

Academic Paper

The role of mentorship in the professional progression of elite youth cricketers in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper investigates the athlete's perspective of the role of mentorship in a cricketer's career progression, from elite youth to the senior arena. A qualitative study explored the understanding and experience of mentorship by the cricketers (n=15). The findings indicated that mentorship played an important role in the cricketers' career development, irrespective of whether they progressed to the professional arena or not. The study provides a more nuanced understanding of mentorship in professional sports development and career progression from the athlete's perspective. The unique context of diversity in sport and society in South Africa further impacts the mentorship experience.

Keywords

mentorship, cricket, athlete development, career progression, South Africa

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Introduction

Mentoring dyads are recognised as developing relationships between a mentor and a mentee, where these parties share common goals, expectations, focus, and mutual trust (St-Jean & Mathieu, 2015; Varghese & Finkelstein, 2021). The ultimate aim is to enhance the career growth of the mentee (Ali & Panther, 2008; Hodgson & Scanlan, 2013; St-Jean & Mathieu, 2015). Mentorship can be described as "a process through which an experienced person (mentor) guides another (mentee) in developing skills and knowledge for their professional development" (Burgess, van Diggele & Mellis, 2018: 198). The formal concept of mentoring has gained prominence over the past two decades within the fields of health, education and training, business management, and psychology (Burgess et al., 2018; Underhill, 2006). Today, many consider mentoring as an essential step in personal and professional development.

Despite the growing interest in mentorship within the field of sport, there is still a lack of depth on mentorship in sport (Lefebvre, Bloom & Loughead, 2020; Malanga, 2018) with empirical evidence primarily focusing on the development of the coach (Lefebvre et al., 2020). Coaches have reported that mentorship was a crucial aspect of coaching and highlighted the need for formal mentoring programmes within coach education (Cruz, 2017). Sports mentoring can also serve as a tool for life skills development; this is used to better both sports relationships and the structure of a one-on-one relationship (Choi, Park, Jo & Lee, 2015). Coaches are therefore encouraged to develop a holistic approach and to optimise the entire environment around the mentee (Henriksen, Storm, Kuettel, Linnér & Stambulova, 2020).

Athletes, who are involved in talent development programmes, are considered to have the potential to reach the highest standard in their sport. However, there is no guarantee that they will progress to the professional level (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015). The care and wellness of the athlete, training specificity, and finding a holistic balance between academic life, sport, culture, social life, and time management all influence an athlete's progress (Henriksen et al., 2020). These socio-emotional factors play a critical part in athletic development and progression and are often also overlooked concepts.

Literature on mentoring in sports has largely been related to focusing on the role of the coach. The coach plays a pivotal role in the sportsperson's career, and there has been an increase in research publications on mentoring in coaches in recent years (Cruz, 2017; Schempp, Elliott, McCullik, Laplaca & Berger, 2016; White et al., 2017). Although the roles of coaches and mentors can overlap, a coach primarily focuses on teaching aimed at skill development to improve performance whereas a mentor's role is to holistically develop the mentee (White et al., 2017).

In the sport of cricket, mentorship is particularly crucial because of the large psychological component of the game (Woolmer, Noakes, & Moffett, 2008). The integration of personal life and well-being is important in this holistic development (Bozionelos, Bozionelos, Polychroniou, & Kostopoulos, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that the most important roles that have been described for athlete coaches are: friend, acceptor, role model, challenger, supporter, problem solver, teacher, and guide (Ali & Panther, 2008; Pearson, 2017; Schempp et al., 2016; White, Schempp, McCullik, Berger, & Elliott, 2017). Mentors were also identified as a key component of the support network of cricket players, acting as enablers for a successful cricketing career (Dove, Draper, Taliép & Gray, 2016).

Many school-age cricketers play competitive cricket; however, only a small minority of them progress to the professional level. While this is partly due to the demanding competitive environment in elite and professional sports, there is concern about why some of those who achieve age-group recognition do not progress to a higher level of play at the senior provincial or national level. While there is expectedly a natural bottleneck of cricketers aiming to enter limited opportunities at the senior professional level, there may be other reasons for these non-progressions. This study proposes that one of these reasons could be the lack of mentorship during this period.

Despite the importance of mentorship in sport, there have been no published studies reporting on the mentor-mentee relationship during the successful or unsuccessful transition from elite youth to the senior professional arena. We, therefore, proposed to investigate the role of mentorship in the transition from elite youth sports to a senior professional level in the sport of cricket. More specifically, the study aimed to identify the role of mentorship in the progression from under 19 cricketers (national level) into senior professional (franchise) cricket in South Africa. Furthermore, it aimed to determine if there is a difference in mentorship experienced by those that progressed and those that did not.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to indicate how a study was conducted to address these aims, in order to provide a contextual understanding of mentorship within the career progression of

elite athletes. This understanding is envisaged to benefit coaches and athletes in terms of their professional development. The paper begins with a review of mentorship literature, highlighting the role of mentorship within career progression, youth development and the context of cricket in South Africa. This is followed by an explanation of the qualitative methodology adopted for the study. The findings of the study are set out according to the key themes emerging from the analysis of the interview data. A discussion integrates these findings in relation to the contemporary mentorship literature in order to identify the key aspects influencing career progression of professional cricketers in South Africa. The conclusion summarises the key findings and proposes the applicability and relevance of the study to other sectors.

Literature Review

A mentor can be defined as "a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher" (Raisbeck, 2012: 52). Raisbeck (2012: 52) provides a useful clarification of mentorship on the "helping skills continuum". This distinguishes mentoring from other helping skills, such as advising, instructing or counselling, by acknowledging that mentoring is a "professional" and "enabling" helping skill. Mentorship may occur informally or through formal programmes within an institution. While formal mentorship programmes have featured in most mentorship assessments, the value of informal mentorship is also acknowledged. For example, James, Rayner, and Bruno (2015) suggested that informal mentorship is considered valuable and more widely accessible to mentees than formal mentorship.

Successful mentoring relationships or programmes are well documented, and the benefits are wide-ranging. Burgess et al. (2018) highlighted that mentorship programmes create benefits for not only the mentee but also for the mentor and the mentee's organisation. For the mentee, benefits could include: improved social-emotional, cognitive, and identity-related developments; improved working capability, decision making; and physical health (Darwin, 2000; Du Bois & Silverthorn, 2005; Raisbeck, 2012; Rhodes & Du Bois, 2008). Burgess et al. (2018) proposed benefits for the mentor as personal fulfilment, recognition, assistance, potential reward, or career advancement. They also proposed benefits for the organisation as increased work performance; professional development of employees; accelerated training; and retention and distribution of organisational knowledge.

Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2007) categorised mentoring research into three main areas of scholarship, namely: youth; academic; and career mentoring. Youth mentoring relationships involve guidance, instruction, and encouragement of adults for younger mentees, with a focus on competence and character development. Academic mentoring focuses on the impartation of academic and non-academic knowledge, support, and guidance by a faculty member for a student. Career mentoring, which is most relevant to this study, focuses on the professional and personal career development of mentees in the workplace. Bozeman and Feeney (2007: 721) further defined career mentoring as a "process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development".

Theoretical framework

There are no theoretical frameworks that describe sports mentoring. For this paper we have chosen to utilise Kram's (1985) "Mentor-Role Theory". This theory describes the two main functions of the mentor-mentee relationship. The first is the career function which relates to career advancement. Here, the mentor guides the mentee to reach a high level of achievement. The career function relates to coaching, sponsoring the advancement of the mentee, increasing positive exposure and visibility, offering protection, and creating challenging assignments. The second function described by the mentor-role theory is psychosocial, where the mentor assists in personal growth and well-being (Kram, 1985). The mentor acts as a role model, supports, builds trust, solves problems, and develops friendships.

In a sporting context, both career and psychological function play a pivotal role in the mentor-mentee relationship (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2016). Firstly, concerning career function, coach-facilitated training is paramount to skill development in sports (Woolmer et al., 2008; Ericsson, 2020). Sponsorship is important as sports persons require appropriate training and competition resources (Baker, Côté & Abernethy, 2003). The mentor also promotes positive exposure and visibility of the mentee. This provides the opportunity to perform in competitions and nurture relations with the media and the mentee's fan base. A mentor often provides protection from adversity for the mentee. Finally, to progress, a player should be regularly placed in challenging environments where they can adapt their skills to improve their sporting performance (Wood et al., 2020).

The psychological function of mentors is firstly highlighted in the need for sporting role models (Dove et al., 2016). Secondly, mutual trust in the mentor-mentee relationship is paramount in developing confidence (Hudson, 2016). Thirdly, counselling provides an important layer of support in conflict situations which are common in a team sporting environment. Finally, the development of friendships through mentor-mentee engagement has been reported in sports-related studies (Choi et al. 2015).

Youth and career mentoring in sport

Mentorship can be considered a means of progression in a profession, and mentors fulfil a specific role for the mentee to achieve their set goals (Nora & Crisp, 2007). A key stage in sport is the progression from the elite youth to the elite professional stage as many players will drop out because of the natural bottleneck at the senior elite level. Youth who received mentorship were found to have a higher outcome in education and work, mental well-being, and behaviour (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Mentorship was reported to be influential in supporting youth towards bridging the gap between youth and the professional arena (Dove et al., 2016; Dove, Gray, Taliep, & Draper, 2021). Participation in a sports-specific mentoring programme has also shown improved physical activity, sports skills, confidence, connectedness, self-management, and growth skills (Choi et al., 2015).

Psychological support has been highlighted as crucial for the development of an athlete to reach a high level (Dove et al., 2016; Dove et al., 2021; Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2016; Park et al., 2017). Inspirational motivation is fundamental in this psychological mentoring (Hoffmann & Loughhead, 2016). A mentor can address these psychological challenges experienced by athletes at the upper sporting level (Robinson, 2014). This ultimately assists with their progression to the professional ranks.

Mentorship in cricket in South Africa

The sport of cricket has a large skill and psychological component (Woolmer et al., 2008) and mentoring are essential for player development (Dove et al., 2016; Holmes, 2016; Nolan & Dixon, 2001). Nolan and Dixon (2001) found that structured mentoring was an effective way to create an organizational culture by helping young cricketers reach their personal and professional potential. The mentoring programme also met individual needs and increased ethnic and gender diversity. There are programmes in South Africa that aim to holistically develop cricketers (Dove et al., 2016). These support programmes could be in the form of professional provincial and national academies or organisations like the South African Cricketers' Association (SACA). SACA's aims at attending to the needs of the player by offering off-field support relating to their personal development, financial stability, and education. Sports academies aim at developing the player through sport-specific skill development and informal mentoring.

In South Africa, the legacy of Apartheid has resulted in a national divide based on ethnicity, with the Black population being largely disadvantaged. The "Target" or "Quota" policy was one mechanism

introduced by sporting federations to redress these disadvantages (Dove et al., 2021). This policy specifies a minimum number of Black players that should be in a team. This policy aims at providing opportunities for Black players, who were previously disadvantaged. However, because players are either included or excluded from the team because of their ethnicity, many uneasy questions are expressed by players (Dove et al., 2021). Adequate support for these players to deal with the psychological effects of the policy is crucial for their well-being. Furthermore, players and administrators expressed their concerns for players from previously disadvantaged communities who have added financial, social, and logistical pressures (Dove et al., 2016).

Methodology

From the review of the mentorship literature, it is apparent that the field is maturing in terms of its ontology and epistemology. From what could be described as a positivist hegemony, rooted within economic or business management studies, today it includes a more heterogeneous range of methodologies, methods and techniques across diverse fields, such as sport. This study adopted a qualitative paradigm to gain an in-depth and holistic perspective of the mentoring experiences of cricketers in their career progression and development. Qualitative methods utilise various data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, and focus groups to explore and understand the meaning of the participants' views and motivations (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). A strength of qualitative studies is that it can help the researcher understand the environment of the cultural group by interacting closely with the population being studied (Farber, 2006).

This study selected in-depth interviews to collect the data. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample. This ensures that both cricketers that had progressed (classified as "successful") who played more than 20 games at a professional level and those that did not progress (classified as "unsuccessful") that did not play more than 5 games (all formats) at a professional level were included, as well as ensuring that distribution of age/ experience, as well as diversity, was covered (Table 1). A total of 15 participants were identified to take part in a semi-structured interview; nine "successful" and six "unsuccessful". A variety of participants were interviewed from professional cricketers, retired cricketers, and current club cricketers. The cricketers selected all represented South Africa at the under-19 level between 2000 and 2016.

As the interview progressed and the themes emerged, it was seen that the sample size was adequate, as the same themes were arising from both successful and unsuccessful cricketers, thus reaching saturation.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

	SA U19 Year	Age (years)	Successful/ Unsuccessful	Professional matches played
1	2008	31	Successful	57
2	2008	31	Successful	103
3	2007	32	Successful	54
4	2000	36	Successful	40
5	2000	36	Successful	39
6	2016	22	Successful	72
7	2008	31	Successful	243
8	2013	24	Successful	54
9	2003	34	Successful	365
10	2006	32	Unsuccessful	0
11	2004	34	Unsuccessful	5
12	2010	27	Unsuccessful	0
13	2000	35	Unsuccessful	0
14	2011	26	Unsuccessful	0
15	2016	22	Unsuccessful	0

A semi-structured interview guide was used, consisting of demographic and open-ended questions related to mentorship and career progression. The semi-structured nature assisted the interviewer to probe and clarify any issues raised and to explore the respondents' understanding of and specific experiences relating to mentoring, as well as a self-assessment of their career progression and the role of mentorship therein.

Questions about demographic information and general career development were asked first, to ensure the correct screening and selection process of the respondent and to build rapport and trust with the participant. Questions relating to mentorship understanding and experiences were based on the participant's perceptions, such as: "In your own words, describe what you believe a mentor to be"; "Have you had someone you consider to be a mentor in your life or cricket development?"; "Who do you consider to have been a mentor?"; "What roles did your mentor fulfil?".

Probing questions were asked about the roles of family members, coaches, and senior players as well as formal mentorship programmes. Questions relating to the cricketer's self-assessment of their career progression included: "Describe any programs that you were part of that assisted you with your overall cricket progression and development"; "Were there any barriers that hindered you from progressing and developing in your cricket career?"; "Did you have any setbacks and disappointments and if so, how did you deal with them?". Despite allowing the participant to talk freely, the researcher used these questions to keep the conversation focused and ensure that all key topics were covered during the interview.

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and the data from each interviewee remained anonymous. Permission to be interviewed was requested through email, and all participants signed consent letters, agreeing to participate in the study. The interviews were captured on a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. Ethical clearance for the study was granted from the authors' institution of higher education.

Table 2: Development of codes

Code family	Individual codes
Mentorship for cricketers:	Describing a mentor Roles fulfilled by mentors Attributes of a good mentor The role of coaches and senior players Mentorship as a component of performance
Factors influencing career progression and development:	<i>Internal factors:</i> Life skills development Handling setbacks or disappointments Finding life balance Expectations & experiences of the professional environment Handling pressure <i>External factors:</i> Barriers to progression Beneficial development programmes Other external attributes

Data was coded using ATLAS.ti, a statistical software package. The researcher took notes during all the interviews. After listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts, the researcher started the first step in the analysis, which involved coding the texts. The interviewees were labelled from 1 to 15 and when respondents mentioned a person's name or province, it was replaced in square brackets with an adjective e.g. [coach], or a pronoun e.g. [province].

Findings

This section details the findings of the study, set out according to the key emergent themes from the interview analysis: All players (successful and unsuccessful) interviewed in this study identified that a mentor had played a role in their cricket progression. This role was at different stages in their progression, starting at school level cricket and going right through to the National team. While no

participants had formal mentorship, all participants claimed to have experienced various mentors throughout their careers and after playing in the U19 SA youth team. The mentoring had various time frames, with no set periods, and was different for each player at their different progression levels. These mentors were most often coaches, family members, senior players, or teachers.

Describing a mentor and the role of mentors

All participants indicated a good understanding and familiarity with the concept of mentorship and mentors. They offered many similar descriptions of a mentor. Participants highlighted that they needed to "trust" a mentor; someone they can be "open and honest" with; and that a mentor must be someone who "guides" or "develops" them in not only aspects of cricket playing but also life in general. This suggests that a mentor is seen as playing a role in the holistic development of a cricketer. The following quotes are indicative of this assessment:

I think a mentor is someone who you can trust enough to guide you in the right way or with the right information that is needed.

The mentor is someone who believes in you and can guide you with life lessons.

A mentor allows for communication both ways and an open and transparent relationship.

A mentor needs to develop you holistically, which encompasses aspects beyond cricket.

Interestingly, respondents indicated that a mentor did not necessarily even have to be particularly familiar to cricket, as the following quotation indicates:

I have people outside of cricket that I trust as mentors. He doesn't actually understand cricket, just sort of has a general understanding of professional sport, and we speak about life and career decisions and stuff like that.

Mentors assisted developing their life skills, and mental aspects and offering non-sporting advice, and when mentors were also coaches, they further assisted with the technical side of the sport. Examples were given of mentors assisting with goal setting; character building; and mental well-being. Mentors should also help the cricketer "understand themselves" and "explain the road ahead". The following quotation indicates this broader perspective of mentors, beyond sports achievement:

I would chat with him and get advice from him, and life in general, and I have always thought of cricket as a reflection of life and all the cricket advice he had given me, which I can apply to my life.

I think the one thing about my mentor is that when we chatted, I often felt relaxed, and his message to me was always to wherever you go, you should add value to the system, wherever it may be, on the field or in the change room. He always inspired me to help others grow, and I am a firm believer in mentorship in cricket.

Perceived attributes of a "good" mentor

The respondents described similar attributes that they expected from a "good" mentor. Interestingly, these combined the personal characteristics of mentors as well as the perceived way the cricketer related to the mentor. The characteristics of a good mentor included: having good people skills; being passionate; being approachable; being trustworthy and honest. The respondents also mention how they experienced good mentors as demonstrating the following: "care" and "interest" in the cricketer; being supportive or "loyal" to the cricketer; having confidence in the ability of the

cricketer, and having the ability to "get the best out of the player". This last aspect highlights a perceived link between mentorship and perceived impact on sports performance and career progression. The following quotations are indicative of the expectations of a good mentor:

Two things that I could tell, they were genuinely interested in my development, and they wanted the best for me.

I think someone who knows you. Honest, but, I think, caring at the same time. I think there's got to be a caring effect because mentors are there to help you understand yourself and understand how things work and not just [be] there to say you're doing this wrong, but explaining why it's wrong.

The role of coaches and senior players as mentors

All participants indicated that they had more than one coach and several senior players who acted as mentors and played a significant role in their professional development. Familiar roles played by several coaches were highlighted as their "man-management skills", being able to "get the best out of a player", being "honest", and getting players to levels that they thought they couldn't reach. Several players also found senior players helped observe their preparation methods and how they went about their match day routine. Several of these participants mentioned that their coaches and senior players were often considered mentors and played a significant role in their progression and development.

Somebody I look up to today is still a very good friend, probably the best captain and leader that I've ever played under, and he was fantastic. He was a player that understood his game and seeing how meticulous he was in his preparation was good to see.

[The captain] was nearing the end of his career, a very good captain, good player, good leader, and he was a good mentor that I learned a lot from him about playing professional cricket.

An interesting observation from a successful participant, who played professional cricket for 15 years in South Africa, confirmed how important mentorship is to accelerate the players' growth. He expressed a concern that players like him, who played at a professional level for an extended period, are not being effectively utilised as mentors.

Mentorship is so important. It just speeds up your learning and assists you with avoiding making mistakes. I don't think they're getting the right mentorship at the under 19 level now. For me, that's where the problems are for Cricket South Africa and with all unions. I finished my playing career two years ago and ... guys like me really should be kept in the system.

Mentorship as a component of future performance

Every interviewee felt that mentorship is a critical component in future cricket performance. Participants emphasized that this is especially relevant for cricket, which they described as one of the toughest sports from a pressure and psychological perspective. An unsuccessful respondent felt that this is where mentorship plays a significant role in a player's development, by giving direction on how to deal with these pressures and psychologically demanding situations. This is represented in the following quotation that also emphasizes the mental demands of cricket:

Of course, remember we're not just talking about any game here. Cricket is the most difficult game, and there is so much pressure.

The respondents also highlighted the importance of soft skills development that mentors assist with, such as reassurance, character development, accelerating personal growth, learning, and

career planning. Mentors assisting with "handling pressure" was also a key aspect mentioned by respondents. The following quotations are indicative of the perceived link between mentorship and sports performance and career progression:

Mentorship accelerates your path towards growth and your path towards where you want to be and often when you sit back and listen and learn from other people's mistakes and try and miss those pitfalls.

You need one [mentor] not just from a cricket side, but for life in general... for things like diet and the academic side, to just guide them and expose them to different aspects of the world.

Factors influencing career progression and development

Life skills

All participants were asked which life skills they felt were the most important to develop as a cricketer. Participants identified "determination", "work ethic", "listening", "being coachable", "patience", and "self-belief". This question was essential to understanding the participants' life skills that were important to develop as a cricketer. While the participants have similar life skills, it was interesting to know which life skills their mentors helped them develop.

[Coach] but more from a lifestyle point of view, you know, he would instil as a cricket coach a lot of life skills, and that you don't only use from a cricketing perspective when you know, punctuality, appearance, all those things that are just general life skills. But you can use them on a cricket field.

... when we chatted, I often felt relaxed, and his message to me was always that wherever you go, you should add value to the system, wherever it may be, on the field or in the change room. He always inspired me to help others grow. I am a firm believer in mentorship in cricket.

One successful participant, who played international cricket, felt that dealing with success and failure and communicating with your coaches and mentors about your development is critical. An interesting observation from one participant from the successful group, and one participant from the unsuccessful group, was that they both felt that dealing with, understanding, and respecting different cultures was vital. This is an indication of the unique South African context that features a highly unequal and diverse society.

I think as a player, you need to learn to play with other individual players and have an understanding of the different cultures and how they approach things, because my background is very different.

Barriers to progression

It was important to identify what the barriers to the progression of the unsuccessful players were and if the lack of mentoring played a role. None of the unsuccessful respondents mentioned a lack of mentorship as a barrier hindering their progression. The barriers to progression were mainly; factors relating to culture, family and environmental conditions, injuries, and the quota system. One unsuccessful participant felt that not having his family watch him play matches limited him the opportunity to interact with family regarding his cricket. He felt isolated from the sport when he returned home. The following quote provides insight into the lack of family support:

I think family plays a big role. Ever since I started playing cricket, I don't remember having my brothers or my mother or my sisters or my father coming to watch one of my games.

Another participant felt that the township (suburb formally officially designated for Black occupation by Apartheid legislation and composed of predominately informal settlements) environment that he lived in, was not conducive to promoting holistic development. The following quotations indicate the inequality of South African society and its impact on player development.

So, I think obviously coming from a township is one of the barriers. The education is so different in the township and a lot of things like skill sets aren't taught and then you go to schools like [a top school in SA] where they broaden your mindset.

Both successful and unsuccessful cricketers mentioned the lack of family support and not having someone to speak to during the challenging times in their careers, which sometimes led to a lack of self-belief. One successful participant mentioned that because his family was not particularly interested in sport and sport was not regarded as a career path, he did not have anyone to talk to whenever he had disappointments, and this was particularly hard on his development as a cricketer.

Another common barrier to players not progressing to the professional arena was injuries. While injuries and the loss of form are part of the game, one successful participant felt the pressure of losing his contract after he got injured. Injuries were a factor that the participants described as a barrier that hindered their progression and development. The following quotation of an unsuccessful player highlights the effect repetitive injuries can have on the progression to professional sport:

My stress fracture in [final school year] - I thought that was like the end of my career. It happened again as soon as I got into franchise cricket. I played the first franchise game and then got an injury that kept me out for another 6-weeks.

A successful participant also describes the anxiety over injury and the perceived lack of support from the coach when the injury negatively affected his performance:

I really struggled the first half of the season (because of an injury), so I knew I was going to lose my contract, but the worst thing was it was almost like I was neglected. I wasn't invited to practice, or the coach never called me the whole season. So, I think that is just kind of really tough to deal with, especially as a 22 or 23 year old.

Another theme that emerged was the ethnic barriers and legislation around the quota system in cricket. The quota system in South African sports was highlighted as a barrier by some White players. The players mentioned that the quota system provides an opportunity for non-White players to be selected and provided professional contracts, often at the expense of good White players. Contrary to this, the quota system was also seen as detrimental to the self-belief of non-White players, who were perceived to be advantaged by the system. The following quote provides insight into the effects of being labelled and favoured by the quota system as a non-White player:

I think I did well and had the confidence. But, being labelled as a player of colour, which I never thought I was, really got me down because I always felt that I was good enough to play. When that got mentioned, it killed my confidence, because I never thought that before. I started doubting my ability. I struggled for a couple of years, and it was something I tried to work on, but I grew up and had no one to speak to about this kind of stuff.

This quotation also points to the perceived need for better mentoring or a mentor that can relate to ethnic challenges experienced by the players, even for those players who were successful.

An interesting reflection from both successful and unsuccessful players was that they felt that their years at school did not prepare them well enough for the professional environment. The following

quotation from an unsuccessful player highlights this gap between high school and the professional arena. It also suggests including another age group level between U19 and professional cricket.

I think the school system was good, and they put a lot of time into you. I think there is a big gap between schoolboy cricket and the next step, and if you have a bad run of games and go back and play club cricket, the pitches and opposition aren't great. You are expected to perform, and I think there should be a structure between school and the next level, maybe an under 23 ... setup. I think it's not great playing club cricket, and that's why people give up easily.

Beneficial athlete development programmes

Participants were asked what programmes they felt assisted their career development and what aspects of these programmes were beneficial to them. All participants were exposed to similar programmes throughout their school and adult cricket careers. However, while successful and unsuccessful participants went through similar school programmes, the successful participants experienced more adult cricket programmes than the unsuccessful participants. Several successful participants mentioned that their provincial academy training programmes and the South African National Academy had assisted them with their progression and development. The following quotes highlight the importance of the provincial and national academies on player development:

In my first two years out of school I went to the [Provincial] Academy, and it was helpful. We did a variety of things, a lot of gym work and skill work.

Yes, I think the National Academy and the [Franchise] environment was very competitive, and you had to go out of your comfort zone". My coach at the National Academy and who is my mentor still today played a big part in this programme.

Furthermore, participants felt that their coaches were vital in these programmes as they put their time and effort into assisting them to improve. All participants acknowledged that the coaches were responsible for taking their game to the next level although they were all talented. It was also worth noting that playing with more skilled players made them work harder and competing with stronger players encouraged competition.

Discussion

Mentorship for cricketers

The findings have highlighted the perceived importance of mentorship in general by cricketers. There was a strong statement of support for the role of mentorship in their personal and professional development. However, the findings did not reveal any obvious difference in the experience of mentorship between those players who successfully progressed to professional cricket compared to those who did not.

The cricketers mostly referred to informal mentorship, through roles such as close relatives, coaches, or senior players in their team. Some gave examples of structures and programmes that incorporated aspects of mentorship, but none gave clear examples of formal mentorship relationships or programmes at any stage in their development.

The perceived need for mentorship among cricketers is highlighted by the demands of the sport itself, which is viewed as one that requires considerable individual development and focuses on character development and maturity to meet the demands of this team sport. The positive

outcomes of successful mentoring relationships are related to aspects of social-emotional development, cognitive (problem-solving), and identity-related developments.

For the cricketers, it appeared that the role of mentors reflected all of the roles of “supporter”, “role model”, “problem-solver”, “teacher” and “guide”. However, there was an emphasis placed on the need for the mentor as a “supporter”. This was evident in examples of mentors that watched their matches and encouraged them when they felt discouraged. This also supports the findings of Dove (2016) who emphasized the need for mentors to provide emotional support critical for the progression of cricketers to the professional arena.

The cricketers also highlighted the role of a mentor as a “guide” as they valued communication on aspects of their development beyond sports performance. This would align with the assertion that the mentor merely guides the mentee in the right direction but does not give a detailed map to the mentee to achieve his or her set goals (Raisbeck, 2012). It also confirms the assertion that a mentor's behaviour and actions affect the mentee's response to the guidance given (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

Linked to this role of mentor as “guide” is the emphasis the cricketers placed on the need for holistic development, seen as key to a successful mentorship. The development of life skills was noted as particularly important to develop a well-rounded individual. This related to aspects beyond cricket performance as well as the emotional maturity to better understand and handle their development within the cricketing context. For example, the cricketers highlighted their need to cope with their success or failure. The South African context may have resulted in cricketers also mentioning the need to understand the diversity within their team contexts.

The findings indicate attributes of mentors that are especially sought after by the cricketers. In particular, the most critical attributes were: trustworthiness, transparency, and effective communication. Trustworthiness has previously been acknowledged as forming the foundation of the mentor/ mentee relationship (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Trust was a crucial aspect for the players, confirming the findings of Leck and Orser (2013) who claimed trust to be pivotal to the success of the mentoring relationship.

The cricketers indicated that the level of trust determined the degree of vulnerability they could have with their mentors. The cricketers appeared to base their trust on the degree of transparency in their relationship with the mentor. Interestingly, trust was not only attributed to the broader context of the mentorship relationship but also specifically to the technical aspects of cricket. With many coaches acting as mentors to the players, they indicated that they needed to trust in the technical ability of the coach.

Communication was highlighted when it came to setting goals during the guidance process and the two-way relationship between mentor and mentee was emphasized to promote this line of communication.

Factors influencing career progression and development

The mentorship literature considers mentorship as a means of progression in a profession, and that mentors fulfil a specific role for the mentee to achieve their set career progression goals. Although, as indicated, there was a strong statement of support for the role of mentorship in their personal and professional development, the findings did not reveal any clear evidence that mentorship made the difference in the career progression of the cricketers between those who successfully progressed and those who did not.

While the primary purpose of mentorship is to maximize success, the integration of personal life is as important (Bozionelos et al., 2014). This validates the participants' statements concerning the

important role that mentors play in their holistic development more than sporting achievement in itself. The athlete's care and wellness, training specificity, and finding a holistic balance between academic life, sport, culture, social life, and time management are understood to influence an athlete's progression. These socio-emotional factors play a critical role in athletic development and are often overlooked concepts of an athlete's progression.

The findings particularly highlighted the need for mentorship of young cricket players. The belief is that South Africa has an abundance of talent, but that players are often pushed to perform at high competitive levels at too early an age, which affects their progression and development detrimentally. Mentorship was therefore proposed by the respondents as critical in the players' performance, particularly for teenagers and young adults.

With all accounts of mentorship in the findings being of informal mentorship, the authors, therefore, support the conjecture of Dove et al., (2021) for more formal mentoring programmes among cricketers, especially given the diversity of cricket and life experiences among South African players.

The peculiarities and diversity of the South African society and sporting context heighten the need for mentorship. Respondents highlighted the challenges experienced by some who emerge from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to those who received more privileged and supported upbringings. In this context, mentorship can even take the role of family support, as this is often lacking among players that transition from township cricket to elite schools or academies. Mentors should also be aware that those from less privileged backgrounds may have received far less holistic development and life skills preparation to equip them for their new context.

The political environment of sport in South Africa is also a challenge for young cricketers to understand and adapt to in their career development. The quota system for players based on ethnic profiling was mentioned as having negative mental and emotional impacts for players of all race groups. While white players may feel overlooked or increased pressure to perform, players of colour also may feel either a lack of confidence in their ability or increased pressure to perform as a result of this system. The negative psychological effects of the quota system on cricketers in South Africa are documented in a paper by Dove et al. (2021). This is a crucial aspect of player development and career progression that certainly could be assisted through the mentorship of all young players.

Conclusion

The study aimed at identifying the role of mentorship in the progression from under 19 national team level into professional cricket and to determine if there is a difference in mentorship experienced by those that progressed compared to those that did not. The findings indicate that mentorship played an important role in their cricket career, irrespective of whether they progressed to the professional arena or not.

However, the findings of the study also provide a more nuanced understanding of mentorship in professional sports development and career progression, particularly within the unique context of sport and society in South Africa.

The study supports the mentorship literature in its identification of key roles and attributes of successful mentors. However, the role of "support" and "guide" was particularly highlighted among the cricket players, who emphasized the role of mentors in contributing to their holistic development, beyond just sporting success. Particularly illuminating is the finding that the cricketers do not necessarily look for a mentor to have a good understanding of cricket. This broadens the potential identification of mentors for professional athlete development.

The study affirms the literature that advocates for mentorship relationships based on trust, transparency, and communication. The experiences highlighted within this study also reveal the nature of the family environment as providing a form of mentorship. For those athletes that do not have a supportive family environment, alternative or formalized mentorship may be crucial.

The challenges within the uniquely South African society and sporting context also necessitate mentorship for mental and personal well-being, life skills and holistic development. Increased mentorship support may be required for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have had the types of informal mentorship relationships as those from more advantaged backgrounds. The context also highlights the need for a greater understanding of different players' backgrounds and cultures among the athletes, which could be achieved through mentors addressing this or opening dialogue with the athletes on this. Issues relating to the South African policy of an ethnic-based quota system similarly necessitate the need for mentorship communication among all race groups, as each one may be affected in different ways.

The study aligns with earlier theoretical work on mentorship. The findings could be extrapolated to other sport codes or possibly to successful career progression in other sectors beyond sport. However, the study clearly indicated how the uniquely South African context – its history, socio-economic and political development – has further influenced the need for mentorship.

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