FIFA Talent Identification Webinar Series

Webinar 2 of 3: Seeing More Clearly – Factors That Shape How We Observe & Evaluate Young Players

Summary · Oct 15, 2026

About This Webinar

Webinar 2 of 3 in FIFA's *Talent Identification in Football – A Global Conversation* series, delivered 15 October 2026 by **Mirelle van Rijbroek** and **Richard Allen** (FIFA Talent Development Scheme), hosted by **Lisa Fallon** (FIFA Training Centre). Runs alongside the free **FIFA Talent Identification Foundation Course**.

- **Webinar 1 (17 Sep 2026):** What is Talent Identification & What Are We Looking For? – available on demand
- **Webinar 3 (19 Nov 2026):** Identifying Female Talent – Seeing Potential Through a Female Lens, Mirelle van Rijbroek with Maria Khan

What You'll Take Away

- Tell performance and potential apart and know which indicators of potential to look for.
- Recognise how relative age, growth and maturation distort what we see.
- Read every observation in the context of the player's environment and access.
- Name your own biases and use structure to reduce their impact.
- Evaluate players against their stage, not just their age; for girls and boys.
- Use the FIFA Dimensions Model and its foundations to move from a snapshot to a system.

1. Factors That Shape What We See

> *"Being aware of these factors doesn't mean we have all the answers. It means we ask better questions."*

Errors in talent ID are **not random**. When the same types of players keep being selected and the same types keep being missed, it is a pattern and patterns are predictable, and therefore preventable. Ignored, these factors shape opportunity, training and game conditions and competition, and lead to lost talent. The response: **create awareness, share knowledge and experience, develop competencies.**

Three steps for every factor: **See it** (notice when a factor shapes what you observe) → **Name it** (use one shared language, so calibration works) → **Adjust for it** (change what you look at, the questions you ask, and the weight you give to what you saw).

Six factors were covered: **performance vs potential · relative age effect · growth & maturation · environment & access · unconscious bias · gender, ages & stages.** None works alone. A late-born, late-maturing player from a poor environment is hit three times. And behind all six sits one practical truth: **one observation is never enough.**

2. Performance vs Potential

> *"The best performers in youth football are not always the players with the greatest long-term potential."*

	Performance	**Potential**
Question	What does this player do?	What could this player become?
Time	Present – visible now	Future – often invisible
Nature	Context-dependent: opponent, role, fatigue, environment	Capacity-based: learning rate, psychology, genetics, opportunity
How it shows	Visible and seductive – one game can show it	Hidden and complex – needs many observations

Across 71 studies and 9,241 athletes, the predictors of junior success were the opposite of those for senior world-class success (Barth et al., 2022).

The **performance–potential matrix** separates **shouting talent** (high on both, e.g. Kylian Mbappé, Linda Caicedo) from **whispering talent** (high potential, not yet performing, e.g. Kevin De Bruyne, Aitana Bonmatí) – the players most easily missed.

Indicators of potential: curiosity · rapid adaptation · focus under pressure · competitive drive · game understanding · resilience · coachability · quality despite context · delivering when it counts. Most show only over time and across contexts – often more clearly in training than in matches, and some only in conversation off the pitch.

Potential killers: early specialisation and burnout · early de-selection · win-first environments · maturation bias · no psychological safety · senior templates on youth players. Performance is the tip of the iceberg (Fernández-Aráoz, 2014); abilities only become elite performance through access, opportunity, the right environment and chance (Bailey & Morley, 2006). The journey is never a straight line and some challenge builds resilience (Collins & MacNamara, 2012).

3. The Relative Age Effect (RAE)

> *"Being relatively older says nothing about your talent or your potential. It can determine whether you are ever seen at all."*

Players are grouped by birth year, so a January-born and a December-born player compete with almost a year's difference in growth, strength and experience. Players born early in the year (Q1) are **over-selected**; late-born players (Q4) are **under-selected** and lose access to higher-level competition, top coaching, better teammates, facilities and medical support, with a higher risk of de-selection and dropout. Late-born players who survive often develop stronger coping, resilience and adaptability: indicators of potential in themselves.

FIFA data: at the Men's U-17 World Cup 2025, 39% of players were born in January–March and 15% in October–December (46% vs 9% in 2023). At the Women's U-17 World Cup 2025: 30% vs 22%. An even spread would be 25% per quarter.

What organisations can do: *check* the birth-quarter spread of every long and short list · *show* relative age while observing (order lists by birth date) · *keep doors open* with later entry points and "futures" squads. FIFA's call for action adds training for coaches and scouts, age- and maturation-appropriate training and competition, a holistic long-term plan and a culture of knowledge.

The question every scout must ask: *are we selecting potential, or players born in the right quarter of the year?*

4. Growth & Maturation

> *"Two players in the same age group can be at completely different stages of biological development."*

Three processes drive development: **growth** (body size – not a straight line), **maturation** (progress toward biological adulthood – same sequence for everyone, individual timing) and **adaptation** (response to training – the one process we influence). Maturation runs in three areas – **biological, cognitive and social-emotional** – that rarely line up: a 14-year-old can look 16 and behave like 12. Relative age and maturation are related but not the same, and a tall player is not necessarily a mature one.

Girls reach the growth spurt about **two years earlier** than boys. Early maturers can dominate at U13–U14 and may be near their ceiling; late maturers may peak only at 17–18+. A temporary dip in coordination is often biology, not lack of talent. The **maturation bias trap**: early maturers get selected, better environments and more coaching; late maturers may drop out before their bodies catch up.

Practical tools – measure, band, label: measure standing height, sitting height and body mass every 3 months (growth velocity, % of predicted adult height); **bio-band** some games and sessions by maturity, not birth year; label maturity status on the lists or bibs scouts use. One question for every report: *"Would I rate this action the same if the player were average size?"*

Note: most of this research comes from Northern Europe and North America, and from boys. The women's game and the Southern hemisphere need catching up.

5. Environment & Access

> *"You never observe a player in isolation. What you see is always a combination of the player and everything around them."*

What the scout sees = Player quality + Context + Opportunity + Task demands. The environment matters three times: it shapes how a player develops, what we see on the day, and whether we see the player at all.

- **Context** – a 7/10 on sand with one coach for 30 players may hold more potential than an 8/10 in an academy with four sessions a week. From the **player's perspective**: quality of coaching, programme, games and competition, facilities, social and daily-life conditions. From the **scout's perspective**: match context, physical conditions, team and game structure, player readiness.
- **Access** – every talent event has a hidden entry ticket: cost, distance, the right club, school and exams, family and culture, and girls' access to teams, pitches and competitions. At the U-17 World Cups 2025, 22% of girls versus 7% of boys came through schools, universities or private academies rather than clubs.

Before writing a report, ask: What were the conditions today? How much opportunity did this player really have? What is the quality of their environment? In a better environment, what could they become? And who could *not* have been here today?

6. Unconscious Bias

> *"Bias is not about bad intentions. It is the normal functioning of human cognition. None of us are immune."*

The famous dress – blue and black to some, white and gold to others – showed how people can look at the same thing and see something different. Our brains take shortcuts, shaped by upbringing, culture and football experience; in scouting, those shortcuts can decide whether a player ever gets an opportunity.

Where	Biases
During observation	**Confirmation** (seeing what confirms our view) · **anchoring** (the badge, a colleague's rating) · **recency** (the last-minute goal) · **halo/horn effect** (one action colours the rest) · **attribution** ("unlucky" vs "poor finishing")
Built into the system	**Profile bias** (what a centre-back "should" look like) · **perception bias** (stereotypes about nationality, background or gender) · **hindsight bias** ("we knew it all along")

Maturation bias is where they meet: the physically dominant early developer triggers them all, the late developer none and disappears.

Structures that reduce bias: rate before you talk · criteria before verdict · evidence, not adjectives ("scanned before 4 of 5 receptions", not "good vision") · many observations and observers · check the list (birth quarter, maturity, region, club) · review outcomes. The goal is not to eliminate bias, but to make it harder to act on unnoticed. Own your biases, invite challenge, slow down.

7. Gender, Ages & Stages

> *"Age helps us organise players. Stage helps us understand them."*

Every player develops at their own pace: **same age ≠ same stage ≠ same readiness.** *Age* is chronological and easy to measure; *stage* is developmental readiness – physical, cognitive and social-emotional; *readiness for football* is whether a player can meet what the game asks at that age (game format, the 4 moments, individual → lines → team). Scouts evaluate against three building blocks: the organisation's **reference framework**, the **developmental characteristics** of the age group, and the **youth football learning process**.

Stage	What to look for	What the system should do
Foundation	Love of the game, coordination, 1v1 courage, learning speed	No selection; lots of play and other sports
Before the spurt	Technique under pressure, scanning, decisions	Open first programmes; start measuring growth
Growth spurt	Game understanding, coachability, resilience	Bio-band, label maturity, no irreversible decisions
After the spurt	Robustness, positional understanding, self-regulation	Re-scout players released earlier
Transition	Adapting to senior speed, consistency	Keep windows open to 23; track late bloomers

Many systems make key selection decisions at **ages 12–14** – the most distorted window: mid-spurt for boys, just after it for girls. *"Don't make your biggest decisions where the picture is most distorted."*

The female lens: female players have long been evaluated through a male lens; male benchmarks, pathways and research (only 6% of sport science studies, 2014–2020, included women only). Five areas – environment & opportunity, decisions & narratives, history & system, developmental psychology, developmental biology - are explored in Webinar 3.

8. Future-Focused Talent ID & the FIFA Dimensions Model

> *"Do we have a system that gives us the best possible chance of identifying the talent that exists in our environment?"*

Each factor can distort a single observation; a **snapshot**. A system builds a **film**: many observations, over time, by several people, using the same criteria. It brings equal opportunities, resource efficiency and long-term goals. *We cannot guarantee the outcome; we can increase the probability.*

What good looks like – nine characteristics: *Direction* (clear vision and philosophy · aligned with the pathway · long-term development) · *Process* (structured and consistent · one shared language · evidence-informed) · *People & context* (inclusive and objective · adapted to local context · trained people, right tools). It **lasts** when it is not tied to one person, written down and shared, data follows the player, new scouts are trained, and it is reviewed and budgeted.

The FIFA Talent ID Dimensions Model & Foundations	
4 dimensions	**Philosophy** (who are we, how do we want to play?) → **Profiles** (what player are we looking for?) → **Identification** (how do we find and observe them?) → **Selection** (how do we decide, fairly?)
2 constants	**Talent ID Education** (shared language, shared standards) · **Plan – Do – Review** (a system that never reviews itself drifts)
3 foundations	**Coverage** (are we reaching every player?) · **Depth** (do we see them often enough to decide?) · **Quality – process & people** (can we trust the work?)

One model, adapted locally. *Context:* player pool, resources and staff, geography, competition. *Process:* adapt, invest (someone whose main job is talent ID), educate, create ownership. *People – the five Cs:* clarity, consistency, capability, collaboration and **care** – player welfare and safeguarding as the golden thread, because we are dealing with children.

Five starting points: create clarity and alignment · build structure and consistency · embed it in the development plan · make the case for investment · keep learning. And ask every question **for girls and for boys**: *"A system that is not intentionally built to include female players will not include them by accident."*

Key Takeaways

- **Performance is not potential.** Watch progress over time: how quickly does this player learn and adapt?
- **What you see is shaped by things you may not notice.** Check birth month and maturation before you judge.

- **Bias is universal – the danger is not knowing yours.** Name it, slow down, use shared criteria and more than one pair of eyes.
- **A late developer is not a lesser talent** – and don't forget early maturers, who often drop off later. Re-assess; don't release on one moment.
- **Talent is always expressed in context.** Write the conditions into every report: pitch, opponent, coaching, access.
- **From snapshot to system.** Coverage, depth and quality make good talent ID structural, so it no longer depends on one scout on one day.

Next Steps & Resources

- **Take the FIFA Talent Identification Foundation Course** – free and open to all, on the FIFA Training Centre.
- **Webinar 1 on demand:** The Fundamentals of Talent Identification.
- **Webinar 3 (19 Nov):** Identifying Female Talent – Seeing Potential Through a Female Lens, with Maria Khan.
- **Research on the FIFA Training Centre** – FIFA U-17 and U-20 World Cup player analyses, and more research on the relative age effect and on growth and maturation.
- A recording of this webinar and the full learner guide will be published on the FIFA Training Centre.

> *FIFA Talent ID Education: give every talent a chance.*