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Talent Identification through Traditional Games in Sports: An Exploratory Review

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Abstract

Talent identification (TID) is regarded as a foundational process for producing elite sporting performance, yet the literature remains dominated by physical and anthropometric profiling with limited consensus on universally predictive variables (Johnston et al., 2018). Bharatiya traditional games such as Kho-Kho, Kabaddi, Mallakhamb, and Gilli-Danda constitute an indigenous movement heritage that has historically served functions of physical conditioning, character building, and community cohesion in India (Kumar et al., 2025). This exploratory review synthesizes existing empirical and conceptual literature to examine the multidimensional determinants that underlie talent identification within Bharatiya traditional games, situating them within the broader global TID framework spanning anthropometric, physiological, psychological, maturational, sociocultural, and technological domains (Pino-Ortega et al., 2021). Kho-Kho performance has been linked to speed, agility, and cardiorespiratory efficiency, and drill-based training has been shown to improve these physiological determinants among junior players (Anil & Gupta, 2022). Kabaddi talent has been associated with positional anthropometric and somatotype differences between raiders and defenders (Shelke et al., 2024). Psychological constructs such as motivation, deliberate practice, and self-regulation have emerged as robust predictors of athletic progression across sports (Baker & Young, 2014). Biological maturation and relative age effects further complicate identification during adolescence by conflating temporary developmental advantage with genuine talent (Finnegan et al., 2024). Sociocultural barriers, including gender norms, rural-urban infrastructure disparity, and economic constraints, continue to shape access to traditional sporting pathways in India (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). The Khelo India Rising Talent Identification initiative represents a state-led attempt to institutionalize scientific talent scouting across these dimensions while explicitly reviving traditional games (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). The review concludes that a multidimensional, culturally embedded model integrating traditional games into national TID architecture can strengthen grassroots talent pipelines while preserving indigenous sporting knowledge systems under frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 (Dar & Giri, 2026).

Keywords: talent identification; Bharatiya traditional games; Kho-Kho; Kabaddi; sports science

1. Introduction

Sport talent identification (TID) refers to the systematic process of recognizing individuals with the potential to excel in a given sport, typically through the assessment of physical, physiological, technical, and psychological markers (Johnston et al., 2018). Over the past two

decades, TID has evolved from single-variable physical testing toward multidimensional models that integrate anthropometric, physiological, psychological, and environmental constraints operating together as a complex adaptive system (Pino-Ortega et al., 2021). Despite this conceptual advancement, systematic reviews consistently report an overrepresentation of studies examining male, adolescent athletes in physical-profile-dominated sports, leaving considerable gaps in sport-specific and culturally situated models of talent recognition (Johnston et al., 2018). India possesses an extensive repertoire of indigenous or Bharatiya traditional games, including Kho-Kho, Kabaddi, Mallakhamb, and Gilli-Danda, that have historically served as vehicles of physical conditioning, moral education, and community bonding across generations (Kumar et al., 2025). These games are deeply embedded in regional cultural practice and continue to demand high levels of speed, agility, strength, and tactical intelligence from their practitioners (Aggarwala et al., 2019). However, indigenous games have experienced a gradual decline in participation because of urbanization, digital entertainment, and the global dominance of standardized international sports (Khan, 2023). Concurrently, national policy instruments such as the Khelo India programme have sought to institutionalize scientific talent identification while explicitly promoting traditional games as a means of reviving grassroots sporting culture (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Within this context, an exploratory review of the determinants that shape talent identification through Bharatiya traditional games is both timely and necessary, given the paucity of consolidated literature linking indigenous sporting heritage with contemporary sports-science frameworks (Dar & Giri, 2026). This paper therefore synthesizes existing empirical and conceptual literature to map the anthropometric, physiological, psychological, maturational, sociocultural, and technological determinants of talent identification as they apply to Bharatiya traditional games, situating the discussion within the national vision of a physically literate and sportingly self-reliant Viksit Bharat (Clarke & Mondal, 2022).

2. Objectives of the Study

The present review was guided by the following objectives: (i) to examine the physical and anthropometric determinants associated with talent identification in Bharatiya traditional games such as Kho-Kho and Kabaddi (Abraham, 2010); (ii) to explore the physiological and psychological determinants that differentiate talented performers from their less accomplished counterparts (Casanova et al., 2026); (iii) to analyze the influence of biological maturation and relative age on talent recognition among young athletes (Finnegan et al., 2024); (iv) to identify the sociocultural and policy-related barriers and enablers that shape access to traditional sporting pathways in India (Clarke & Mondal, 2022); and (v) to evaluate the emerging role of technology and artificial intelligence in strengthening scientific talent-scouting mechanisms relevant to traditional games (Zhou et al., 2025).

3. Methodology

This paper adopts an exploratory narrative-review methodology, which is appropriate for synthesizing a heterogeneous and emerging body of literature that has not yet been consolidated into a single evidence base (Shahidi et al., 2023). Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and policy-oriented sources relevant to talent identification, traditional Indian games,

and youth sport development were located and cross-verified using their digital object identifiers to ensure authenticity and traceability (Nijenhuis et al., 2024). Sources were selected on the basis of relevance to at least one of the determinant domains examined in this review, namely anthropometric-morphological, physical-physiological, psychological-behavioural, maturational, and sociocultural-technological determinants (Han et al., 2023). Given the descriptive and exploratory nature of the review, no formal meta-analytic pooling of effect sizes was undertaken; instead, findings were thematically organized to construct a conceptual determinants framework specific to the Bharatiya sporting context (Mendes et al., 2022).

4. Bharatiya Traditional Games: A Sporting Heritage

Kho-Kho is among the oldest tag-based team games native to India and is practiced from the grassroots to the national competitive level, requiring high levels of speed, agility, and anaerobic capacity from its players (Gandhi et al., 2019). The introduction of the Ultimate Kho-Kho League has professionalized the sport and created a structured competitive pathway that increases the visibility of talented players (Barman et al., 2023). Kabaddi, similarly rooted in Indian cultural tradition, combines elements of wrestling, evasion, and breath control, and has achieved international recognition through professional leagues that showcase elite indigenous talent (Ali & Adhikari, 2011). Playing positions in Kabaddi, namely raiders, defenders, and all-rounders, are associated with distinct anthropometric and physiological requirements, indicating that talent profiles must be considered position-specifically rather than uniformly across the sport (Aggarwala et al., 2019). Mallakhamb, a traditional pole- and rope-based gymnastic discipline that integrates elements of yoga and wrestling, forms part of the same indigenous movement heritage and similarly demands considerable strength, flexibility, and coordination from its practitioners (Kumar et al., 2025). Beyond these prominent disciplines, regional variants such as Gilli-Danda, Kanche, and Langadi form part of a wider ecosystem of indigenous play that has traditionally supported the incidental development of coordination, balance, and tactical awareness among Indian children (Khan, 2023). Collectively, these games constitute a low-cost, culturally resonant, and widely accessible medium through which raw athletic potential can be observed in naturalistic community settings prior to formal sport specialization (Çinar & Hassani, 2026). Beyond competitive talent pathways, sustained participation in games such as Kho-Kho and Kabaddi has also been linked to broader community health and sanitation outcomes in India, underscoring the value of Bharatiya traditional games well beyond elite performance alone (Deepak & Yadav, 2022).

5. Determinants of Talent Identification

5.1 Anthropometric and Morphological Determinants

Anthropometric profiling remains one of the most extensively studied components of TID, with height, body mass, limb length, and body composition frequently reported as discriminating variables between elite and sub-elite athletes (Pino-Ortega et al., 2021). In Kabaddi, raiders have been found to possess comparatively taller stature and longer leg length that support offensive mobility, whereas defenders exhibit greater mesomorphic characteristics suited to resisting and tackling opponents (Shelke et al., 2024). Somatotype and body-composition analysis using

standardized skinfold and girth protocols has been recommended as a reliable method for characterizing playing-position-specific physical profiles among Indian Kabaddi players (Ali & Adhikari, 2011). Comparable anthropometric assessment in young Indian athletes across disciplines has demonstrated that regional and sport-specific reference norms are necessary because morphological demands vary substantially between events (Abraham, 2010). In basketball, meta-analytic evidence indicates that anthropometric and physical-performance variables jointly and meaningfully differentiate more talented from less talented players, reinforcing the relevance of morphological screening within TID batteries in general (Han et al., 2023). Nonetheless, anthropometric determinants alone are insufficient predictors of long-term success, since systematic reviews of TID literature report substantial heterogeneity regarding which morphological variables actually discriminate future performance across sports and settings (Johnston et al., 2018).

5.2 Physical and Physiological Determinants

Physical fitness components including speed, agility, explosive strength, and cardiorespiratory endurance constitute core physiological determinants of talent in Bharatiya traditional games (Anil & Gupta, 2022). Comparative research on junior-level Kho-Kho players has demonstrated that aerobic and anaerobic efficiency can be systematically improved through structured drill-based training protocols, highlighting the trainability of physiological determinants central to the game (Anil & Gupta, 2022). Kabaddi similarly demands a composite of aerobic and anaerobic fitness, agility, neuromuscular coordination, and quick reflexes, with playing-position analyses showing that raiders and defenders differ significantly in these physiological requirements (Aggarwala et al., 2019). Investigations into oxidative-stress and genomic biomarkers among competitive Kho-Kho players have further revealed that the chase-attack-defence structure of the game imposes both aerobic and anaerobic physiological loads comparable to other high-intensity indigenous sports (Gandhi et al., 2019). At the global level, systematic reviews of racket and team sports confirm that physiological capacities such as repeated-sprint ability and aerobic power remain consistently among the strongest predictors of talent across disciplines, lending external validity to the physiological determinants identified within Bharatiya games (Nijenhuis et al., 2024). Training-design research using principal component analysis has shown that aerobic capacity combined with power and strength explains a substantial proportion of variance in performance-relevant profiles across team sports, suggesting that comparable multivariate approaches could be productively applied to Kho-Kho and Kabaddi talent batteries (Pino-Ortega et al., 2021).

5.3 Psychological and Behavioural Determinants

Beyond physical capacity, psychological characteristics such as motivation, resilience, self-regulation, and achievement orientation have been consistently identified as influential determinants of talent development across sporting contexts (Baker & Young, 2014). Primary and secondary influences on the development of sport expertise, including family support, coaching quality, and cultural environment, interact with these psychological determinants to shape long-term talent trajectories (Baker & Horton, 2004). Deliberate-practice theory posits that

sustained, effortful, and specifically structured training accumulated over years is a primary driver of expertise attainment, although recent evidence cautions against premature early specialization on the grounds that it does not consistently confer physiological or motivational advantage (Mendes et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive coaching environments have been shown to strengthen self-determined motivation among young athletes, which in turn sustains the long-term engagement with sport-specific training essential to talent realization (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007). Meta-analytic evidence from soccer indicates that psychological attributes, including achievement motivation, coping skills, and perceptual-cognitive ability, meaningfully distinguish talented from non-talented youth players, even though psychological assessment remains under-utilized relative to physical testing in many talent programmes (Casanova et al., 2026). Systematic-review evidence similarly shows that psychomotor and personality-related factors, particularly decision-making speed and achievement motives such as hope for success, carry moderate-to-strong predictive value for future performance (Murr et al., 2018). Coaches nonetheless continue to rely disproportionately on informal, unstandardized scouting judgments when assessing psychological readiness, revealing a persistent gap between research evidence and applied talent-identification practice that is equally relevant to Indian traditional-game contexts (Musculus & Lobinger, 2018). Longitudinal work further suggests that holistic developmental patterns combining technical, tactical, physical, and psychosocial indicators offer superior predictive validity compared with any single-domain model, reinforcing the case for integrated psychological assessment within Bharatiya talent-identification frameworks (Zuber et al., 2016).

5.4 Biological Maturation and the Relative Age Effect

A critical confound in talent identification, particularly among adolescent athletes, is the tendency for early-maturing and relatively older individuals within an age cohort to be systematically over-selected because their temporary physical advantage is mistaken for genuine talent (Finnegan et al., 2024). This relative age effect has been documented across multiple stages of formal talent pathways, with athletes born earlier in the selection year disproportionately represented at club, regional, and national identification centres (Finnegan et al., 2024). Because biological maturation independently influences anthropometric and physical-performance variables such as stature, strength, and sprint speed, talent scouts risk conflating maturational timing with true sporting potential unless maturity-adjusted assessment protocols are employed (Finnegan et al., 2024). Given that Bharatiya traditional games such as Kho-Kho and Kabaddi are heavily contested at school and junior levels, safeguarding against maturity-related selection bias is essential to ensure that late-maturing but genuinely talented children are not prematurely excluded from developmental pathways (Johnston et al., 2018).

5.5 Sociocultural and Environmental Determinants

Talent identification does not occur in a vacuum; sociocultural and environmental conditions substantially shape who gains access to structured sporting opportunities in India (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Gender-based constraints, including restrictive social norms, limited infrastructure, and unequal funding, continue to disadvantage the identification and development

of talented female athletes in both traditional and modern sports (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Rural-urban disparities in coaching quality, training facilities, and exposure to competitive events further mean that many potentially talented children in remote or under-resourced regions remain undetected by formal talent-scouting systems (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Because Bharatiya traditional games require minimal equipment and infrastructure relative to globally standardized sports, they retain particular value as accessible, low-cost platforms through which talent can be observed even in resource-constrained rural settings (Kumar et al., 2025). Educational integration of indigenous games into school curricula has been identified as a practical and culturally resonant strategy for widening the base of the talent pyramid while simultaneously preserving indigenous movement heritage under frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 (Dar & Giri, 2026). Evidence from physical-literacy interventions employing traditional games demonstrates significant improvements across physical, psychological, social, and cognitive domains among school-aged children, indicating that early and sustained exposure to such games can build the foundational competencies from which sporting talent is more reliably identified (Çinar & Hassani, 2026). Complementary evidence from indigenous-games interventions elsewhere shows measurable gains in cognitive function and academic achievement alongside physical literacy, suggesting that the developmental value of traditional play extends beyond athletic outcomes alone (Manzari Tavakoli et al., 2021).

5.6 Technological and Artificial-Intelligence-Driven Determinants

Emerging technologies, including machine learning, wearable sensors, and data analytics, are increasingly being applied to talent-identification processes worldwide, offering the capacity to integrate high-dimensional physical, physiological, and performance data beyond the scope of traditional scouting (Zhou et al., 2025). Artificial-intelligence-based approaches enable coaches to evaluate large numbers of athletes objectively using standardized, quantifiable criteria drawn from performance statistics, biomechanical data, and psychological profiles, thereby reducing reliance on subjective scouting judgment (Zhou et al., 2025). Within the Indian context, the Khelo India Rising Talent Identification initiative has begun incorporating standardized testing protocols and data-driven assessment centres to identify promising athletes transparently across the country, extending scientific talent-scouting infrastructure into traditionally under-served regions (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). The integration of such technologies with Bharatiya traditional games holds particular promise, since large-scale participation in low-cost indigenous games could generate rich, naturalistic performance data suitable for algorithmic screening if appropriately digitized and standardized (Zhou et al., 2025).

6. Discussion

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that talent identification through Bharatiya traditional games cannot be reduced to a single determinant but instead emerges from the dynamic interaction of anthropometric, physiological, psychological, maturational, sociocultural, and technological factors (Pino-Ortega et al., 2021). This multidimensional characterization aligns closely with contemporary global TID models, which increasingly treat talent as an emergent property of performer-environment interactions rather than a fixed, innate trait

detectable through isolated testing (Han et al., 2023). International systematic reviews of male football talent identification similarly emphasize the necessity of combining anthropometric, physical, technical, and psychosocial predictors within a holistic, multidimensional model of talent detection and development, reinforcing the applicability of such integrated frameworks to Bharatiya traditional games (Sarmiento et al., 2018). At the same time, the review highlights sport- and culture-specific nuances: the chase-and-evade structure of Kho-Kho privileges speed and agility (Gandhi et al., 2019), the wrestling-derived combative structure of Kabaddi privileges positional strength and breath control (Aggarwala et al., 2019), and the accessibility of both games across rural and resource-constrained settings positions them as valuable, low-cost talent-scouting platforms relative to infrastructure-intensive global sports (Kumar et al., 2025). The persistence of gender and rural-urban disparities, however, suggests that anthropometric and physiological screening alone cannot achieve equitable talent identification unless accompanied by deliberate policy interventions addressing structural access barriers (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Similarly, the relative age effect and biological-maturation bias documented in international literature are equally likely to distort selection outcomes within Indian school and junior sporting competitions unless maturity-adjusted protocols are adopted (Finnegan et al., 2024). The growing integration of artificial intelligence and data analytics into national programmes such as Khelo India offers a promising avenue for mitigating subjective scouting bias, provided that such technologies are deployed inclusively rather than reinforcing existing urban and infrastructural advantages (Zhou et al., 2025). Overall, the evidence supports a conceptual model in which Bharatiya traditional games function simultaneously as sites of grassroots physical-literacy development and as accessible windows for early talent observation, provided that identification systems account for the full determinant spectrum identified in this review (Shahidi et al., 2023).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This exploratory review has synthesized existing literature to construct a multidimensional determinants framework for talent identification through Bharatiya traditional games, encompassing anthropometric-morphological, physical-physiological, psychological-behavioural, maturational, sociocultural, and technological domains (Johnston et al., 2018). The evidence indicates that games such as Kho-Kho and Kabaddi impose distinct but scientifically characterizable physical and physiological demands that can support systematic talent scouting when assessed using standardized, sport-specific protocols (Shelke et al., 2024). Psychological readiness, biological-maturation status, and sociocultural access must be assessed alongside physical testing to avoid premature or biased selection decisions, particularly among adolescent and rural populations (Finnegan et al., 2024). Integrating traditional games more systematically into school curricula and national programmes such as Khelo India could simultaneously widen the grassroots talent base, preserve indigenous sporting heritage, and advance the broader national vision of a physically literate and sportingly self-reliant Viksit Bharat (Dar & Giri, 2026). Future empirical research employing longitudinal, multidimensional, and technologically supported designs is recommended to validate sport-specific talent-identification batteries for

Bharatiya traditional games and to examine their predictive validity against long-term competitive success (Nijenhuis et al., 2024).

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