

Identification of Talent in Soccer – What Do Coaches Look For?

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Talent identification is considered an important task for soccer coaches. Even though researchers have focused on talent identification, few have paid attention to the criteria the coaches use to identify soccer talent. This review article is limited to one country and covers studies on Norwegian youth and senior top-level coaches. The main purpose is to describe which criteria the coaches use to identify talented soccer players, by comparing their criteria to Williams' and Franks' model of talent prediction. The results indicate that most coaches mainly focus on player skills, and that also mental factors were described as important. Even if some coaches focused on their own position in the talent identification process, most of them clearly stated that the players' development is dependent on the players themselves, also indicating that sociological factors were of less importance. In conclusion, the article highlights that the Norwegian coaches seem to have clear views on how to identify the most talented players. Even so, they demonstrate difficulties in defining which criteria they use to identify the most talented players..

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Introduction

Talent identification is considered an important task for soccer coaches. As a consequence, top-level European clubs seem to identify soccer talent at an increasingly earlier age (Rodríguez 2006). One reason for the clubs' wishes to identify soccer talent at a young age can be related to their fear of identifying these players too "late", both in terms of development opportunities and the risk of losing the players to competing clubs. By identifying players earlier, the clubs get to "shape" them at an early age, and thereby produce players according to the clubs' own playing systems and/or desirable skills. Even though quite a few researchers have focused on talent identification, few have paid attention to the criteria the coaches use to identify the soccer talents (Pankhurst & Collins 2013). An essential question in this regard is which criteria they use to identify talented players and, furthermore, how certain the coaches are regarding these criteria. Even though there are similarities between different European leagues, it is reasonable to assume that there are national differences both within and between European countries. This review article is limited to one country and includes studies on Norwegian youth and senior top-level coaches. The main purpose is to describe which criteria the coaches use to identify talented soccer players.

The talent concept

There is little consensus in the academic literature regarding the definition of talent (Gagné, 2000; Howe, Davidson & Sloboda 1998; Ommundsen 2009). Even so, there is agreement that the concept is interpreted differently within the context of sports (Wolstencroft 2002). According to Ommundsen (2009), talent is something you have, something you are, something you can be, or something you can develop. Talent can in this regard be seen as a static or dynamic concept. The static definition views talent as something you have inherited, which implies a focus on the performance level at an early age, while the dynamic definition regards talent as something you can develop. A common definition by Singer and Janelle (1999), which covers both these aspects, also includes the static dimension by stating that it "disposes of a specific combination of anatomical-physical characteristics, abilities, and other personality traits", and the dynamic by further stating that "provided that specific training and other environmental conditions are given". Researchers have challenged the static definition since this approach focuses on a few early indicators of skills and performance, which often can be explained by differences in maturation and the fact that development is individual and therefore appears at different speeds (Gagne 2000; Martindale, Collins & Abraham 2007).

Simonton (1999) has emphasised the importance of a multi-dimensional definition to understand completely the talent concept in a multi-faceted development process. Even if these definitions point to the need for a multidimensional concept, its extensive use would indicate that talent is viewed as a clearly defined term in soccer. Nevertheless, this has not been confirmed in studies on the concept (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Auweel, Cuyper, Mele & Rzewnicki 1993; Howe et al. 1998; Regnier, Salmela & Russell 1993; Simonton 1999). Other researchers have even indicated that the concept of temporary talent or innate genius is a pure myth (Howe, Davidson and Sloboda 1998). Perhaps, as a consequence,

the talent term has also been divided into more manageable terminology; Russell (1989) proposed four concepts within the talent definition. He distinguished between ‘detection’, ‘selection’, ‘identification’ and ‘development’, where talent detection refers to the discovery of potential performers who are currently not involved in the sport in question. Talent identification refers to the process of recognising current participants by their potential to become elite players. Talent development implies that players are provided with a suitable learning environment so that they have the opportunity to realise their potential. Finally, talent selection involves the ongoing process of identifying players at various stages, which can demonstrate a prerequisite level of performance for inclusion in a given squad or team. This article will only cover the identification of talented players.

Talent identification

Early indicators of talent may be used to provide a basis for predicting those individuals who are more or less likely to succeed at some later stage. The talent concept is often used in many contexts because of the need to legitimise the identification of players ahead of others and often at an early age. Such an understanding indicates the intention to separate the performers on the basis of talent and abilities, and to a lesser extent on the development of skills and abilities. The idea of identifying talent at a young age rests on several basic assumptions suggesting that talent, at least partly inherited, is domain specific, that there are observable early indications of talent that a trained eye can identify, and that such early indications can predict success in the future (Durand-Bush & Salmela 2001). Sport scientists have tried to identify indicators of talent at an early stage by using different test batteries (Abbott & Collins 2004). Few of these have managed to describe factors that can be used to identify players ahead of others. At present, professional soccer clubs rely on the subjective assessment of scouts or coaches, supported by a ‘shopping list’ of key criteria. These criteria include acronyms such as TABS (Technique, Attitude, Balance, Speed), SUPS (Speed, Understanding, Personality, Skill) (Stratton, Reilly, Williams & Richardson 2004) and TIPS (Talent, Intelligence, Personality, Speed) (Brown 2001). Identification of talent in soccer should be considered complicated, mainly because soccer performance consists of a variety of skills that influence the results. According to Williams and Franks (1998), you have to consider the role of sociological, psychological, physical and physiological factors to be able to predict talent in soccer. Within these four categories there are also a range of factors that have to be regarded as important in the prediction of talent in each category. In recent decades, several extensive models have been presented and increasing numbers of researchers are using a more complex model to predict what is required to reach a high international level (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson & Wall 2003).

The most probable and known outcome of identifying soccer players at an early age is selecting those who are oldest both physically and biologically. A characteristic that has been proven to be crucial to identify at a young age is birth month, an effect known as the relative age effect difference (RAE). This effect among male players, who have been selected or identified as talented at a young age, is characterised by birth early in the year and especially during the first three months (Helsen, Van Winckelmann, & Williams 2005; Musch & Hay 1999; Peterson 2011, Verhulst 1992). This means that the players who are

perceived as talented have advantages over other athletes in their cohort, as a result of differences in maturation and development of the individual which takes place at different speeds (Gagne 2000; Martindale et al, 2007). Even though this effect has been known since 1985, the same effect still exists among Norwegian premier level players (Wiium, Ommundsen & Enksen 2010). As this effect is so well documented, there is risk that the coaches gamble on the wrong players, instead of players who might have major development potential and developed better skill. Coaches who focus on identifying players at a young age will have to focus on the contemporary level of performance and physical characteristics as the fundamental factor in the talent identification process (Musch & Grondin 2000). This implies that it is at least difficult to identify a talent at an early stage, and thereby predict which players will develop into elite performers in the long term, and manage to preserve a performance curve at a high level (Bloom 1985).

Many researchers have examined the different criteria to identify talent in soccer (Helson, Hodges, Winckel & Starkes 2000, Reilly, Williams, Nevill & Franks 2000; Williams & Reilly 2000), even though few of them have drawn attention to the role of coaches and their understanding of the identification process, and which criteria they use in their identification. Previous studies have shown that many coaches relate to a smaller number of factors when identifying talent (Williams & Reilly 2000). One of the few studies concerning coaches' understanding and criteria for identifying talented soccer players is the Danish study of national youth team coaches (Christensen 2009). By adopting Bourdieu's concept of practical sense, Christensen (2009) found that coaches use their practical sense and their visual experience to recognise patterns of movement among the players. Secondly, she showed that coaches used classificatory schemes to characterise their preferred so-called "autotelic" players, that is, players that, from the coaches' perspective, exhibit a potential to learn, practice and improve. In this process, these coaches largely focused on specific skills and the importance of attitudes and described game intelligence as a vital factor in identifying talented soccer players. However, few of these coaches were able to express clearly which criteria they used to identify the most talented players.

Even though talent identification is a vital part of talent development, we have little knowledge about which criteria top-level coaches use to identify the most talented players. This review article presents an overall picture of Norwegian soccer coaches' criteria to identify talented players by looking at studies covering the last decade.

Method

The present article is a review of studies on Norwegian soccer coaches, which focuses mainly on coaches of players at the highest youth level in soccer. The criterion included in this review was that the study had to be conducted within the last 10 years, starting from 2004. Most studies cover coaches at a high performance level at a club, regional or national level, studies that can be described as using strategic samples. Some of the coaches are also part of an exclusive group of top-level coaches, which makes it difficult – a methodological challenge – to compare them with other coaches.

Table 1 *Overview of studies on talent identification among Norwegian soccer coaches.*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Sample (n)</i>	<i>Type of Coach</i>	<i>Design</i>
2004	Sæther	14	Premier League coaches	Interview
2009	Mong	53	Development coaches Group 1: 19 premier league coaches Group 2: 14 2 nd level Group 3: 20 2 nd division	Questionnaire
2009	Engevik & Eggen	1	Player development coach	Interview
2010	Moberg	3	Academy coaches	Interview
2011	Christiansen	12	Group 1: 9 player development coaches in the region Group 2: 3 player development coach in a premier level club	Questionnaire
2011	Roaas	6	Development coaches (club and national team coaches)	Interview
2011	Jenssen	7	Group 1: 5 U15-U18 coaches Group 2: 1 U13-U16 player development coach Group 3: 1 U21 top-player developer	Interview
2011	Michalsen	2	Senior coach 2 nd division Junior coach	Interview
2013	Lekve	2	Player development coach Recruit coach	Interview

These studies have mainly a qualitative design, with the exception of two quantitative studies. Although nine studies have been published on this topic in the last ten years, they only cover the total of 100 coaches (see table 1). With the exception of one study from 2004, all studies were conducted between 2009 and 2013, indicating increasing research on this topic.

Analysis

Williams and Franks' (1998) model for selection of soccer talents can be seen as the paradigm in identifying soccer talents. According to their model, the role of sociological, psychological, physical and physiological factors has to be considered to be able to predict talent in soccer. Since they came up with their model, it has been used to a large extent in Norwegian studies on talent identification in soccer. My main focus will be on the main factors in this model. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the Norwegian coaches are highlighting other factors as of equal importance.

How coaches rank the importance of different skills in soccer

Three of the nine studies asked coaches to rank the importance of different factors in the prediction of identifying talented players, partially by using Williams and Franks' (1998)

criteria for talent prediction. Elite coaches at senior level were asked to rank five factors from the most to the least important factor coaches use to identify a talent on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is most important and 5 is the least important. The results showed that coaches rated the technical (Mean 1.5) and tactical (Mean 2.29) features as most important followed by the psychological (Mean 3.14), physical (Mean 3.64) and social (Mean 4.43) properties (Sæther 2004). Mong (2009) studied player development coaches using the Talent Identification Questionnaire (TIQ). This questionnaire covers six factors with a range of questions regarding every factor, and the respondents were asked to answer on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 from fully agrees to fully disagree. These coaches rated the tactical (Mean 6.02) and psychological (Mean 5.86) factor as the most important, while the sociological (Mean 5.48) and technical (Mean 5.37) factors were of secondary importance. The least important factors according to these coaches were the physiological (Mean 5.28) and the anthropometric (Mean 3.12) factors. Christiansen (2011) used TIQ among player development coaches both in an elite club and regional teams. He found that these coaches emphasised all factors, even though the sociological (Mean 5.99), tactical (Mean 5.96) and psychological (Mean 5.95) factors were ranked as the most important. These coaches considered the technical (Mean 5.13) and physiological (Mean 4.85) factors as less important, even if they considered them almost equally important as the first three. However, these coaches too ranked the anthropometric criteria (Mean 3.53) as less important compared with the five other factors.

Since many coaches described most factors as important in talent identification, this would indicate that they emphasize an holistic perspective of the process. One player development coach emphasised such an holistic perspective when stating: “I cannot see that a 15 year old boy has a good talent, but I can talk to him” (Roas 2011:46). Furthermore, Sæther (2004) found that many of the elite coaches pointed to the importance of an holistic perspective, by focusing on the individual overall. These coaches viewed the player in relation to his situation both on and off the pitch, even though they stressed the importance of many factors in selecting the most talented players. This could be seen as support for Simonton’s (1999) selection process, and his claims that the concept of talent cannot be understood without a multidimensional understanding. However, with the exception of the study of elite coaches (Sæther 2004) who had to rank the different factors, the coaches could have problems separating the importance of the different factors in relation to each other. Seeing the factors as equally important could indicate that the coaches would have problems in identifying the talented players, because of the lack of definite factors to separate the players.

Basic skills

Studies have also required coaches to describe with their own words which criteria they use to identify talent. A common feature among most studies is the importance of skills (Jenssen 2011; Roas 2011; Sæther 2004). Even so, both within and between the different groups of coaches, they have a different focus regarding their criteria for identifying talented players. One of the biggest controversies in identifying players is the importance of basic or specific skills. While Christensen (2009) found that most Danish national

youth coaches focused mostly on specific skills, a large group of Norwegian elite coaches focused on basic skills (Sæther 2004). However, the elite coaches seem to be focused on both basic and extreme skills, while some see these skills in relation. The player development coaches in the Engevik and Eggen study (2009) disagreed in this regard, which corresponds with Moberg (2010) and his study of academy coaches who also differed on this issue. Furthermore, there were differences regarding which skills they focused on; some of the elite coaches pointed to the importance of having a wide range of skills, while others emphasised both the general and specific skills when identifying talent. This was also confirmed in the study of Jenssen (2011) showing that coaches highlighted the importance of players having both a certain skill level and expertise.

Even if there was distinct difference in the importance of basic or specific skills, many of the coaches pointed to the importance of the technical skills. As one second division coach pointed out: “that’s what you see, there and then” (Michalsen 2011). The study of Lekve (2013) confirms this statement; the player development coach highlighted the technical aspect as especially important. This was similarly the case in Moberg (2010). Jenssen (2011) found that the youth coaches pointed to perceptual skills, including motoric and technical skills. The elite coaches who ranked the technical factor as the most important did not emphasise this when asked to describe what they looked for in order to identify talented players (Sæther 2004). This could, however, indicate that these coaches viewed the technical factor as fundamental in the identification process.

Physical and physiological skills

A common characteristic which many of the groups of coaches mention regarding the importance of skills is physical skill. Quite a few of the elite coaches described the importance of such skills, but also mentioned different skills like speed, technique, physical resources and coordination in this regard (Sæther 2004). Some of these coaches considered soccer skills in relation to specific game situations, special playing styles and new trends in soccer. One player development coach also mentioned the importance of the physical factor among others when he stated: “we also look for players who have good basic skills, where speed is very important” (Engevik & Eggen 2009:20). That said, there were different reasons as to why the coaches focused on physical resources. One of the elite coaches stated that he had seen clear examples of age-specific national team players who had poor basic skills in this area. Another of the elite coaches remarked that the combination of physical resources and mental skills is important and claimed that “the better the skills a player has in this regard, the better prerequisites the player has” (Sæther 2004:37). Furthermore, a development coach argued that the physiological factor must be a part of the basic skills (Lekve 2013), indicating the natural expectation of physiological skills as the foundation of a player’s performance.

However, challenges in identifying young players by physical and physiological characteristics have also been noted by some coaches, mainly because of the difference in puberty and growth rate (Jenssen 2011), which have been found to be difficult to predict (Musch & Hay, 1999). One of these coaches viewed the definition of talent as difficult, since players are automatically characterised as talented because of their physical growth.

This coach was suggesting that talented players should have the potential to develop in the future. Since early physical development and the relative age effect clearly has been established as a vital factors in the identification of young talented players (Helsen et. al. 2005; Musch & Hay, 1999; Peterson 2011, Verhulst, 1992), he means that we should try to ignore this factor to a greater extent. According to Lekve (2013), development coaches see the talent concept as a challenge for many young players, since it sometimes is unfounded because of physical advantages, which are often lost when players grow older. These coaches claim that they are aware of the problem and focused more on technical players, even though they are obviously challenged by physically bigger players. Another of the coaches in the Jenssen study (2011) asserted – in line with Gagne (2000) – that one should go with those players who have the greatest potential and not those who have less potential but are physically dominant. This was also pointed out by a development coach who highlighted that selecting players early in the identification process is of advantages to the physically big and technically skilled players. However, he further stated that players who have physical advantage will never succeed in soccer (Roas 2011). He explained this, stating: “We mustn’t throw away time on players with a special competence at an early age, which wins terrain because they are big (physically), I am completely open on the fact that physical factors are too important in the selections process”. This coach seems to agree with Bloom (1985), who argued that it is difficult to identify a talent at an early stage, and, therefore, to predict which players will develop into elite performers in the long term, and manage to preserve a performance curve at a high level.

Mental skills – the vital difference?

One factor which is really characteristic among the different groups of coaches is the importance of the mental or psychological factors. Even if they differ in their arguments as to why, most of them agree on this. Some of the factors mentioned were game intelligence, mental maturity, attitudes and personal qualities. Mental factors, however, were often considered as important in relation to each other; for example, a development coach claimed that personality and perceptual cognitive skills (game intelligence) were the most important mental skills (Jenssen 2011). Christensen (2009) showed that the Danish national youth soccer coaches emphasised game intelligence as a vital factor in identifying talented soccer players. The same seems to be the case among the Norwegian coaches. In the study of elite coaches, Sæther (2004) found, as already shown, that they regarded tactical skills as the second most important skill in identifying talented players. Quite a few of the development coaches also remarked on the importance of this factor and one of them clearly stated that “You must have it” (Jenssen 2011), which was also highlighted by the second division coach (Michalsen 2011). However, as another of these coaches pointed out, this is the most difficult skill to develop, indicating that it is a vital identification factor (Jenssen 2011).

Furthermore, mental maturity and the ability to cope with pressure and the challenges in the development process were also mentioned by a few coaches. Some of the elite coaches view the mental maturity in relation to the physical and highlight that the ability to handle challenges must be seen in terms of both. In this regard, one stated: “There can be players

who have matured both physically and mentally and who look to have a good proficiency, but that does not mean that this player is mentally ready to be lifted up to the observation 2-3 days a week, for example from older and better players” (Sæther 2004). This coach suggests that we should not challenge the young players if they are not mentally ready. Another of the elite coaches goes further when stating that the mental factor is actually the reason why many players fall behind in their development process, meaning a lack of expertise in Norway related to the mental factor (Sæther 2004). This was also noted in the study of development coaches, which stated that lack of mental skills was a destroying mechanism for young players (Jenssen 2011). However, according to a player development coach, the importance of maturity as part of the mental factor means that he can see a change from 10 years of age, in those players whose later development is tougher mentally, as opposed to players used to being the best at a younger age and cope badly when adversity comes (Roas 2011).

According to many of the coaches, talented soccer players are expected to have ambitions and “good/healthy” attitudes towards their soccer career. This was emphasised by both the elite coaches and elite development coaches (Engevik & Eggen 2009; Sæther 2004), and was pointed out earlier by the Danish national team coaches (Christensen 2009). The importance of attitudes was largely connected to an understanding of their own talent, which it is claimed are missing among many of the most talented players (Sæther 2004). Furthermore, this attitude was especially observed in relation to games and training, but also inner drive was mentioned by both player development coaches and elite coaches (Sæther 2004, Jenssen 2011). Engevik and Eggen (2009) found that when the elite player development coach talked about the most talented players in the club, he focused on the fact that they have an interest and inner motivation to be good players. Quite a few of the coaches claimed in fact that attitudes constituted one of the most decisive factors when identifying talent, and that this factor actually decides how professional the player will become (Roas 2011; Sæther 2004). One development coach clearly stated in this regard: “the thing that separates the players who can become good players and the players who will be good third division players are the attitudes” (Roas 2011:46).

The importance of personal qualities or personality is also seen as a crucial distinction between the best and second best players, according to many coaches. Personal characteristics such as “daring to try”, taking a chance, was stated as important (Sæther 2004), while others pointed to independence as a common feature among the many who become elite players (Roas 2011). Another of these coaches argued the fact that the players also need to be present (mentally) in the development process (Roas 2011). Jenssen (2011) showed that there was a distinct difference in the degree to which these coaches see personality as something they could affect. Some coaches had a dualistic understanding of personality, as genetically conditioned as well as influenced by the environment, and therefore adopted the more complex understanding of talent as described by Singer and Janelle (1999). The same coaches had a more static understanding (Ommundsen 2009) as regards the opportunity to change the player’s attitude and will to develop. Based on the responses of the coaches, Jenssen (2011) claimed that five such personal characteristics can be distinguished: courageous, self-reflective, willing to learn, hardworking and dedicated.

Development depends on the player, not the coach or the environment?

An interesting similarity between the coaches in the different studies is their focus on the players' responsibility for their own development. Few of the coaches mention the socio-logical factors as one of the most important in talent identification. In fact, the elite coaches describe this factor as the least important (Sæther 2004). Even so, these coaches highlight the holistic perspective if this process in terms of looking at the players' situation both on and off the pitch. Furthermore, Christiansen (2011) found that development coaches regarded the sociological factor as most important, even if they also considered the tactical, psychological, technical, and physiological factors as almost equally important. However, it seems like many coaches emphasised the importance of the clubs, as described by one coach; "the club should be a medium to make the player good", which also was highlighted by quite a few development coaches who described the club as the most important development arena for young players (Roaas 2011). The importance of a good environment for development was also mentioned by quite a few coaches, as one development coach stated; "we consider players who can go into our milieu in a good way" (Jenssen 2011:66). Such a focus was pointed to by other coaches, when they highlighted that a club-change can be justified only if the player is not given the same development opportunities in their current club (Engevik & Eggen 2009; Roaas 2011). Furthermore, the collaboration with schools was also mentioned as a vital environmental factor by many coaches (Engevik & Eggen 2009; Jenssen 2011; Sæther 2004).

Since many of the coaches' focus on the importance of mental skills like inner drive, motivation and willingness to train, this could indicate that they consider the talent development process as largely dependent on the players themselves (Moberg 2010; Jenssen 2011; Sæther 2004). Furthermore, Jenssen (2011) found that one of the coaches noted a change in the way coaches assess the talented players from a focus on visible skills to broader focus on mental abilities, such as willingness to train. According to this coach, they now also look at the mental capacity of the player. This was also explicitly stated by the player development coach in Engevik and Eggen's (2009) study, who stated that "we mostly look for players who have good attitudes to what we are doing, players who take responsibility and realise that the job has to be done by the player himself". Interestingly, some of the coaches referred to the difficulty of their own role in this process. One such difficulty was the number of coaches, which could make players uncertain of which coach to listen to (Jenssen 2011). In the study by Michalsen (2011), a senior coach claimed that the junior players did not know what was expected of them in the transition between junior to senior. This could indicate that there are quite a few pitfalls in the communication between what the coaches perceive as important and the degree to which the players are told what the coaches are expecting of them. The coaches do not seem to have problems defining who the talented players are, as shown by Christensen (2009), even if they, to a lesser extent, focus on their own role in this process (Durand-Bush & Salmela 2001). Moreover, motivation has been mentioned as an important factor affecting the possibility of players becoming elite players (Jenssen 2011). One development coach claimed in this regard that the top-level clubs in Norway focus insufficiently on attitudes and the ability to develop

and maintain motivation in the players (Roas 2011), indicating that the coaches could do more to motivate the players to do the “work” they are expecting of them.

Conclusion

Norwegian soccer coaches seem to have clear views on how to identify the most talented players. However, comparing the various findings both within and between the different studies, the coaches demonstrate difficulties in defining which criteria that could or should be used to identify the most talented players, as Christensen (2009) has shown in a study among Danish national youth coaches. Bearing in mind that most of the predicting factors from the model of Williams and Franks (1998) were mentioned by the coaches, this could indicate that these factors are indeed seen as essential. However, the coaches also focus on factors which could be described as secondary in the same model. Not surprisingly, most coaches were mainly focused on player skills, even if there were some differences regarding the importance of physical skills and the focus on basic or specific skills. The mental factor seems to be important for most coaches in all studies, where motivation was described as an essential factor. Even if some coaches focused on their own position in the talent identification process, most of them clearly stated that the players’ development is depends on the players themselves.

Since most studies in this review have been conducted in the last five years, this could be seen as an indicator of increasing focus on the problematic process of identification of talented players and the coach’s role in this process. The fact that Norwegian soccer coaches do not seem to have a clear definition of what talent is and how it could be identified, highlights the importance of more research on this topic and perhaps more longitudinal studies on the identification and development process. By following players and coaches over a period of time, one could have the opportunity to observe how the players develop and, therefore, determine the challenges that the coaches are faced with in the identification process.

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