# The talent quest – comment on Baker & Wattie

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COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

Explaining exceptional human performance remains problematic. Baker & Wattie (2018) explored the value of innate talent as underlying cause for excellence in sports. Although the absence of the influence of biological genetic influences cannot be confirmed or rejected, it is recommended to discuss this topic while taking into account the time-depending sport-specific context. Moreover, if, as Baker & Wattie (2018) concluded, the concept of talent has limited utility to the world of sport, the use of the predicate 'talent' might better be reconsidered in practice.

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Curiosity and the drive to explain phenomena are typical characteristics of human beings and maybe even most noticeable in scientists. One of the quests that still attracts a lot of scientists working in different fields is to reveal the mystery of exceptional human performance (Ericsson, 2006; Rees et al., 2000). How can we explain the special and unique level of ability? And maybe even more important nowadays, can we predict excellence already at an early stage? An innate predisposition or so-called 'innate talent' has been proposed and explored by many as a possible explanation for exceptionality in both the academic and practical contexts. As Baker & Wattie (2018) point out in their review, this is undoubtedly the case in the domain of sports. The policies of national sport association/clubs are generally focused on effective and efficient athletes' development programs to yield international successes (Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009). Early identification of those athletes with the highest probability to win future medals is considered crucial to keep up with the global medal race. Getting a grip on exceptional performance and the search for high potential athletes is of main concern. Baker and Wattie (2018) present some examples how people rely on the 'talent account' in real-life sports. It is clear that the discussion raised by Baker & Wattie (2018) about the validity of 'innate talent' as an explanation for excellence is of relevance. The purpose of this comment is to highlight some issues that, to my opinion, were not included or scarcely addressed by the authors.

In their discussion about the validness of the concept of innate talent, Baker & Wattie (2018) mainly focus on the genetic predisposition of anthropometrics and physiological capacity that align with the demands in certain sports. Specifically, being taller is considered to be a genetic advantage or innate talent. However, in many sports a specific height is not a clear advantage (e.g. badminton, field hockey, table tennis, soccer) (Elferink-Gemser, Visscher, Lemmink, & Mulder, 2004; Keogh, Weber, & Dalton, 2003; Pion et al., 2015; Reilly, Bangsbo, & Franks, 2000). The athletes' profiles might differ even at the highest competition level using strengths to compensate for weaknesses; for example, within the world's top 10 ranking in

badminton (January 2019) height differs from 1.75 m to 1.94 m between men and from 1.56 m to 1.79 m for women (https://bwfbadminton.com/rankings/). Therefore, the reasoning might be valid for specific sports, but not to all. Moreover, the importance of being taller might be overestimated in certain sports as a result of the selection policies and the developmental system used in youth sports. Being taller can be a temporary advantage during youth development. If the identification and selection of 'talented' players take place within this period, it is likely that the taller and probably more mature players will be selected especially when the focus is to win already in youth sport. If the development program prevents entry at a later point in time, only the taller/early mature players will survive in the system. This can lead to a misinterpretation of height being a talent indicator. Thus, the validness of innate talent concerning anthropometric predisposition might not hold in all sports. The same could be true for other physical genetic predispositions. It is often not clear what the exact determinants for future success are in a certain sport and temporary advantages could be wrongly construed as talent indicators. Although this does not wipe away the possible influence of biology, it recommends a careful consideration per sport and its context.

Also for other reasons, the sport's context is an important factor that should be taken into account when explaining human excellence. Some sports are popular all around the world and have been practiced intensively for many decades by many athletes while other sports are relatively young, less widespread and only practiced by a small number. It is likely that in the latter case, performance differences can be validly explained by differences between athletes in the amount and quality of deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2006). The role of innate talent might be negligible or even absent. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the role of chance in the pursuit of excellence (Gagne, 2004). The coincidental presence of among other things the right club, trainer, team mates and sparring partners will influence the opportunities for development, even as the accidental presence of the athlete and the talent scout at the place at the same time and the scout actually seeing the right performance at the right moment. Even when an athlete might have the accurate genetic predisposition to excel in a certain sport, the environment needs to recognize and value this at the right place and time. As an extension to this, Baker & Wattie (2018) plead for more credence to coaches' intuition or 'gut-feeling' to early identify talent and use this as another argument in favor of the validness of the talent account. Although I value the expertise of coaches to a large extent, I also need to admit, based on the large datasets from many sports revealing relative age effects, that their judgement concerning the selection of players is often biased (Musch & Grondin, 2001). Moreover, Howe, Davidson and Sloboda (1998) already argued that early abilities are often better explained by difference in opportunities than innate talent without discarding the possibility of innate talent.

In conclusion, explaining exceptional performance and defining talent in sports remains a challenge. It requires a holistic approach in which sport-specific aspects need to be taken into account. It also seems a semantic challenge to speak the same language within science and practice. As Baker & Wattie (2018) concluded, the concept of talent indeed seems to have limited utility to the world of sport. In addition to this, the use of the predicate 'talent' might better be reconsidered in practice.

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