Self-regulation of learning and the performance level of youth soccer players
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Summary

The current thesis investigated the relationship between self-regulation of learning and performance level among youth soccer players. Self-regulated learning has been suggested to help individuals learn more effectively (Zimmerman, 2006). It implies that players must know what aspects to improve and how to do so, that they must be motivated to improve, and that they must act accordingly. As the time to reach the top in soccer is limited, effective learning may be an important factor to consider in the development of promising soccer players. By self-regulating their learning well, youth soccer players may be better able to get the maximum out of their potential.

In Chapter 1, the definition of talent is briefly discussed and a view of the possible role of self-regulated learning in soccer talent identification and -development processes is presented. It is suggested that the definition of talent has been overly simplified and it is argued that more sophisticated approaches to talent identification and -development are needed. Acknowledging the complexity of the talent development process may lead to approaches, in which fewer potential professional soccer players get overlooked. Self-regulation of learning may be an important factor to consider in talent identification and -development, because its focus is on development potential (players’ capacity to improve). Since the discrete performance measures used in current talent identification and -development systems only provide limited information about players’ development potential, it is suggested that variables such as self-regulated learning may yield valuable additional information in this respect.

Chapter 2 investigated the reliability and validity of the Self-Regulation Scale (SRS) among adolescents aged 11 to 17 years. The SRS was composed on the basis of Zimmerman’s theory of self-regulated learning and set out to measure self-regulation of learning as a relatively stable individual feature. The instrument contained the subscales of planning, self-monitoring, evaluation, reflection, effort, and self-efficacy. The study provided support for the reliability as well as the content and construct validity of the instrument.

In Chapter 3, the level of academic achievement of elite youth soccer players and regular students was compared to investigate whether the stereotype of youth soccer players performing poor at school actually holds. Self-assessed self-regulated learning scores were examined, as it was assumed that self-regulation of learning processes may underlie attainment in both sport and academia. Results indicated that elite youth soccer players attend higher levels of academic achievement than regular youth. It was also shown that elite youth soccer players obtained higher self-assessed scores on the self-regulation aspects of self-monitoring, evaluation, reflection, and effort, which is in accordance with the results of Chapter 4 in the present thesis.

Chapter 4 examined the relationship between self-regulation of learning and
performance level of elite and non-elite youth soccer players. Results revealed that elite players tended to score higher on each self-regulation aspect than non-elite players. When tested for significance, the aspects of reflection and effort appeared to be associated with performance level. A higher score on these aspects indicated a greater chance of players belonging to the group of elite players (OR = 5.48 and 7.73, respectively). What youth soccer players derive from practice and competition seems at least as important as the number of practice hours.

Chapter 5 examined the relationship between self-regulated learning and performance level within a group of elite youth soccer players. As relative age may affect this relationship through its association with maturation, experience, and performance level, relative age was included as a possible confounder. Performance levels of international and national level players were compared. The amount of practice and competition of both groups was comparable. The logistic regression analysis revealed that higher reflection scores were associated with a greater chance that players belonged to the international level group (OR = 1.69). Results also indicated that a relative age effect was present in both groups, and that the relative age effect was stronger among international level players. Relative age did not affect the relationship between reflection and performance level. Given that international level players scored higher on reflection, irrespective of their relative age, it is speculated that in talent identification procedures it may be more informative to use variables associated with development potential rather than only discrete performance measures. The equal amounts of practice and competition combined with the differences in reflection scores suggest that reflective thinking enables international level players to benefit more from practice than national level players.

Chapter 6 aimed at measuring behavioral correlates of self-regulation in elite youth soccer players. First, behavioral items regarded as indicative of good and poor self-regulation were identified by interviewing six expert youth soccer coaches. The expert coaches associated the behavioral items with several metacognitive and motivational aspects, and mostly mentioned verbal approach behaviors, coaching of teammates, and behaviors referring to focused practice as expressions of self-regulation of learning. Second, the behaviors mentioned by the coaches were observed using video-taped practice sessions of elite youth soccer players. Third, players completed the SRS which measures self-regulation of learning. The SRS scores were combined with behavioral observation in order to describe behavioral correlates of self-regulation. Self-regulation of learning as reported by the players seemed to be associated with behaviors that referred to providing and receiving information, and focused practice. Results also showed that coaches’ and players’ perspectives on self-regulated learning differ. In short, self-regulation of learning appeared to be reflected in behaviors that refer to taking responsibility for learning. The study indicated that the practice environment (i.e., coaches, teammates) should be taken into account when investigating youth soccer players’ self-regulated learning processes. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of measuring overt behavior to gain a complete impression of players’ self-regulated learning processes.
In Chapter 7, it is concluded that self-regulation of learning distinguishes between performance levels of youth soccer players and is reflected in behaviors that refer to taking responsibility for learning. Although the thesis provides indirect evidence, self-regulation of learning may be a key factor in players’ development towards their full potential. Reflection in particular seems to make a difference. Given its relationship with development potential, self-regulated learning may provide valuable information in addition to the discrete performance measures that are currently being used in soccer talent identification and –development systems.

Findings of the current thesis show that youth soccer players and coaches should focus on identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and to set goals accordingly in order to make progression. It was also shown that interpretations of self-regulation behavior may differ between coaches and players. This indicates that, in order to correctly interpret players’ behavior, coaches should make sure that they get to know their players, so that they can adjust their feedback to players’ needs and create a learning environment that encourages players to be proactive. Furthermore, elite youth soccer seems to inherit two kinds of goals: making progression and getting selected. Therefore, players may show several behaviors because they are aware that the coach appreciates these. Coaches and practitioners should be aware that players may pursue different sets of goals.