

# **“An Eye for Talent”: Talent Identification and the “Practical Sense” of Top-Level Soccer Coaches**

**Mette Krogh Christensen**  
University of Southern Denmark

The purpose of this study is to explore how top-level soccer coaches identify talent. I draw on Bourdieu's work to challenge a commonly held assumption that talent identification is a rational or objective process. Analysis of in-depth interviews with eight coaches of national youth soccer teams indicated these coaches identified talent in three ways. First, coaches use their practical sense and their visual experience to recognize patterns of movement among the players. Second, the coaches' classificatory schemes are characterized by their preference for so-called “autotelic” players, that is, players that, from the coaches' perspective, exhibit a potential to learn, practice, and improve. Third, the study shows that talent, of which the coaches act as arbiters of taste, is socially configured in top-level soccer.

Le but de cette étude est d'explorer la façon dont les entraîneurs de soccer de haute performance identifient le talent. J'emprunte aux travaux de Bourdieu pour contester une supposition communément acceptée que l'identification de talent soit un processus rationnel ou objectif. L'analyse d'entrevues en profondeur avec huit entraîneurs d'équipes nationales junior suggère que ces entraîneurs identifient le talent de trois façons. Premièrement, ils utilisent leur sens pratique et leur expérience visuelle pour reconnaître les patrons de mouvement chez les joueurs. Deuxièmement, les schémas de classification des entraîneurs se caractérisent par leur préférence pour des joueurs soi-disant « autotéliques », c'est-à-dire des joueurs qui, selon les entraîneurs, exhibent un potentiel pour apprendre, pratiquer et s'améliorer. Troisièmement, l'étude démontre qu'en soccer de haute performance, le talent (dont les entraîneurs sont les arbitres au plan du goût) est socialement configuré.

Over the past decade coaching practice has been studied from a variety of sociological approaches that “expand upon the traditional focuses of ‘what to coach’ and ‘how to coach’ to more adequately examine the complex question of ‘who is coaching’” (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004, p. 3). This evolving body of research (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2006; Cushion & Jones, 2001; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Jones et al., 2004; Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002; Potrac, Jones, & Cushion, 2007) highlighted the link between coaches' biographies and their

behavior as important and complex determinants of coaching practice. Cushion and Jones (2006) found that, “the coaches’ practice appeared to be a product of their habitus, an often unconscious process related to the internalization of a cultural arbitrary” (p. 158). The majority of this research focused on social interactions at the micro level of the coaching process. Relatively little attention, however, has been given to the actual process of identifying young talent capable of attaining top-level positions in their sport. The purpose of this study is to examine the formation and social construction of the “eye for talent” that many top-level soccer coaches have. Specifically, I explore talent identification in soccer by top-level soccer coaches as a sociological phenomenon that involves their “practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25) and the resulting “classificatory schemes” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 470). I base the study on the assumption that talent identification in top-level soccer involves the coaches’ eye for talents and their practical sense:

*A practical sense, that is, an acquired system of preferences, of principles of vision and division (what is usually called taste), and also a system of durable cognitive structures (which are essentially the product of the internalization of objective structures) and of schemes of action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25)*

In particular, the study challenges the assumption that talent identification is a rational or objective process.

In this study I explore the expert knowledge of eight male coaches of the Danish national youth team soccer and examine the ways in which this knowledge affects their identification of talent. I situated this attempt to examine the incorporated beliefs and principles that guide the identification of talent by top-level coaches in a Danish context within Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of “taste,” practical sense, and classificatory schemes (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 470; Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8).

## **Talent Identification: A Matter of Taste?**

The ability of top-level coaches to be able to identify “true” talent is a highly sought-after quality that ensures clubs or national teams do not lose time, money, and prestige by investing in the “wrong” players. However, the multidimensional structure of soccer and the dominant role of continual purposive training and practice activities enable athletes with widely different skills and abilities to excel in the sport (Hohmann & Seidel, 2003). In other words, soccer is a sport in which the “right” and “wrong” qualities are identified not through a few single factors but through a multifaceted set of characteristics.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the amount of research into talent identification in soccer has increased considerably in both the natural and the social sciences (Williams & Reilly, 2000). This research is characterized on the one hand by the wish to identify talented players at an early stage in order to develop them over a longer period, and on the other by the discovery that precise criteria for talent identification are remarkably difficult to isolate (Morris, 2000; Simonton, 1999). Recently, researchers have devoted their attention to contextual factors

such as the early experiences of the athletes, the value framework of the coaches, environmental and economical opportunities, habits, and training traditions, all of which affect the identification and development of talent in sport (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998; Kay, 2000, Simonton, 1999; Tranckle & Cushion, 2006). These contextual factors include talent scouts and top-level coaches, who play a pivotal and powerful role in soccer. Researchers (Bailey & Morley, 2006; Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; Nash & Collins, 2006; Régnier, Salmela, & Russell, 1993; Roderick, 2006; Thomas & Thomas, 1999; Williams & Reilly, 2000) from different theoretical positions all stressed that the experience-based judgments of top-level coaches should be a point of departure for understanding talent identification in sport and in professional soccer in particular.

Williams and Reilly (2000) pointed out that professional soccer clubs rely on the subjective assessment of scouts or coaches supported by a “shopping list” of key criteria. The researchers stated, “Scientists need to determine the nature of the subjective and implicit criteria that coaches and scouts use to identify talented players” (Williams & Reilly, p. 664). Nash and Collins (2006) concluded that the activities of expert coaches (including talent identification) are based on a complex interaction of knowledge and memory of similar situations, honed by years of experience and reflection. Côté et al. (1995) used their analysis of experienced gymnastic coaches to develop a model of the process that coaches use to identify talent. A critique, however, is that the model is a simplification of coaching practice and therefore does not sufficiently explain the social construction of coaching and talent identification. Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2006) stated, “While this approach [the model of coaching] acknowledges that no single element can represent the coaching process, viewing coaching so unproblematically limits our understanding of it” (p. 88). Even so, the model of coaching proposed by Côté et al. (1995) has been used to study the ways in which Brazilian soccer coaches prepared for the Soccer World Cup in 2006 (Salmela, Mauricio, Machado & Durand-Bush, 2006), as well as the significance of social relations and contexts for expert knowledge among English top-level soccer coaches (Jones et al., 2003; Potrac et al., 2002). Research into the behavior of coaches has explored the social configurations of coaching practice including talent identification.

An interesting contribution to this field of research was work by Cushion and Jones (2001, 2006) on power, discourse, and symbolic violence in professional youth soccer. The researchers stated that because “the coaches used authoritarian actions to define and categorize the players as good or bad” (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p. 158), the hierarchical relation between coach and player constructs the categorization of ability and traits of players. According to Cushion and Jones (2006), “good players” displayed “a habitus similar to that established by the coaches” (p. 152), whereas the “rejects” (the “bad” players) deviated from the expectations with regard to soccer ability and “attitude” determined by the coach. This differentiated assignment of capital resulted in uneven training conditions for the players and unequal chances of being selected for the team.

Nevertheless, this body of Bourdieu-based research seems to have neglected a particular aspect of coaching practice, namely the dynamic of coaches’ incorporated and tacit knowledge that might be elucidated by Bourdieu’s concepts of practical sense, classificatory schemes, and taste.

## Practical Sense and the Development of Expertise

Practical sense is a key concept in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990, 1998). This theory was developed as a combined analysis of how a practitioner performs an action and how he or she learns to perform that action. Practical sense is, then, both a name for the ability to perform and an account of the manner in which a practitioner develops the knowledge and expertise on which the performance is based. "Practical" refers to ways of doing and handling things using knowhow and a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 82). Social practices such as coaching are (perhaps primarily) guided by so-called implicit, incorporated, practical, or tacit knowledge (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Polanyi, 1958; Schön, 1987), which has a fundamentally different logic than explicit knowledge. Classificatory schemes are categories of perception that become a particular taste. The schemes permit coaches to distinguish and to "make distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8). For example, Cushion and Jones (2006) found that coaches were "central figures in assigning capital valued by the field amongst the players" (p. 152) based on the coaches' own professional ideals or classificatory schemes.

Experts in a given activity such as soccer coaching are considered experts because their flair for sensing what is going to happen—their "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 82)—is valued and is assigned capital in the field of soccer. Practical sense here is not a result of logical thinking or declarative knowledge. It is founded on practical intuition or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25), which might be informed by explicit knowledge, but is primarily based on hands-on and incorporated knowhow earned through a legitimate and privileged access to the field.

Furthermore, practical sense uses "procedural knowledge" (Nash & Collins, 2006, p. 468) that is closely connected to the field in which the activity is carried out. The coaches' sphere of action (i.e., the practice in which they are involved) and the logic of that particular sphere of action are central to talent spotting by coaches. Likewise, Tranckle and Cushion (2006) maintained, "Talent can only be talent and recognized as such where it is valued" (p. 266). I add that assessment and judgment of talent in top-level soccer resides primarily with coaches whose practical sense and eye for talent are formed and developed by individual trajectories (Jones et al., 2003; Potrac et al., 2002). An exploration of the practical sense and classificatory schemes of coaches entails an examination of their incorporated categories and individual preferences that are actualized through the socially instituted power of the top-level soccer coaches (Jones et al., 2004). Such an exploration requires a qualitative approach (Mattingly, 1998; Potrac et al., 2002; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999) that I outline in the following section.

## Methods

The empirical basis of the study is a sociological analysis of eight in-depth interviews. I base the choice of this approach on its sensitivity to narratives and to coaches' descriptions of categories and individual preferences, as well as their manner of "doing" and learning to "do" talent identification. Telling tales and recounting anecdotes is a fundamental human way of giving meaning to experi-

ence (Christensen, 2007; Garro & Mattingly, 2000), because the narrative functions as the mediator between subjectivity and an outer world of actions and objective structures. This means that narratives acquire a cohesive force as they construct a meaningful link between praxis (the lived life) and pathos (the emotions and memories of the lived life) (Ricoeur, 1990). When persons speak about their lives, they do so with the aid of explanatory models or narratives that are legitimate in their culture (Järvinen, 2000). In this way, insights into the narratives of the coaches allow for an understanding of their way of structuring their experiences and provide a cohesive picture of the different practicalities and limitations that construct their coaching practice (Jones et al., 2003). Social scientists talk about the biographical turn and the biographical approach in sociology that “lays stress on valuing knowledge of a personal history in arriving at an understanding of the choices which people make” (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 22).

## Participants

The participants in this study are eight male Danish soccer coaches who coach the national youth team. They were selected according to three criteria. First, coaches had to be appointed by the Danish Soccer Association. I assume that this appointment meant they were best qualified to identify and develop male Danish soccer talents for the Danish national youth soccer team. Second, the study had to include both national youth team coaches (NYT coaches) and national talent development coaches (NTD coaches). NTD coaches are appointed to arrange individual career guidance and training for national youth team players in their respective clubs, as well as supervising NYT coaches and the leading professional soccer clubs in their talent-development work. Third, coaches must have had at least eight years of experience as top-level soccer coaches before their participation in the interview. I assumed that this time period enabled them to have developed their “taste” for talent.

In March 2007 the eight selected coaches received a letter with a description of the study and an invitation to take part as respondents. Soon after, I telephoned them to make an appointment for an in-depth interview expected to last between 90 minutes and 2 hours. All eight coaches agreed to participate. The interviews took place in April and May 2007.

At the time of the interview the coaches were between 33 and 64 years old (mean = 45 years) and had between 8 and 28 years coaching experience (mean = 15 years) in top-level soccer. All the coaches had completed a bachelor’s degree and were employed as full-time professional coaches. One of the coaches had been a professional soccer player and played for the national team, after which he became a professional coach. The other coaches had not been top-class soccer players but had focused on their training as coaches since their teens. They said they had a burning interest to work with young people and wanted to see them develop as individuals and as soccer players.

## Generation of Data

An interview guide (Kvale, 1996) consisted of five thematic questions pertaining to the connection between the coaching profession, talent identification, taste, and life stories of the coaches. Each question had an additional 5–7 attached subques-

tions and cues. I sent these questions to the respondents in advance to prepare them for the content and form of the interview. The in-depth interviews focused on the production of narratives (Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Mattingly, 1998; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999) that involved concrete examples of people, anecdotes, episodes, dilemmas, and decisions that have been important for the coach's self-understanding and development of expertise. The narratives of the respondents and their spontaneous wish to talk about subjects that interested them within the framework of the interview guide determined the order of the questions and the course of the interview. For that reason there was considerable diversity in the length of the interviews, which lasted from 58 to 104 minutes (mean = 85 minutes), and in the degree of saturation with regard to each question.

Four interviews took place at soccer clubs, three took place in coaches' homes, and one interview was conducted at the University of Southern Denmark. Typically, the interviews conducted in the homes of the respondents were longest in duration. The interviews were in Danish, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim with notation of salient body language. Transcriptions were subsequently sent to the participants for verification. To preserve anonymity, the coaches were given the opportunity to delete or modify sequences in the transcribed data. Coaches were given pseudonyms in the presentation of the results.

## Data Analysis

I analyzed the in-depth interviews using the phenomenological method known as "meaning condensation" (Kvale, 1996), which is inspired by the phenomenological psychologist Amedeo Giorgi (1975). According to Giorgi (1975), a phenomenological research method such as meaning condensation is appropriate to "the study of the structure, and variations of structure, of the consciousness to which any thing, event, or person appears," and further: "This strict point of departure is adhered to because man [sic] can only speak of that which appears to someone's stream of consciousness or experience" (p. 83–84). In the analysis of the in-depth interviews, I followed the four successive steps of meaning condensation as described by Giorgi. Step 1 identifies natural "meaning units" as expressed by the subject. Step 2 explicates central themes in terms revelatory of the structure and the style of practice, that is, it explains what takes place and how it takes place. Step 3 describes situated structure and situated style of practice in relation to a specific context or specific situation. These descriptions help the researcher to understand the world of the subject. Step 4 describes general structure and general style of practice that allows the researcher to "relate them to other findings and with other phenomena in a more theoretical context" (Giorgi, p. 97). This phenomenological way of approaching data begins with the participant's immediate experience of being in the world, and is an attempt to deal systematically with data that remain expressed in terms of ordinary language. In the analysis of data I was also inspired by an ethnographical approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) that, similar to meaning condensation, involves a stepwise shift from data collection, analysis, and description to write-up and theory.

These four steps are comparable to those advocated in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but differ from them in two ways. First, in the phenomenological approach the initial data must be "biographical and personal because

all human phenomena are temporal, historical, and personal” (Giorgi, 1975, p. 101). Second, the fourth step consists of theoretical reflections in a search for meaning rather than the inductive creation of a theory (as occurs in grounded theory). The aim of my application of this stepwise method is to articulate the prereflective level of practical sense and thereby make “invisible” categories and preferences “visible” (Kvale, 1996) to reveal the constructed nature of the practical sense that the coaches use.

In parts of the cross-case analyses, I direct attention to metaphorical expressions used by the coaches and to their increased use of gesturing and body language when speaking of exceptional soccer talents. Body language punctuates verbal language and compensates for the verbal language’s deficiency in describing the expert knowledge that the coaches have. When coaches spoke of that special feeling associated with identifying a great talent, they often used metaphorical words and phrases alongside more active soccer-related movements. These I noted during and after the interview because metaphor and body language enhance the description of the nature of practical sense that the coaches are trying to share with me in the interviews (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). I therefore conducted semiotic metaphor analyses of the data (Christensen, 2004) by systematically searching for central and frequently used metaphors in the narratives.

## Findings

Because I used the meaning-condensation method, I present the results in three general themes, structured around the most central concepts of Bourdieu. To allow the reader to participate as cointerpreter, I present the quotes<sup>1</sup> and extracts in an extensive manner.<sup>2</sup>

### Visual Experience and Pattern Recognition

Coaches describe their knack for identifying talents as something that originates from intuition—an inner yardstick such as “my gut feeling,” “something I see with my minds’ eye,” “my inner self,” “a visual experience.” In other words, a practical sense that feels right. For example, in the last 10–15 years Einar has watched thousands of games to identify and evaluate talent. I asked him what he had written in his notebook after each game. He answered, “Generally only names, nothing about qualities.” He did not use words to describe what he saw but noted only the name of the player. Details and qualities remained a feeling and a sensual experience on which he based his judgment of the player. A name is enough for Einar. He has confidence in his “gut feeling” that he has seen something that is right and important, but he cannot easily express in language the quality he observed. This gut feeling did not fit into declarative knowledge. Rather, it was a practical sense reduced to the name of the player.

Everyday language is filled with phrases and expressions that are actually metaphors for how individuals perceive knowledge and give meaning to their experience. The metaphorical construction and use of language reveal cognitive structures that are determined by the embodied mind that is the ever-present bodily presence in the world and serves as a basis for verbal expression. In particular, the

coaches often used the phrases, “I can see” and “I saw” when they described how they selected talented players. For these coaches talent is something that looks right. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), “seeing” is a primary metaphor for knowledge (pp. 53, 238, 393). Generally, Lakoff and Johnson argued, individuals receive the greatest amount of knowledge through vision and therefore often use the metaphor “seeing” as synonymous with knowledge, understanding, or insight. Examples of this are, “I see what you mean,” “Now I see,” or “I cannot see the point.” In other words, the logic of sight is transferred to the logic of knowledge—seeing is knowing. A characteristic of the primary metaphor of seeing is that it consists of evaluating subjective experiences through sight as a sensory–motor domain and establishes itself as knowledge in the person who has seen or perceived something. So, when coaches say talent is something they “got a glimpse of,” something experienced “as a quick flash” and resembling “a familiar pattern,” they have made a subjective judgement of a visual impression and acquired a personal “visual experience”:

Visual experience—it is essential that you get some [mental] pictures that in some way evoke a response; something that reminds you of what Michael Laudrup did when he was 16 years old when I saw him for the first time. Something you’ve seen before and that was good. . . . That’s what I call that, just getting a glimpse. (Einar)

Coaches recount how important it is to have “seen the international requirements time and time again” through their work with the national teams. The main source of knowledge of these coaches comes from their constant observation of players. Being able to see talent, however, is not the same as being able to describe it. Several of the coaches recount their uncertainty in verbalizing practical sense, as the following example illustrates. I asked Axel, “How can you see a young soccer player’s potential?” And he replies,

We can’t either. . . . I just think many coaches will probably say to you they just take a look and see if they are quick and things like that. I’d say that, yeah, well, maybe you do that too, but as far as I’m concerned, I look for something that tells me, “Hell! That looks just right, that does.” (Axel)

Axel’s certainty about his judgment of the qualities he observes should be understood as an evaluation that derives from an intuitive response toward the complete picture that is judged by “principles of vision and division” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25). In Axel’s case, these principles give him the feeling of doing something self-evident, logical, and inevitable as he distinguishes between different talented soccer players without being explicit about the generative principles that guide his observation.

In the same vein, coaches often used the phrase “checking the players out” as an ability that has to do with pattern recognition. George recounts enthusiastically and with much use of soccer movements and vigorous body language (as if he were literally making the interviewer “see” his point) the following story of how quickly he is able to read the moves, ball handling, and poise that the players display:



I can give you an example when Peter [another coach] and I were in England to watch a game. The game had been going for 4–5 minutes and I say to Peter, “Heck! Take a look at number 8, I’ll bet you anything that he’s a good player.” Peter says, “Come off it, man, you can’t tell if he’s good or not. They’ve only been playing 3–4 minutes!” I say, “I’m telling you, he’s a good player. He’s had contact with the ball twice and I can see his sense of balance and everything.” “Yeah, right, we’ll see about that.” Funny thing was that this player was chosen as *Man of the Match*, and Peter said, “You know what? You’ve got quite an eye there.” (George)

In stressing visual experience as a matter of pattern recognition—the glimpse that is recognized as an entirety—each coach gives expression to an incorporated classificatory scheme of principles, preferences and cognitive structures that seem to give these coaches confidence in their evaluation of what they see and, therefore, in what they know. Consequently, the socialization and training of top-level coaches might well be the result of building up a repertoire of exemplary pictures and pattern recognition that enables them to convey unspoken or unspeakable cultural knowledge as they pinpoint players.

This finding reflects Dreyfus’ (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Dreyfus, 2001) theory of learning. Dreyfus developed a seven-stage model for skill acquisition that uses a scale of 1–7, with 1 being novice and 7 being practical wisdom. An expert is someone who no longer relies on analytical principles but has an intuitive grasp of his or her area of expertise. In other words, the expert has a subtle and refined ability to differentiate developed through an extensive repertoire of situational discrimination in which he or she has had to make decisions. Dreyfus (2001) contended that the performance of practical wisdom has an incorporated cultural style that cannot be expressed in theoretical terms or conveyed in theory. Similarly, the coaches in this study display reliable astuteness characterized by an incorporated cultural and socially contingent style when they identify talents. This reliable astuteness is not explicit and logical but implicit and marked by the style of each coach. Consequently, the identification of talents is not based on precise evaluations of isolated elements but builds on a practical sense of visual impressions as a whole. This means that talent identification rests on a multifaceted intuitive knowledge comprised of socially constructed “images” of the perfect player.

This intuitive knowledge is also a source of frustration among top-level coaches because they feel they lack an accepted common language in performing their job.

We’re talking soccer now, and you can say if we’re talking soccer, we should have a common language. . . . If there’s one thing that has been unclear in Danish soccer it’s terminology. People have been talking at cross-purposes and have their own idea of what they mean. (Axel)

It’s just a load of nit picking, whether it’s called a dead ball, standard situation, or whatever. The Danish FA wants to call it this or that. I don’t give a damn. I can easily sit down and draw a picture of it for them if that’s what they want. That’s no problem. (Daniel)

The lack of an accepted shared terminology indicates a characteristic and somewhat problematical quality of the coaches' practical sense, namely that the "distinctions are not identical" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8). According to Bourdieu (1998), principles of vision and division "become symbolic differences and constitute a veritable language" (p. 8) or distinctive signs, but these are not necessarily transformed into an acknowledged explicit language accessible to people who do not occupy the privileged position of coach. More likely, they are passed on in apprenticeship-like relations from coach to coach as symbolic capital in terms of images and pattern recognition rather than in words and explicit "theoretical" categories.

The quotations above indicate a twofold concern: On the one hand, the coaches consider existing soccer language blurred and somewhat irrelevant—"it's just a load of nit-picking"—to the core issue in their profession, namely their feeling for the game and their eye for talent. On the other hand, these coaches are concerned that their practical sense and implicit knowledge are devalued and ignored as being inferior to explicit and what Bourdieu called "scholastic" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 127) knowledge when they have to justify the selection of young talents to players, to colleagues, and to management in Danish soccer. Bourdieu (1998) discussed how the scholastic rationale reflects an appreciation for and an interest in the naming of things. Such pursuits require the possession of free time, of *skholè*, or time to play seriously with speculative problems such as terminology and criteria for identification at a distance from the urgency of a practical situation. The coaches only partly recognized this scholastic logic, and apparently, they do not see it as important as long as surrounding elements in society do not challenge or question their expertise and power as coaches.

The twofold concern—practical sense versus scholastic logic—seems to characterize a central struggle in the field of top-level soccer, in which the power to identify talent and "make distinctions between what is good and what is bad" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8) is imperative to the "doxa" of the field (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66).<sup>3</sup> Cushion and Jones (2006) argued that "an examination of the discourse surrounding this space of 'good player' reveals how doxa, or assumptions, about occupying the space were legitimated and complied with" (p. 152). In other words, the indisputable positions of the coaches as definers and categorizers of talent and consequently as controllers of the construction of symbolic capital in the field sustain the current logic of talent identification. In summary, then, of the first theme emerging from the data analysis, I consider both the lack of an accepted, shared terminology and the primacy of visual experience and pattern recognition to be a part of the doxa in the field of Danish top-level soccer, and therefore perceived as legitimate by these coaches. In this way, these coaches reproduce and produce "orthodoxy" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 22), that is, the powerful and dominant structures, ways of doing, and ways of knowing in this particular field.

## The Preeminence of Hard Work and Dedication

The second theme reveals the composition of the schemes that coaches use to identify talent. The following analyses are primarily based on data from one question that I asked all the coaches: "Taking a concrete example, how would you describe the qualities of a young talented soccer player?" By asking the coaches

this seemingly simple question, I challenged their image of talent as something that was visible and observable but incapable of definition in precise words and categories. However, in their stories and anecdotes (and through my deliberate use of follow-up questions relating to the concrete example in their stories), the coaches formulated individual tastes and preferences with regard to soccer. In this way the data reveal a whole range of interrelated features and criteria used by the coaches to identify “good” and “bad” players in a Danish soccer context. Not surprisingly, the “soccer skills” and the “personal qualities” of young soccer players comprise the primary criteria in the classificatory schemes of the coaches, although personal qualities predominated.

**Soccer skills.** Classification of soccer skills relates to identification of the observable, immediate performance of skills among different soccer players. The coaches differentiate between two categories of soccer skills: *game intelligence* and *peak competences*. The first is predominantly regarded by the coaches as the tactical and mental ability to read and predict the game and move effectively in relation to time and space. According to the coaches, game intelligence is a non-verbal, spatial, bodily skill that cannot be measured in isolation from the playing of the game. In the following quotations, two of the coaches explain game intelligence:

When they play 4-a-side, for example, in a small area . . . you see the players put under maximum pressure when they receive the ball—you can see it [their game intelligence] in their choices. If each time he gets the ball a player makes the same choice and makes the same mistakes, then it tells me that he isn't that intelligent. (Frank)

He was really good at reading the game, good at making a run at the right moment. He has scored lots of goals by being good at moving the way he should. (George)

The second category, *peak competences*, covers a broad spectrum of chiefly physical and highly technical skills such as speed, heading precision, and low passing. The coaches present these soccer skills in widely different ways usually in relation to a certain context or with the use of concrete examples. Their construction of categories and their criteria for skills identification varied widely and were often described using illustrations of specific players closely connected to a concrete context. Moreover, most of the coaches doubted that soccer skills could be described thoroughly with either the use of words or numbers. The “true” criteria for identification are, according to the coaches, closely related to contextualized practice and thus to more complex and situated soccer skills. These have to be seen and recognized in movement patterns related to real play.

**Personal qualities.** Classification of personal qualities encompasses seeing and knowing the soccer player as a person, that is, recognizing the qualities that are less soccer-specific but still regarded by the coaches as significant for a further development of talent. Axel explains:

I have seen so many talents that have been so damn good but just haven't had what it takes mentally or just didn't want it bad enough. The thing is, no matter how good you are at soccer you have to want something bad enough.

You have to be willing to put other things aside to become really good, you have to have some humility towards the game generally. . . . That is the mental bit about being strong—that and the fact that they’re clear about all this and say, “I want to spend some time on this, and I’m going to work hard for it.” They are willing to put their nose to the grindstone for something and look a bit further ahead than just to the next game. (Axel)

This quotation exemplifies a shared belief among all eight coaches in the study, namely that the decisive factor in the development of a young soccer player is his “character” and “attitude” toward training and games. According to the coaches, a talented soccer player has a “drive to succeed” and an attitude signaling “will and perseverance.” The coaches describe these as follows:

When he plays soccer, he plays soccer. For him it is natural to go in and do what he always does no matter what his opponents happen to be called. (Axel)

When they play, they just keep going—you can see it on the pitch. Who keeps running even though we’re behind by 0–4, who has that extra energy? He goes the extra mile for his mate. (David)

[He had] a fantastic attitude. He would walk through fire. He was a survivor. You could just see he meant a lot to the team all the time because he had this ability. (George)

According to these coaches, *attitude* is a dominant category in the classificatory scheme that distinguishes one highly skilled soccer player from another. The coaches especially like an attitude that reflects the players’ “willingness to learn, to work hard, and to dedicate themselves” to their sport—not just at the regular training sessions but also in their own time. The following quotations are examples of the ways in which the coaches describe this particular attitude:

[They can] see themselves as players who have to learn all the time. . . . There is a spark and a burning desire to practice, to learn and get better. . . . You can feel it, when you tell them that they have to work at this and that, they don’t just say, “yeah, ok.” They say, “Yes.” And then they go out onto the pitch and you can see them doing the things you asked them to do. . . . They have Dumbo ears—they listen to what is said. (David)

The guy with the greatest potential grabs a ball and practices what he does best. (Curt)

He wants to learn, he will learn, and he can learn because he has such a high level of skill. He doesn’t have any major obstacles blocking his further development. . . . With regard to the mental side of things, he seems completely untouched by the life that otherwise surrounds him as a soccer player. He is a soccer player through and through and is bent on improving. (Harry)

Although research (Morris, 2000; Williams & Reilly, 2000) examining the connection between psychological qualities and talent identification indicated

essential problems in the use of traits as predictors in talent identification among young athletes, the current data show a strong link between the coaches' taste for particular psychological qualities and their identification of soccer talents.

A social constructionist point of view suggests that the coaches construct the ideal talent as someone who has the ability to be coached according to the perceptions of "good" and "bad" learning strategies that the coaches have. Csikszentmihalyi described teenagers with such talent as having an "autotelic personality" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 78). They have the ability to concentrate and focus on immediate performances while remaining open to external impulses and development of experience in "a mode of serious play" (Csikszentmihalyi et al., p. 258). Consequently, the classificatory schemes of the coaches concern not only the present make-up of a player but also the player's presumed potential to learn, to practice, and to improve. This means that their classificatory schemes recognize and value players as capable of assimilating a particular habitus in preference to them possessing particular skills. If this is so, then talent identification is a matter of assigning capital to players who are already well on their way to incorporating the structures of Danish top-level soccer: to practice, to concentrate fully on improving their soccer skill "completely untouched by the surrounding world," and to "listen to what is being said" by the coach. Bourdieu wrote, "when the embodied structures and the objective structures are in agreement . . . everything seems obvious and goes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). The same logic applies to talent identification in top-level soccer: When a coach literally sees a player perform the embodied and the objective structures of top-level soccer in which that coach is socialized, it seems self-evident that the player is talented—and words seem redundant.

## The Coach as an Arbiter of Taste

The coaches described the personal qualities of talented soccer players as attributes that would not necessarily be fully evident in Saturday games. All the coaches emphasized the importance of confirming or denying the first impression of soccer skills in face-to-face meetings during training and dialogues with the "person behind the skills." A pivotal outcome of the use of these classificatory schemes is that talent is socially configured to legitimize the coaches as arbiters of taste. These arbiters of taste are assigned the power and the expertise to judge and label observable skills and perhaps less observable personal qualities. According to Frank the fact that each arbiter of taste has his or her own style or philosophy seems to be widely accepted in Danish top-level soccer:

We define soccer talents according to our own philosophy, and others do so according to theirs. In Danish soccer we have very different views of soccer, whereas in Holland and Spain they have a single model. We just can't do that in Denmark, because we are far too . . . umm . . . we do our own thing. That's why we will always select our own type [of player]. Sometimes I also think, "How can that player even be considered? It's completely hopeless." But it's because it [talent identification] reflects our philosophy. (Frank)

The highly subjective variation in taste among coaches is further confirmation of their power as the ultimate arbiters in top-level soccer. Consequently,

selection and rejection in the process of talent identification seems to be completely random to outsiders. This conclusion, however, ignores the forces and struggles that are present in the field of soccer and that construct the coaches' taste and their selection and rejection of players. Bourdieu (1998) stated that a distinctive property or quality, such as a hard-working and dedicated attitude, "only becomes a visible, perceptible, non-indifferent, socially pertinent difference if it is perceived by someone who is capable of making the distinction" (p. 9). This means that only coaches who are inscribed in the field of soccer, and who are assigned the authority to identify talent by the very field they themselves are both constructing and being constructed by, are able to make the distinction. If this is the case, then talent identification is a self-perpetuating cycle of construction and reconstruction. Coaching practice is thus assumed to have a logic based on visual experience, recognition of patterns of movement, and a taste for hard-working and dedicated players. This logic nurtures the talents it wishes to replicate. Moreover, the legitimized selection and rejection practice of coaches based on their tacit or metaphorically expressed taste perpetuates the coaches' power over the process and their ownership of "doxical" (cf. *doxa*) knowledge. Taste, knowledge, and expertise are intertwined and thus make the coach the arbiter of taste.

Jones et al. (2003) also showed this dynamic social construction of coaching knowledge and philosophy. However, they did not describe the coach as an arbiter of taste whose philosophy is part of a struggle for power. Yet recognition of the coach as an arbiter of taste is crucial to an understanding of the social construction of taste and of "Danish soccer philosophy." Bourdieu (1984) argued, "Taste classifies as well as classifies the classifier" (p. 6). The resulting Bourdieuvian field might exclude players, coaches, and other agents who are regarded as a threat to the orthodox, or dominant, logic and who might challenge the power of the established coaches. A "closed" field is characterized by an unwillingness to include different viewpoints and, as such, increases the possibility of mistakes. In contrast, a broadly based scouting system could prevent a "closing" of the field because scouts and coaches would have to exchange views on talented soccer players in more scholastic ways (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 127) and, in so doing, develop explicit categories that arise from their classificatory schemes. The current study shows that a reliance on the visual experience and metaphorical language of a coach and the lack of challenge to a limited number of coaches' tastes leaves little space for the sharing of explicit knowledge and the development of a shared language and classificatory schemes.

## Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this study was to provide insight into the formation and social construction of the classificatory schemes and practical sense of talent that are employed by top-level soccer coaches. In that respect, the study contributes to practice-related and experience-based knowledge and to the understanding of talent identification in a complex sport such as soccer. The findings suggest three trends in talent identification in Danish top-level soccer. First, coaches use their practical sense—visual experience and the experience-based ability they have acquired through sustained scouting work and through their feel for the game—to

recognize patterns of movement among the players. Second, the classificatory schemes of the coaches are characterized by their preference for so-called “autotelic” (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993, p. 78) soccer players, who are assumed to be willing to learn and are perceived to be hard working and dedicated. This autotelic category plays a decisive role in the evaluation of talent and indicates that the coaches’ construction of talent is based on a taste for certain perceived traits. Third, the study shows that talent, of which the coaches act as arbiters of taste, is socially configured in top-level soccer.

The top-level soccer coach is the person who represents the specific culture in which talent is either identified or overlooked. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1993) defined talent as “a social construction: It is a label of approval we place on traits that have a positive value in the particular context in which we live” (p. 23). Similarly, soccer players are constructed by each coach as talented only in relation to a specific context in which the coach holds a dominant position as the person who has both the experience and the power to define the players as “talented.”

The growing professionalization of the soccer field (Roderick, 2006) encourages children ages 10–14 years to choose (or more likely, to be chosen) to devote more time and effort to develop their soccer skills. The coaches in this study figuratively speaking “inherit” already chosen soccer players from the field of junior soccer. Consequently, research is needed that investigates the taste and classificatory schemes of club team coaches who coach these young players. Possibly coaches responsible for younger soccer players may not have the same classificatory schemes as the coaches participating in the current study. As arbiters of taste, coaches have significant influence on the future of young players (Cushion & Jones, 2006)—not only in the field of top-level soccer but also at lower levels. Similarly, the globalization of professional soccer requires comparative studies of the formation and social construction of the practical sense that top-level coaches have, as well as what I have called their eye for talent. Holt (2002) showed an important and decisive difference in Canadian and English top-level coaches’ manners of learning and ways of constructing talent.

The use of a theoretical framework based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu accompanied by a qualitative methodological approach might offer insight into the construction of cognitive structures used by coaches and into the ways they exercise their power. In this study I found that in top-level coaching “seeing” is knowing and knowledge is related to taste. These results can be used as a basis for future research that explores expert knowledge in different fields in society. In a “bodily” field such as top-level sport, a theoretical framework based on the work of Bourdieu seems an appropriate point of departure in the search for new understandings of the logic of practice because this framework might reveal underlying structures of power, hierarchies of knowledge, and dominant symbolic capital in the field. The Bourdieuan framework “incorporates issues of both knowledge and taste” (Cushion and Jones, 2006, p. 158) because it recognizes the social construction of the logic of practice in a field. It might therefore provide a suitable theoretical basis for the exploration of the interrelation between, on the one hand, the preeminence of implicit classificatory schemes as tools for distinctions and actions in top-level sport and, on the other hand, the prioritizing of explicit and apparently quantifiable scientific expertise that is to be found in the surrounding society.

## Notes

1. An English native speaker, who is also a professional translator, translated the quotes from Danish to English. The translator lives in Denmark and is familiar with the Danish language.
2. Words and expressions in quotation marks not accompanied by a citation are the words and expressions used by the coaches during the interviews.
3. Pierre Bourdieu used the work *doxa* to express the commonsense “accepted by all as self-evident” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 67) and the dominant point of view in a field: “Doxa is . . . the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68).

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