

## From the playground to the WNBA. A case study with basketball player “Ticha” Penicheiro

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*FROM THE PLAYGROUND TO THE WNBA. A CASE STUDY WITH BASKETBALL PLAYER “TICHA” PENICHEIRO*

KEY WORDS: Basketball, Excellence, Athletes, High Level Competition, Deliberate Play.

ABSTRACT: A growing interest in the characteristics related to the excellent performance has provided a marked increase in research in the area of excellence in sport. In this sense, the purpose of this study was to characterize the life story of a high level international basketball player. The investigation used a qualitative methodology. The main resource was an in-depth interview to the athlete, supplemented by interviews with relevant people in different stages of their process as well as a comprehensive search of available data in the media on matters relevant to our study. Data was analyzed using inductive and deductive processes of qualitative analysis. The main conclusions point out the decisive importance of the social environment during her childhood, parental education and safety of the neighborhood. Psychological factors were identified: intrinsic motivation, willingness to sacrifice, adaptive perfectionism, calm and self-reliance. These are the basis of a strong competitive attitude, with great control over stress and anxiety. Humility, sports intelligence, professionalism, leadership skills and respect for the game are other features that stand out. Deliberate play and the specific way in which occurred constitute a decisive training factor that carved the athlete way of play. The distinct stages and characteristics of the deliberate practice were also decisive for the development of the skills aroused in her childhood. Constant individual success is considered crucial in the development of increased perceptions of competence and motivation.

Nowadays, high performance sport is a unique social and cultural phenomenon. The achievements of a sports athlete, team or selection are immediately projected on all current means of social communication and the emotions provoked by their successes, heightened almost to the limit of madness. These passions are triggered by the incredible feats and skills of elite athletes, which cause admiration, and gratitude of all.

As Starkes (2003) regards, we are amazed and mesmerized by its fluidity, energy and ease with which they perform movements that seemed impossible that we forget to stop and think about the role that the years of training, the sacrifices, the resources spent, relationships with peers, coaches and family among other aspects, had for the athlete to reach that moment, that level of performance excellent, distinguished by Starkes (2003) as a top athletic performance and constant over an extended period of time.

That is precisely the aim of the research topic in the field of expertise and development of sporting excellence. To study and identify the path, characteristics, stages, strategies and training methods that allow these athletes to reach and remain consistently at the top of their sport.

We proposed in our study to contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the development of talent and expression and maintenance of excellence. For that purpose we characterized as fully as we could, the life history, highlighting the process of training, of a leading global player in her sport, using what Chi (2006) refers to as an absolute approach, research of exceptional, truly unique individuals, which due to its scarcity

require studies with an individual or a small number of participants.

From Figueira da Foz, Portugal, Patricia Penicheiro is a basketball player, worldwide recognized as one of the best guards of all time.

We find of great interest to the development of scientific knowledge in the area of high performance training, to characterize the course and determine the elements (factors of training, psychological and social and cultural factors), moments and decisive steps in the development of elite athletes, who have made a child born in Figueira da Foz - Portugal, a country without basketball tradition, a leader of the world best competition in two major statistical categories, that define the players in their specific position: offensively the “assists” - decisive passes that allow teammates to convert baskets and defensively, “steals”.

In order to support the proposed objectives, we carried out a review of the literature through which we sought to frame the issue and highlight the current state of knowledge that sustains it.

Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the female basketball player “Ticha” Penicheiro and testimonies of people close to it were collected, a coach and her brother. To complete the process of data collection, it was carried out an extensive search of relevant information currently available on the Internet, with the double task of gathering any new relevant information about the athlete and validation of some of their own data.

**Method**

This study adopts a design of a single case study, a life story, focusing on the process of training, of a female basketball player Patricia Penicheiro, a leading player in her sport.

We used a qualitative methodology in which we adopted as a main instrument an open interview, deep and semi-structured, based on the model proposed by Côté (Côté, Ericsson and Law, 2005), particularly with regard to the structuring of the script, and recovery of quantitative data related to experiences of athletes and sports activities (e.g. first contact with the sport, type of practice, hours devoted to practice). Open questions were added related to social (role of parents and peers), psychological (motivation, obstacles, personal characteristics) and qualitative factors of training. The main interview was supplemented by interviews with relevant people in different stages of their process as well as a comprehensive collection of data available in the media on matters relevant to our study. Data was analyzed using inductive and deductive processes of qualitative analysis.

To ensure the quality and increase the credibility of the investigation various conditions and procedures were assured for collecting and analyzing data, conducting a pilot study, a calm interview environment in the presence of the interviewee and interviewer only; a copy of the full transcript of the interview was send to the interviewee to check and propose possible corrections; conduction of a systematic search for negative cases in order to find contradictory statements; triangulation of sources in order to

obtain a more complete and multifaceted study on the case and frequent consulting with experts in the analysis qualitative.

**Presentation and Discussion of Results**

Analysis of the general development path

Figure 1 shows the development path of the athlete and the different landmarks. These, along with different characteristics of sport-practice, led us to divide her sports life path in five stages, using the Model of Participation Sports Development (Côté et al., 2007) as reference. The first stage, 5 to 11 years old, which we refer to as the Romance stage, begins with the first contact with the sport of basketball, determined by a high number of hours of “deliberate play”, an autonomous, spontaneous, individual or collective practice, often with older peers from the opposite gender, at the playground located near her home. The stage ends with the start of official practice of the sport, the second stage, specialization, begins at 11-years old with the start of practice federated and ends at 15 years-old with the option of the player to accept the invitation to join “Project Rio Maior” a nationwide high performance sports program. The third phase, of investment, begins with project Rio Maior, ending with the scholarship to Old Dominion University (ODU). The fourth phase, considered a second phase of investment, begins with the scholarship to ODU and ends with the entry in the WNBA, which initiates what we call the stage of Expression and Maintenance of Excellence, the fifth and last stage of her sports career as an athlete.

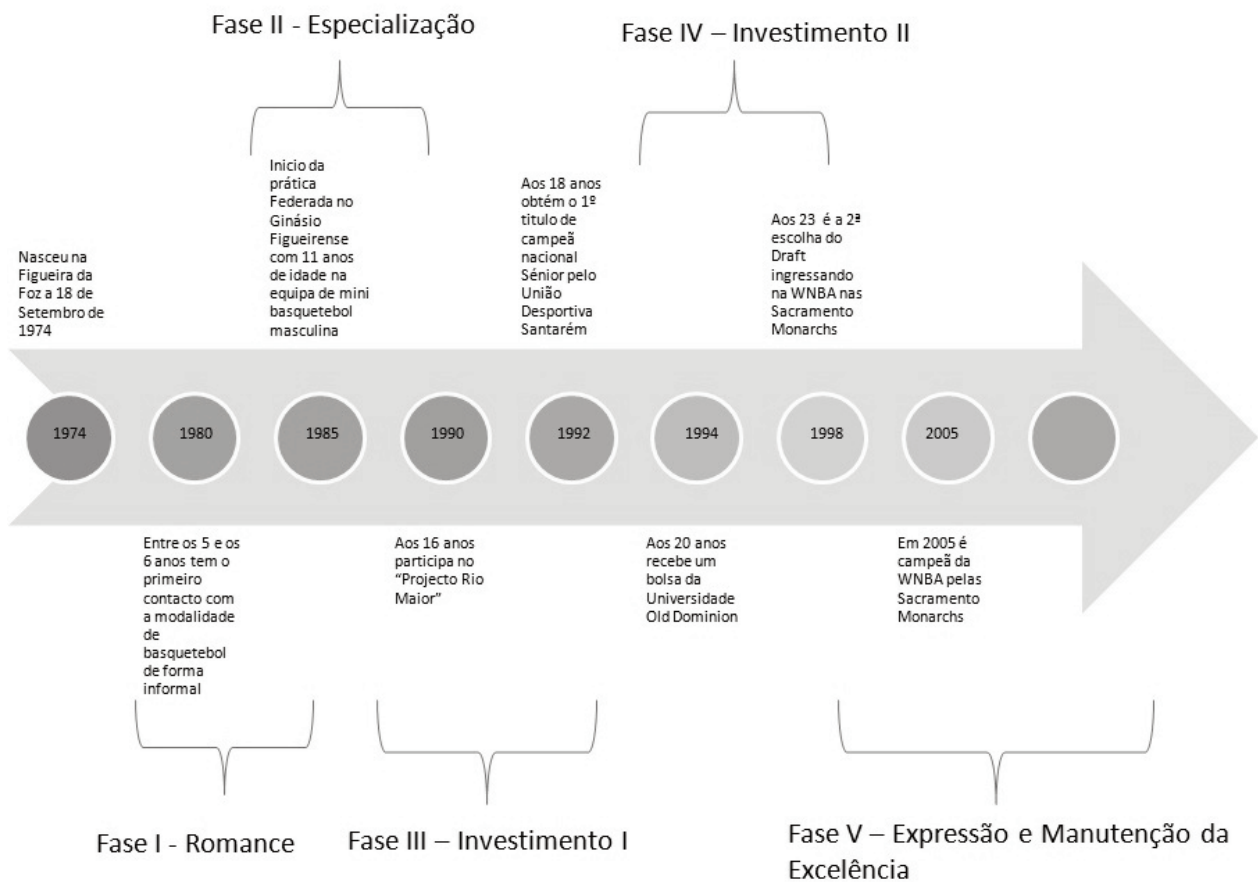


Figure 1. Timeline of the development stages of the Athlete “Ticha” Penicheiro.

Analysis of the factors that influence the development path

Social and Cultural Factors

The main conclusions point to the crucial importance of Social Involvement in childhood, transmitted by parents' education and the climate of safety and enjoyment of the community.

As Bloom (1985) and Côté (1999) conclude from their studies, no one can reach the highest levels of performance alone, without the support and supervision of others, and parents have a pivotal role as purveyors of various types of support. Education is considered decisive for the athlete throughout her journey, attributing a decisive importance to the role of her parents. The fun, unpressured environment, provided during childhood, as well as the nurture of other interests, including school performance, are in compliance with reported literature on the role parents should play in the healthy development of children in the context of sport (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Soberlak and Côté, 2003).

The community where the athlete was born and spent her childhood and adolescence gather some of the characteristics described by Côté and colleagues (2006), in their study of the birthplaces of top athletes in the ways of hockey, basketball, baseball, and golf, where it was shown a deviation probability in favor of small cities on the possibility of athletes reach the highest level of their sports. In fact, the community is characterized as a developed city of medium size, with adequate outdoor space for children to enjoy playing, with sport facilities for practice, a safe, secure city, which allows a sense of comfort to parents and freedom and autonomy in the games of children, central aspect in the development process of the athlete. At the same time, in the context of sport, the city is organized, and without having a large number of athletes, has a competitive system that allows the early expression of young talent.

Psychological factors

At a psychological level, several features stand out. The intense intrinsic motivation developed in her childhood is fundamental to the way she deals with obstacles and opportunities throughout their career. Considering Ryan and Deci Self-Determination Continuum (2000), we found that the activities to which the athlete dedicated herself during her childhood "deliberate play" lie at the extreme right of the same - self-determined behavior, regulated internally, facilitated by, and facilitators of increasing intrinsic motivation. This type of

motivation is clearly associated with high levels of satisfaction, commitment, involvement and even extended performance in sport (McCarthy and Jones, 2007, Pelletier et al., 1995; Frederick and Ryan, 1995; Ryan, Vallerand, and Deci, 1984; Vallerand, Deci, and Ryan, 1987; Vallerand and Reid, 1990; Vallerand and Losier, 1999).

Grounded by the intrinsic motivation, different characteristics appear. The ability to sacrifice in pursuit of goals, the adaptive perfectionism, and the work capacity, these factors were identified by several authors as decisive in the development and expression of excellence for elite athletes (Durand-Bush and Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach et al., 2002, Gould, et al., 1999, Holt and Dunn, 2004; Pensgaard and Duda, 2002; Wolfenden and Holt, 2005). These abilities are the foundation of a confident intense attitude towards competition, with great control over stress and anxiety. We highlight the humility, sports intelligence, professionalism, leadership and respect for the game.

Training Factors

"Deliberate play" (Côté et al. 2007), stands out as a decisive factor in training. It was the dominant practice of the athlete's childhood and adolescence, a massive practice (see Figure 2), fun, self-motivated and self-regulated, whose specific constraints (practice with older athletes and of the opposite gender) have shaped the way she play. This practice is referred to as pivotal in the development of talent and confirmed in different modalities, whose age of specialization occurs in early adulthood: rowing and tennis (Côté, 1999), football (Ford et al., 2009), Australian football (Berry, et al. 2008), hockey (Soberlak and Côté, 2003), basketball, netball and field hockey (Baker et al., 2003b), basketball, football, handball and field hockey (Memmert et al., 2010). Deliberate play is directly linked to development, not only of high technical skills, but cognitive, anticipatory and perceptive skills (see Williams, 2000) and is also associated with the development of creativity (Memmert, 2011), aspects highlighted in the athlete style of play that define her as an elite worldwide player.

The various features and stages of deliberate practice (see Figure 2) were also critical for the development of skills in childhood aroused. We highlight the absence of learning plateaus, which is due to the different opportunities that have arisen in her path, which enabled a gradual increase, qualitatively and quantitatively of the level of training and competition.

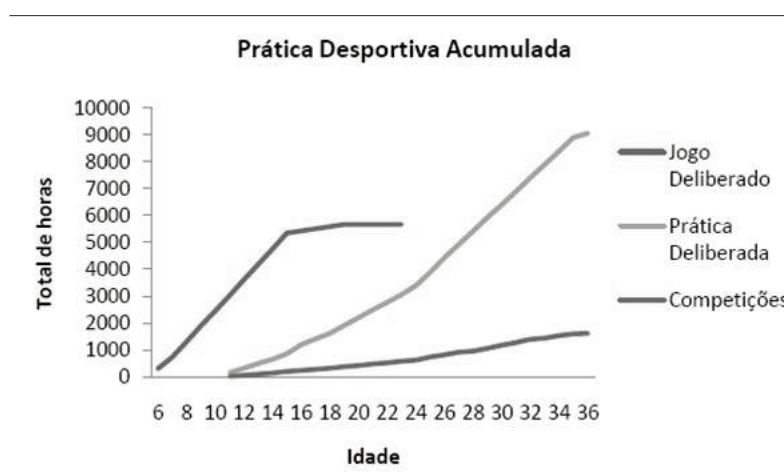


Figure 2. Graphical representation of accumulated hours of sport practice.

## Conclusions

The specific results of our study uncover not a path that needs to be exactly reproduced, but an ideal interaction between various factors and the individual dynamics of the athlete appearing before them.

We emphasize the importance of “deliberate play” in the development of various abilities that are the foundation of the athlete’s elite game, a factor that should be cause for reflection by coaches when developing their training programs. The absence of multiple sports sampling, other than basketball, show us that more than diversity, it is the intense intrinsic motivation towards the chosen sport (with or without sampling) the most important factor for long-term development of sports excellence.

### *DEL PATIO A LA WNBA. ESTUDIO DE UN CASO CENTRADO EN LA ATLETA DE BALONCESTO "TICHA" PENICHEIRO*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Baloncesto, Excelencia, Atletas, Alta Competición, Práctica deliberada.

**RESUMEN:** Un creciente interés en las características relacionadas con el excelente desempeño ha proporcionado un notable aumento de la investigación en el ámbito de la excelencia en el deporte. En este sentido, es el propósito de este estudio caracterizar la historia de la vida de una atleta de baloncesto que ha alcanzado un alto nivel de excelencia internacional.

Como metodologías se utilizaron una entrevista en profundidad a la atleta, complementada con entrevistas a personas relevantes en las diferentes etapas de su proceso, así como una colección completa de datos disponibles en los medios de comunicación, sobre temas de interés para nuestro estudio. Los datos se analizaron utilizando procesos inductivos y deductivos de análisis cualitativo de contenido.

Las principales conclusiones apuntan hacia la importancia fundamental de la Participación Social en la infancia, la educación impartida por los padres y clima de seguridad y divertimento de la comunidad. En el nivel psicológico, se distingue la intensa motivación intrínseca, a la que se incorpora, la capacidad de sacrificio por el bien de los objetivos, el perfeccionismo de adaptación, la capacidad de trabajo, la calma y la autoconfianza. Estas capacidades son la base de una actitud ante la intensa competencia, con predominio sobre el estrés y la ansiedad. También destacamos la humildad, la inteligencia deportiva, el profesionalismo la capacidad de liderazgo y el respeto por el juego.

Hacemos hincapié como factor en la formación, el tipo de práctica que estuvo involucrado en la infancia, "juego deliberado", una práctica masiva (en términos de volumen de entrenamiento), la diversión, la auto-motivación y auto-regulado, cuyas restricciones específicas (práctica con deportistas de mayor edad y del sexo opuesto) dieron forma a su manera de jugar. Las diferentes características y etapas de la "práctica deliberada" también fueron cruciales para el desarrollo de habilidades despertadas en la infancia. El éxito individual permanente se considera determinante en el desarrollo de percepciones de mayor competencia y motivación.

### *DO PLAYGROUND PARA A WNBA – UM ESTUDO DE CASO CENTRADO NA ATLETA DE BASQUETEBOL “TICHA” PENICHEIRO*

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Basquetebol, Excelência, Atletas, Alta Competição, Jogo Deliberado.

**RESUMO:** Um interesse crescente nas características relacionadas com a performance excelente tem proporcionado um aumento acentuado da investigação na área da excelência no desporto. Neste sentido, é propósito do presente estudo, caracterizar a história de vida de uma atleta de basquetebol que atingiu um elevado nível de excelência internacional.

Foram utilizadas como metodologias uma entrevista em profundidade à atleta, complementada com entrevistas a pessoas relevantes em diferentes fases do seu processo, bem como uma recolha compreensiva de dados disponíveis nos meios de comunicação social, sobre matéria pertinente para o nosso estudo. Os dados foram analisados utilizando processos indutivos e dedutivos de análise qualitativa de conteúdo.

As principais ilações apontam para a importância decisiva do Envolvimento Social na infância, a educação transmitida pelos Pais e clima de segurança e divertimento da comunidade. A nível psicológico, distingue-se a intensa motivação intrínseca, à qual se foi adicionando, a capacidade de sacrifício em prol de objetivos, o perfeccionismo adaptativo, a capacidade de trabalho, a calma e a autoconfiança. Estas capacidades são a base de uma atitude perante a competição intensa, com amplo domínio sobre o stress e a ansiedade. Realçamos também a humildade, a inteligência desportiva, o profissionalismo, a capacidade de liderança e o respeito pelo jogo.

Destacamos como fator de treino, o tipo de prática em que se envolveu na infância, “jogo deliberado”, uma prática massiva (em termos de volume de treino), divertida, automotivada e autorregulada, cujos constrangimentos específicos (prática com atletas mais velhos e do sexo oposto) moldaram a sua maneira de jogar. As diferentes características e fases da “prática deliberada” foram também decisivas para o desenvolvimento das capacidades despertadas na infância. O sucesso individual permanente é considerado determinante, no desenvolver de perceções acrescidas de competência e motivação.

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