



## ‘As you set out for Ithaka hope your road is a long one’: the talent development journey

letter to the Editor

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**GEORGIOS ANDRONIKOS**

School of Life, Sport & Social Sciences, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

This article used the popular poem of Ithaka by C.P. Cavafy to create an analogy aiming to provide a theoretical analysis of the journey of talent development within sport. Concepts discussed include the similarities between elements of the poem and talent development literature. Elite level can be perceived as the ‘Ithaka’ for athletes while Cyclops and other mythical monsters can be viewed as the obstacles in the pathway of development towards elite level. Therefore, athletes need to be prepared for those potential challenges throughout their journey. As highlighted by ‘Ithaka’ and as shown in the literature within the last decade, the development and learning experiences appear to be more important than the destination. The analysis concludes that the approach from practitioners and organizers needs to be focused on appropriate, holistic, and long-term development to facilitate to the ‘craft’ of better people through sport.

**Key words:** talent development, pathway, environment, elite sport

*As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.*

This article has used the poem ‘Ithaka’ by C.P. Cavafy as an analogy to describe and explain the journey of talent development within sport. The journey towards Ithaka can be linked with the athletic journey as they both have an end goal as destination: reaching the island or reaching the elite level. However, as outlined in the poem, individuals should hope to have a long and adventurous journey as what is of true significance is not merely reaching the destination but to develop oneself throughout the journey. Similarly in sport, even though many athletes (along with their coaches and families) cherish the idea of reaching the elite level, it is well known that only a small percentage will do so. As such, learning and developing during the athletic journey is or needs to be the key focus, as highlighted by researchers throughout the recent years [1, 2].

*Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:  
you’ll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement  
stirs your spirit and your body.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

Obstacles like the Cyclops or challenges within the development pathway do exist and they can be indeed difficult to overcome. It is important, though, to have a growth mindset and strive for the best aiming to reach the destination – Ithaka. This type of motivation is critical, as highlighted in the poem. Similarly, in the sports literature, intrinsic motivation, desire to be the best you can be, growth mindset, taking responsibility for your personal development are the cornerstone characteristics for effective development [3]. Even if it appears to be an inherent element of someone’s personality to ‘keep their thoughts raised high,’ research

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*Correspondence address:* Georgios Andronikos, School of Life, Sport & Social Sciences, 9 Sighthill Ct, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, United Kingdom, e-mail: [G.Andronikos@napier.ac.uk](mailto:G.Andronikos@napier.ac.uk)

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has shown that the environment can help individuals be better prepared for the Laistrygonians, Cyclops, or the angry Poseidon that they may encounter in their athletic career. The environment is controllable and hence we can use it to carve the young talented athletes [4, 5]. To be more specific, an environment can enable us to develop better people, instil values, and enable those individuals to grow in healthy circumstances and (possibly) fail in a healthy way. This means that with the appropriate balance of challenge and support, we can help athletes using psychological skills training and properly structured challenges [6] to develop the necessary characteristics required to deal with the potential impediments that may occur in their journey. Thus, and as shown in one of the most effective environments worldwide, individualized and holistic development is more important than winning matches [7] or, in other words, the journey is more important than the destination. Therefore, even if athletes do not manage to reach or stay at the elite level, they would have gained from their journey of development, which is nicely expressed by the following verses of the poem.

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

Those verses may have a double meaning that can be used in our theoretical analysis as they refer to both the length of the journey and the expectations of the destination. Firstly, it has now become clear within the literature that talent development is individualized and complex and therefore each athlete may show their potential or flourish at a unique rate and time. Thus, understanding the key stages and transitions is crucial [8] and hence providing the essential support plan can have a positive influence [9], especially for those who may need some more time in order not to be left behind [10]. Moreover, instead of focusing on the potential benefits (mainly monetary; fame) of sport, particularly at the elite level, athletes need to concentrate on the 'wealth' they can gain in this journey. Often, the likely advantages of sport are overlooked despite the multitude of findings boldly highlighting that sport may help youngsters first and foremost with their wellbeing, their personal development, and, inevitably, their physical health [11–13]. Consequently, those benefits can

and need to be considered as the true 'wealth' that sport can offer, especially to the young. As such, instead of being overlooked, they need to be strongly acknowledged by practitioners, families, coaches, and athletes as there are not many activities or environments that can provide young people with this positive combination.

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.*

Hence, as Cavafy expressed, we as researchers also argue that the focus needs to be on the experiences of the journey rather than the expectations of how rich someone will become when and if they reach Ithaka – the elite level in sport in our case. We suggest that athletes who may not enter elite sport can acquire a toolbox of skills which can be used in whatever domain of their professional and personal lives. For this to happen, an appropriate talent development environment is crucial to provide the type of experiences that will allow young people to grow through them in their journey towards Ithaka. This process can be left to luck; however, this contains the risk of children having development experiences that will hinder their participation in sport, wellbeing, and psychosocial maturation and, as a result, bring the opposite outcome to that expected. Therefore, creating an environment focusing on holistic, long-term development while also challenging individuals and allowing them to take responsibility of their development can become the focal point of talent growth. Those findings and conceptual ideas aligned with the poem of Ithaka go beyond research and theory as they can influence practitioners and organizations in the 'here and now' to create a positive future for young people.

### **Ethical approval**

The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author does not have any financial interest and did not receive any financial benefit from this research.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author states no conflict of interest.

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