

The Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Top Level Young Footballers

David Richardson, Liverpool John Moores University, England, d.j.richardson@ljmu.ac.uk

Simon Smith, Liverpool John Moores University, England

Martin Littlewood, Liverpool John Moores University, England

Keywords: young footballers, socio-economic, family

Abstract

Introduction

Introducing and developing young people into and through sport has been characterised by a number of participant development models (1, 3, 5).

Typically, such models are limited in the empirical, cultural and contextual nuances of particular sports and/or countries.

Developing young football players in England is typically the responsibility of the football academies.

Football in England is traditionally the preserve of the working classes (2).

The introduction of the academy system appears to have given rise to a (perceived) gentrification of young talent entering the game.

In this regard, football academies need to understand, and subsequently respond to, any apparent change in the socio-economic contexts of young players and their families that may influence initial and long-term participation in the sport.

Parents of talented individuals make occupational and socio-economic sacrifices in order to enable their talented child to pursue their sporting career.

A more middle class (i.e., typically more affluent with greater occupational flexibility) can be a significant advantage in supporting a young talented athlete (4).

This study explored critical issues that may help better inform ‘the duty of care’ of football clubs towards the development of young players from different socio-economic climates. Moreover an exploration of the socio-economic backgrounds of the parents of the young elite footballers offers to better understand the socio-economic tensions that parents face in bringing up a talented player and offers valuable insights into the influence of the family circumstance on a young player’s sports participation.

Methods

The socio-economic tensions associated with bringing up a talented young footballer were assessed through a 5 phase questionnaire including, ‘cost of intensive training’, ‘occupation’, ‘mode of entry in to football’, ‘social and environmental location’ and ‘family structure’. Parents (and guardians) (n=141) of Academy (n=2) and Centre of

Excellence (n=3) players aged between 8-16 years completed the questionnaire. Written consent was obtained from all parents.

Data was grouped into 'socio-economic classification' (or occupational groups) (i.e., Group 1: professional, intermediate and skilled non-manual, Group 2: skilled manual, partly skilled, unskilled, Group 3: armed forces, home duties, other, unemployed, part-time), 'age of the player' and time spent at the club').

Descriptive statistics and chi-squared cross-tabulation were employed to explore the data. Results The majority of parents (and guardians) (42.57%) of the young players were located within the Group 1 socio-economic classification with 31.57% and 23.7% in Groups 2 and 3 respectively.

Fathers were predominantly classified in Groups 1 (48.86) and 2 (40.74%). A high proportion of mothers were classified in Group 3 (41.47) with both Groups 1 (36.28) and 2 (22.39%) being well represented. Parents located within Group 1 and Group 3 had a high level of occupational flexibility compared to those located in Group 2.

All parents claimed to make lifestyle sacrifices as a result of being the parent of a talented young player.

Group 1 cited their own time and social life as their predominant sacrifice whilst Group 2 families were affected financially.

The additional financial burden associated with parenting a talented young footballer player approximates to £1000 per year between the ages of 8-13 years and up to £2000 per year between the ages of 14-18 years.

The largest cost was attributed to transport.

Discussion

It is apparent that the football family is not restricted to the preserve of the working classes.

Indeed, the academy structure, and the subsequent elevated status of the education and welfare remit, appears to have attracted a more gentrified clientele.

However, it appears that the lower socio-economic groups still perceive football as a vehicle to improve their child's standard of living. It appears that families located in occupation Groups 1 and 3 possess greater (occupational) flexibility.

Group 1 families are also financially advantaged.

Families located in occupation Group 1 appear to be afforded a competitive advantage over those families constrained by more restrictive socio-economic circumstances.

The extent to which these families may be able to continue to offer such sacrifices may indeed prevent (some) talented young players developing.

Furthermore, the additional stressors placed on the family may diminish the (overall) enjoyment and prestige of being part of such a development programme.

It would appear that football clubs need to explore the potential competitive advantage afforded to Group 1 families and look to adjust their practices and/or offer resources that would seek to address the perceived imbalance.

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