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Much Ado About....?

A response to Hardy et al.

Abstract

Our response to the Great British Medallist (GBM) study focuses on three concerns. Firstly, we discuss the extent to which the findings presented are actually novel and offer practitioners genuine guidance and information about how to structure talent development pathways. Secondly, we suggest that a lack of critical consideration of the findings against the considerable body of knowledge that already exists in this domain is a significant limitation. Finally, and most pertinently from a practitioner perspective, we highlight our concerns about the extent to which the findings presented may be prematurely adopted by practitioners without a genuinely appropriate evidence base.

Much Ado About....?

A response to Hardy et al.

First of all we must commend the editors of this special edition for their innovative method of providing a balanced view. As researchers of several years standing in the area of Talent Identification and Development (TID) we have been increasingly frustrated at the lack of opportunity to submit critical responses to papers across a number of journals. Soliciting critique, as the editors have done, offers a good way forwards which we would commend to others.

That said, we are particularly pleased to comment on this paper as, we believe, its' genesis, presentational style and subsequent distribution seem to have been designed to confirm a seminal status; most relevantly (and we will suggest, concerningly) with practitioners. Aware of the space allocated, and the number of our fellow critique-ers, we will confine ourselves to three concerns. As pracademics (cf. Collins and Collins, 2016) we will place an emphasis on the applied implications and consequences of the content.

Question 1: How much of the content is genuinely new?

There are a number of features which seem designed to 'sell' the study. For example, the GBM study offers substantial detail on its approach, the quantity of data, etc. However, we would argue that the findings from this apparently exhaustive process are neither particularly novel nor offer practitioners sufficient new information to guide their practice. Details of experts consulted (coincidentally, we wonder how many of those were invited to comment here), the length of time taken and even the number of person-years taken to transcribe are provided; but does this really confirm what is said or obviate the need for a genuinely considered approach? More specifically, is it really new to stress that...

Rather, through *counterphobic processes* and *total preparation* Super-Elite athletes are able to control their emotions (such as anxiety and fear) and

maintain high levels of performance in high-pressure situations. This finding stands opposed to the lay-perspective or typical media-standpoint that Super-Elite athletes are always highly confident and do not experience anxiety in the face of high competitive pressures. (GBM, p.163)

We would suggest that this is both well-known and commonly catered for by those who work in high performance sport. So why report this in such detail? The “culture of striving” (p. 17) is another example of a construct which has been well evidenced and even, perhaps, more thoroughly considered by other authors (e.g., Smith et al., 2007; Stoll et al., 2008). In short, it is surprising that the GBM authors did not skirt over findings that are well accepted, citing the original research to support their findings, so that more detail (and indeed, a more succinct presentation) could be offered on more original insights.

Question 2: How much of the content is critically considered?

We are always pleased to get a mention when others write about one of our target areas, although we would have to question the veracity of some of the things we are referenced for in the GBM study! Our Rocky Road paper, for example, is cited six times (and referenced twice with different author orders) but, interestingly, none of our other work, all very pertinent to the GBM study, is even mentioned. Of greatest relevance, our recent paper on Superchamps, Champs and Almosts (Collins et al., 2016) is omitted, despite the fact that it offers compelling evidence in complete contradiction to what the GBM study itself acknowledges as “contentious” but also “consistent” with other research; namely, the existence and importance of foundational negative critical events. In our study, 18 contrasting triads, drawn from a number of sports, were examined in a similar fashion to the GBM approach. Even with specific probing, however, we failed to identify the uniform experience seen as such an important discriminating factor by Hardy et al.; indeed, if any trend was apparent it was for the Almosts (successful as young performers but not at top level) to report more trauma, although even this

was nowhere near the levels reported in the GBM study. The paper is open access and has, to date, received over 10000 downloads yet it is not cited. Our earlier investigations which highlight the existence of skills and transformational challenge in the development of elites across a variety of performance domains (e.g. Kamin et al., 2007; MacNamara et al., 2006; MacNamara et al., 2008; MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b; MacNamara and Collins, 2011) are also unreported. Furthermore, this oversight is not exclusive to our work. For example, work in mental toughness (e.g., Crust and Clough, 2011, Crust, 2007) and self-regulation (Toering et al., 2011), both pertinent and potentially differing constructs to the GBM perspective, are missed whilst more recent work which ‘supports’ the GBM standpoint (e.g., Morgan et al., 2015) is included.

We hope our point is acknowledged as more than professional pique. It is surely crucial to offer a balanced critique, especially in papers and reports like the GBM study which are designed to have such a broad influence. This is especially important when consumers of this study (e.g., coaches, NGBs, athletes) may well be swayed by the authority (e.g., professional standing, accreditation, or certification) of the authorship team, together with its’ uncritical endorsement by UK Sport. On this basis, we suggest that the lack of criticality and debate about opposing findings are a major limitation of the GBM study; as such, the opportunity to respond is very welcome. ...after all, the original authors had over 190 pages to play with!

Question 3: What *are* the key messages for practice and *how fair* are the claims made?

Quite apart from the points made above, we feel that the GBM study and this subsequent paper need to more carefully consider what implications are offered and even, perhaps, whether these are premature. Once again, our points relate to what is said and how it is presented.

We present two examples: firstly consider this statement:

Although all 16 Super-Elite athletes experienced foundational negative critical event(s), these negative critical events occurred in close temporal proximity to the experience of a positive critical event(s) within, or specifically linked to, the sporting domain. This temporal proximity, between the negative and positive critical events, was likely an important factor in preventing the negative outcomes typically associated with negative critical foundational events highlighted above (cf. Rees et al., 2016; Wiersma et al., 2009). GBM p.28)

Our question would be how this speculative and, as yet, unsupported contention should be interpreted by practitioners. In the applied summary document for coaches, this finding is presented as

All of the Super elite athletes reported experiencing foundational *negative critical events* during their early developmental years in close proximity to a *positive critical event related to sport*. Only four of the 16 Elite athletes reported experiencing a combination of negative events and positive sport related events. (UK Sport, p.3)

Concerningly, however, the implications of this unequivocally presented finding are not explored. In fact, and somewhat tangentially, the applied *guidelines* presented are “*Athletes should be allowed to develop coping strategies through appropriate levels of support and challenge*”. We completely concur with this last statement; indeed, it is the basis of the Rocky Road process which we espouse (Collins et al., in review). However, it isn’t clear to us at all how the findings logically lead to the advice, or the extent to which a practitioner now knows what to do with the information on foundational negative critical events. In fact, it occurs to us that uncritical acceptance and application of these ideas may have some seriously negative consequences.

As a second concern, we would question the extent to which these *qualitative* findings on *one* group of 16 individual sport athletes have been taken forward. For example, findings seem to be being presented without qualification or critique across sports by the same authors. As one example, the study has been used as a direction for the English Rugby Union, despite the fact that there were no team athletes in the original study. This reflects the authoritative way in which results have been presented but surely represents bad practice. In short, a shiny presentation should not be allowed to make up for a lack of evidential ‘meat’ nor the absence of clear translational links. After all, many would argue that qualitative study aims to generate a useful map of the world rather than a correct one (Strean, 1998).

Conclusion

In short, given the points made above, we are concerned (though perhaps not surprised given precedents in this area such as the adoption of LTAD policy) at the traction suggested for the GBM study with the sporting community and its potential role in guiding practice in TID. We mostly question the lack of criticality with which the findings seem to be adopted and endorsed within UK sport. If such a study is to guide policy and practice it is surely important that there is a strong degree of criticality apparent; in our opinion the GBM lacks this critical thinking on a number of fronts; presenting evidence that disconfirms (and confirms) their findings, presenting a robust evidence base and deducing and inferring conclusions from the available facts.

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