

# THE ROLE OF COACHES IN IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING TALENT THROUGH CO-CURRICULAR SPORTS

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**Abstract:** Identity is an important part of an individual, especially a university student. However, how does a coach perceive those participating in co-curricular sports? Coaches are in the position to guide young athletes and contribute to the formation of their identity as varsity athletes. It is important for coaches to wholly observe them and support their participation. Any words said to young athletes will directly influence their self-perception and their ability to cope with the challenges in achieving victory. This research has two objectives: (i) to determine the extent of the coaches' role in the participation of varsity athletes; and (ii) to assess the perception of coaches toward co-curricular sports in Malaysian universities. The data were collected via questionnaires from 32 coaches. The findings indicated that, from the perspective of the coaches, the most important variable was the individual performance of varsity athletes ( $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), followed by talent development ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ). Identification and selection of talent was the least important variable ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). If a coach is confident with the potential of a student-athlete, he would continue to search for tournaments relevant to the latter's skills. If the student-athlete has displayed consistent performance, the coach would look for teams and coaches from whom the athletes can gain more knowledge and experience. However, the sole efforts of the coaches alone are not enough, so the varsity athletes themselves must possess strong interest, high commitment, and enduring discipline to persist with the sport of choice. These factors are indispensable for the success of varsity athletes.

**Keywords:** Coach, co-curricular sports, varsity athletes, talent development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sports as a co-curricular activity is typically identified as an important promoter of physical activity in institutions of higher learning (Hills et al., 2015). It complements formal education by simultaneously delivering social, emotional, academic, and physical health instructions. According to a recent survey, football and swimming are the most popular sports among youth, followed by cycling (male and female) and aerobics (female only) (Costa et al., 2015). It is important to identify the most common sports, as they are of varying intensities, energy requirement, and training time (Spark, 2018).

Co-curricular sports have an important place in society, influencing the self-perception and pride of an athlete. University may provide a platform to develop the talents of varsity athletes. The sporting identity is an inseparable attribute of a varsity athlete; it is a "persona" shaped by their achievements (Syarizal et al., 2015). The athlete identity forms an integral part of the personality of varsity athletes. They are driven by such factors as motivation and attitude to win every varsity tournament. Competition level and success offer specific momentum during this phase due to the complementarity between the student-athletes' performance-orientation and their socially formed athlete identity (Klein et al., 2020). The study explored the socialization process resulting from the interaction between agents of socialization, that is, coaches and athletes, within the environment of co-curricular sports in universities. It also discussed the milieu of the varsity athletes from which they drew their athletic values,

knowledge, and behavior (Coakley, 2006). Outside of this formal organization, coaches also influence the career relations and decisions of varsity athletes.

International and national universities have long recognized the importance of co-curricular sports in identifying and developing talent. However, the proportion of high-level athletes from local universities are much lower than their international counterparts (Mohd Yusoff, 2020). Some challenges identified by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) are the poor structure of co-curricular sports in universities. Wheeler (Wheeler, 2012) suggested that co-curricular sports facilities are more particular for student-athletes. For example, pétanque has received the attention of public universities since the past decade, but none of them, until today, have built an indoor court for the sport. Though its activities may outwardly seem relaxed, training cannot continue for an extended period as players have to play under the heat of the sun. New players, especially, are often deterred from continue playing for this issue. Prolonged exposure to the sun can also damage the health of the athletes.

On top of issues related to facilities, inadequate sponsorship and poor experience due to the late exposure to co-curricular sports are also evident in the Malaysian athletic ecosystem (Lee & Gallucci, 2013). For example, Muhammad Ashraf Haikal, a 22-year-old varsity table tennis athlete, have won several competitions as a representative of his university. Because of his records and talent, sponsors like University Malaya have committed to develop his talents by entering him in elite competitions.

Another obstacle facing school athletes is coursework. Most of them are admitted into the university through academic exceptions, which lower the opportunity for other students (Charles, 2011). Most institutes of higher learning emphasize that the main responsibility of student-athletes is studying. They also typically require them to pass at least 60% of the coursework to maintain their eligibility (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Based on the above discussion, this study confines its discussion on two objectives: (i) to determine the extent of the coaches' role in the participation of varsity athletes; and (ii) to assess the perception of coaches toward co-curricular sports in Malaysian universities.

## **II. Socialization Agent Theory**

Socialization is formed from the interaction between one's immediate environment, personal relations, and social institutions, where more formal socialization process occurs. The shift from and influence of informal milieu (home and its surroundings) to a more formal environment (school and university) are part of the socialization process that the individual must adapt to (Cumming et al., 2017). Psychosocial support is imperative during this phase (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013). At the institutional level, support systems in academic, psychological, and social aspects are indispensable in realizing an environment conducive for talent development (Höll & Burnett, 2014)(Kami et al., 2013). Varsity athletes require academic, counseling, and other such assistances, on top of athletic support, so that they can perform well as students and athletes (Syarizal et al., 2015).

Socialization agents and varsity athletes need academic support and sufficient resources from the university to complete the intensive training schedule of co-curricular sports. (Considering that a varsity athlete requires 10 years (or 10,000 hours) of continuous training to excel in his sport (Balyi, 1998)). The talent development timeframe requires efficient assimilation and unique behavior at various levels of involvement (Martindale et al., 2005)(Coté & Hay, 2002). Varsity athletes have to be aware of the demands of co-curricular sports to be successful. They should likewise be cognizant that they are in the beginning steps of becoming professionals, either within or without sports (Amenta et al., 2012). Socialization into and through co-curricular sports is also part of the learning and adaptation processes with the prevailing social and cultural system (Coakley, 2006)(Jennifer Plant, 2018). Socialization also influences varsity athletes to choose a career outside of the active network of co-curricular sports (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

Age and environment have a direct influence on the assimilation of roles and formation of identity of varsity athletes. At this young age, the participation of the opposite gender also influences the idealistic projection of becoming a varsity athlete (Diamond, 2005). Their identity is formed through participation, success, and failure in co-curricular sports. Only those varsity athletes who are able to uphold the norms and behaviors of a university student may realize their goals. A more pragmatic and critical attitude may develop from socialization, as it forms a fragment of a more complex learning process, where the discovered norms and values are implemented (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013).

Every individual is exposed to different values, norms, and activities of society due to the difference in social class, ethnicity, race, and gender (Gil et al., 2014). Role determination in distinct areas often demonstrates interrelated layers of experience and understanding, which found the identity formation of a varsity athlete (Boostani et al., 2016). Therefore, every person goes through a unique socialization process, as the dynamic society around him necessitates continual adaptation.

The socialization path of an individual is unique, as no one receives the same influence from another person, institution, or society (Austin, 2012). In a larger cultural group, individuals who conform to similar norms and values will form a sub-culture. Intergroup conflict may occur, especially between different generations who belong to dissimilar social worlds and exposed to contrasting influences, or received identical influences but in a dissimilar way (Lappi, 2018). Accordingly, this theory has been used to guide research and clarify concepts in examining the assumptions, rationale for the assumptions, and comprehension of data which otherwise provide little explanation beyond the parameters (Leonard & Sensiper, 2008).

### **III. Coaches**

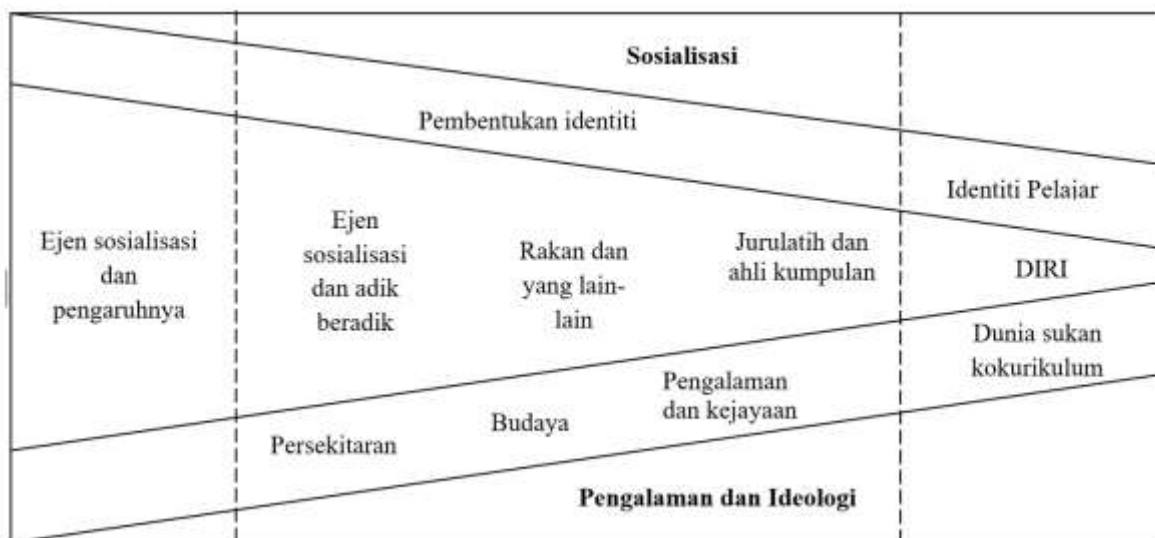
Coaches carry the role of socializing co-curricular sports to university students. This study focuses on their role in the development of interest and career of varsity athletes. Environment is an important factor in the socialization of varsity athletes. For example, the coach (as an agent of socialization) would typically distinguish between the sports activities of male and female. University students are thus socialized, according to gender roles, through social interaction, type of environment, and the way coaches interact with them (Adams et al., 2000). Access to material and financial resources depends on the socioeconomic status of the athlete's family; social class is determined by the level of education and occupation of parents. Nonetheless, co-curricular sports in universities do not require expensive equipment, and the club fees and training costs are affordable. Therefore, the family socioeconomic status will not influence the university student's access to co-curricular sports.

Prior research on social systems suggests that the active involvement and support of coaches toward varsity athletes will determine the extent of the latter's participation in co-curricular sports (Wuerth et al., 2004)(Roberts et al., 2019). Coaches are also perceived as those who facilitate the training of varsity athletes, as they carry out supportive duties such as accompanying and entering student-athletes in varsity competitions and ensuring their participation (Power, 2004). Being the facilitator of participation in co-curricular sports does not strictly cause them to act as "coaches of co-curricular sports". Only a small number of coaches are willing to play an important role in the careers of varsity athletes (Webb et al., 2016). Most successful varsity athletes usually have highly supportive coaches, especially at the start and midpoint of their careers (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017).

Bandura's social learning theory suggests that coaches, as socialization agents, are role models who are experienced in sports (Martin et al., 2014). They also have an active role in motivating university students to participate in co-curricular sports. Coaches must explain to the varsity athletes the appropriate behavior to display upon winning a match or tournament, and they must, as well, facilitate the participation of student-athletes in varsity competitions (Holt et al., 2011). The behavior and expectations of coaches could affect varsity athletes in the socialization of co-curricular sports. (Adamakis & Zounhia, 2016) identified five main issues in the interaction between coaches and varsity athletes: heavy emphasis on victory, placing unrealistic expectations, training varsity athletes alone, harsh criticism, and too much pampering. They added that varsity athletes who are strongly supported by coaches can cope better with career pressures. Some studies indicate that the technical and emotional support of coaches are important for young varsity athletes (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017)(Mason et al., 2009).

### **IV. Phases of Socialization**

Socialization is an interactive learning and social development process through which individuals can learn each other's culture and be familiarized with different values, attitudes, needs, and norms (Coakley, 2006). Accordingly, socialization of co-curricular sports is described as "a process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become acquainted with the social world we live in" (Coakley, 2015). The social learning theory (Grusec, 1992) posits that social agents (like parents, peers, lecturers, and coaches) strongly influence the personal development and experience of varsity athletes. Emotional, social, financial, or physical support given to the varsity athletes during their participation in co-curricular sports helps strengthen their motivation and goal orientation, in addition to positively or negatively influence them (Burnett et al., 2010). Figure 1 below illustrates the different influences of socialization agents on the experiences of varsity athletes throughout various stages of socialization, from the first introduction to sports until they become a serious commitment.



**Figure 1: Socialization model of varsity athlete identity (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011)**

Identity formation is an inherent part of the socialization process of varsity athletes. Whether consciously or not, they obtain a set of dispositions that orient them toward a particular understanding and interpretation of their role in the social world (Holl & Burnett, 2014). The most influential factors for the identity formation of varsity athletes in the construction and comprehension of their social world are the “self” and their own interpretation of their identity, success, and goals. Their perception of success forms their identity and pushes them to consider their carriers in co-curricular sports more seriously (Burnett et al., 2010)(Evans, 2004).

**V. Methodology**

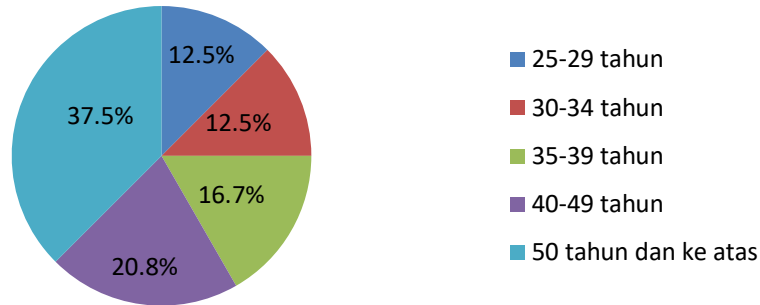
The study employed the quantitative approach, sampling 32 coaches aged 25-60 in University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), the youngest public university in Malaysia. Despite its limited sports facilities, it has consistently entered participants in varsity tournaments held by MOHE.

The questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument to ensure that the data reflected the role of coaches in forming varsity athlete identity in the area of co-curricular sports. According to Hayes (RYAN, 1992) and Kwak and Radler (Kwak & Radler, 2002), survey is used to introduce the subject of research to the respondents. All 32 coaches were asked to provide feedback for this pilot test. Every coach had the same chance of being selected as a respondent. The questionnaires were sent to and filled by the respondents and returned to the researchers in a span of two weeks in February 2020. The questionnaire is composed of six sections (Appendix 1): the first relates to the demographic profile of the respondents, while the second to sixth to the perception of coaches on talent identification and selection, talent development, agent of socialization, long-term development of varsity athletes, and individual performance. The sources of each items are also shown in Appendix 1. The items were measured on a six-point Likert scale, from highly disagree (1) to highly agree (6).

The collected data were analyzed descriptively as this study is still at the preliminary stage. The results were therefore confined to percentages, means, and standard deviations, which were then compiled into tables and figures.

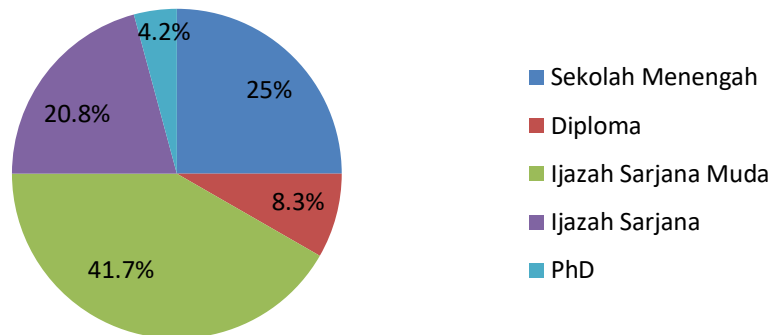
**VI. Research Findings**

Based on the returned questionnaires, around 75% of the respondents were male. Figure 2 shows the age distribution of the coaches. The majority (37.5%) were aged 50 and above, followed by 30-39 years old (29.2%). Varsity athletes are trained by coaches residing close to the university and holding a coaching certificate in a certain sport.



**Figure 2: Age distribution of respondents**

Figure 3 presents the distribution of educational attainment of the respondents. The sample was dominated by coaches who hold a bachelor’s degree (41.7%) and attained secondary education (25%). Obtaining a coaching certificate is quite difficult because it involves written and practical examinations, thus favoring those with higher education. Nonetheless, certified coaches usually have better understanding of the life of student-athletes, who must balance between practice and academic work. Typically, as well, the coaches themselves used to be student-athletes.



**Figure 3: Distribution of educational attainment of respondents**

Lastly, two-thirds of the coaches (66.7%) always accompanied the student-athletes in tournaments, while the rest only did so once every three competitions. The more frequent the coaches accompany the varsity athletes, the easier they can evaluate the latter’s performance in training and tournament. They can inform the student-athletes of any gaps in skills, and these can later be worked upon more effectively during training. If these weaknesses cannot be improved upon within a pre-determined period, the coach will relinquish his role to a more competent confrère.

The trustworthiness of an instrument can be assessed using Cronbach’s alpha of reliability. According to Hair (Hair et al., 2011), reliability is the consistency of feedback across time. Reliability analysis was carried out in this study to measure the inter-item consistency for each variable. The computed alphas were between 0.747 and 0.947, which are within the accepted threshold of reliability (Sullivan, 1992).

**Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, and variable rank**

Section	Variable	No. of items	Mean	Mean gap	SD	Rank
B.	Identification and selection of talent	10	4.8750	-1.1250	0.9858	5
C.	Talent development	34	5.0900	-0.9100	0.9111	2
D.	Socialization agent	38	4.9383	-1.0617	1.0563	4
E.	Long-term development of varsity athletes	24	5.0091	-0.9909	0.8388	3
F.	Individual performance	10	5.3531	-0.6469	0.7421	1

Descriptive statistics can provide a detailed analysis on the feedback of the respondents for the survey items (Rowley, 2014). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) regarding the perception of the respondents on the variables (identification and selection of talent, talent development, socialization agent, long-term development of varsity athletes, and individual performance). The means of the variables ranged between 4.87 and 5.35.

Individual performance was the most important variable, according to the coaches, for the participation of university students in co-curricular sports ( $M = 5.35, SD = 0.74$ ). Coaches give similar support and attention to exercising university students. Students with certain criteria, such as strong interest, good physical condition, searching for self-identity, and wide social network, are encouraged to participate in co-curricular sports. Looking at the educational background of the coaches, nearly half (41.7%) of them had bachelor’s degree. Better-educated coaches have more access to resources (e.g. coach, team, or sponsor). Such educational background can push coaches to improve the competitiveness and consistency of performance of the varsity athletes. Coaches offer the freedom to varsity athletes to choose and succeed in their preferred co-curricular sports. They believe that the student-athletes will best exposed to their environment if they seriously participate in the sports. For example, if they train in the rain, the student-athletes believe that the coaches can offer appropriate guidance to overcome the challenges of representing their university. Sponsors usually will assess talent based on the consistency of performance in several varsity tournaments. The sponsorship packages also differ in scope, some only cover sporting equipment, or sporting equipment and coach, or full sponsorship, including allowance to participate in tournaments. The consistent top performance from the student-athlete may earn him a more comprehensive sponsorship, including victory incentives and monthly allowance. It should therefore be a strong motivation for him to remain competitive.

About two-thirds of the surveyed coaches accompanied the student-athletes in varsity tournaments to observe the environment of the venue (for example, the loudness, heat, and condition of the field/court); to observe how the student-athletes perform under pressure; and to determine the appropriate timing to assign the athletes to a coach who is more knowledgeable of tournament affairs. The second most important variable was talent development ( $M = 5.1, SD = 0.91$ ), while the variable ranked last was identification and selection of talents ( $M = 4.87, SD = 0.98$ ). Coaches will give equal opportunity to university students who are interested to participate in co-curricular sports. The role of coaches in universities are more inclined toward the development of soft skills, educating on a particular sport, and facilitating matters related to tournament participation. If the coaches managed to identify a talented student-athlete, he would be given intensive training to allow him to climb to the next level.

The common practice in Malaysia is to scout talents for co-curricular sports from the mid-teenage years. At this age, coaches are more confident that the student-athletes can compete in the sport of choice. Varsity athletes and their coaches can also engage in a two-way feedback regarding equipment, skill, and playing style.

**VII. Conclusion**

This study discussed several points regarding the perception of coaches as an agent of socialization for co-curricular sports in Malaysian universities. The findings suggest that the demographic profile of the coaches

influences the individual performance of student-athletes. This is consistent with the findings of Pankhurst (2014) (Pankhurst, 2014). The endeavors of the coaches enable university students to become successful student-athletes. Similarly, Webb et al. (2016) found that coaches play a significant role in the success of varsity athletes (Webb et al., 2016). However, the sole involvement of coaches is not enough to elevate the varsity athletes to a much higher level of co-curricular sports. Other social agents, such as parents, lecturers, and peers, also bear the responsibility to help the student-athletes to remain highly focused for an extended period. This integration encourages the expansion of socialization that supports the dynamic experience and ideology of representing the university.

As future varsity athletes, university students also have the responsibility to self-develop, complementing their current knowledge and experience with better skills. They should also consider the fact that being full-time professional athletes can earn them a substantial income, just like their sporting heroes. Additionally, they could also become a subject-matter expert in sports development at the national and international levels.

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