

## Conceptual Framework in Developing Malaysia Equestrian Sport Elite Development Pathway

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### Abstract

Development pathways in sport are challenging and beset with multi-faceted issues of choice and obstacles in realising a sustainable outcome. Developing a framework into sport elite is an expensive investment and features expectational risk taken by individuals, advocating sport associations and Government indulging from the many phases and parameters of development and programming; interfacing early engagement or late specialisation, nurturing, structured training, competing and ultimately measured achievable performance and not least important the post active participative sustainable career. This paper outlines the frameworks and models pertaining to sport development and career pathway espousing the importance and relevancy in the contemporary environ particularly in the context of the equestrian sport organisation i.e. EAM. Successful equestrian nations have adopted the generic Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model to guide their elite pathway for their equestrian sport development. Successful sporting nations have set the standard for other aspiring nations to emulate. Nevertheless, nations using the benchmarks of other countries have frequently showed failure in attaining goals, suggesting the adaptational process is crucial. The contemporary view is that sport development and pathway should be moulded in frameworks as per contained in LTAD, DMSP etc. of a long-term structure rather than ad hoc or short-term perspective and the most successful sport development and career process theoretically must satisfy conditions and achievement of key critical success factors in relation to SPLISS framework. The findings reveal the stakeholder sport organisation i.e. EAM adherence is rather piecemeal and is suggested to practically takes on board exploratory study through communicative and adaptive processes toward formulation of frameworks in the form of development plan and blueprint for equestrian elite development pathway.

**Keywords:** Sport Development, National Sport Association, Sport Development Pathway, Elite Sport Development Pathway, International Sporting Success

**Introduction**

Sport development is now a vital part of the global sport sector, as modern nations strategically prioritize international sporting success through substantial governmental investment and deliberate policy construction (Mackintosh, 2021). Conceptually, a clear distinction must be made between sport development (i.e., focused on building pathways for participation and nurturing athletic talent) and sport for development (i.e., which leverages sport as a tool to achieve non-sporting outcomes such as promoting mass participation and social cohesion) (Mackintosh, 2021). The essence of sport development lies in its capacity to generate opportunities for individuals and communities to engage with and advance through various forms of physical activity (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). It operates as a continuous process across diverse social settings, forming a developmental continuum that stretches from the initial introduction of sport to children in foundational settings to the high-performance programs dedicated to helping elite athletes secure medals at major global tournaments (Baker, Gayman, et al., 2023).

Sport development management and delivery are typically the responsibility of local sport organizations, sanctioned and coordinated by a National Sport Association (NSA) (Viollet et al., 2023). In the Malaysian context, this structure is centralized through the 56 NSAs (e.g., Equestrian Association of Malaysia (EAM); Football Association of Malaysia (FAM)) affiliated with the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM). Each NSA acts as both the governing body and the primary driver of sport development efforts for its respective discipline. Crucially, in order to be recognised by the Malaysian Government (i.e., Ministry of Youth and Sports; National Sports Council) for granting grants, funding and facilitate support, each NSA must maintain recognized membership with its relevant International Sport Federation (IF) ensuring international alignment (e.g., EAM is a member of the Federation Internationale Equestre (FEI); FAM is a member of Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)). International sporting success is generally regarded as a direct reflection of the NSA effectiveness in managing and delivering comprehensive sport development (Shilbury et al., 2023).

Numerous governments globally including Malaysia have made strategic investment in sports, visionarily to produce successful athletes competing nationally and internationally (De Bosscher et al., 2023). Within the responsibility of the NSA, sport development requires a spectrum of organisational aspects such as provision of programmes supporting appropriate experiences for participants based on their age, skill level, and other factors; flexible pathways that allow participants to transition to various programmes at various levels to meet their needs; appropriate facilities for individuals to participate; and personnel to facilitate programme delivery and participant development (Baker, et al., 2023; Viollet et al., 2023). Achieving elite performance requires understanding the confluence of various factors across the entire system: from the broad macro-level (country context) and the meso-level (National Sport Association policy and delivery) to the micro-level (athlete and participant characteristics) (Thuany et al., 2023).

Over the past few decades, the adherence to the concept of systematically and strategically developing athletes in pursuit of enhancing their medal winning prospects has emerged as a priority area for sport development among most, if not all, nations competing at major international events (De Bosscher & Shibli, 2021; Gómez-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Kučera et al.,

2023), alongside a growing tendency and initiative in the discovery of talent, talent development and development pathway as subject matters of interest of many countries as well as researchers and practitioners (Taylor et al., 2022; Till & Baker, 2020a). It is established that there was correlation with regard to NSA capable of developing successful performance of athletes at international level are likely to benefit from receiving government funding, financial rewards and recognition (Kučera et al., 2023).

Recent studies emphasise the need for sport-specific evidence to guide athlete development pathways, especially in settings where elite systems are still uneven or fragmented (Coutinho et al., 2023; Gallant and Bélanger, 2021). Although structured support from national sport bodies is known to influence international success, very little of this understanding has been applied to Malaysian equestrian sport. This paper responds to that gap by reviewing established development models and considering how they can be adapted to the realities of the sport in Malaysia.

The study focuses on the relevance of LTAD, DMSP and SPLISS Pillar 4 and how these frameworks can inform a clearer and more consistent pathway for equestrian athletes. The aim is to offer a conceptual foundation that future exploratory or athlete-based research can build on.

Using these frameworks as a guide allows the paper to reflect on how Malaysia's equestrian pathway compares with broader international practices and where meaningful improvements are still needed.

#### *Common Sport Development Model*

The most common analogies on sport development (i.e., providing pathway for participation and talent development) resemble the pyramid model in which the entry level to a sport is at the base of the pyramid (i.e., mass participation) before moving up to the peak of the pyramid (i.e., elite participation) (Adelfinsky, 2021; Baker, Gayman, et al., 2023; Eime et al., 2022). Holistic athlete development pathway consensus views it as a progression of athletic development along a development continuum or development pathway from the acquisition of fundamental movement skills to lifelong participation and elite excellence (Patatas et al., 2020). However, this common pyramid analogies represent a linear pathway to elite success in which further progression of the athletes depends on the process of elimination (i.e., talent identification, talent selection), hence a short term or piecemeal perspective and approach as opposed to the contemporary advocacy to long term and dynamic athlete development pathway (i.e., talent development) (Till et al., 2022; Till & Baker, 2020b). Athlete development pathways, according to researchers, are dynamic processes in which individuals enter, progress, or remain at a specific stage based on their skill, interest, opportunity, and goals (Patatas et al., 2020; Till et al., 2022).

Likewise, the current sport development framework or model of Malaysia is largely based on the pyramid model and in essence, has been the general pathway for participation and talent development for various sports development conveniently for the past two decades under the purview of National Sports Council (NSC) of Malaysia. This sport development model has been the general guidance and practice of various National Sport Associations (NSA) in Malaysia providing the pathway for participation and talent development. It essentially

outlays the pathway and talent/athlete development programmes based on the progression (i.e., school level, district level, state level, international level) from grassroot to elite level especially to the traditional, popular or excelled sports (e.g., badminton, athletics, aquatics, gymnastic, football, hockey).

#### *Contemporary Sport Development Pathway Model*

The development and transformation of sport talent into elite athlete require the athlete to go through different stages or phases along the development continuum or development pathway (Baker, Gayman, et al., 2023). In terms of managing or administering sport talent, scientific research underpins the conclusion that it normally takes eight to twelve years of structured training (i.e., structured training, deliberate practice) for sport talent to achieve the elite level (Dowling & Washington, 2021; Staff et al., 2023). Researchers suggest that participation of several sports (i.e., unstructured training, deliberate play) at the early stage before focusing and mastering at a specific discipline of sport (specialisation) is valuable and contribute to active participation (Murata et al., 2022). However, in contrast, researchers also acknowledge that some sports benefit on the late specialisation pathway rather than the early specialisation regime (De Bosscher et al., 2023).

Recognizing the limits of linear pyramid analogies, new models emerged to provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic and complex sports career pathway. These theories, which elaborate on or condense existing strategic frameworks, center on three main perspectives: athlete development and participation (i.e., Long-Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD); Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP); Foundation, Talent, Elite, Mastery Model (FTEM)), organizational and management strategies (i.e., Attraction, Retention/Transition and Nurturing Model (ARTN)), and athlete environment and career transition (i.e., Athletic Talent Development Environmental Model, Holistic Athletic Career Model (HAC)) (Patatas et al., 2020).

A recent scoping review of research on athlete development confirmed strong support for two major models, the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) and the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) (Gallant & Bélanger, 2021). These models effectively map out an athlete's journey across different developmental stages and levels of sport involvement (Varghese et al., 2022). Specifically, both models emphasize that young athletes should engage in deliberate play early on and then transition to deliberate practice at the appropriate time to build the expert skills needed to reach an elite level. While studies supporting these models come from 13 different countries, the majority originate from Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom (Gallant & Bélanger, 2021). These two models fit the developmental pathway characteristic of an individual evolution of sport participation into becoming elite performers (Baker, Gayman, et al., 2023; Gallant & Bélanger, 2021).

#### **Discussion -Towards A Practical Framework**

Moving forward for a more sustainable talent development, there is evidently an increasing number of countries incorporating and emphasising elite athlete development pathway in relevance to the need for excellence in performance and medal winning success (Gallant & Bélanger, 2021). Instead of viewing talent as a fixed and measurable trait, talent should be viewed as emergent in which talent will experience and follow a set process of developing and nurturing (Till & Baker, 2020a). A key step forward for sport development could be the

establishment and implementation of a defined concept that prioritises long-term development (i.e., player enhancement) over immediate results (e.g., winning and current performance). Such advocacy and positioning mean that NSA faces difficult challenges in the management and delivery of sport development that should strike the balance between long term athlete development needs and the organisation needs for immediate success (Till & Baker, 2020a).

Assuming the need to have a long-term plan for the development of the athlete, various NSA of successful sporting nations have taken on board proper planning, development and nurturing of the athletes from junior to elite level as their primary objective (Kitching & Campbell, 2019). There are generic models and practice theory (e.g., LTAD, DMSP) that address talent development as well as athlete development pathway to achieve certain required level of performance (Kitching & Campbell, 2019; Millar et al., 2020; Patatas et al., 2020). Evidently, developed nations (i.e., United Kingdom, Australia, Canada) have made it mandatory for each NSA of different sports to have in place long term athlete development plans as a blueprint document for the development of sport talent of their respective sports (Nolte & Hollander, 2020). The long-term athlete development plan is paramount to receiving government grant, funding, private sponsorship and in ensuring the succession of elite sport development (Nolte & Hollander, 2020).

Theoretically, the athlete has to undergo at least 8-10 years of structured training (deliberate practice) to become elite performers. Therefore, it is common for the athlete to follow certain pathway of development and sport participation. The bulk of the sport specific athlete development plan and details should be designed based on studies derived from the athlete perspectives (i.e., micro-level) which identify relevant factors such as unstructured training (i.e., sampling, deliberate play), structured training (i.e., deliberate practice, specialisation) (Coutinho et al., 2023), coach support, parent involvement and motivation of the athlete during the different stages and transitions of athlete development (Valenti et al., 2020). Insights from the athlete perspectives (i.e., identify the different stages of development of the specific sport) provide empirical support for the respective NSA to devise the athlete development pathway (i.e., meso level) allowing the NSA to communicate their broad long-term practices of athlete development (Kitching & Campbell, 2019). Conscientious understanding and approach to long term athlete development have led NSA of successful sporting nations particularly developed nations to formalise elite pathways to ensure organisational transparency and efficiency as well as outlining the coordination of resources for elite sport development success (Minikin & Robinson, 2015; Taylor et al., 2022).

Equestrian Association of Malaysia (EAM) functions as the NSA and affiliate member of the Olympic Council of Malaysia; is responsible for the participation and governance of equestrian sport in Malaysia. Internationally, EAM is the registered member of the FEI, therefore, is the sole sanctioning authority for equestrian discipline in the country. Elite equestrian talent identification, talent development, development programmes and strategies are within the scope of interest and responsibility of EAM. Equestrian sport is unique in the sense that in contrast to other sports, equestrian sport is a sport that 1) features the combination elements of human rider athlete and horse athlete; 2) has no gender separation and particular rigid age segregation for competition events and uniquely; 3) equestrian rider athletes enjoy relatively longer competitive career; and 4) two distinct sport development pathways for the rider and

the horse. In the context of EAM, this acquisition and analysis exercise of structured athlete perspectives are rather mundane or absent. Perhaps a focus-group discussion of athletes and other players in the field be arranged towards this end.

Each sport requires specific elite sport development pathway depending on the nature and the point of specialisation (i.e., early specialisation or late specialisation) of the respective sport to ensure prudent planning (e.g., policy, programmes) and support (e.g., funding, sponsorship) given to the athlete at the right juncture along the development pathway (Coutinho et al., 2023; Ridpath et al., 2020). Concurrently, research on the NSA of countries like Malaysia which are at the nascent of elite sport development is still sporadic and fragmented in the formalisation of elite pathway for elite sport development resulting in the inconsistencies of producing high performing athlete at international stage (Minikin & Robinson, 2015; Muslim et al., 2021). The outlook is short term rather than long term at the expense of consistency and stability in achieving the desired key performance indicator.

In terms of elite sport development in Malaysia, the National Sports Council of Malaysia (NSC) in collaboration with the NSA of respective selected priority sports (e.g., aquatic, gymnastic, taekwondo) provide elite programmes (i.e., podium programme) that focus special form of pathway for selected elite athlete on expectation of relatively higher possibility to contribute medals in major international games (i.e., Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, SEA Games, Asian Games). Notably, elite pathway of different sports in Malaysia may also vary depending on how the respective sport either private (i.e., private coaches, academy) or publicly provided (i.e., podium programme, National Football Development Programme (NFDP)) athlete development pathways. Equestrian sport in Malaysia for instance operate mainly through private athlete development pathway although being recognised by the NSC as priority sport for SEA Games and Asian Games. Nonetheless, it is important to realise that the publicly supported sports development pathway in Malaysia are akin to the pyramid model and there is much advocacy in developing elite sport development and long-term athlete development pathway as strategic initiative in the National Sport Vision 2030 (NSC, 2021) albeit in the current context it is still much to be desired.

Malaysia has only a small successful elite equestrian rider which have competitively competed in major international games (i.e., SEA Games, Asian Games, Equestrian World Championship). The current practice of Equestrian Association of Malaysia (EAM) is limited to talent selection for specific short-term purposes (i.e., Youth Olympic Games, SEA Games, Asian Games). In light of the random but persistent measured success of the Malaysian equestrian sport in producing medals for major international games such as SEA Games and Asian Games, equestrian sport has been listed as priority sport for these major international games (National Sports Council, 2019). Concurrent with the view of having athlete development pathway to guide the practices of NSA in long term athlete development, EAM has stated in their last available strategic plan (i.e., Road to Olympic Tokyo 2020) the need to develop and incorporate elite athlete development pathway but however notably, has yet to materialise (EAM, 2022).

As aforementioned, there are theories and generic development model on athlete development being adopted by the NSA of successful sporting nations as the basis for their respective sport development pathway (Gallant & Bélanger, 2021). Notably, successful

equestrian nations (i.e., United Kingdom, Canada) have adopted the generic Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model to guide their practices in forming the elite pathway for their equestrian sport development. Successful sporting nations have set the standard for other aspiring nations to follow, however, nations who have used the benchmarks of other countries have frequently failed to attain the desired goals (Kitching & Campbell, 2019). It has been discovered that further research on the differences in the delivery and management of elite sport development is required to represent country and sport-specific settings (Coutinho et al., 2023; Kitching & Campbell, 2019). The different contextual dimension is also telling in equestrian sport, for example the competitive horse athlete in the Malaysian context is not a privilege resource and must be acquired overseas at a great cost.

Previous Malaysian studies on sport developmental pathway (i.e., swimming, badminton, soccer) have primarily concentrated on identifying the structured (deliberate practice) and unstructured training (deliberate play) undertaken by the elite athlete along the different stages of development pathway (Ahmad, Low, Nadzalan, et al., 2020; Low et al., 2018) to determine the nature of the respective sport specialisation stage (i.e., early specialisation or late specialisation). Findings so far conclude that most elite Malaysian athlete of these respective sports (i.e., swimming, badminton, soccer) follow the early specialisation pathway (Ahmad, Low, Nadzalan, et al., 2020; Low et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2019) nonetheless, far too little attention has been paid to mapping these findings to established athlete development model. Recent conceptual studies on the Malaysian sport developmental pathway suggest that NSA of respective sport should identify the different development stages and adopt athlete development model (e.g., LTAD, DMSP) to provide elite athlete development plan (Ahmad, Low, & Nadzalan, 2020).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Despite the international success of some Malaysian elite equestrian athletes, there is no official program or roadmap detailing the development pathway they followed. This gap makes it difficult for new, promising athletes to replicate that success, potentially causing Malaysia to lose out on talent. To solve this, the individual development paths of current elite riders should be compared and aligned with established theoretical models of sport participation (i.e., DMSP and LTAD). These models demonstrate that athletes advance through clear stages (i.e., sampling, deliberate play, deliberate practice, specialization) and that success is fundamentally driven by crucial individual ingredients: motivation, rigorous training, strong coaching, and family support.

While individual talent is necessary, athletes require organizational support to transition to the elite level. Equestrian Association of Malaysia (EAM), as the national governing body, plays a critical role in managing all phases of the athlete development process from mass participation to professional training. EAM is tasked with talent identification, selection, and long-term development. Consequently, assessing the support and role provided by the EAM to enhance the elite athlete pathway is a necessary undertaking, which need to be investigated as highlighted in Pillar 4 of the SPLISS framework.

Ultimately, creating an effective elite equestrian pathway for the entire nation requires considering both the athlete's individual development (micro-level) and the support provided

by the governing organization (meso-level). These two perspectives must be integrated to successfully shape the country's equestrian sport system (figure 1).

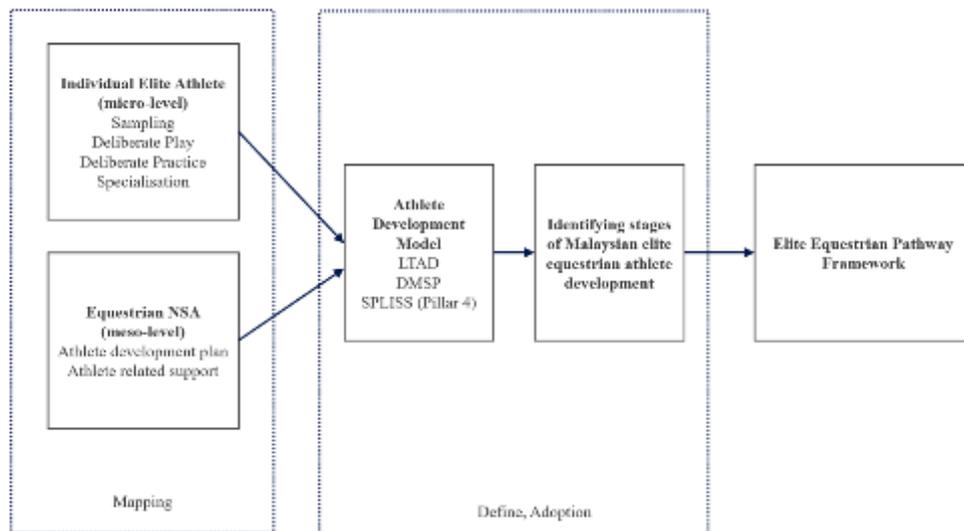


Fig. 1 Practical Elite Equestrian Pathway Process Framework

## Conclusion

In view of the fact that there is an absence or uncharted official development pathway or long-term development plan for the equestrian athlete in Malaysia, it is imperative that an exploratory study on the nature of the current development pathways for the elite equestrian athlete in Malaysia would be necessary through identifying the profound stages or transitional stages on how these elite equestrian athletes were introduced to the equestrian sport and the progression reaching up to professional or elite level. The aforesaid discussion highlights the importance of an adaptable framework for equestrian sport development pathway especially developing the elite equestrian pathway that is relevant to the distinctive nature of equestrian sport in particular the presence of the horse athlete that requires special reflection and thus requires a clear and robust initiatives taking the cue of the LTAD and SPLISS frameworks, among others.

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