

(SP) YOUTH PLAYER DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES IN ELITE FOOTBALL: PAN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

Football is an important and well recognised "...element of popular culture" (Parker, 1995, p. 107), that represents a game embracing millions of people. Professional football clubs are now service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment, and financial profit (Smoll, 2001; Bourke, 2003; Vaeyens *et al.*, 2005). Stratton *et al.* (2004; p.183) referred that "...talent development is predominantly associated with the provision of a suitable environment from which potential talent can be realised." As the values of young players became inflated, professional football clubs began to invest in youth academies, talent identification and development models (Reilly & Gilbourne, 2003; Vaeyens *et al.*, 2005). The present research explores the youth development working practices of top-level football clubs from a European cross-cultural perspective. More specifically, the study explores the organisational structure, working practices, and philosophy regarding youth development of top-level football clubs.

Methods

The present study forms part of an extensive reconnaissance phase of a more longitudinal research project (3 years). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews (more or less 60 minutes) were conducted with Academy Managers/Head of Youth Development within top-level clubs in several European countries (Portugal, England, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia – at least two per country). Semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed utilising the principles of content analysis (Scanlan *et al.*, 1989; Côté *et al.*, 1993). Interviews were supplement with additional structural information sourced directly from club administrators and club web sites.

Results and Discussion

Results suggest that the Academy Managers/Head of Youth Development consider that poor communication between Academy coaches and First Team coaches is a major concern in the transition from the youth to professional environments. For them the success of the Academy environment lies on a good communication and a good definition of roles from the staff working there. Despite having similar organisational structures, departments and staff members, it is apparent that differential roles and working practices exist within each club, even inside the same country. It seems that each local institution (or club) is likely to have its own specific cultural environment (Parker, 2001) despite of country and that player development demands an inclusive, appropriate and supportive environment (Richardson *et al.*, 2005).

Conclusion

This Study presents the actual organisational and management structure (i.e., personnel, support staff, working practices) of the youth player development in elite football from a cross-European perspective. It seems important to provide more

meetings with all staff members to clarify their role and responsibilities. Additionally, and maintaining this idea of good communication within the structure, to give a continuation to the work made in the academy, it seems that it could be important to upgrade someone in the structure (e.g. coach) who observes and follows the youth teams inside the transition phase (reserves team; under 19; under 18), and provides reports from the players to the staff member responsible for the 1st Team. This way, the first team coach can have a better knowledge from the players in the youth structure and in case of good quality or need, call them to the 1st Team instead of buying new players.

This Study allows a thorough understanding of the cross-cultural youth development environments, which play a critical role in the player development process. The further extension of this research hopes to gain a better understanding of the organisational structure, working mechanisms, and philosophy regarding the development of elite young footballers within football development programs across Europe. The results will allow football development programs and specifically the staff responsible for young player development, to reflect on the most suitable environment for young player's potential, their talent and reach higher standards of performance.

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