challenge level outside of the national context (i.e. in their grassroots club setting). This is particularly significant as a) players spent the majority of their time in their grassroots club, rather than an academy (formal selection for the academies of League of Ireland Football Clubs began at the end of the year; upon the conclusion of this study), or national environment, and b) this sample consisted of a geographically distributed sample from across Ireland. Illustrating this, player 5 reflected on these marked differences in challenge levels at the start of the season: 'the standard of play is not as good [at the club]. Playing out from the back and stuff like that, we don't really do that' (Q1) and months later at the end of the season: 'everything really; technically, tactically, physically, mentally. Everything's better than where I'm playing at right now. It's just the jump; you're not expecting the players to be as good as they are [at the national level] because you're playing at a low level' (Q3). This left several players frustrated at the level of competition and learning opportunities at their grassroots club:

You're not really learning anything. When you can beat them comfortably at that standard, you're not really pushed to raise it and when you're not pushed to raise it, you're either gonna fall or it will stay the same, so there isn't much you can take from those games (player 3, Q1)

This frustration was consistent across the season, even where coaches in the club environment were taking active steps to try and increase the challenge level for players:

We played another team, and we were beating them 13–0 and then we could only use our bad foot on one touch. They're some of the limits we got put on us. That's why I'd

rather the hard games because there's more of a challenge and its beneficial to me and my team (player 2, Q3)

This reduction in club-based competitive challenge may be the result of a comparison with the National Academy and was a perception that grew over the course of the year. Consequently, players described frustration when playing with lower-level peers: 'you do a lot of work and then you give the ball to someone, and they lose it and it's annoying. You're sort of just doing the work for them' (player 6, Q1). Similarly, player 6 later reflected: 'it can be a bit annoying because at the nationals, every time you pass to someone you can trust them to control it, but sometimes at the club you're almost like 'can he do this?'" (Q2). This highlights one of the many dilemmas for those seeking to develop TD systems (Taylor, MacNamara, et al., 2022). The desire to keep young players involved in the broader club-based game by delaying selection may risk a lack of appropriate challenge for those who are early relatively high performers (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Alternatively, it may be that it was the selection of these players to a higher performance level that led to perceptions of reduced challenge in their grassroots club settings. In addition, for the broader system, the removal of players from the community game and into selective environments may deny high quality development opportunities for those who are not selected (Erikstad et al., 2021).

Lack of coherence of expectations and processes

Players also described a sense of incoherence across their different football environments with contrasting coaching approaches, activity design, and competitive level between contexts. Whilst a breadth and range of experience is likely an adaptive feature of developmental experience (Webb et al., 2016), players had to navigate significant incoherence. In some instances, directly contradicting developmental needs: 'the stuff they're [National Academy coaches] teaching you is just completely different to what they're teaching you at the club (...) it gets confusing' (player 6, Q1). Players discussed a lack of coherence of expectation and process between different contexts within the system. For example, player 5 reflected upon this incoherence between the club and national context after just one month in the national TD system:

They [new National Academy coaches] tell me different things that I wouldn't normally do [compared to club coaches], but I suppose that's better for me because they know what they're doing... I'm not sure what to do sometimes. You have to be really concentrated and know where you are (Q1)

These incoherent experiences were described as frustrating: 'it's annoying because you're used to playing out [at the national level], but then [in the local club] they just want you to get it [the ball] out and get it up the pitch' (Q1). The extent of this variability seemed to be driven by a lack of integration between coaches across the players' experience (Taylor, Collins, et al., 2022b). Yet, players also described a lack of integrated practice within the same environment: 'with my club, I have three different coaches and almost every coach does a different thing ... for the first few months I found it a bit difficult because you're hearing one thing from this side and another thing from the other side' (player 3, Q1). Reflecting this incoherence, upon entering

the national system, each player was still typically engaged in football across a multitude of different, often competing, environments including at school, club (in multiple age groups), district, regional and national level. A consequence being *high physical loading* throughout the season:

On Monday I train with the school team after school, and after that with my local club, then on Tuesday with [club], Wednesday I have the regional FAI centre [training], on Thursday I'm with [club] again, then on Friday I have strength and conditioning with my coach ... and then I have a match on the Saturday, and then on the Sunday I play for [club] the year up (player 6, Q2)

Player 3 explained how these significant physical loads were becoming increasingly detrimental: 'well, it's almost been even worse for the last four weeks or so. It's nearly been four games a week' (Q1). Reflecting on this issue again at the end of the season, after months of repetitive exposure, this negative perception of the impact of high physical loading had not changed:

It was pretty difficult. Some of the games, especially at the end of the season, you were going out there and you didn't feel 100% because you had a game two days ago. Your body just hasn't recovered (player 3, Q3)

Players were also engaging in other physical activity including physical education and other sports. For those who did participate in another sport, this engagement was considered by players to be secondary, but still a significant additional commitment with the other setting exercising a level of influence:

I'd only play a game [of Gaelic football] a week. Also, again, my [Gaelic Football] coaches know I have a lot of football on so they say I don't have to go to the training, they just say I can just play the matches or if we're playing a weak team in the Gaelic, he says that I don't have to play because it will make me more tired (player 6, Q1)

During a given week, players could be engaged in football activities across six different environments with six different coaches. These week-to-week demands were not imposed by a single system or environment per se, but instead being an incidental consequence of the number of sporting environments they were a part of. The breadth of input and lack of integration between stakeholders meant players experienced high training and competition loads (Bjørndal et al., 2018; Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018). Thus, the data presented here add to the complex nature of the decisions that might be taken at this stage of the talent system. Whilst there appear some benefits to engaging with multiple sports (Jayanthi et al., 2013) and social environments, the experiences of these players highlight the risks of a lack of integration between such contexts.

Fear of losing your spot

Pressures of judgment

A prominent feature of player experience was the pervasive perception that they needed to perform and that they were being judged based on this performance (Taylor, Collins, et al., 2022a). This uncertainty regarding their position in the

programme was a prominent feature of all players' experience; one that did not show temporal changes. The consequences of this were expressed on entry to the programme, with players engaging in more exploitative, than exploratory behaviour (Friston et al., 2015): 'I was a little bit nervous because I didn't know what to expect, but I tried to express myself as good as I could, but I felt that I could have expressed myself a little bit more...[I need] to make sure that I make use of this great opportunity that I have been given' (player 1, Q1). Similar to previous research at higher levels of performance, a driver of this was the judgement conferred by the regular selection and deselection decisions (Taylor, Ashford, et al., 2022b). These perceptions were influenced by a general lack of role clarity regarding the criteria by which players were being judged, with player 1 reflecting again months later in the season:

Will I be invited back? Will I not? It's kind of a nervous thing. Even if I did really well in a session, I'd still be nervous, like maybe I did something wrong that I'm not aware of (Q3)

This lack of clarity seemed to be a significant feature of the hidden curriculum for players (Cushion & Jones, 2014) with sustained competition for places and the monthly selection and deselection procedures provoking a lack of certainty regarding their position in the programme. Players were wholly uncertain of continuing selection on a monthly basis:

No matter how good I feel about how I did in the last one, there's always that voice in the back of your head that says, 'it's not 100% yet'. When I get that email [invited back], it's just a breath of fresh air (player 3, Q3)

Such feelings appeared to be inherent and consistent to the national-level experience for the players examined in this study. After months in the programme, these feelings persisted: 'I'm happy to still be there, but the pressure's on because people are still getting dropped every month, so I just need to keep trying my best' (player 5, Q2). At the end of the year, players described uncertainty about whether they were going to be invited back for the last few sessions: 'it's about trying to stay in it and make a good impression; that's what you worry about really. I hope that I can get called back to the last few' (player 4, Q3). This sustained competition for places also led to intra-group competition. For example, player 3 reflected on the need to retain his place: 'everybody is going for the same thing...you can be friends or even best friends with people, but you have to remember that everybody is there for a reason and 99% of them will take your spot on the team to put their spot on the team' (Q2). For some players, selection was reflected on as being a motivating and adaptive feature of their experience. Player 2 described how competition for places drove internal focus and motivation: 'it's good competition for places and I like that. You have to give one hundred percent every game or else someone can just take your spot' (Q2). In contrast, player 6 reflected on how the uncertainty over his position in the programme limited his exploratory behaviour during training:

Maybe because it's the nationals and it is Ireland U13s and it's just like 'oh I might not do that pass in case I make a mistake or something. It's weird because my confidence is normally one of my good things (Q3)

Similarly, feelings of pressure were regularly described by players: ‘the intensity has been raised... there was constant pressure’ (player 1, Q2). Players suggested that rather than coaches actively increasing pressure, it was a lack of clarity regarding their status leading to individual perceptions of a lack of certainty that persisted throughout the year: ‘I still feel like there’s pressure to perform. No one is really putting pressure on you to perform week in, week out, but we feel like we have pressure going down [to the national events]’ (player 6, Q3). This continues the complex picture represented by the existing body of research investigating safety-based concepts in sport (Jowett et al., 2023). Whilst coaches did not actively reference or use selection to pressurise players, uncertainty of selection and uncertainty regarding the extent to which errors were appropriate persisted. Yet, at no point did any player state that they felt unable to speak up to their coaches, ask questions or voice their opinions. Whilst this finding should be treated with caution given the obvious difference in power dynamics between a coach and U13 player, it also suggests a need for future research to consider the voice and performance-based components of psychological safety in the selective sport setting (Hauser et al., 2024).

Players would reflect on the challenges that evoked emotional disturbances with family members, as exemplified by player 1 after an unsatisfactory performance: ‘I was telling my thoughts to my Mum and Dad, and just telling them, and they were just reassuring me. So, maybe it wasn’t my fault.’ (Q1). Players also sought guidance from family members in response to setbacks, as player 3 reflected on a perceived sub-standard performance:

When I’m talking to my Dad when I thought I’ve done something wrong and my Dad might agree...it’s never just all about the problem, there’s always, and it might not be one hundred percent solving the problem, but its not just critical, critical, critical, there’s always ‘you could do this’ or ‘you could do that to get better at it’. There’s always a way to counter the problem. (Q3).

‘I’m loving it’ – an adaptive developmental experience

Learning and development experience

Despite the challenges faced in the national TD system, all players reflected on a global sense of meaning and enjoyment from the unique opportunity of the National Academy experience. This theme was a universal perception for all players throughout the season. Player 1 alluded to this following his first few sessions: ‘being called up for the National Academy and having an opportunity to train and play with the best, it’s a huge privilege and I’m loving it’ (Q1). Player 1 later reflecting on his experience at the end of the year:

My personal experience with the last twelve months in my journey with the national academy has been an experience that I will always remember and something that I know that I have been privileged to be part of such an excellent set-up. Somewhere I know that I will take all the information that I have learned and use it to the best of my ability (Q3)

Players described how they perceived their experience to be beneficial in the long-term: ‘I think I also kind of learn something new every time I go up there, so

there are different points just to take away from each time I'm up there' (player 4, Q2). Player 4 reiterated these perceptions towards the end of the season, reflecting on his time in the programme:

It's had a positive effect on me, just playing against better players once a month gives you a perspective about how good the players are. Without that, I wouldn't have developed as much and thought about these new things (Q3).

Being within such a selective national TD system elicited feelings of pride for all players. This was consistent across players from rural areas: 'I'm proud that I'm representing my county, myself, I'm representing my friends, my school, my parents, my family, my area; it's brilliant' (Player 1, Q3) and urban areas alike: 'I have as much pride as you can get. I feel like I've made the first step on the ladder to international football. I'm pretty much the most [names city in Ireland] person you'll ever meet in your life' (Player 3, Q3).

Conclusion

The participants in this study were a notable cohort in several ways. Firstly, there is relatively little literature examining the experiences of athletes at this stage of the talent system. Secondly, the longitudinal data collection enabled an investigation of how exposure to significant challenge over the season temporally influenced each player's experience. In adopting this approach, we identified that players reported a lack of coherence across their pathway, exposure to high training volumes, and the lack of an overall coordinator for their individual programme as significant challenges (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018). The players were highly aware, and able to offer examples, of the incoherent messaging they were receiving across environments. Across contexts, players described experiencing a range of different coaching instructions and messaging, some of which was contradictory, often leaving them confused and unable to make sense of some experiences (Taylor, Collins, et al., 2022a). Whilst heterarchical talent system structures create an integrated web of activities and actors that provide multiple development opportunities (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018), a lack of integration across contexts can present a significant barrier to progression in talent systems (Taylor & Collins, 2020). These challenges cannot be considered as optimal and highlight how the lack of coherence and integration in Irish football can hinder long-term development (Sweeney, MacNamara, et al., 2022).

The findings of this study also point to the need for a consideration of the appropriateness of the challenges faced by the players at this stage of an international pathway. Talent systems are often critiqued for removing players from their community environments (Erikstad et al., 2021). However, in this instance, where players simultaneously remained in grassroots settings, a side effect of keeping players engaged in multiple unintegrated environments led to exposure to very high and unmanaged volumes of football-related activity (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018). This poses a significant challenge, and for the players, not one that could be considered developmentally appropriate (Bjørndal et al., 2018). On the other hand, players described how exposure to higher technical and tactical demands and competing against peers perceived as

higher performing in the national context presented a significant challenge; something that they were not exposed to outside the national context. This increase in competitive challenge experienced within the national context was perceived by all players as beneficial for long-term development.

The present study is not without limitations. It should be noted that these findings are contextually situated in the male national Irish football talent system. Care should, therefore, be taken in considering transferability to alternative populations (Burchett et al., 2013). There is also a need to acknowledge the power dynamics involved between the first author and the youth players, who were aged between 12–13 years at the time of investigation (Arkin et al., 1980). Perhaps most significantly, the findings are limited in that they do not provide insight into the experiences of players beyond that of one season, and no indication is provided as to how these challenge experiences did or did not change and impact development in the longer term through to senior performance, making a longitudinal follow up a desirable next step in this research context.

Despite the significant challenges faced and the emotional disturbances evoked, all players expressed their enjoyment of the experience and the perceived benefit that the national system had on their development. Using a prospective and longitudinal design has shed light on the temporal nature of the challenge experience for these players. Indeed, the perception and temporal nature of the challenge experience between players was highly individualised and influenced by an interacting range of biopsychosocial factors. Similarly, early selection into the national system provided players with a consistent lack of certainty regarding their status in the programme, although this impacted players differentially; again influenced by a range of both internal and external factors with temporal fluctuations. The findings of this investigation call for the need for TD systems and practitioners to recognise challenge as a highly individualised, temporal, and biopsychosocial concept and adopt an individualised approach to the management of challenge.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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