

# THE OPTIMAL STRUCTURE OF A FOOTBALL YOUTH ACADEMY: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Arlo Hemkes  
ING Insurance Europe

## Context

Interest from clubs and nations in optimizing the pathway to excellence in sport is intensifying (Martindale et al., 2010). Not surprisingly this trend is prominent in professional football. The future of the sport is determined by the development of quality young players, therefore talent development academies form the foundation of clubs. Additionally, the financial stakes in football have grown and transfer income is an increasing source of revenue for football clubs. Therefore, selling home-grown world-class players is crucial for clubs seeking to gain a competitive advantage. In this regard, it is paramount to understand how to optimize the development of young elite football players (Relvas et al., 2010). Consensus among scholars and practitioners has been found on discrete traditional elements such as the physiological, technical, and medical aspects (Reilly & Williams, 2003). So, to further our understanding of the inclusive talent development process we have to examine more nontraditional elements. Considering the multidisciplinary character of elite player development, and the numerous attempts to disentangle these areas of expertise, literature in this field is scattered and far-reaching. In order to assimilate these intersectional research perspectives in a way that becomes meaningful for management scholars, it is necessary to begin to compile and interpret the breadth of interdisciplinary literature in order to understand the essential elements and structure of talent development focusing on optimizing football academy environments. This paper links the different areas of talent development expertise together to create new insights in structuring the pathway of excellence in football. We present a systematic review of the findings in contemporary research on talent development structures and processes. Combining traditional knowledge of elite football player development with new findings in different realms of talent development, adds to the quest for optimizing elite football player development, the creation of new world class football players, and ultimately club competitive advantage.

## Method

A qualitative systematic review was used to gather knowledge to explore variations in practices and to confirm appropriateness of the different elements of a football academy structure. The review assesses the effects of nontraditional elements of the talent development process on the academy structure. The Cochrane Collaboration recommendations (Higgins & Green, 2006) have guided the exhaustive literature review to locate and interpret relevant studies. These recommendations allow for a cohesive qualitative interpretation and validation through triangulation. Furthermore, a holistic and integrated paradigm was used to designate the search key words. The ancestry approach and the descendancy approach were used until repetitive findings occurred. To control for quality and relevance, inclusion and exclusion techniques were applied.

## Results and discussion

The analysis of the included articles (n=109) leads to nine themes on important elements of the structure and environment of talent development. These themes are: (1) Regional development center, (2) Inclusion of scholastic courses, (3) Mentoring/Tutoring, (4) Integration of Elements and Communication, (5) Importance of Mental Skills and Sport Psychology, (6) Individual approach, Autonomy and Mastery, (7) Team Division and Relative Age Effect, (8) Decision Making and Situational Awareness, and (9) Management, Academy Culture and Research. The analysis revealed that the implementation of a regional development center would increase the academy's accessibility towards late developers. The regional character can be applied through sharing knowledge and equipment with amateur clubs in the region in exchange for privileged access to the club's talents. Results also reveal that the inclusion of scholastic courses adds to the intellectual development of the players. The structure and information are of crucial importance to a transition to the professional status. In addition, more extensive knowledge on the elements of performance increases the performance capacity. Next, mentoring and tutoring supports necessary decision making during the pathway of development. This should be provided within all social environments, and has to be integrated, coordinated and managed accordingly. Research has shown that this increases the effectiveness of a talent's scarce time and energy that is being put in the development process. An important role for managers is being outlined here, to optimize the development through coordination, motivation and facilitation of the young athletes. Another paramount element is the inclusion of mental skills training, which has yet to be fully embraced in many youth football development environments. Several studies show that psychological interventions can be applied at a very young age and have been positively related to athletic success. More specifically, strong decision making skills and a high situational awareness have been found to be paramount qualities of world-class players. Youth academy structures should include infrastructure, and exercises that allow for the development of these important qualities. This review demonstrates that football clubs are seeking to gain a competitive advantage through player development in football academies. Consequently, it is important to examine the varied fields where talent development is being explored. Openness to new approaches can extend the current boundaries, such as the implementation of sport psychology and flexible management structures. Further research needs to be done to explore where organizational design theories can contribute to optimizing talent development structures.

## References

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