Managing the Transition of Young Footballers from the Youth to the Professional Environments in Elite European Football: an Organisational Perspective

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Background
The global exposure of sport through the media, and the increased interest and association of sponsors and investors (O'Brien & Slack, 2003), has reshaped the sports environment into a highly business oriented domain primarily engaged in securing sustainable revenues and financial success (Slack, 1997). In this regard, the need to invest and develop homegrown players from within the club has never been more critical. The preparation of young football players for the realities of the first team environment is primarily seen as the preserve of the youth development department. However, players progressing into the first team environments are normally not the 'finished' article and still require an extended developmental plan to ensure their readiness to play for the first team. The present research explores a practitioners' perspective of how the organisational structure, strategy and operational practices of both the youth and first team environments influence, and ultimately effect, the successful transition of young players to the professional environment.

Method
This Study forms part of a longitudinal exploration of the organisational structures and practices of elite European football clubs. The Study adopted a longitudinal ethnographic approach (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005) where author two (Relvas), 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). Within the six clubs, thirty eight face-to-face informal semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a range of academy staff and players. Interviews were typically framed around issues concerning player transition from the youth to the professional environments. Day-to-day practices were captured through researcher observations, informal interactions and field notes (Krane and Baird, 2005). Case studies were developed using a creative non-fiction approach (Van Maanen, 1988; Sparkes, 2002) that crafts and illuminates significant episodes that allow the reader to 'see' the reality of day-to-day working practices.

Results
Results evidence physical, philosophical, and/or cultural distance between the youth and the professional environment. Such distance appears to further complicate the already complex transition from the youth to the professional environment. Moreover, it was recognised that inconsistencies existed between the staff (including coaches) and the players regarding the players' post academy developmental strategies. Specifically, the inter-channels of communication (i.e., between youth and first team departments) were merely a consequence of staff and/or players' personal relationships as opposed to designed strategic intent.

Conclusion

In line with organisational literature (see Rinke, 1997; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; De Knop et al., 2004), the perceived lack of coherent practices amongst the two departments (i.e., youth and professional) associated to a lack of long-term youth development strategic planning, seemed to contribute to some uncertainty and dissatisfaction amongst the different stakeholders regarding their purpose (i.e., to develop players for the first team). It was evident that there was a need for a more global strategic intent to assist the development of these young players. Moreover this philosophy must be shared, communicated, believed and practiced by everyone within the club (i.e., Board, first team and youth departments).

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