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“All They Have Seen is a Model for Failure:” Stakeholder’s Perspectives on Athletic Talent Development in American Underserved Communities

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Abstract

This study explores the primary challenges faced and strategies implemented in underserved athletic talent development environments (UATDEs) in the United States and examines how developing within such environments impacts athletes once they reach the college and professional levels of sports. Thirteen stakeholders (M = 10, F = 3), who had significant experience working with professional and youth athletes from underserved communities, participated in the study. Unstructured interviews lasting slightly over an hour (M = 74 minutes) were analyzed using the principles of reflexive thematic analysis and the process uncovered two categories: shared features of school-based UATDEs in the United States and the ripple effects of trauma which were used to structure the findings. Within these two categories, primary themes were presented relating to the challenges observed and strategies implemented to overcome these obstacles in UATDEs as well as how developing within a UATDE can influence an athlete upon leaving the environment. The study found that stakeholders (i.e., administrators, coaches, etc.) who work within UATDEs must be aware of the inherent challenges that the environment creates and how to best support the athletes who require increased psychosocial developmental attention. Further, the same stakeholders also need to be supported in their work. Finally, when athletes from UATDEs leave the environment, stress inducing traumatic events of their formative years may stay with them requiring that stakeholders at the university and professional levels provide support to those that need it as talent can suffer from trauma.

Keywords: socioeconomic status; elite sport; athletic career; holistic ecological approach; underserved athletic talent development environment
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1 Lay Summary
2 This study explored the perceptions of stakeholders who work with athletes in or coming from
3 American underserved communities. The consensus is that significant challenges exist for
4 coaches working in such environments and athletes developing in these circumstances will likely
5 carry emotional trauma with them during their life and athletic careers.

6 Implications for Practice
7 • Applied practitioners working in UATDEs must prioritize the psychosocial development
8 of their athletes as much, if not more, than athletic development.
9 • Organizations such as AASP and ISSP must educate (e.g., through conferences, seminars,
10 webinars, etc.) stakeholders and coaches working in UATDEs of the potential challenges
11 faced and resources required to excel in such environments.
12 • Applied practitioners in university and professional sport
13 coming from UATDEs will need additional and specialized support focused upon, for
14 example, the transition to a new environment or managing the ripple effects of trauma.
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People always want to look at money first, and they want to look at all of these material things that our athletes from underserved communities don’t have, but it’s deeper than that. It’s this lack of hope, like, ‘I hope I get out of my community,’ but it’s almost impossible to turn this self-talk in the back of their minds into action because the whole neighborhood says you’re going to end up back here no matter how hard you try.

We began this paper with a quote from a National Football League coach and executive stakeholder with over three decades of experience working with the sport’s most elite athletes, many of whom come from underserved American communities. Rather than identifying the primary challenge for prospective athletes in such communities as monetary, this passage instead reflects upon deeper societal issues that can often inhibit athletic success. This study, which relies upon the knowledge and expertise of professionals who work with athletes in, and coming from low socioeconomic environments, offers a glimpse into the complex realm of underserved athletic talent development environments in the United States (from here UATDE).

The Holistic Ecological Approach to Athletic Talent Development

Over the past few decades, the world of high performance sport has witnessed an “increasing systematization of athlete development and talent identification” (Baker et al., 2017, p. 2) in response to a heightened pressure to identify the most talented athletes and place them into optimal environments. Within this discipline, the talent identification and talent development approaches broadly guide the field (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). As the field has expanded, the holistic ecological approach (HEA) has emerged as a perspective which moves “attention from the individual athletes to the broader developmental context or environment in
which they develop” (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017, p. 271). This approach, which was inspired by cultural (Hofstede, 1997; Si & Lee, 2007) and ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) psychology as well as systems theory (Lewin, 1936), suggests that some environments are superior to others in their ability to develop and guide talented junior athletes to the elite amateur or professional levels. The HEA proposes that athletic talent development takes place “between an aspiring athlete and a composite and dynamic sporting and non-sporting environment that supports the development of the personal, psycho-social, and sport specific skills required for the pursuit of an athletic career” (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017, p. 272). Further, it advocates that factors related to athletes’ success simply cannot be separated from the micro and macro environments in which their sporting and non-sporting lives exist.

The Context of Athletic Talent Development in the United States

Considering America’s sporting success, some readers may be “surprised to learn that the systems undergirding youth sport development are remarkable as much for their lack of interconnectedness as for their production of successful elite athletes on the international stage” (Bowers et al., 2011, p. 173). Grounded deeply in a history of federalism (i.e., regional and local governments are granted independent powers and autonomy, Bowers et al., 2011) as well as America’s “avowedly capitalistic, market-driven politico-economic philosophy and a cultural resistance to any type of government imposition on free markets,” (Green et al., 2013, p. 21), the philosophy of athletic talent development in actuality lacks systematic national level governance (Smolianov et al., 2015). In fact, the essence of laissez-faire ideologic principles are inseparable from the fabric of American society and their authority over sport policy and development is palpable; so much so that the only meaningful sport development legislation is the Amateur Sports Act adopted in 1978 (and slightly ammended in 1998, Chalip, 2011). Consequently, rather
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than attributing America’s sporting success to a strategic plan initiated at the national level, which is an approach often seen from nations adopting a centralized position, the country’s sporting success occurs despite lacking a strategic and holistic national strategy (Green et al., 2013). Further, Green et al. (2013) suggest that America’s sporting success could be attributed to the country’s affluence and control over a quarter of the world’s financial resources (International Monetary Fund, 2020) rather than “its systems of sport governance” (p. 21). Therefore, America’s athletic prowess depends greatly upon its large population and mass sport participation at the grassroot level whereby elite sport programs (i.e., the United States Olympic Committee or professional sports teams) will then have the required deep pool of potential athletes to identify for senior levels (Bowers et al., 2011).

The process of developing athletes capable of professional or international competition is contextualized and varies across the globe (Stambulova et al., 2020), but the American school-based athletics model differs from the club/community based system seen in many countries (Johnson et al., 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Competitive amateur sport is still primarily controlled through the American educational system (both private and public), creating a structure whereby prospective athletes travel through a developmental pathway juxtaposing academic responsibilities with athletic ideals. This integration begins during the childhood years when children first enter school but intensifies during the middle/high school years as athletics gain importance, while the talented athletes are then recruited (i.e., discovered) to continue their athletic development during their college years (Authors, 2020a). Finally, the nature of professional (and elite) sport is independent from any singular governing body or national level strategy and relies upon varying means of talent identification to determine who will get a contract and whose careers will likely terminate after graduation.
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**Athletic Talent Development in Underserved American Communities**

The United States remains an epitome of financial inequality, on the one hand controlling more wealth than any other nation (International Monetary Fund, 2020), while on the other distributing financial resources to a disproportionately small amount of the population. For example, census data estimates that roughly 70% of all wealth in 2018 was controlled by the top 10% of households (Semega et al., 2019), while this inequality worsens among minorities. Resulting from this disparity in financial resources as well as America’s historical practice of redlining (i.e., discouraging financial lending in minority inhabited neighborhoods, see Krieger et al., 2020), the United States is divided into pockets of affluent and underserved communities. Importantly, there is not, nor do we attempt to offer a consensus definition of what an underserved community might look like in the United States. However, our underpinning supposition is that these communities are prevalent and children who develop in such neighborhoods are afforded less opportunities resulting from: high unemployment, low educational attainment, low overall income, crowded housing, and a high percentage of households below the poverty line (Wright & Montiel, 2004). Consequently, and directly attributable to the fact that most children attend a public school within the geographical boundaries of where they live (over 90% of high school students; Johnson et al., 2017) and that a significant part of their athletic development will occur in that school, athletic talent development environments (ATDE) in America reflect the overall inequality of the country.

The issues surrounding the quality of education in underserved American communities are substantial and thoroughly documented (for an overview see O’Day & Smith, 2016), yet within this backdrop, the field of athletic talent development within such communities is just emerging in sport psychology. Recently, we published a series of articles (Authors, 2020a;
Authors, 2020b; Authors, 2021) in which we expounded upon the career pathways, stages, and transitions of professional athletes who came from underserved communities in the United States. Within these studies, the participants highlighted challenges (i.e., gang violence, paternal abandonment, financial insecurity, etc.) that plagued the communities in which they lived, how these issues negatively affected the UATDE located in their public school, and also the coping strategies that aided in their sporting success (e.g., influential relationships, earning scholarships, leaving the UATDE, etc.). Similarly, multiple studies within sport for development literature have contextualized the perception of sport environments within underserved American communities in their studies on youth sport amidst trauma and chaos. The findings suggest the sport programs were frequently located in dangerous communities that stakeholders compared to “warzones” (Whitley et al., 2018, p. 121), athletes often lacked positive relationships (Massey & Whitley, 2016), and suffered from fewer financial resources (Massey & Whitley, 2020). Further, vast research surrounding socioeconomic status (SES) in the United States demonstrates that those born into poverty suffer from an array of physiological and psychological complications, and that SES contributes to long-term health and well-being (Felitti et al., 1998; Letourneau et al., 2013). Correspondingly, UATDEs will likely be exposed to a complex range of challenges resulting from environmental factors in which the athletic program is embedded as well as contextualized issues that the athletes bring with them.

Considering the preceding information, this study was guided by two questions and informed by the perspectives and experiences of professionals who work in such environments:

1. What are the primary challenges faced and strategies implemented in UATDEs?
2. How does developing in a UATDE impact an athlete once they reach the college and professional levels of sport?
The foundation of this exploratory study was predicated upon the belief that the fundamental social, economic, and political structure of the United States inherently places power and strength in the hands of the few, while countless others are placed in unequitable, and often unenviable, positions of weakness and oppression. Currently, an emerging line of research within the talent development discourse in sport psychology is considering how athletes develop within such hierarchical social systems. Consequently, the philosophical underpinnings of this project are rooted in a critical ideological paradigm (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011), positioning ourselves within a nonfoundational relativist ontology (Amis & Silk, 2008), a social constructionist epistemology, and an axiological position whereby we acknowledge that we cannot divorce our values from the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). Importantly, however, is to note that this project was undertaken with caution to avoid substantial deficit framing which could give the reader the impression that only negative things happen within the communities we investigated. Poignantly, this is not the case nor the perspective of the authors. Yet, we did adopt a critical theoretical perspective, in part, to be critical of the unequal power and social structure in the United States and to offer a reflective assessment of challenges that exist within UATDEs.

Participants

Upon ethical approval from the first author’s institution, participants were located through purposive and snowball sampling and contacted via email to judge their interest and suitability for the study. The criteria for inclusion were based upon potential participants holding or having previously held a relevant professional position at a UATDE (e.g., coach, athletic director, school principal, etc.), and/or having professional experience of working with athletes from underserved communities. Notably, since the concept of an underserved community is
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subjective and elicits varying connotations for different people, we simply had to rely on the stakeholder’s own interpretation of whether or not they were qualified to discuss the subject of inquiry. The 13 stakeholder’s (M = 10, F = 3) backgrounds can be found in Table 1.

[Please insert Table 1 around here]

Procedure and Data Collection

All data for this investigation were collected through an unstructured interview format and each (except for one) conducted over Skype. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the project’s purpose, criteria for inclusion, and ethical considerations pertaining to voluntary participation, data protection, and confidentiality. Each interview commenced after verbal consent was given by the participants to be recorded, followed by the interviewer giving a brief and unscripted biographical account of his relevant experience leading towards the project’s inception. Following this short introduction, the formal interview began with the question, “could you please tell me about your life and how you began working with athletes from underserved communities,” to comfortably begin the conversation and promote reflection. Excluding the first question, the interview had little structure because it was decided that the range of participants made an openness to their unique perspectives and reflections a priority. The first author relied upon his ten years of coaching and teaching in an underserved school in the United States to guide the conversation, asking appropriate questions in order to stimulate conversation and facilitate reflection (i.e., “do you find your work fulfilling” or “what do you find most challenging”). Importantly, our data collection process, as promoted within a critical theoretical paradigm, strived to “engage research with and not on” participants and approached them with “both care and humility” (Mobley, 2019, p. 93). Our position throughout data collection was of an interested learner and “facilitator of experiences…[so] that research can be
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empowering or beneficial to participants and communities” (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, p. 9).

The interviews lasted slightly over an hour (M = 74 minutes), were transcribed verbatim, and
sent to each interviewee for the participant’s reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Data Analysis, Representation, and Reflexivity

The data were explored using Braun and colleagues’ (2016) reflexive thematic analysis
process as a guide and inspiration for understanding, comprehending, and interpreting the
knowledge, insights, and wisdom contained in the interview data. This method was selected, in
part, because of its detachment from “specific, or inbuilt, ontological, and epistemological
anchors” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 193), meaning that it was a useful tool within a critical
ideological paradigm. Further, considering that critical theory offers “less of a clear delineation
as to how to connect critical theory to the data analysis process” (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, p.
9), reflexive thematic analysis provided the “flexibility” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 195) we desired
to explore both latent and semantic themes. The analysis process began with the first author
immersing himself in the data for a prolonged period, reading and re-reading transcripts,
discussions with co-authors about initial ideas, thoughts, and insights in order to truly “know the
dataset” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198). Next, the inductive process of coding the data was
thorough, deliberate, iterative, and ultimately a systematic development which progressed
deliberately and slowly over time. Simultaneous discussions with co-authors acting as critical
friends (Smith & McGannon, 2017) challenged the first author’s initial interpretations, solidified
others, while uncovering new perspectives that had not yet been considered. Finally, the codes
were refined, then divided into sub-themes, primary themes, and finally placed into two
categories entitled: Shared Features of School-Based UATDEs in the United States and The
Ripple Effects of Trauma.
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In reflecting upon the quality of our dataset and analysis, we emphasize that our relativist ontological position promotes using “criteria from lists that are not fixed, rigid, or predetermined before the study” (Smith & Sparkes, 2020, p. 1009) to allow for flexibility and the open-ended nature of our project. Consequently, to ensure rigor we drew upon familiar criteria such as (but not limited to); topic worthiness, substantive contribution, member reflections, critical friends, expression of reality, and transparency (Smith & Sparkes, 2020). Throughout the process we were ever reflexive about our position as researchers, dialoguing and reflecting internally and collectively about our hopes, goals, and expectations for this research. Crucially, while not an ethnographic study, the first author’s ten years of coaching and teaching in an underserved American school (i.e., 99% below the poverty line, 99% minority students, and 70% gang affiliated) influenced the shape of the study in all facets, but we contend this was not a shortcoming, rather, a great strength that increased research quality.

Findings

The following section was organized into two categories entwining the thoughts, beliefs, and reflections from 13 stakeholders who have worked professionally in UATDEs and/or with university and professional athletes coming from such environments. This group of experts is wide ranging, encompassing those who worked in small grassroots sporting environments all the way to those coaching in America’s most elite professional leagues.

Shared Features of School-Based UATDEs in the United States

Unfavorable Context: Communities Not Built for Success

According to the 13 participants in this study, an overarching problem that directly affects UATDEs is that the communities in which they are entrenched are simply not built for success; neither socially, psychologically, nor by default, athletically.
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When you consider where they are from, is it designed for success? You were in Atlanta, you went through the neighborhoods, you even cited the statistics. Was it designed for them to have hope, that they can have a garden? How many gardens did you see in the front of houses? I bet not many. But how many liquor stores or check cashing spots did you see? It’s not designed for them to have hope or for them to get out. (P13)

Subsequently, before even addressing issues within the sport domain of a UATDE, coaches have to overcome significant community barriers to even get prospective athletes to practice. P4 expressed this concern: “one of the best players to ever come through [my school] I could never get into a jersey. The kid had…talent, but he was so in those streets, fighting, drugs, in a gang.”

Similarly, many of the stakeholders discussed that “the biggest hurdle to overcome in this kind of community is exposure” (P7), meaning that people in poverty do not leave the familiarity of their immediate surroundings, resulting in a world view that is small and unable to process life choices outside of this context. Consequently, P5 suggested that prospective athletes often do not “have a role model who has actually done what you are asking them to do…often, they haven’t seen people go to college, or seen people thrive and succeed. What they have seen is a model for failure.” However, P10, who personally grew up in a poor and minority dominated environment, reflected that these communities were also familiar and comfortable.

But here is the question, why go anywhere? I rarely, if ever, left my neighborhood because nobody out there looked or acted like me. But if I did go, once you crossed those railroad tracks, now you’re getting bothered, cops will pull you over, people will start following you around if you go to a store. It just isn’t worth the trouble.

Finally, given the often-hazardous reality of the community surroundings, many young people are forced to adapt their habitus to a survival mentality, which then “conflicts with the structure
and middle-class values of many public-school settings” (P2).

**UATDE Challenges Communicated by the Stakeholders**

Within the micro-environment of a UATDE, the surrounding community conditions in which the athletes live would permeate into the sporting environment. Although many of the participants believed that the problems were much deeper than an imbalance in tangible monetary resources (prefaced in the paper’s opening quote, P13), they also did not deny that this remained a clear barrier to athletic success. “The financial piece is huge, of course. You have to get money. You have to find money to pay for things because the school system is not going to pay for it” (P4). This financial imbalance between poor schools and those in affluent communities resulted in “horrible facilities” (P5), “insufficient equipment” (P6), “no transportation” (P1), and “poor nutrition” (P2), creating a situation whereby coaches used their own personal income to contribute to the UATDE. On the one hand, some of the stakeholders, such as P3, simply felt that this was a choice that coaches who work in such communities knew they would have to make:

I don’t think anyone in the administration really paid attention to athletics, but in that atmosphere it’s almost a given that you’re going to have to give extra, you’re going to help clothe students, get them food for Thanksgiving, like some principals expect it. I spend at least 1000-2000 dollars a year of my own money on my track and field program.

Yet, on the other hand, there were participants who felt conflicted about using their own personal financial resources to support their sport program: “This part always bugged me. Even peanut butter sandwiches before games add up and I have a family at home to feed too.” (P4)

Although financial issues were a concern, most of the participants did not view them as insurmountable and believed that they could be somewhat mitigated by solid structure within the
micro-environment of the UATDE (e.g., regular communication and shared values between principals, athletic directors, teachers, and coaches). Yet, it was the belief of many stakeholders that this structure was lacking in UATDEs, creating situations where coaches were generally left to fend for themselves without support from school leaders. For instance, P4 reflected that the administrator at his school offered “zero support and didn’t value athletics at all,” while P5 had a unique interpretation of administrative support: “I was not supported, but I want to put in a caveat. I was supported by being left alone to do whatever I deemed necessary to run a successful basketball program. But was I given help? Absolutely not.” However, the structural inconsistencies within the UATDEs did not only pertain to principals or school administrators not valuing the athletic programs as this group of stakeholders perceived that, for multiple reasons, many parents were unable to support the athletes and teams effectively. P4 reflected that he could not depend on parents to bring his players to the games, so “I took kids home almost every day, or picked them up for games on Saturday,” while P5 said he received very little parent support and was “unsure if it was a case of finances, time, or apathy.”

Lastly, the participants discussed that the inherent nature of their work was extremely stressful, and P2 suggested that “you better have your life in order when you are working with an athlete whose life is not.” P4 reflected that in his administrative role he “talks teachers off the ledge every single day” who don’t think they can handle the stress. The coaches in the study also struggled to balance their teaching role in the school with their coaching or athletic director position within the same environment. In the United States, a majority of coaches in the school system are also full-time teachers, and coaching is a poorly paid endeavor that for P4, “was my love, but it was a side hustle, because I am in class sneaking in some game film, trying to draw up plays, but I am still teaching, that is what I am accountable for.” This might not be an issue
exclusive to UATDEs, but many stakeholders perceived that coaches and teachers in more affluent schools not only could be compensated better for their dual roles, but also would have significantly more help. P5 mentioned several times having to personally raise thousands of dollars each year to build a structured program because “I simply don’t have enough paid positions. I can’t pay them much for the commitment that we ask for, which is why I train them in the summer by myself.”

UATDEs’ Strategies to Facilitate Talent Development against the Odds

Despite significant challenges that can exist within UATDEs, no stakeholder in this study voiced the opinion that they could not be successful. “I believe every child can succeed in sports and life and I simply can’t have another thought about that. Given the right circumstances and the right amount of pressure put upon them, support, and resources, they can overcome anything” (P2). However, considering the aforementioned structural challenges that seem to arise frequently in UATDEs, the role of the coach is pivotal, and when asked, P5 said that success: depends on what the coach and coaching staff are willing to do. Are you willing to contribute financially? Are you willing to give up your time? Are you able to find other supportive resources that will allow you to do the things that you need? In fact, the stakeholders in this study, especially those who were coaches themselves, acknowledged that success or failure of the UATDE was often dependent upon their efforts, and not necessarily contingent upon their sport specific knowledge or administrative support. For example, P9 acknowledged that if he left his team there would be a regression but “not because they couldn’t get a better basketball coach than I am. I have just spent so much time here, and in this environment, it takes time to create success.” Yet, the stakeholders indicated that people who work in UATDEs are fully aware of the task they are undertaking, perceiving that the majority of
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people who work in these areas are the “kind of people that are going to give extra…we do the work for a reason and there is a reason for what we do.” (P3). Finally, many of the stakeholders simply believed that working in UATDEs was their life’s work, or a “calling.”

Above all else, an athletic environment must be a place where athletes can find the hope often lacking at home.

They’re all basically coming from the same neighborhoods and starving for one thing, and that’s hope. A lack of hope can douse the most talented athletes ever, and collectively. You have to create an environment where they can hope to achieve something more. (P13)

In order to create an environment whereby the prospective athletes can feel a sense of hope, the coaches must break down the barriers that so many young people bring with them when they develop within impoverished environments: “they have to know you care, know that you are authentic, … once they realize that you care about their success and have a compass for fairness, then you can start to achieve something” (P5). The participants overwhelmingly agreed that stakeholders who directly work in UATDEs must create “trusting relationships” (P11), take on a motherly or fatherly role (P3, P11), display empathy and compassion (P4, P6), and create a safe environment to “keep kids out of the neighborhood and away from doing dumb stuff” (P5). This is not to say that preconditions for success such as expert coaches or training in proximity with highly skilled athletes would not be beneficial. The fact remains that the participants in this study seemed to perceive that community issues in low SES neighborhoods create contextualized challenges that must be addressed before other sport specific concerns become equally relevant.

The Ripple Effects of Trauma

College Culture Clash: “They Are Navigating Differently”
In the United States, the vast majority of elite prospective athletes will enter into a college or university sport setting to continue their athletic development following their high school years. For any young athlete, continuing their career in a new environment is a particularly challenging time. However, the participants underscored that for athletes coming from low SES communities, it presents an entirely different set of challenges because now they are living in an environment well outside of their former community where people “don’t look, talk, or act like them” (P8). P10 stated that “there are certain regular norms that most people just take for granted, but when you’re coming from certain environments they’re not. So, when someone comes from, for lack of a better word, the hood, they’re navigating completely differently.” P13 agreed, stating that “college campus life is totally different from where they grew up,” while another reflected, “it was very hard for them to adjust to college, like way harder than for athletes from affluent communities” (P8). P10, who not only had years of professional athletic and coaching experience, also grew up in poverty and personally experienced the difficult transition from a UATDE to college, witnessed:

In the hood, we learned that if we dressed or carried ourselves a certain way, maybe we wouldn’t get picked on or it was a way to protect ourselves, and we learned from being in it. Well, it was the same when I went to college, you go ‘dang,’ like I have this gold grill in my mouth, I still like it, but in this environment it isn’t going to help me get to where I need to go. But, I see athletes who can’t make the transition because it’s too ingrained, like taking out their gold teeth may feel like they are losing too much of themselves.

“You Get Great Athletes, but You also Get Everything Else that Comes with Them”

The common perception amongst this group of stakeholders was that in many instances when you recruit athletes from underserved communities, they will be highly skilled athletically,
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“but when you bring them to your college or university, you’re getting everything else with them” (P13). The first problem was financial, and although it might seem like a simple problem to solve, not all university programs can offer the same amount of support. “As an HBCU [Historical Black College or University] we don’t have the money to provide a cost of attendance check, so it’s obviously tough on these kids because we can’t help with food, gas, or whatever they might need” (P8). Conversely, when P13 discussed a former hall of fame NFL player that he coached, he described deeper issues that got him released from two elite university programs before finally succeeding in a program closer to his home community. “He was always smart, but he had issues. He went to university and got in trouble, or he had issues there before he even got started. Didn’t belong. That is why he went back home to go to school.” The stakeholders reflected upon an array of other issues that such athletes bring with them including; “terrible nutrition” (P9), difficulty maintaining academic eligibility (P9, P8), sustaining negative relationships in their community (P6), team cohesion issues (P9), as well as difficulty trusting people (P10). P6 recounted a story concerning a former player who went on to play in the NBA, highlighting how these problems manifested in a real-world sporting context, stating: “when I coached him in high school, we had people to keep him on the right path, but when he went to college he started regressing, and culminated when he almost got in a fist fight with his coach.”

“They Are Expected to Perform” but “Life is Bigger”

According to the stakeholders in this study, although most university coaches and administrators are well aware of the issues that athletes from low SES environments will bring with them, some programs are better at supporting them than others. P8 stated that:

I am the recruiting coordinator and I will be honest with you, there is a big difference between awareness and intention. We are 100% aware of where they’re from and how
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much help they’ll need, but the intention is that we just want kids who can play
basketball and help us win….

The sentiment that university sports are about winning was common amongst the stakeholders and that many programs care less about the athletes’ personal well-being and more about results. “What becomes the premium when you get really talented kids? Winning. And coaches don’t spend time on what? The personal stuff. Especially when you get talented kids that go to really big schools. It’s about winning, it’s about business” (P13).

On the other hand, the stakeholders offered many specific strategies that their programs had in place for their athletes from underserved communities to improve their chances of success, but compellingly, not all strategies were implemented for the sole purpose of supporting athlete well-being. For instance, P10 described that at his current university “there are certain things in place that keep athletes from getting out of hand…but it comes from more of a business standpoint and to protect their investment than from aiming for well-rounded persons.” However, other participants provided a wealth of insight into how a college sport program can help their athletes coming from underserved communities to be more successful. Most of the stakeholders agreed that the more structure that an ATDE has in place, the better it will be for the athletes because the structure “doesn’t allow for the athletes to become distracted” (P11). Other participants outlined different initiatives used to help their low SES athletes such as coaches making themselves available at all times to their players (P9), providing academic help (P9), taking on a fatherly or motherly role (P8), creating a family environment (P11), and weekly mentorship programs facilitating small group discussions about everything but the sport (P8). Ultimately, the stakeholders in this study, and specifically the coaches who worked at the university level directly with a high proportion of athletes from underserved communities, felt a
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calling to be more than simply a coach trying to develop athletes and win games.

You know, basketball is awesome, but life is bigger…like it just can’t be only about basketball…Before kids care what you know, they have to know that you care, and that is especially the case with an inner-city kid [low SES]. You might think they’re dumb, like they have bad grades or bad test scores, but kids from the hood are really smart when it comes to people because they have been burned by their dads or other people have let them down. But once you get them to trust you and they let their guards down, it’s powerful and it’s like they become this unstoppable force. (P9)

Professional Level Talent, Professional Level Problems but Both With Old Roots

When athletes turn professional, they are now adults, and although the stakeholders believed that the athletes’ background of developing in an underserved community influenced their life, the participants remained unsure about what a team’s responsibility was for guiding their life outside of the sporting arena. For instance, P6 discussed that:

The NBA has the rookie symposium, but I don’t know how far they go after that. It’s like, we gave you the information and now it’s on you because you are a grown man. But even though they’re grown men, they are still young, and they have lots of chances to make some bad decisions which we see all the time.

Another stakeholder, with a long career as a player and coach in college and professional football agreed, saying that not only are “coaches scared to go and talk about it [their background] and really find the root issues,” but also most teams “don’t care about their background …and just want them to show up and play football” (P11). However, despite professional sport leagues having a long history of ignoring issues for those athletes coming from low SES backgrounds, at least within the NBA, there is now a “concerted, honest, and authentic focus to take care of the
Regardless of whether or not professional sport leagues or individual organizations focus on the well-being of athletes who come from underserved communities, the consensus of the stakeholders was that these issues are real, follow them, and need to be addressed.

Poverty is a trauma, and there is a lot of data to support that… men are essentially incentivized to say nothing, be tough, man up, and this mask is what I call invisible tattoos. Tattoos are very painful and take a long time over several days or weeks to put on. You have a needle penetrating the epidermis of the skin, and the emotions that these guys feel as a young kid, each emotion is like a pin that the artist draws with his needle and then you have that invisible tattoo of trauma which is a permanently etched memory of situations that weren’t very good. We’re talking sexual trauma, incarceration, spousal battery, alcohol, or gang violence. (P12)

Incidentally, although the athletes are now within a completely different environment, underneath everything is “still that young kid. People didn’t change, they still beg, they just know how to beg differently. The money is nice, it eases the pain, but it doesn’t cure the symptoms unless you talk about it” (P13). Consequently, the stakeholders perceived that if professional athletes from low SES communities are not able to feel a sense of belonging to this new world that they are now a part of, there is a good chance that they will end up back where they came from. “If you go through a college process and get to the professional level, and the only place where you belong is athletically, at some point you’re going to revert back to something in your life” (P13). P6 recalled this phenomenon happening to a former player of his who had a brief, but successful NBA career before a series of events culminated with a serious legal offence and lengthy incarceration. “He recently wrote me a letter from prison detailing
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everything, but the crazy thing is that when he committed this crime, he was with his old gang members, like, why was he still hanging with these guys?”

The perception of the stakeholders was not that athletes coming from UATDEs were destined to a life whereby the environment they came from would necessarily determine their life once they left. However, they did believe that the lasting memories of trauma stay with a person, impact ones’ life and athletic career, yet are infrequently discussed or even realized by the athlete themselves.

Irrespective of the sport, professional athletes have a short window, so the idea is suck it up, camouflage it, so I can just get through it. And that works for athletes from childhood trauma because they have a goal…and the more successful they become, the more they can push this stuff back and so there is an illusion that everything is fine, they may even feel healthy…but then you have an incident that will trigger [trauma] in some way (P12)

Further, the athletes who are the most successful at addressing challenges associated with developing within a low SES community do not simply do so by chance, rather, it is a concerted and intentional decision.

It all starts with the athlete and what they’ve seen and that ‘I no longer want to feel that pain.’ That’s the number one thing. I want to stay alive and don’t want to feel pain, I don’t want my mom or my family to feel that pain either, I want to bring them joy, I want to bring them hope. It takes people in your circle saying, ‘don’t come back here,’ or it’s the people when you go to college…teammates taking you in or taking you to their house, showing you different things. You have to fill that vacuum up and build up to the point where you say ‘I belong,’ and that is the difference. (P13)

Discussion
This exploratory study was inspired by our aspiration to better understand how UATDEs operate and how developing within such environments may impact athletes once they reach the university and professional levels of sport. Consequently, we were driven to move beyond the perception that gold medals necessarily denote that America’s sport development system is unproblematic, nor that it cannot be improved and more equitable. Thus, through 13 interviews with experts who are well qualified to enlighten scholarship concerning this issue, the proceeding discussion concentrates upon two primary considerations; (1) the conceptualization of a UADTE, and (2) how developing within a UATDE influences athletes once they leave the environment.

**Conceptualizing a UATDE**

Researchers employing the HEA approach athletic talent development by shifting the focus from individual athletes towards environmental contexts (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) and this change has prominent implications for this study. In fact, all 13 participants either specifically stated, or at the minimum expounded upon the perception that those working within UATDEs must first prioritize the vast social and psychological issues that inherently exist in the surrounding environment before sport specific concerns become equally important. However, while highly relatable, case studies using the HEA are empirically grounded within affluent contexts (for summary see Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) and the principles have not been applied within low SES settings. Therefore, if we look at the way UATDEs are described by our participants and then compare this with the shared features (i.e., integration of efforts, proximal role models, etc.) of successful ATDEs proposed within the HEA, the differences are at a minimum notable, if not glaringly apparent. Thus, in light of the data presented here and supported by substantial literature indicating similar issues within sports in low SES American
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communities (Authors, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Massey & Whitley, 2016, 2020; Whitley et al., 2018), we offer a conceptualization of what a UATDE might actually entail and further propose that significantly more research of UATEs is required.

At the most basic level, UATDEs and ATDEs are both environments that support athletes on their journeys to sporting excellence. However, we propose that UATDEs are distinctive environments in which the sporting domain is disproportionately affected by the burdening socioeconomic factors of the surrounding community in which it is embedded. The influence of these factors upon a given UATDE are of course relative, contextualized, and unique to each particular environment, including indicators presented in the Rockefeller Institute’s economic hardship index (i.e., crowded housing, high unemployment, etc.). The participants discussed in detail that community problems consistently infiltrate the sporting domain of a UATDE, denoting key shared features such as lack of structure within the system, no support from administrators, an absence of parental support, hindering peer influences, or a lack of physical and psychosocial safety. While this non-inclusive list of characteristics may or may not present itself in a given UATDE, the stakeholders suggest that “the root issue concerning a lack of hope” in underserved communities will generally create two primary shared features. First, the center of a UATDE is often occupied by psychosocially vulnerable athletes who require heightened attention upon their personal development and social mobility. Second, in order to successfully combat the challenges, the coach as the primary (and sometimes only) driver for success in the UATDE must recognize and address this vulnerability and psychosocial development before sport specific tasks become equally prioritized.

Elaborating on the first feature, perhaps a UATDE’s intentional focus on the athletes’ need for personal development and social mobility is best encompassed by one participant’s
understanding that for many young people coming from low SES communities, they simply do not have a network of successful people guiding the way, rather, “what they have seen is a model for failure.” There was a tangible belief amongst the participants that UATDEs are ethically obligated to nurture and protect the individual as much as developing the athlete’s physical skills, and the people who work in these environments understand that (i.e., “we do the work for a reason and there is a reason for what we do”). Principally, research highlights the increased risks of growing up in low SES communities (Letourneau et al., 2013), which increases amongst minorities (Do et al., 2019), and the stakeholders work tirelessly to overcome them. Bourdieu’s (1984, 1994) social theory, with a primary concept being that people innately have, and aim to accrue, varying forms of capital (i.e., social, cultural, economic) to improve and enrich their lives, has been regularly used in sport psychology (Authors, 2020a; Light et al., 2019). Thus, while the stakeholders (especially the coaches) naturally desire to create an athletically successful sport program, they also recognize that a primary role is to improve their athletes’ prospects of upward social mobility by fostering forms of capital (i.e., “basketball is awesome, but life is bigger”).

Furthermore, the data suggests that a second shared feature of a UATDE is how the epicenter is not solely occupied by the athlete (as seen in the original ATDE working model, Henriksen et al, 2010) but also by a coach, and without this individual, the UATDE would be inclined to fail. Regardless of the socioeconomic level of an ATDE, we know that “from when a child first enters sport through to Olympic competition, athletes’ personal development is fundamentally shaped by coaches” (Turnnidge & Côté, 2018, p. 327). However, the data from this study suggests that not only does working in a UATDE attract the “kind of people that are going to give extra”, but the stakeholders indicate the work fulfills their life’s calling or vocation
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(several used this specific term). There is no consensus definition of a calling, but “one aspect of
the subjective meanings of work is the extent to which it contributes to a sense of purpose or
meaningfulness” (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 425), and this concept certainly applies to the ways in
which their work was storied in the interviews. Consider, the stakeholders emphasized that they
spent their own money, provided transportation, were frequently unsupported by anyone but
themselves, raised their own funds to hire additional coaches, were available to their players
outside of the sporting environment, and worked year-round (sometimes for free) to create a safe
environment for their athletes to spend their time. Definitively, while often too modest to
acknowledge the crucial role they played, the participants recognized that their team’s success
was dependent upon their effort (i.e., “It depends on what the coach and coaching staff are
willing to do”).

Talent Suffers from Trauma: How Developing Within a UATDE Influences Athletes Once
They Leave the Environment

While the discussion so far has prioritized the conceptualization of a UATDE, this second
section focuses upon the implications of developing within such an environment once the athlete
leaves. Within this context, the participants who have the most experience working with
university and professional athletes overwhelmingly agree that such athletes will bring the
“baggage,” “pain,” or the “invisible tattoos of trauma” with them to the new environment.
Further, the participants also discuss how these problems cannot be ignored and need to be
intentionally addressed to prevent the athlete from reverting to potentially damaging behaviors.

When athletes from a UATDE leave for college, they are making a multilevel transition
entailing athletic, educational, and financial challenges – all shaped by their cultural transition
into a more affluent community (Authors, 2020a, 2020b, 2021); in addition, many minority
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athletes might also be transitioning into a White dominated world for the first time. Thus, whether it is because the universities feel morally inclined to help the student-athlete or comes from “a business standpoint and to protect their investment,” colleges and universities do recognize this issue. Interestingly, the stakeholders indicate that similar strategies to those at the high school level are implemented to either facilitate the athlete’s development outside of sport, or simply to protect them from making potential mistakes. The participants discuss the need for an almost militaristic structure to allow for little idle time, coaches must be available outside of sport, provide academic support, adopt a parental role, create a family environment, or even organize weekly group “therapy” sessions. Compellingly, not one stakeholder mentioned that the athletes coming from UATDEs do not have the prerequisite skills (physical, mental, etc.) to become successful senior level players. What we do see is that the challenges these athletes face during their time in UATDEs predictably follow them to a new environment and cause a consistent ripple effect whereby colleges and universities know they will be forced to address them, with or without the appropriate resources to do so.

Yet, once the athletes transition from university to the professional or elite level, this does not mean that the invisible tattoos of trauma will have magically disappeared (Parham, 2020). In fact, the participants with the most experience in professional or elite sport have the perception that they are still extremely vulnerable and at great risk of reverting to past negative behaviors. The degree that professional and elite American sports (or international teams for that matter) are equipped to handle such cases is unclear and varies according to these stakeholders. However, the understanding that the psychological scars of trauma will stay with an athlete in a detrimental way (Whitley & Massey, 2020) lends itself to a brief reflection of this concept that unfortunately permeates within the athletic talent development discourse, primarily framed within a European
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sport context (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Collins et al., 2016). Naturally, we recognize the
substantial body of literature demonstrating how adversity can be beneficial in athletic
development (Collins et al., 2016; Sarkar et al., 2015), and admittedly our own research supports
that athletes coming from underserved environments can build athletic and life resilience
(Authors, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, the results of this study and our previous research (Authors,
2020a, 2020b, 2021) demonstrates there remains a clear limit to the argument that severe trauma
is beneficial since our data shows that athletes from UATDEs “make it” in professional sports in
spite of trauma, not because of it.

From our perspective, the problem originates with what Krupnik (2020) and McNally
(2009) refer to as conceptual bracket creep, or conflating the concept of adversity with trauma
which is dangerous and misleading considering that research shows how different adverse
childhood experiences lead to qualitatively different outcomes (McLaughlin, 2016). For instance,
Collins et al. (2012) example of Lance Armstrong being forced to take swimming lessons with
younger children as a case of beneficial trauma not only blurs the line between adversity and
trauma but is quite disingenuous to survivors of severe trauma. Our prior studies (Authors,
2020a, 2020b) highlight professional and elite athletes who had to endure their loved ones being
murdered, gang violence, parental abandonment, substance abuse, or incarceration.
Consequently, our contention is that inserting trauma into the athletic talent development
discourse is contrary to anything the stakeholders report in this study or what we have seen in
our previous research and goes well beyond what could reasonably be considered beneficial.
Primarily, those who work in UATDEs understand the significant challenges of working with
athletes who might suffer from trauma and their (as well as the authors’) advocacy is against
artificially or intentionally inserting trauma into training settings of young athletes.
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Final Remarks

The results-based success of America’s athletic talent development system has the ability to minimize critics and silence opponents. Historically, and presently, the United States has been undoubtedly effective in producing accomplished athletes. However, according to the 13 stakeholders in this study, who total over 200 years of collective experience working within a segment of this system that has received limited to no scholarly attention, the picture is not so idyllic. The study participants highlight problems (i.e., structural, ethical, etc.) within a particular sphere of the American talent development system we term UATDEs, and further elucidate issues for athletes once they leave such environments. Unfortunately, from our perspective, the issues uncovered within this study are not small, or a rarity; they are in fact glaring, yet somehow hiding in plain sight and often ignored. Athletes developing within UATDEs face significantly greater barriers to success than those in affluent communities while coaches who work there are often unsupported in their efforts. Finally, once athletes reach the university or professional level, the scars of trauma stay close to the athletes.

Ultimately, while concluding sections of journal articles are generally included to instruct the reader on the implications of their research and how to apply it, in this case, it seems quite self-evident to say that coaches in UATDEs need to be informed of the challenges they will face before they enter the environment or how they should be supported. Further, is it enough for us to simply advocate that organizations such as AASP, ISSP, and others take initiative to inform policy makers at the national level all the way down to those working in grassroot organizations of the contextualized problems that exist? While it is of course important that we do so, the issues uncovered during this investigation are enormous, have deep roots, and are an accurate reminder that America is a land of opportunity, but clearly not for everyone. America has more
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money than any nation on earth and could address the lack of social justice in athletic talent
development (and elsewhere) if it was prioritized, but when the country also believes the
government needs to “stay out of the way,” then where (and how) does change begin? While we
do not have the answers concerning such large-scale issues, we do hope that at a minimum this
paper brings to light some of the inequity that permeates within the American athletic talent
development system and acts as a place to begin this conversation.

Author’s Note

The terms underserved community and low socioeconomic (SES) community are used
interchangeably in this study.

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Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions

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