

(SP) FOOTBALL LABOUR MIGRATION: PLAYER ACQUISITION TRENDS IN ELITE LEVEL ENGLISH PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL: 1990/91 to 2004/05

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Introduction

English professional football has undergone substantial changes during the 1990s and is now considered to possess one of the most powerful leagues in the world (Maguire, 1999). Legislative developments (i.e., Bosman ruling) and the increased wealth of football clubs have helped to fuel the acquisition (and movement) of talented players. This process is known as football labour migration (Maguire, 2004). The English Premier League attracted players from a variety of countries (i.e., both within and outside of the European Union) (see Maguire and Stead, 1998; Maguire and Pearton, 2000). This study embraces a more longitudinal perspective of player labour migration and attempts to offer a more precise perspective on the perceived impact of foreign players on indigenous or home-grown player progression (i.e., players developed within a club's youth development system/Football Academy). Furthermore, the study aimed to examine the trends (i.e., origins, ages and playing positions) of all players acquired into elite level English professional football from the 1990/91 competitive playing season through to the 2004/05 season.

Method

Data was collated via a number of official player directories (i.e., Rothman's Football Yearbook & The Official Professional Footballers Association Factfile) and systematically inputted into the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS V12). The coding of specific variables in the database enabled the effective management and analysis of a vast amount of quantitative data (7447 entries).

Results

Findings revealed significant inward player migration from the UEFA confederation (i.e., 87.7% of all acquisitions), predominantly from within the U.K. and Republic of Ireland (56.2%). Players were also acquired from Scandinavia (8.8%), Western Europe (18.2%) and Eastern Europe (4.5%). The dominant player nationalities being Norway (N=68), France (N=133) and the Czech Republic (N=14) and Croatia (N=14) respectively. Acquisition of players from the remaining FIFA confederations (i.e., CONMEBOL, CONCACAF, CAF, AFC and OFC) also increased throughout the time period, with players from Africa demonstrating the largest increase throughout the time period (N=94, 4.4% of all acquisitions). Significant differences in acquisition age emerged ($\chi^2(8)=20.46$; $p<0.01$), with players from the OFC confederation having the lowest mean acquisition age (22.85). Further analysis revealed a significant association between primary playing position and confederation. The number of home-grown players that progressed to the professional environment over the fifteen seasons totalled 1814, with 95% being from the UK and Republic of Ireland. English born players, although the highest in frequency (N=1357), decreased from a high of 134 acquisitions in 1998/99 to 63 in 2004/05. Analysis of initial 1st team appearances for English born home-grown players suggested that 91.7% made zero appearances, whilst only 8.3% made greater than one appearance.

Discussion

The findings suggest that professional football clubs within the English Premier League have engaged in significant player acquisition activity throughout the fifteen year time period. This activity has shown an overall decrease in the acquisition of U.K. & Republic of Ireland born players and, more specifically, a decrease in English born players. The acquisition of 'foreign' born players has increased. Such findings highlight the growing speed of the player migration process in English professional football. The overall decrease in English born home-grown player acquisition and, more interestingly, their subsequent lack of initial 1st team appearances may be as a consequence of the rapid growth in foreign player acquisition. Such findings raise potential concerns over indigenous talent development and the competitive playing opportunities for such players. European football's governing body UEFA recognise the concerns over lack of home-grown player progression and are seeking to ensure clubs provide more competitive playing opportunities in their recent proposals (see Richardson et al., 2005).

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