

The influence of organisational structures on youth development in European professional football clubs: A player and practitioner perspective

Contact details

Name author(s): Hugo Relvas, Martin Littlewood, Mark Nesti & David Richardson
Institution(s) or organisation(s): Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University
City and country: Liverpool, UK
Email address for correspondence: hrelvax@portugalmail.com

Aim of paper and research questions

This presentation aims to explore player and practitioner perspectives on the organisational structures (i.e., structure, relationships, controlling mechanisms, and practices) of elite professional football clubs and their subsequent influence on the progression of youth players to the professional environment.

Literature review

Professional football clubs operate as service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment, and financial profit (Bourke, 2003). Recently the financial concerns of (some) elite clubs has encouraged increasingly more 1st team coaches to invest in high profile players who can not only make an immediate impact on results, but also increase merchandise sales. The emergence of youth talent has been limited, and has subsequently led to the introduction of UEFA interventions. It is thought likely that these measures, and the associated increased value of young players, may encourage professional clubs to invest more in youth academies, talent identification and development (Reilly et al., 2003). In a business sense, clubs may become more cautious with their investments, and consequently need to be more concerned with reducing the risk of their investment in youth development (i.e., financial and time intense investments) (Gonçalves, 2003). In this regard, it seems that there is a strategic concern with the development of youth players to progress successfully into the professional environment.

Research design and data analysis

The first author spent one month with each of six elite professional football clubs from four countries: Portugal (n=1), Spain (n=3), France (n=1), and Sweden (n=1). The author adopted an ethnographic approach that utilised participant observation, a field diary, research log, interviews, and the collation of texts/documents. Within the six clubs visited, thirty eight face-to-face informal semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a range of youth development staff including: head of youth development (n=6), coaches (n=7), technical coordinator (n=1), head of recruitment (n=1), sport psychologists (n=3), teachers (n=4), internal assistant (n=1); professional players (n=8); and youth players (n=7). Interviews were typically framed around issues concerning player transition from the youth to the professional environments. Data collected was analysed using content analysis procedures (Biddle et al., 2001) and contextually presented using narrative vignettes.

Results

Content analysis revealed four pertinent managerial and structural dimensions that seemed to be critical for youth development and player transition to the professional environment: 'role clarification', 'organisational cohesion', 'communication channels', and 'long-term strategic planning'. The academy staff voiced the need to establish clear roles. Both academy staff and players reported the need to encourage close proximity and cohesion amongst everyone within the academy. It was also deemed essential to feel 'support', 'care', and 'part of something'. Both staff and players perceived a lack of inter-channel communication (i.e., between youth and first team) and sometimes geographical distance between the youth and first team environments. Conversely, it was evident that a more unified and coherent relationship existed amongst (almost) everyone within the academies (i.e., intra-channel communication).

Discussion and conclusion

It was evident that in order to develop more efficient working practices (i.e., help the players to progress into the 1st team), some issues must be considered. The academy staff felt the need for greater role clarification and responsibility (see Woodman and Hardy, 2001). Such role clarification and responsibility issues were further intensified by the (apparent) lack of a clear strategic organisational plan and/or a specific purpose for youth development environments. The pressure for immediate results, winning and/or survival, may not be so amenable to long-term strategic planning and the subsequent development of youth players. It would appear that unless youth development programmes are afforded more respect and value alongside heightened levels of inter-channel communication, then strong relationships and coherent practices (i.e., between the first team and the academy) are increasing unlikely. Communication is seen as essential for the good functioning of the organisation, working as a vehicle for role definition, organisational culture, group cohesion and goal clarification (see De Knop et al., 2004; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Similar to Jones et al. (2004) the academy staff and players recognised the need for a more unified and cohesive environment in order to stimulate a more caring and supportive development programme that maximises player potential. Maintaining philosophical and geographical distance between the youth and professional environments will ultimately make the transition of youth players, and the effectiveness of the youth development programme, even more challenging.

References

- Biddle, S., Markland, D., Gilbourne, D., Chatzisarantis, N., & Sparkes, A. (2001). Research methods in sport and exercise psychology: quantitative and qualitative issues. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 19*, 777-809.
- Bourke, A. (2003). The dream of being a professional soccer player: insight on career development options of young Irish players. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 27*, 399-419.
- Gonçalves, C. (2003). Fórum – Seleção e detecção de talentos. *Treino desportivo, V, 21(3)*, 32-33.
- Jones, R., Armour, K., & Potrac, P. (2004). *Sports Coaching Cultures: From Practice to Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Knop, P. De, Hoecke, J. Van, & Bosscher, V. De (2004). Quality Management in Sports Clubs. *Sport Management Review, 7*, 57-77.
- Reilly, T., Williams, A., & Richardson, D. (2003). Identifying talented players. In T. Reilly & A.M. Williams (Eds.), *Science and Soccer* (pp. 307-326). London: Routledge.
- Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2001). A Case Study of Organizational Stress in Elite Sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 13(2)*, 207-238.