# A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE TRANSITION FROM YOUTH TO PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL ACROSS EUROPE: A CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURES, SUPPORT MECHANISMS AND PRACTITIONER ROLES

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Para as estrelas que iluminam a minha vida

(To the shining stars who illuminate my life)

Gonçalo and Patrícia

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## Abstract

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). Elite professional football clubs now operate as service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment and financial profit (Bourke, 2003), (re)formulating structures, goals, strategies, and also integrating new personnel (e.g., professional administrators) in order to respond to the demands of the surrounding environment (Slack, 1997). The financial concerns of football clubs have (more recently) encouraged elite clubs to invest in 'more finished' and/or experienced high profile players. The purchase of such players may offer clubs a more immediate return on their investment (i.e., more likely to influence results) alongside an increase in merchandise sales (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). Consequently, the opportunities for youth players to progress to the first team appear to have decreased. As service enterprises, professional football clubs must be effective in all areas (including their youth department). The present research explores the players' and practitioners' perspectives on how the organisational structure, philosophy and working mechanisms of their club impact the transition of youth football players to the professional environment. Moreover, it aims to explore the youth player's psychosocial support, development, and preparation for such a transition.

Study One adopted a combined protocol of semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Côté et al., 1993; Biddle et al., 2001), allowing the interviewees to share their true perspectives (Dale, 1996). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Head of Youth Development (or equivalent) within elite European football clubs (n=26) across five European countries (i.e., England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). The interview schedule concerned the club's youth development philosophy, organisational structure, working practices, within-career transition from the youth to the professional environment, psychosocial support and development. Data collected was analysed using content analysis procedures (Biddle et al., 2001) and contextually presented using narrative vignettes. Emerging themes were subject to within methods triangulation (McFee, 1992). It was evident that there were no specific structures, philosophies and/or working practices that could be associated to any one particular country. Typically, practices appeared to be more concerned with, and influenced by, the practitioners' character, and specific club culture or sub-cultures. Developing players for first team, player's personal development, and financial profit were predominant aims of all youth programmes. Operational differences included roles, responsibility, youth to professional transitions, and the dominant presence of a club orientation towards player development (n=22). It was evident that a physical, philosophical, and/or cultural distance existed between the youth and the professional environments. This distance led to a lack of identification with the club philosophies and some dissatisfaction amongst the practitioners. Barriers to the youth player's transition to the professional environment were identified. The most significant external barriers were: lack of trust and/or belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development; organisational barriers; and fortune and/or luck. Internal barriers included a player's 'lack of readiness to face the professional environment' and a player's 'lack of maturity'. To help overcome these barriers some players' attributes were identified, as critical to a player's successful progression: 'good sporting skills' (i.e., an equal balance of physical, technical, tactical, and psychosocial skills), 'special attribute(s)', 'mental strength', 'a desire and willingness to make personal sacrifices', and 'hard work/commitment'. It was generally perceived as impractical for the coach to undertake the delivery of psychosocial support. Thus, HYDs reported the

need to engage more with other practitioners such as sport psychologists and educationalists.

Study Two utilised a longitudinal ethnographic approach (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005) to further explore, understand and experience the day-to-day working practices of football clubs environments. The author 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). The selection of these clubs was determined by clustering clubs according to organisational structure criteria evidenced in Study One. Study Two consisted of two parts. Study Two Part I explores the academy staff and players' perspectives on the preparation and transition of youth players to the professional environment within the six football clubs. 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. Data collected was analysed using content analysis procedures (Biddle et al., 2001) and contextually presented using narrative vignettes. Study Two Part II captures the day-to-day existence of the practitioners through the collation of researcher observations, informal interactions and field notes (Krane and Baird, 2005). A creative non-fiction approach (Van Maanen, 1988; Sparkes, 2002) was adopted in order to craft and illuminate significant episodes that allowed the reader to 'see' the reality of day-to-day working practices. Results from Study Two reinforced the concerns highlighted by the HYDs about the physical, philosophical, and/or cultural distance between the youth and the professional environment. Moreover, it was recognised that an inconsistency existed between the staff (including coaches) and the players regarding the players' psychosocial development strategies. Whilst HYDs, and the other staff, reported that psychosocial support was embedded within their respective academies, it was evident that their delivery approach was typically sporadic and ad-hoc. However, the players tended to recount concerns over the lack of specific strategies that prepared them to deal with the professional environment. Such indifference suggests a need for practitioners to redefine the type of strategies, and their subsequent effectiveness, used to help the players' psychosocial development and preparation for the professional environment. This perceived lack of support within the clubs compounded the continuing existence of the ruthless and 'masculine culture' that permeates the football environment. As players progressed through towards the professional environment they preferred to share their personal issues, feelings and thoughts with their parents rather than staff. Fundamentally, players were only willing to share their issues with people that really cared about them. In some 'special' cases players did turn internally but only to practitioners who possessed a sustained and genuine care for them. These generally 'good people' tended to adopt a more caring approach that seemed to earn the trust and respect of the players.

Generally, there is a clear need for an all inclusive youth development philosophy. Moreover this philosophy must be shared, believed and practiced by everyone within the club. It was also evident that such a belief emanates from the presence of 'good people'; people who care and look out for players, yet understand and translate the harsh reality of elite European football player development to them. The presence of such practitioners seems more critical to the successful progression of young players than any seemingly progressive and harmonious, but ultimately superficial, structure. These 'good people' need to operate in more strategic positions within the hierarchical structure where they can be empowered and subsequently more able to influence practice.

**Key Words**: Elite football clubs, career transitions, qualitative research, practitioners' caring agenda

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# CHAPTER ONE

## 1.1 – Introduction

Football has always been one of the most popular games in the world, if not the most popular. Parker (1995, p.107) stated that, football is an important and well recognised *"...element of popular culture..."* that represents a game embracing millions of people. The game's worldwide impact and the public interest on a daily basis attract sponsors and investors into the game. Professional football clubs now appear to operate more as service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment, and financial profit (Bourke, 2003; Vaeyens, Coutts & Philippaerts, 2005). This more entertainment and business perspective of European football is influenced by the finance flowing from media, sponsorship, marketing contracts (Maguire & Pearton, 2000), and the new competition structure with big money prizes now available in Europe (e.g., UEFA Champions League) (Ernst & Young, 2007). For example, the rights to broadcast English Premier League Football matches have increased substantially in the last few years. The seasonal cost of the rights, shared equally amongst all the professional clubs, have risen from £49m in 1996/97 (Symanski & Kuypers, 1999) to £568m in 2007/08 (The Political Economy of Football, 2008).

The more business oriented reality of sport organisations (e.g., professional football clubs), and the major concern with financial profit, (re)shape the club's philosophies and consequently their working practices. Sport organisations must be very competitive on both a sporting and a financial level, in order to be effective and successful within the growing sports industry (Slack & Parent, 2006). The combined work of all relevant stakeholders of the organisation appears to play a key role on the organisational aims and subsequent success (De Knop, Van Hoecke & De Bosscher, 2004; Zink, 2005; Slack & Parent, 2006). In this sense, the organisation seems to benefit from an enhanced performance of their stakeholders through a better and more effective management practice (e.g., organisational structure, quality systems, job/role satisfaction, commitment) (De Knop et al., 2004).

With respect to the football industry, Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) consider that the vast commercialization of the game, and the intensity of such a results and performance oriented environment (i.e., a need to win and survive at all costs), will undoubtedly have an impact on the clubs' organisational position (e.g., autonomy, goals definition, targets, performance measurements), and subsequent operating culture and philosophy of practice. The idea of financial profit has also been seen to influence the recruitment of players to the first team. More and more, clubs appear to favour bringing high profile players into the club in order to obtain immediate sporting results and increase merchandise sales (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). This proliferation of incoming players was boosted by European Union (EU) legislation allowing the freedom of player movement within the EU, and the Bosman judgement in 1995 that allowed players to move freely to another club at the end of the contract with their present team (Giulianotti, 1999). Such a situation has not only increased salary levels but the subsequent availability of European wide talent has reshaped European Football through the proliferation of migrant patterns (Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Stead, 2001; Vaeyens et al., 2005). The perceived need to invest in more typically 'finished' or complete players (i.e., a talented young player who may have been more exposed to high-level meaningful competitive football) (Richardson, Littlewood & Gilbourne, 2005), suggests a lack of readiness and/or even willingness to prepare the indigenous youth Academy players for elite football.

The apparent lack of emerging young talent in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Federations and the perceived reluctance of investment in youth development programmes by some clubs (Richardson et al., 2005), has become an increasing concern for football's governing bodies. Some measures to rectify this situation were undertaken by national and international organisations. For example, UEFA proposed that, by the 2008/09 season, each club participating in UEFA competitions should include in their squad four players from their own academy and four others from clubs of the same national association (UEFA, 2005a). It was anticipated that these new measures, and the increased values of young players, would encourage professional clubs to begin to invest more in

youth academies, talent identification and development (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Reilly, Williams & Richardson, 2003; Vaeyens et al., 2005). However, although some talented youth players (i.e., playing in youth programmes and national youth squads) are often labelled as future stars, frequently, when they progress to the professional environment they do not perform or achieve the level expected of them. With more professional clubs working as business enterprises, it would appear necessary to reduce the risk of the investment in youth training (i.e., financial and time intense investments) (Gonçalves, 2003). In this regard it seems that there is a lack of coherent (or effective) development plans to enable the youth player to progress successfully into the professional environment.

When a player enters a systematic developmental process, the objective is to develop playing ability and nurture the individual towards realizing their potential (Reilly, Williams, Nevill & Franks, 2000). The attention given to the player's development has been mainly focused on their athletic career. More recently, there have also been some concerns about the non-athletic aspects that may affect the athlete's sports career, such as the psychological, psychosocial and/or academic tensions that accompany young people as they travel through various development stages (Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004). The youth player's development is a very complex process. To understand the difficulties faced by the youth player progressing towards a professional squad, it seems appropriate to explore the process of youth player development and the complexity of the transition from the youth to the professional environment. Within this system, the period between 17 and 21 years of age, is considered by some researchers has one of the most critical periods of the player's development, with direct impact on their future professional sporting career (Richardson et al., 2005; Vaeyens et al., 2005).

This present research aims to contribute to the search for the 'best and most suitable environment' for elite player development, by understanding the support mechanisms provided in order to help the player's travel through their complex transition into the professional environment (or elite sport). A club's structure,

organisation and philosophies concerning youth football alongside a better understanding of the dynamics and working mechanisms of such an organisation (Gammelsæter, 2006), and their subsequent effect on the youth player's development and promotion to the first team would appear to be a critical area of research. Indeed, as stated by Durand-Bush and Salmela (2001, p.285) *"...we cannot change our genetic makeup, but we can change our environment to make it as conducive as possible to improving performance..."* Specifically, the nature of the environment, working practices and its practitioners may be a determinant key for successful player progression.

## 1.2 – Aims of the Research

The overall aim of this research is to explore the players' and practitioners' perspectives on how the organisational structure, philosophy and working mechanisms of their club impact on the transition of youth football players to the professional environment. Moreover, it aims to explore the youth player's psychosocial support, development, and preparation for their transition to the professional environment. To achieve this overall research aim, a series of evolving studies and complimentary aims were defined.

### 1.2.1 – Study One: Organisational Structure, Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development within Elite Football Clubs

Study One aims to explore the existing management practices and organisational structures within elite European football clubs. In addition, it also aims to identify the club's philosophies regarding youth development, including a specific understanding of the psychosocial issues surrounding player development, as well as the location and positioning of the youth department within the organisation. Moreover, and focusing into the club's youth development philosophies and working practices, Study One aims to explore the Head of Youth Development (HYD) perceptions of the youth players' preparation for the 'complex transition from the youth to the professional environment' (Richardson et al., 2005). Study One incorporates the following specific aims:

**Aim 1** – To explore the management practices and organisational structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 2** – To explore the respective youth philosophies and structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.

### 1.2.2 – Study Two: Ethnographic Engagement within Six Elite European Football Clubs

The results from Study One can only provide an insight into the club's philosophy and practice (i.e., what they say they do). Whilst the results offer a unique account and synthesis of organisation and subsequent practices, they are unable to capture the day-to-day practices and experiences of the practitioners and the players. In this sense, Study Two aims to explore the intricacies of the practitioner and player day-to-day existence. A particular focus of Study Two is to better understand the provision of psychosocial support in order to prepare them for (and through) the transition to the professional environment. The transition from youth to the professional environment is a critical development period (Richardson et al., 2005). According to Krane and Baird (2005) the best way to capture the reality of an environment and the people's perspectives is through ethnographic engagement. Study Two consists of two parts: Part I provides the academy staff and players' perspectives on the preparation and transition of youth players to the professional environment within six different elite football clubs; whilst Part II reports specific and significant episodes that allow the reader to 'see' examples of daily delivery practices. Study Two, both Part I and II, extends the exploration of aims 3 and 4 through a more researcher-immersed position applied and daily perspective. Subsequently, Study Two also incorporates a specific aim that attends to the day-to-day preparation for (and through) the players' transition into the professional environment:

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments;

**Aim 5** – To (better) understand and further explore the day-to-day practices utilised in the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments.

### 1.3 – The Management of Sport Organisations

Prior exploring the specificity of professional football clubs, it seems important to provide the reader with some general (i.e., structural, environmental and philosophical) characteristics of sport organisations, before extending the reader's understanding to the particularity of the football world and the organisations within it. According to Slack (1997, p.5), *"a sport organization is a social entity involved in the sport industry; it is goal-directed, with a consciously structured activity system and a relatively identifiable boundary."* Commonly, sports organisations are associated with clubs and governing bodies directly linked with a certain sport, although considering the present definition it's possible to include all sorts of organisations engaged in the production of sport-related products or services (Slack, 1997), for example sports clothing enterprises. The wide range of sport organisations, might present diversity in structures and objectives, and the analysis of a particular type of sport organisation is crucial to offer a better understanding of their specificity, structure and operationalisation (Gammelsæter, 2006).

According to Slack (1997), to analyse a sport organisation it is necessary to consider their structure, design, context, culture, strategy and goals. In this sense, the following section offers the reader an outline of relevant organisational and management structure literature and the subsequent emergence and alignment of literature associated with sport organisations.

### 1.3.1 – Organisational Structures

Understanding the organisational structure of an organisation not only allows the identification of different and distinct departments and personnel within the organisation, but also the nature and flow of the interactions amongst them (Miller, 1987). Accordingly, Slack (1997, p.6) defines organisational structure as *"...the manner in which the tasks of a sport organisation are broken down and allocated to employees or volunteers, the reporting relationships among these role holders, and the coordinating and controlling mechanisms used within the sport organisation."*

Different dimensions have been identified in the analyses of organisational structures, including *complexity*, *formalisation* and *centralisation* (Miller & Dröge, 1986). Moreover, Slack (1997) reported that these dimensions (typically) help to characterise (and perhaps shape) the sport organisation.

#### 1.3.1.1 – Complexity

Complexity is usually related to the way the sport organisation is differentiated and structured (Slack, 1997). According with the same author, the differentiation can occur in three different ways: horizontally, vertically or spatially. The *horizontal differentiation* is related with the number of departments, divisions and subdivisions within the organisation (Blau & Schoenherr, 1971) and to the work broken down into narrow tasks (Slack, 1997). The *vertical differentiation* is related to the number of levels in a sport organisation. As shown in figure 1.1, an organisation can present a different structure according to the number of vertical levels: a flat structure represents a low number of vertical levels, whilst a tall structure represents a higher vertical complexity (Slack, 1997). Finally, the *spatial differentiation* can occur as a form of either horizontal or vertical differentiation, when the levels of power, tasks and departments can be separated geographically (Slack, 1997). Even identifying these three different ways of organisational complexity, Mintzberg (1979) considers that horizontal differentiation is usually associated to vertical differentiation. An increase in the horizontal, vertical or

spatial differentiation contributes to a higher level of complexity within the sport organisation.

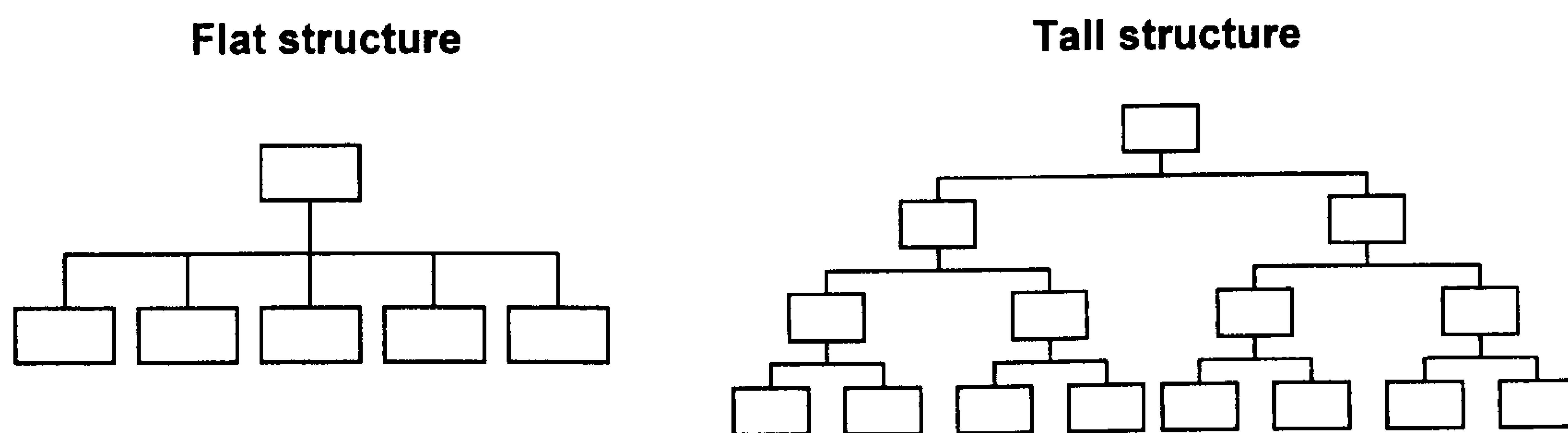


**Figure 1.1:** Flat and tall structures (adapted from Slack, 1997, p.47)

### 1.3.1.2 – Formalisation

Formalisation is considered a key dimension due to its impact on the individual's behaviour, mainly by establishing and shaping the culture of the organisation. In this regard, formalisation *"refers to the extent to which mechanisms such as rules and regulations, job descriptions, and policies and procedures govern the operation of a sport organisation."* (Slack, 1997, p.49) The level of formalisation differs not only from organisation to organisation, but it can also be found within the different hierarchical levels and departments of an organisation. It is possible to identify two ways to 'formalise' the employees within an organisation: developing and writing documents that clarify the different rules, jobs, and policies; and secondly through professional training (Slack, 1997).

### 1.3.1.3 – Centralisation

Generally it is accepted that when the decisions are taken at the top of the organisation (e.g., board members, general managers), it's considered centralised, and when those decisions are taken in lower hierarchical levels it's called decentralised (Slack, 1997). However, Slack (1997) also recognises that it is difficult to determine the extent to which an organisation is centralised or not. Van de Ven and Ferry (1980, p.399) consider that *"when most decisions are made*

*hierarchically, an organisational unit is considered centralised; a decentralised unit generally implies that the major source of decision making has been delegated by line managers to subordinate personnel."*

Having considered these structural dimensions, it appears relevant to explore and present the structure designs and practices operating within sport organisations.

### 1.3.2 – Structural Design of Sport Organisations

Gammelsæter (2006) reported a lack of empirical research on organisational structures within professional sport organisations. In this regard, Gammelsæter in his research concerning the structure of professional football clubs explored the application of Mintzberg's *"The structuring of organisations"* model (1979): *"...not so much because I am convinced that Mintzberg provides the answers but rather because his book has made his mark on my and later generations of organisation researchers. Mintzberg's five configurations still feature as the most complete typology in standard textbooks on organisation structure..."* (p.2) Slack (1997), also considered that, although not intended specifically for sport organisations, the best-known attempt to identify organisational designs is the one presented by Mintzberg where he identifies five design types of organisations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalised form and adhocracy.

Independently of the design type, Mintzberg (1979) also identified five key parts of an organisation: *strategic apex*, which includes the senior managers of the sport organisation; *middle line*, refers to the managers who make the link between the strategic apex and the operating core; *operating core*, usually is where the employees responsible for the basic work of the organisation are located; *technostrutcture*, integrates all the personnel responsible for the standardisation of working processes within the organisation; and *support staff*, as the name indicates, report to all the personnel who provide support for the organisation (see figure 1.2).

Moreover, Mintzberg (1979) believed that the work within these parts is based around one or more of five mechanisms: *mutual adjustment*, the coordination is based on informal communication; *direct supervision*, one person is responsible to give orders to all others; *standardization of work processes*, when the working processes followed by the employees were not determined by them but by someone else; *standardization of outputs*, when the results and goals are defined, and the department managers are responsible for defining the best method(s) to achieve them; and *standardization of skills*, development of programmes to guarantee that the employees are ready to do what is expected from them.

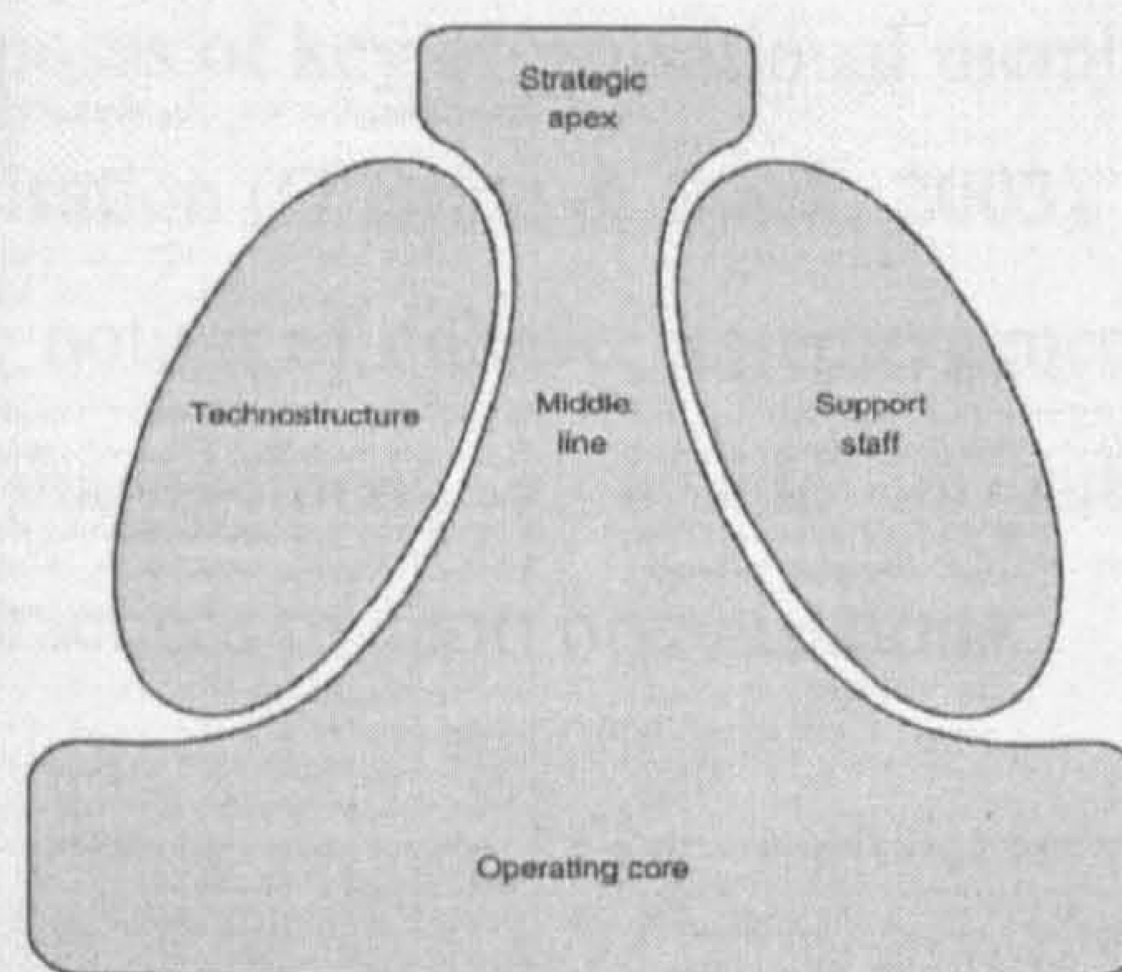


**Figure 1.2:** Five basic parts of organisations (adapted from Mintzberg, 1979, p.20)

To Mintzberg (1984), each one of the design types is associated with a predominant 'key part' of the organisation and one 'mechanism' of coordination (see table 1.1).

**Table 1.1:** Association between organisations design types, key parts, and working mechanisms according to Mintzberg (adapted from Mintzberg, 1984)

| Design type | Key part | Mechanism |
|---|---|---|
| Simple structure | Strategic apex | Direct supervision |
| Machine bureaucracy | Technostructure | Standardization of work processes |
| Professional bureaucracy | Operation core | Standardization of skills |
| Divisionalised form | Middle line | Standardization of outputs |
| Adhocracy | Support staff | Mutual adjustment |

Whilst considering the importance and relevance of Mintzberg's work, it is important to recognise that it may not necessarily directly map sport organisations. Moreover, Slack (1997, p.87) highlighted that these design types relate to ideal models of an organisation, and that some sport organisations might be in *"transitional states between design and others may exhibit a hybrid structure, that is, a structure that exhibits the characteristics of more than one design."*

According to Kikulis, Slack and Hinings (1995a) the structures and systems adopted by an organisation are interwoven with the intentions, aspirations, rules, values, beliefs, and purposes of key organisational members, which are shaped by the culture of the organisation (O'Brien & Slack, 2003). At this juncture, it seems pertinent to explore the notion of culture, its emergence, evolution and presence within organisational management, alongside its subsequent impact on the structure and working practices of sport organisations.

### 1.3.3 – Organisational Culture

To Haggett (1975, p.238), *"culture describes patterns of behaviour that form a durable template by which ideas and images can be transferred from one generation to another, or from one group to another."* It seems important to clarify that in this definition the transfer of behaviour is not a consequence of genetics, but through social interaction between members of the group. More recently, Schein (1991, p.9) referred to culture as *"a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and relate to those problems"*. These definitions of culture report the presence of shared behaviours developed within a group, which are transferred through social interactions amongst their members. Considering the employees of an organisation as a group, organisational culture can be described as a range of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that will have an

impact on the organisational processes and members behaviours (Deal & Kennedy, 1999; Sackmann, 2001).

Kotter and Heskett (1992, p.4) considered that *"at the deeper and less visible level, culture refers to values that are shared by the people in a group and that tend to persist over time even when a group membership changes. At the more visible level, culture represents the behaviour patterns or style of an organisation that new employees are automatically encouraged to follow by their fellow employees. Each level of culture has a tendency to influence the other."* The latter definition from Kotter and Heskett (1992) makes reference to two levels of culture that might exist within an organisation: *visible*, reporting to aspects possible to observe such as the behaviour, the physical and social environment, or the spoken language; *less visible*, is usually related to aspects (e.g., norms, values, goals of the organisation) that we can't observe just by looking, but that exist (written or not) and that can influence the organisational culture. Both visible and less visible levels of culture interact and influence each other, as reinforced by Wilson (2001, p.356): *"the visible and less visible norms, values and behaviour that are shared by a group of employees which shape the group's sense of what is accepted and valid."*

Wilson (2001) identified four major factors that have a direct influence on the organisational culture, namely: *business environment*, the nature of the environment and their demands will have an impact on the organisational culture; *leadership*, leaders are the key elements to create and transmit the organisational culture within the organisation; *management practices and formal socialisation process*, the manner in which a company is managed is likely to influence either positively or negatively beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of their employees. This formal socialisation might include recruitment and turnover of employees (Harrison & Carrol, 1991), or social activities to reinforce attitudes and behaviours (Schein, 1991); and *informal socialisation process*, the individual is in a group and through working together, he will gradually learn from the other group member's how to behave and act.

Some factors seem to influence the organisation's culture, like for example the values, beliefs, socialisation process, shared understandings and meanings common to a group of people. Even being a shared phenomenon, it doesn't mean necessarily that the same organisational culture is shared by the whole organisation (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Wilson, 1997). These authors consider that within one organisation it will be possible to identify multiple cultures and subcultures. This perspective seems to concur with what some cultural theorists have posited, that is, that no organisation is monocultural. In reality, every organisation comprises of different organisational cultures, subcultures, values, and beliefs (Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Golden, 1992). According to Wilson (2001), at an organisational level the different subcultures may co-exist in harmony, conflict or indifference to each other.

With respect to the existence of different subcultures that might be present within the organisation, managers are still concerned with establishing a homogenisation of beliefs amongst their employees that leads to similar interpretations of the environment and similar strategic issues that, ultimately, make the organisation more competitive (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994; Jarzabkowksi, 2008; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008). This idea assumes even more relevance when the employees' beliefs, norms and values interpreted from the general organisational culture, have a major impact not only in their daily practices, but also in the information that they will pass to other members (Wilson, 2001). Therefore, in order to understand how this homogenisation of beliefs and values is achieved, and recognising that one of the central elements within an organisation that directly influences the organisation's values is the decision-making structure (Kikulis et al., 1995a), it seems pertinent to focus our attention on the power and decision-making in sport organisations.

### 1.3.4 – Power and Decision-making within Sport Organisations

In 1966, Peter Drucker defined the term *decision* in a very simple and direct way: *"a decision is a judgement… a choice between alternatives"* (p.143). As human

beings we have to make decisions on a daily basis, normally decisions that will have a direct impact in our lives; and some of them can be very difficult and complex. If we consider an organisation, it's perceptible that the decisions are much more complex because it will have an impact not only on one person but (potentially) on many individuals and/or groups. Within an organisation it is possible to identify very distinct types of decisions. Decisions may range from choosing the outfits of the employees (and perhaps the subsequent establishment of a corporate look or brand image) to the investment of millions of pounds (euros, dollars or other currencies) in facilities (Slack, 1997). Simon (1960) identified two major types of decisions: *programmed* – predictable, repetitive and routine decisions based on defined policies and procedures; *non-programmed* – unpredictable, new and unique decisions without any established guidelines or procedures.

Every organisation has certain elements that can be associated with the power to make decisions. *Power* can be defined as the *"individual's capacity to influence decisions"* (Robins & Barnwell, 1998, p.223), or the *"ability to get someone to do something they would not have otherwise done"* (Slack, 1997, p.179). In sport organisations, the sources of power and the members' involvement are determined by the broader goals, structure, culture, and resources of the organisation (Doherty, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003). This idea seems to be supported by Slack (1997), who considers that power can be exercised vertically or horizontally within the organisational hierarchy, and that specifically the structure may lead to some members with lower hierarchical positions becoming powerful, playing a key role on the decision process. The role and hierarchical position in the structure may vary, but those elements are associated to the organisation's decision-making structure (Kikulis et al., 1995a). These elements of the decision-making structure are mainly managers (Mintzberg, 1973) but they can be anyone within the organisation with the power to influence behaviours, interests, practices, goals, priorities, relationships, and communication processes (Kikulis et al., 1995a). Managers are part of an organisation's culture and therefore, their own values and assumptions need to be reviewed (Irons, 1993; Wilson, 2001).

In a competitive environment, *governance* (i.e., responsibility for the functioning and overall direction of an organisation) plays a vital role on the effective and efficient management of sport organisations (Hoye & Auld, 2001; Ferkins, Shilbury & McDonald, 2005). According to Stiles (2001), the members governing an organisation must consider the external environmental impact, and develop a good strategic plan to ensure a viable future for the organisation. At this stage in the review, it seems pertinent to perceive how the decision processes, practices and strategies may impact the effectiveness of an organisation. However, it is important to recognise that *"...there is no best way to strategise in sport organisations; the strategy developed should reflect the organisational situation..."* (Thibault, Slack & Hinings, 1993, p.41)

**1.3.5 – The Effectiveness of Sport Organisations**

All organisations exist in order to achieve a goal or a set of goals. However, the goals are not always clear, which leads to a different understanding and interpretation from the various elements within the organisation (Slack, 1997). Each organisation determines their own goals, allowing both managers and employees to identify themselves with the organisational purpose, provide a direction in order to reduce uncertainty, clarify the desired end or future, and increase the organisation's effectiveness. Usually an organisation that achieves their goals/aims is seen as effective.

However, *effectiveness* is a very difficult concept to define and to measure. According to Slack (1997), effectiveness usually refers to the extent to which an organisation achieves or not its goal or goals. Commonly it's possible to associate the notion of efficiency with effectiveness. Effectiveness (doing the right things) considers the achievement (or not) of an organisation's goal, whereas efficiency (doing things right) refers to the amount of resources used to achieve a determined goal (Slack, 1997). It's important to clarify this distinction because there are cases where an effective organisation might not necessarily be efficient or vice-versa. For example, a professional football team might be effective as a consequence of achieving one goal (e.g., winning the championship), although to do so the club

might have overcome the expected budget. If no financial return occurs, the organisation even being effective was not efficient.

According to Mintzberg (1979), it appears that the stability and effectiveness of an organisation is based on notions of order, coherence, and consistency, where the human resources seem to play a critical role (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). This perspective appears to align with similar managerial practices such as Total Quality Management (TQM). The tenets of TQM aim to increase the organisations quality and success through the participation, satisfaction and commitment of all stakeholders (De Knop et al., 2004). Similarly, the Baldrige National Quality Program's (2009) performance excellence framework, embodies seven categories of good management practice including: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis and knowledge management; human resources focus; process management; and business results. These advocates of effective management practice appear to reinforce the fact that organisations will ultimately benefit from the enhanced performance of their employees.

Within the organisation, the decision-making structure is regarded as decisive in the definition of behaviours, interests, goals, priorities relationships and communication process (Kikulis et al., 1995a). Moreover these strategic personnel need to encourage and guarantee the stakeholder's full commitment, in order to establish and maintain the effectiveness of the organisation. The effectiveness of managing the employees lies in the ability to create a climate, where their individual perceptions and interests can be put on the service of the organisation (Chelladurai, 2006). Indeed, the shared values and goals of the organisation must be clear and accepted by all stakeholders (Wilson, 2001; Zink, 2005; Slack & Parent, 2006). In order to guarantee that all stakeholders know the values and goals of the organisation (Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Ferkins et al., 2005), and what is expected from them to contribute to the organisational aims (Woodman & Hardy, 2001), the decision-making structure must develop a sound, robust and clear communication system.

Three aspects have been identified as critical for the effectiveness of an organisation: *group cohesion* – creating a positive environment with everyone working as a unit toward some common goals (Waterman, 1994; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008); *communication* – as the main vehicle to transmit the organisation's goals, values and stimulate relationships (Rinke, 1997; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; De Knop et al., 2004); and *role clarification* – referring to the definition of expected behaviours according with a determined position (Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Bray, Balaguer & Duda, 2004). To be effective an organisation must work as a unit, where the final result is the sum of the individual role of each one of their members. *"If people are to work together successfully, the members of a group have to perform their roles with a high sense of efficacy"* (Bandura, 1999, p.227), and for that they need to know clearly what is expected from them. In this regard, the three aspects identified as critical for an effective organisation must be interwoven.

Woodman and Hardy (2001) re-iterate such position as they consider that the main workplace stressors include: communication failures, ambiguity regarding the aim of the organisation, lack of role awareness, lack of role structure, and the difficulty in fulfilling two (or duplicate) roles. Moreover, role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, and lack of knowledge or responsibility seemed to be critical in the development of staff satisfaction and performance (Jamal, 1985; Kemery, Mossholder & Bedeian, 1987; Rabinowitz & Stumpf, 1987; Seegers & van Elderen, 1996). A higher level of satisfaction should be pursued, that facilitates higher loyalty and strong involvement from all members (De Knop et al., 2004). According to Woodman and Hardy (2001, p.228), the efficiency of an organisation is directly associated with clear communication and role clarification: *"...You can't sort of be united and everyone striving for one goal when everyone seems to be sort of split into different directions so that no one knows what's happening..."* It seems that a higher level of decision making and more written procedures were positively linked with a better and clearer communication process (Wilkesmann & Blutner, 2002), and consequently an increase in the organisation's effectiveness (Kimberly & Rottman, 1987). However, management

is a transient occupation with permanently changing challenges in the environment. In order to ensure an optimal quality for the organisational stakeholders, the supporting managerial processes need to be (continually) (re)defined (Zink, 2005).

### 1.3.6 – Relation between Business and Sport Organisations

The exposure of the sport phenomenon in the media, mainly on television, has increased the interest of sponsors and investors (O'Brien & Slack, 2003). The fact that sports events and sport organisations capture the attention of millions of people, has led corporations to consider them as main vehicles for the global expansion of their products (Coakley, 1998). The consequence was a reshaping of the sport environment into a highly competitive business environment engaged primarily in generating revenues and obtaining financial success (Slack, 1997). This more competitive sport-meets-business environment, requires organisational changes (i.e., structurally and philosophically) to remain competitive and effective (Peters, 1990). Subsequently, sport organisations have had to adopt a more business orientation that reflects and embraces a more economic focus (Coakley, 1998). Specifically, sport organisations were forced to consider (re)formulating structures, goals, strategies, and integrating new personnel (e.g., professional administrators) to prepare them for the demands of the surrounding environment (Slack, 1997; O'Brien & Slack, 2003). Organisational changes can be very complex, requiring breaking down old beliefs and values (Kikulis et al., 1995a). However, even necessary, changes face (some) resistance from elements within the organisation. Resistance typically comes in the form of protection of self-interests, a lack of trust or understanding of change, and different perceptions about changes and their cost (i.e., time, money, and personnel turnover) (Slack, 1997). Sport managers must be aware of this resistance and, following the example of business managers, exhibit trust, vision, and communication skills to make everyone understand their importance for the short and/or long term success of the organisation (Covey, 1990; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002).

It's possible to identify a number of books written by recognised coaches referring to the transferability of principles of success between the sport and business worlds (see Jackson, 1995a; Parcells, 1995; Pitino, 1997; Holtz, 1998; Packer, 1999; Shanahan, 1999). Indeed, sport and business worlds seem to share similar sentiments, beliefs, practices and philosophies regarding their effectiveness (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). Nevertheless, the meaning of these beliefs and practices must be contextualised within the individuality of each sport. Being this research located within football, after providing the reader with a general concept of sport organisations, it seems time to focus specifically on professional football organisations.

**1.4 – Professional Football Clubs Environment**

Kikulis, Slack and Hinings (1995b), reported that the high visibility (and value) of sport worldwide has encouraged governing bodies to pressurise sport organisations into assuming a more professional approach to the delivery and design of the sport product (e.g., National sport organisations in Canada). The most popular game in the world, football (and its structures), has changed considerably during the last few decades. Specifically, a number of clubs have turned from a non-profit-making association to a limited company (e.g., England – 1890's; Italy – 1960's; Spain – 1990's). Some clubs can now be found in stock-market listings, with their club owners being (predominantly) concerned with financial return. The 'privatisation' and subsequent re-positioning of the organisation's perspective has led to increased concerns from governing bodies, where "*...gradually, sporting and ethical values are being eroded under increasing commercial/financial pressures...*" (UEFA, 2005c, p.18) This new economic reality, associated pressure and need to win (at all costs), appears to have an impact on a club's organisational position (e.g., autonomy, goals definition, targets and performance measurements), and subsequent operating culture and philosophy of practice (Gammelsæter & Jakobsen, 2008). For example, the importance of, and investment in, the club's first team (professional team) has increased, mainly with the emergence of (and continual search for)

global players (i.e., those players recognised worldwide). However, the search for top-quality, globally recognised talent (in some cases) has been at the expense of indigenous youth development (Maguire & Pearton, 2000).

### 1.4.1 – External Challenges and Pressures over Football Clubs

Through the years, football clubs have frequently been subject to external influences from national, international organisations, and ruling bodies. From a broad European perspective, the influence comes essentially from UEFA. As a consequence of the incremental player and market movements following EU legislation and the Bosman ruling, UEFA introduced a club-licensing scheme for the season 2004/05, imposing minimum requirements for a club's infrastructure, designated personnel, administration, and legal and financial procedures in order for clubs to be able to participate in their competitions (UEFA, 2005b). UEFA believes that such freedom of movement is leading to a lack of local identity within teams (i.e., teams without eligible national players), and the loss of potentially talented youngsters who don't get to play in and/or for the club that represents their community (UEFA, 2006). In 2005, UEFA released a document called *"Vision Europe – the direction and development of European football over the next decade"* stating the need to encourage unity and equity amongst all member clubs of UEFA. Specifically, the document deals with corporate/ organisational strategic aspects and not with questions of implementation and/or operationalisation (UEFA, 2005c). The concerns exposed by UEFA and the subsequent need for clubs to develop and 'write down' strategies, appears to align with the effective management practices (i.e., clear, coherent and well defined strategies, common and transparent interests and aims) outlined earlier (see Kikulis et al., 1995a; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Wilkesmann & Blutner, 2002).

The (organisational) influence over clubs has not been exclusively the reserve of the international governing organisations. At a more local level, clubs have also been subjected to the influence of their national governing bodies. In England, The Football Association (The FA) introduced the *"Football Education for Young*

*Players: A Charter for Quality"* (1997). In essence, the Charter's purpose was to provide a more structured approach to player development. Whilst not explicitly documented, the Charter was also a response to the increased inward migration of European players (i.e., as a consequence of EU legislation mentioned earlier), and to create more and better indigenous youth (home-grown) players. The FA was, in effect, encouraging (or challenging) the clubs to be responsible for developing these players. The Charter for Quality listed specific environmental and operational criteria that were considered essential for appropriate player development (e.g., facilities, staff, medical provision, practice, legislation). Specifically, The FA was attempting to guarantee quality standards and equitable provision and opportunity amongst clubs. In France, the French Football Federation (FFF), together with the Ligue du Football Professionnel (LPF), implemented a similar 'quality' model through the adoption of the *"Charte du Football Professionnel"* (2007). The Charte is a document updated and released every season to regulate the Academies of French professional football clubs. As in England the FFF defined requirements for the academies, including facilities, staff, players and efficacy criteria. Each club is then classified and/or grouped into different levels of quality, and subsequently receive relative financial support from the FFF according to their classification. More recently, the Belgium FA, Finnish FA, and both the German FA (DBF) and Professional Football League (DFL), recognised the lack of 'home-grown' players moving from the academy environment to the professional teams, and the subsequent effect on the future success of professional football clubs. With respect to such concerns, each of these respective governing bodies has explored and implemented a new programme called Foot PASS (Professional Academy Support System) (Van Hoecke, Schoukens & De Sutter, 2006; Van Hoecke, Schoukens, Lochmann & Laudenklos, 2008). The principles of Foot PASS mirror (some) concepts of TQM (e.g., through encouraging coherent, clear and long term strategic planning, or developing and better preparing the different stakeholders in order to enhance the organisation's effectiveness). Specifically, Foot Pass looks to support the implementation of a quality management system within football clubs aiming to enhance the progression of young players through the youth academies located

within professional football clubs. The engagement of such a programme by the respective governing bodies suggests a willingness, and need, to emphasize the importance of a high quality youth academy in the development of home-grown talent, and the subsequent relevance for the club's success in a very competitive environment (Van Hoecke, Schoukens & De Knop, 2007). Van Hoecke and colleagues (2006) considered seven dimensions: strategic planning, organisational structure, talent development, supporting activities, internal marketing, external relations, and facilities. Typically the results provide advice and guidance for supporting activities (e.g., debates, sessions with club leaders, courses for different heads of youth development (HYD), and the publication of a quality manual) to be developed by the respective FA alongside professional advice for the respective HYD (or equivalent). Accordingly, the authors highlight that Foot PASS offers clubs (specifically youth departments) a better understanding of the quality of their practices.

### 1.4.2 – Football Clubs Investment on Youth Department/Academy

As noted previously, the changes in the football world alongside the involvement and influence of both national and international governing organisations may lead to the emergence of similar professional structural designs (O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Van Hoecke et al., 2007), cultures, goals, programmes and/or mission statements. These changes and influences were designed to encourage and stimulate professional clubs to invest in youth football, including improved facilities. The (amount of) investment made by clubs is a consequence of the belief, perception and importance ascribed to youth football. Some clubs have created a more formal managerial structure for youth development (i.e., typically through football academies or equivalent entities), with the idea of providing the player with the best nurturing environment: good youth development programme, good facilities, and the best human resources (Stratton, Reilly, Williams & Richardson, 2004; Fulham FC, 2006).

Exploring the organisational structure and operating practices of a football club, the subsequent interpersonal relationships that exist within and between different

departments and stakeholders, may contribute to a better understanding about the impact of the daily working practices within the club, and also specifically about the youth players' development and promotion to the first team.

### 1.4.3 – The Purpose and Structure of a Youth Department/Academy

Due to the directives from the different governing bodies (i.e., national football associations, UEFA), it appears that within and between countries, the clubs' formal structures and aims may become homogenised. The similarity between clubs is particularly noticeable in the mission statements that have emerged from various football academies (or youth development departments). Generally, clubs identify the need to create an appropriate environment to develop elite players for their first team, or to generate income through the sale of (some) players (Ajax FC, 2003; Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004; Fulham FC, 2006; Laurin, Nicolas & Lacassagne, 2008).

> *"Fulham Academy graduate Sean Davis is an England U-21 international... his estimated transfer value is around six times more than it costs to run the entire academy system for one year"* (Fulham FC, 2006)

> *"Building up the Sporting Academy cost around 17.5 millions of Euros, although selling only three players, Nani, Cristiano Ronaldo and Quaresma generated an income of 48 millions of Euros... almost the prize of three academies"* (Pereira & Almeida, 2008)

Whilst similar strategies, structures and organisational hierarchies (influenced by football's governing bodies) may have emerged, it is important to note that certain local (philosophical and operational) characteristics of practice may prevail (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2007). Indeed, some clubs have presented other specific aims. For example, the director of youth development of FC Barcelona, José Ramón Alexanco, in an interview mentioned that FC Barcelona not only look to develop football players, but also develop players both socially and intellectually

(Roxburgh, 2006). Similarly, Fulham FC defends the importance to have a positive impact on the player's life, through a positive learning environment based on a holistic developmental approach (Fulham FC, 2006). Interestingly, the meaningfulness and holistic approach is advocated by Richardson and colleagues (2004; 2005), mentioning its importance alongside support mechanisms to ensure a smooth and efficient youth players' development. Stefano Bonaccorso from FC Atalanta provides a different and unique view, reporting that the club's aim is to 'survive in Serie A with youth players from the academy', considering decisive to provide the players with meaningful competitive opportunities to help their development and preparation to play on Serie A (Hague, 2002).

According to Stratton and colleagues (2004), professional football clubs are more aware of the importance of providing a more effective coaching and more sophisticated youth development programmes, in order to produce talented players not only for the club but also for the National squad. Nevertheless, due to the competitiveness of the football environment, it seems that the general philosophy of the clubs is focused on developing players for the club (i.e., not the national side), obtain financial income, and win competitions (Ajax FC, 2003; Richardson et al., 2004; Fulham FC, 2006).

Various differences in the structure of football academies might be found, especially when comparing those in England who must follow certain well defined criteria by the English FA, with others around the world where the clubs appear to have more autonomy. Nevertheless, it seems important to establish some basic mechanisms regarding the organisational structure of a 'typical' football academy. In this regard the work of Richardson and colleagues (2004) offers some insights into the organisational structures operating in elite youth academies in England. Figure 1.3 represents the structure and human resources present in elite youth player development football academies. "*The Academy prides itself on its premier facilities and utilises the unique atmosphere of the Club to enhance a positive learning environment. With a dedicated team of highly qualified and experienced staff, the coaching, medical, fitness and administration personnel*

*work closely together to ensure organisation of the highest standard*' (Fulham FC, 2006).

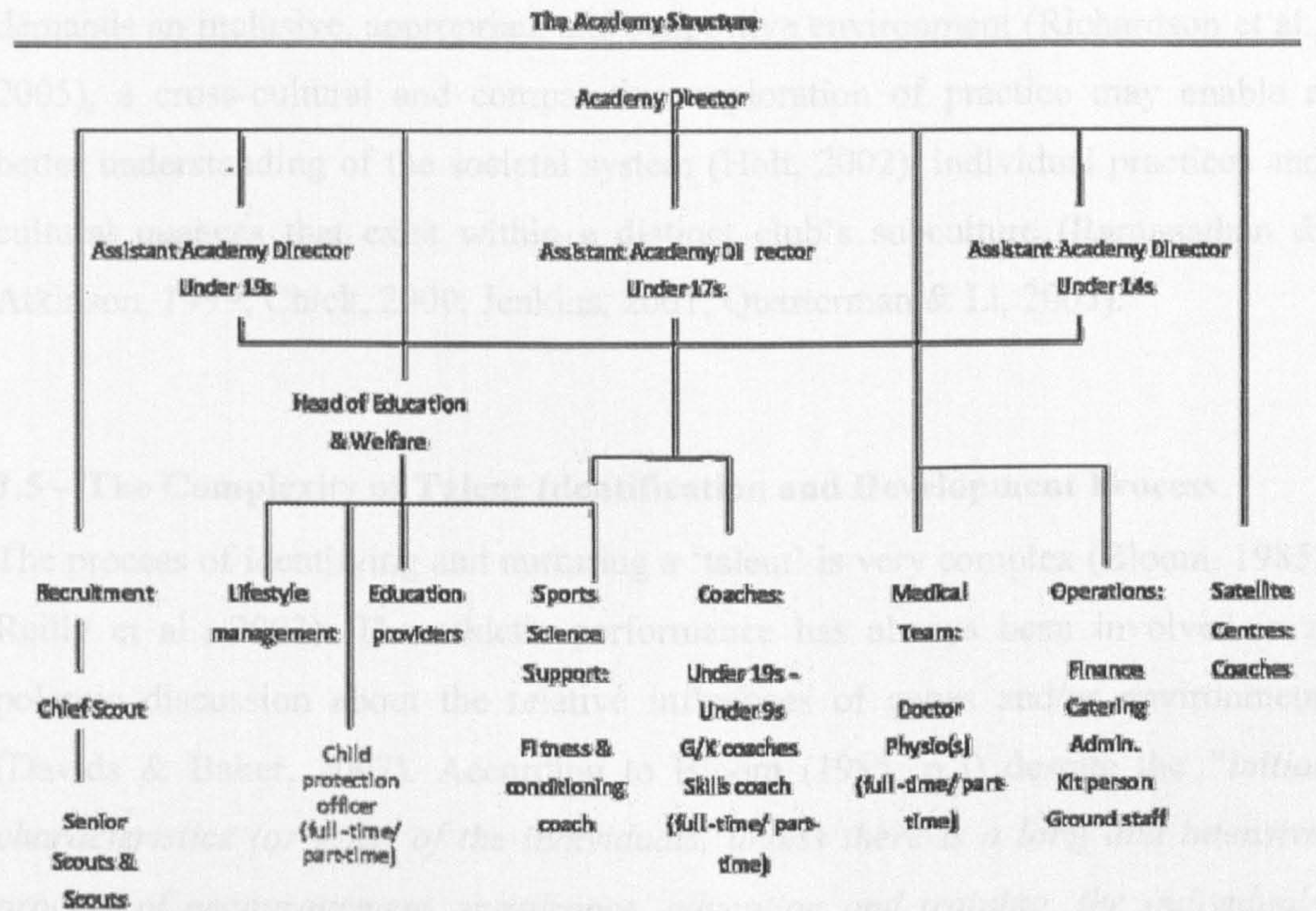


**Figure 1.3:** Representation of a typical organisational structure in a football academy (Richardson et al., 2004, p.197)

Within the academy, the AM/HYD is responsible for the youth players' development. The Academy manager (normally) is the person responsible for strategic and day-to-day operationalisation of the academy, reporting all the work developed to a sports director, first team manager, or someone from the board responsible for the youth department (this might vary slightly from club to club). The role of the AM/HYD is predominantly managerial in nature, as he/she 'controls' a number of practitioners located in the different departments (e.g., coaching, social/educational/psychological, fitness conditioning, technical skills, recruitment, medical, and operational). Each one of these departments presents at least one coordinator (but could be more), to whom the academy manager may delegate certain powers and responsibilities. Nevertheless, all decisions are typically reported to the academy manager who has direct responsibility for everyone who works within the youth structure.

Given that each local institution (or club, in this instance) is likely to have its own specific cultural environment (Parker, 2001) and that player development demands an inclusive, appropriate and supportive environment (Richardson et al., 2005), a cross-cultural and comparative exploration of practice may enable a better understanding of the societal system (Holt, 2002), individual practices and cultural nuances that exist within a distinct club's subculture (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Chick, 2000; Jenkins, 2001; Quarterman & Li, 2003).

### 1.5 – The Complexity of Talent Identification and Development Process

The process of identifying and nurturing a 'talent' is very complex (Bloom, 1985; Reilly et al., 2003). The athletic performance has always been involved in a polemic discussion about the relative influences of genes and/or environment (Davids & Baker, 2007). According to Bloom (1985, p.3) despite the *"initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in these particular fields."*

Despite Bloom's perspective, various researchers still defend that the athlete's performance is related with a more 'nature or innate' account, where their aptitude is innate and consequence of their genetic heredity, while others defend a more 'nurture and environmental' account, where the athlete can develop a special ability through practice and personal experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998; Howe, Davidson & Sloboda, 1998; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). On later 90's, Csikszentmihalyi (1998, p.411) stated that *"at this point, there is no conclusive support for either account, and it is doubtful that talent could be explained exclusively by one of them."* Since then, both 'nature' and 'nurture' researchers continued to look for a way to demonstrate the supremacy of one account, although as defended by Davids and Baker (2007, p.964) *"there is very little to suggest the nature-nurture debate could be resolved in favour of one constrain to the complete exclusion of the other"*. Moreover, they suggest that it's time for science to move beyond this debate and start looking to understand an individual's ability as a result of a combination of a genetic heredity alongside an adequate environmental influence.

The pursuit for talent and excellence was broken down by some authors into four key stages (see figure 1.4): detection, identification, selection, and development (Russell, 1989; Borms, 1996; Williams & Reilly, 2000).

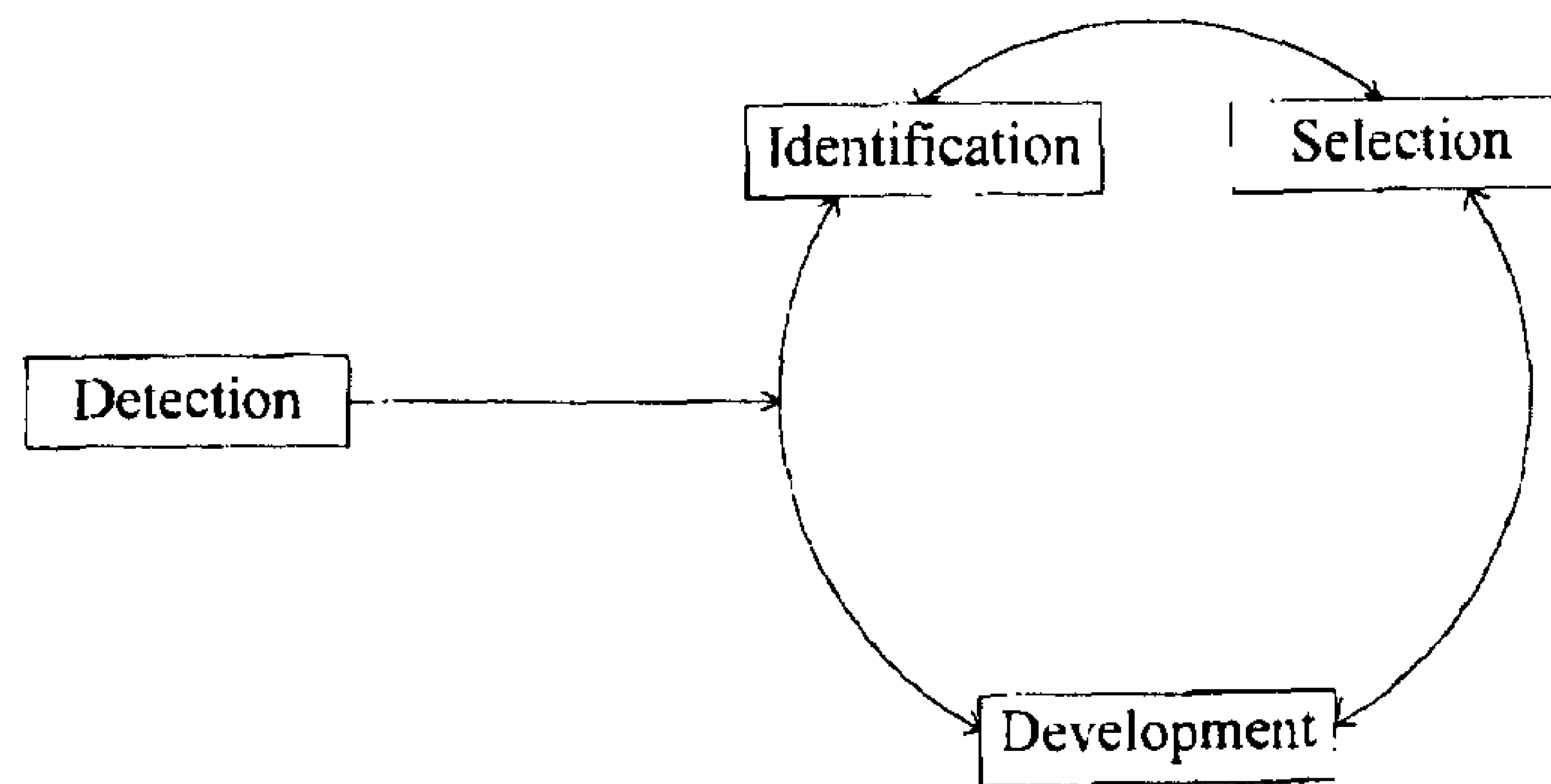


**Figure 1.4:** Key stages in the talent identification and development process (Williams & Reilly, 2000, p.658)

*Talent detection* refers to the discovery of a potential highly performer who is not yet involved in that specific activity (Reilly, Williams & Richardson, 2008). *Talent identification* is associated with the recognition of certain characteristics in a youth player, either innate or subject to the effect of learning or training, which might predict his readiness for future high performance (Régnier, Salmela & Russel, 1993; Borms, 1996; Williams & Reilly, 2000). *Talent development* on the other hand, is linked with providing a suitable learning environment (e.g., access to top class facilities, quality coaching, opportunities to play, and the provision of appropriate support mechanisms) in order to nurture the youth players and ensure that they reach their full potential (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Richardson et al., 2004). Finally, *talent selection* involves choosing the most appropriate individual or group of individuals to carry out the task within a specific context (Borms, 1996). Talent identification and development are usually the two stages more often mentioned in literature, and it would appear that talent development is the most complex; capturing an array of physical, psychological, educational, social, relational and environmental considerations '*throughout*' a player's career (i.e., the early years of childhood through to, at least, the beginnings of a professional career).

As mention previously, talent can be associated to a combination of innate and environmental factors. The difficulty of clearly identifying a talent, and how to detect this in the early stages has a practical impact on the daily talent identification and development process, shifting the researchers' attention from talent detection to talent guidance and development, where it appears possible to have a more effective approach (Durand-Bush & Slamela, 2001; Reilly et al., 2008). In line with the previously outlined researchers, this thesis focuses on the talent development process, and the associated structures, philosophies, working practices and aligned support mechanisms offered to youth players in order to better enable them to navigate through this complex pathway into the professional environment. Knowing that the youth talent's development pathway is characterised by different phases (Sosniak, 1985a) it would seem appropriate to explore the synergy between athletic career development models, development stages, and transitions.

### 1.6 – Athletic Career Development Models

Bloom's (1985) model is probably one of the most significant when discussing issues related to talent development. In his research with 120 talented individuals from the fields of science, art and sport, three phases of development experienced by the participants were identified: *initiation stage*, reporting to the introduction of youngsters in organized sports, during which they might be identified as talented; *development stage*, when athletes increase their commitment, the amount of time practice, and their level of specialization; and *mastery or perfection stage*, where the individuals become experts, developing high-level techniques and reaching their highest level of athletic proficiency.

Côté's (1999) research analysed the families of four talented athletes (rowing and swimming) during their development process. Like Bloom (1985), Côté also identified three phases: *sampling years (6-13 years)*, where children were encouraged to experiment different sports. The main focus was to experiment fun, excitement, and to develop fundamental motor skills and beliefs about sport; *specializing years (13-15 years)*, where the youngster decides one sport discipline

and develop sport-specific skills through more structured practice; and *investment years (above 15 years)*, where athletes develop high-level technical skills, in pursuit of the elite level.

Stambulova (1994, 2000) presented a more complex and detailed athletic career pathway based on Russian athletes: a) beginning of the sports specialisation; b) transition to intensive training in the chosen sport; c) transition to high-achievement and adult sports; d) transition from amateur to professional sports; e) transition from culmination to the end of the sports career; f) end of the sports career.

More recently, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) advocated a more holistic life-span approach, considering not only the athletic, but also the transitions occurring in other domains of the athletes lives. The authors presented a developmental model organized across four levels: athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/vocational interactions (see figure 1.5). The athletic development level includes the three stages defined by Bloom (1985), plus a discontinuation phase.

The second level represents the psychological changes, while the third is focused on the psychosocial interrelationships emerging during their athletic career development. This psychosocial level includes relations with family, peers, coaches, marital or other relevant relations to the athlete. Finally, the fourth level reports to the academic/vocational level.

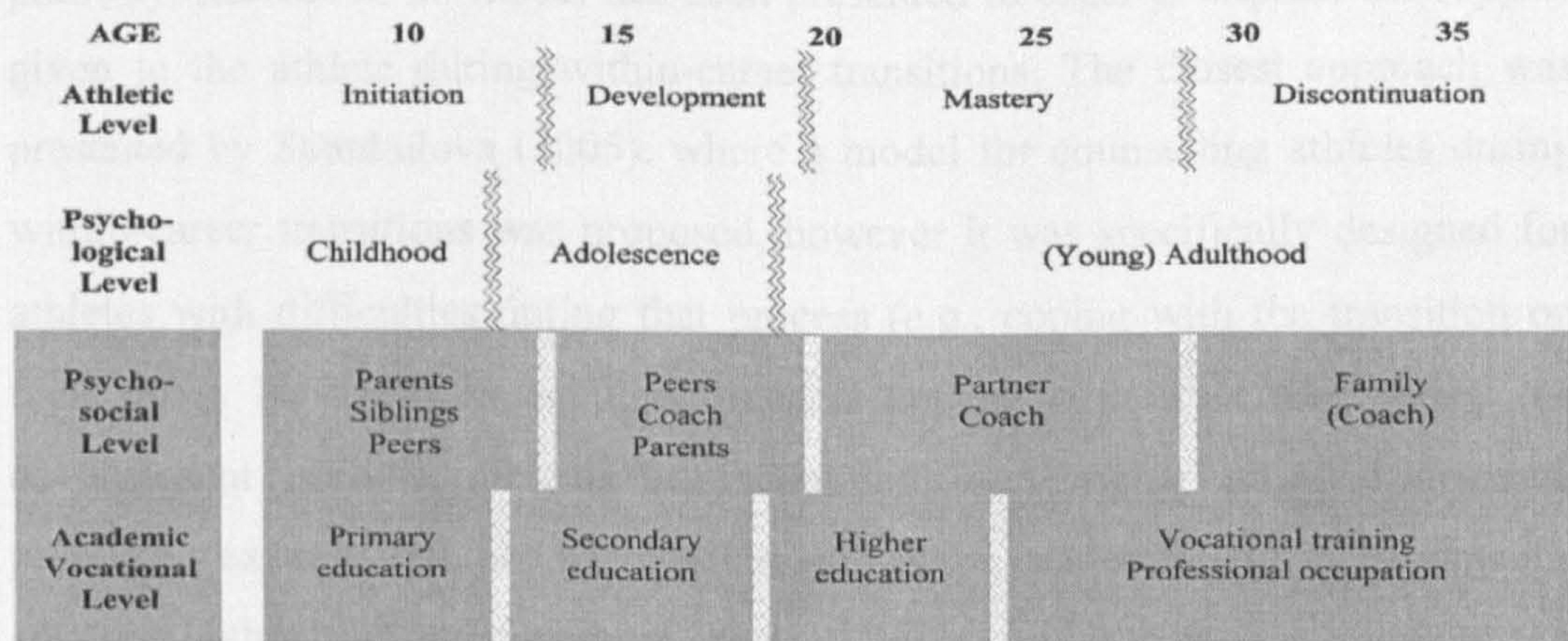


**Figure 1.5:** A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level (Adapted from Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, p.516).

Whilst different phases and levels were defined in the model, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) suggested that they cannot be seen independently, but as a whole. For example, when an athlete move from the athletic *development* to *mastery* phase, they are submitted to higher demands and need to perform at the highest level, but they also may have to cope with changes at a psychological (*adolescence to young adulthood*), psychosocial (*temporary to stable relation with partner*), and academic (*move to higher or into a professional occupation*) levels (Wylleman et al., 2004). The authors' perspective was supported mainly due to the interaction and reciprocal nature of relations between non-athletic and the athletic transitions found in some studies (e.g., Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish & Murphy, 1997; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing & Cummings, 2000). This more holistic approach was further reinforced, for example, by Cecić Erpič and colleagues (2004) who found that the athletic transition is influenced by both athletic and non-athletic factors, or Wuerth and colleagues (2004), who demonstrated a strong link between positive psychosocial transitions and the individuals' athletic development.

It seems important to mention that neither Bloom nor Côté's studies included talented athletes from team sports within a European context. Stambulova and Wylleman and lavallee's models, provided an insight of European athletes, although none of them was specifically about the youth footballers' development pathway. Moreover, no model has been presented in order to explain the support given to the athlete during within-career transitions. The closest approach was presented by Stambulova (2005), where a model for counselling athletes during within-career transitions was proposed, however it was specifically designed for athletes with difficulties during that process (e.g., coping with the transition on their own). Nevertheless, all these models appear to indicate that during the development process, athletes are submitted to a higher physical demand, pressures, expectations, interpersonal relationships, and different environments/ contexts both within and outside of sport.

## 1.7 – Career Transitions

Wylleman and De Knop (1997) in considering the athletic development models suggested that an athletic career may look very smooth and continuous from the beginning until the end. In reality however, some specific moments and/or situations faced by athletes might have an impact on their future. According to Wylleman and colleagues (2004, p.8), a transition can be seen as a *"...occurrence of one or more specific events which brings about not only in an individual 'a change in assumptions about oneself' (Schlossberg, 1981; p.5), but also a social disequilibrium (Wapner & Craig-Bay, 1992) that goes beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life (Sharf, 1997)."*

From the definition presented, it's perceptible that the individual is submitted to certain events that require a considerable personal adjustment (Brewer, Van Raalte & Petitpas, 2000). The *Model of Human Adaptation to Transition* (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995) considers individual transitional experiences, and identifies three major influences in the way individuals cope and adapt: the perception of the particular transition; the perception about their own characteristics; and the characteristics of the environment involving the transition period (e.g., support, strategies). This perspective was also supported by Stratton and colleagues (2004), who consider that progress in a successful sporting career is influenced by external social values, the nature of the competitive environment, and the provision of appropriate support mechanisms. In this sense, the ability of youth athletes to deal with social and cultural aspects of the competitive environment is essential to their future careers (Bourke, 2003).

Schlossberg's model has been extrapolated to sport career transitions (e.g., Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), considering self-identity as the most relevant personal factor. In sport, self-identity (or 'athletic identity') can be defined as the way the individual identifies himself within the athlete's role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Theorists consider that self-identity in sport is dynamic and

mutable according to social and environmental influences, determining the individual's adjustment to sport career transitions (Markus & Kunda, 1986).

Lavallee and Wylleman (2000) have brought together a comprehensive collection of career transitional literature in sport. Transition theoretical perspectives (e.g., Social Gerontological and Thanatological models) and research on career transitions have been mainly focused on the understanding and preparation for career termination or retirement (Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008). Social gerontology, or the study of the aging process and associated social changes, has been aligned with post-sport career transitions and the process of retirement from the labour force, whilst Thanatology, or the study of the death among human beings and people's grief experiences, has been used to help deal with sport retirement, perceiving it as the loss of athletic identity and/or social death (Lavallee, 2000). Even stimulating research on career transition issues, neither of the models (i.e., Social Gerontological and Thanatological models) has a sport specific character, and both perceive the career termination as a singular and negative event (see Ogilvie, 1987; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). According to Wylleman and colleagues (2004), after this initially viewing of career termination or retirement as a singular, all-ending event, researchers then re-appraised this event as a transitional process of the athletic career. This 'new' perspective of career termination as a transitional process, shift the focus of career transitions research from end career termination to a more holistic life-span perspective, where athletes encounter distinct phases and transitions (Wylleman et al., 2004).

Those transitions faced by the young athletes in their development may differ in the degree of predictability and/or in origin (e.g., physical, psychological, social) (Wylleman et al., 2000). Stambulova (2000) identifies two types of transitions: *normative*, characterized by events that are predictable and expected to happen (e.g., transition from junior to senior competition); and *non-normative* referring to those events that are unpredictable and unexpected (e.g., injuries or unexpected success). Even being unpredictable, these transitions can be effectively supported

by a prevention programme, or by a quick and clear identification as soon as possible (Stambulova, 2000).

According to Stambulova (2000), each one of these transitions is associated to possible contradictions and/or transitional problems that athletes, whilst not being cognisant, *"feel that they are not okay, and therefore search for assistance"* (p.592). Within the different transitions, Stambulova (2000) identified the transition to *high-achievement and adult sports*, and the transition *from amateur to professional sports* as the most difficult for athletes. Some of the 'transitional problems' of these transitions include: 'adaptation to higher level of physical loads'; 'difficulties in combining sports and studies'; 'introduction of self-restrictions'; 'life subordinated to sport'; 'searching for individual path in sport'; 'pressure of selection to main competitions'; 'deterioration in relations with coaches'; 'deterioration in relations with team-mates'; 'a lack of special knowledge'; 'independent training'; and 'family concerns'. Athletes must solve these transitional problems in order to progress successfully in their athletic career.

In more contemporary research Pummell and colleagues (2008) identified five categories experienced by young event riders: motivation for transition, perceptions of the transition, sources of stress, support for the athletic development, and post-transition changes. Within the five categories some factors were identified: 'sacrifices/high commitment'; 'increased standards'; 'athlete's lack of control over transition'; 'high levels of stress'; 'internal and external pressure'; 'organizational pressure'; 'lack of organizational support'; 'sport career/lifestyle pressures'; 'identity-related changes'; and 'social-related changes'. The transition focused in Pummell and colleagues' research seems to be the same identified previously by Stambulova (2000) as the most difficult for athletes.

The literature thus far provides some generic understanding of the talent development process. However, it is evident that each sport is a hostage to its own performance timelines, culture, governing bodies and operating procedures

(Petitpas & Champagne, 2000). An understanding of the specific demands associated to the distinct phases and transitions might allow more effective support to help athletes face them successfully (Wylleman et al., 2004). That way, it seems important to explore not only the end career transition, but also the different transitions that occur during the career development, that are referred to as 'within-career transitions' (Wylleman et al., 2004; Pummell et al., 2008). Within-career transitions made athletes face challenges, expectations, and pressures, therefore research on these transitions is needed to allow developing programs that can facilitate the athlete's development, mitigate negative influences, and minimize talent loss (Pummell et al., 2008). It seems apparent that in order to better understand the 'reality' of an athlete's performance pathway and complexity of the subsequent transitions it is necessary to explore them from the individual's experience within the specific context and culture of their (performance) environment (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Chick, 2000; Jenkins, 2001; Quarterman & Li, 2003).

### 1.7.1 – Youth Players' Transition to Professional Football

The development of a youth football player is a protracted process, which (normally) begin in early childhood until achieve professional football. Successful youth players are (usually) offered professional contracts around the ages of 17 and 18 years of age. During this period a youth player is not only subjected to the trials and tribulations of 'growing up' and dealing with life's complexities, but is also required to navigate this journey whilst being 'identified' as a gifted individual. In essence, the youth footballer is submitted to a number of circumstances that might influence and even hinder their natural progression. The way a youth player deals with the different constraints and transitions experienced during his development, will have an impact on their future career (Richardson et al., 2004).

Amongst the different within-career transitions, the period between 17 and 21 years of age, which concern a player's transition from the youth to the professional environment, can be considered as a critical development period (Richardson *et al.*, 2005; Vaeyens et al., 2005). With respect to the various participant pathway models and subsequent periods of transition and within-career transitions, this period would appear to have (some) synergy with the transition from the *development* to *mastery* phase (see Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), transition to *high-achievement and adult sports*, and *from amateur to professional sports* (see Stambulova, 1994, 2000). However, this period is more complex than any model appears to be able to describe, marked not only by a high proportion of drop out, but is also heightened by the conflicts of adulthood, difficulties of peer group acceptance (youth players start to interact with the players from the reserves and first team), and adaptability to the professional football environment (Parker, 2001). Moreover, players progress from a nurturing and supportive youth environment to a less socially supportive first team culture characterised by a reduced tolerance to failure, high demands, and expectations about performance (Reilly et al., 2003).

A successful transition to the professional environment seems to depend on some external factors such as, the opportunities to play, the absence of injuries, the nature of guidance and training, personal, social, and cultural factors (Reilly et al., 2000). That way, an appropriate and supportive environment based on a holistic perspective of development, including technical, tactical, physiological, social and psychological characteristics, appears to be crucial to prepare players to deal with the demands of professional environment (Williams & Franks, 1998; Reilly et al., 2000; Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Richardson et al., 2004; Williams & Richardson, 2006).

Dealing successfully with the transition from youth to professional was perceived by professional players as crucial to survive within such a demanding sport (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). According to Littlewood (2005), there is a need to conduct research in order to clarify the players' difficulties and challenges faced during

their development process, mainly through the transition period from youth to professional. Understanding the specific particularities associated with this transition (i.e., youth to professional) may allow a more coherent and focussed supportive environment to be developed (Richardson et al., 2004), helping players deal with the move to the professional environment.

### 1.7.2 – Environmental and Cultural Issues within Football

Very little research has focused on the lived experiences and perceptions of youth players within professional football from a developmental perspective (Littlewood, 2005). Parker (1995) provided an explanation for this lack of research in professional football, suggesting that professional sport is culturally a closed environment, where those living and working within it, have created an insular atmosphere that has (typically) limited the accessibility of research. In this sense, it is not surprising that limited research has been done regarding the different stakeholders' perspectives, and players' support and preparation for the complex transition from youth to the professional environment. The present research intends to contribute to a better understanding of this critical period, which may add for an enhanced and effective preparation of youth football players for the reality in the professional world.

In England, Hunter Davies (1972) was the first person to provide some insights into life within professional football. In the season of 1971/72, Davies explored the reality of life at Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, and identified notions of *insecurity*, *loneliness* and *rejection* as features amongst players within the environment. Later, Parker (1995, 1996, 2000, and 2001) conducted a sociological case study analysis of the youth training scheme that operated within English professional football prior to 1997 (i.e., the beginning of the football academies system), in an attempt to explore the presence of masculine construction within a group of youth trainees. His research offered an additional insight into the lived experiences of youth players within the professional environment. In football it is possible to find particular club cultures (Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002), and

specifically, professional football is strongly influenced by a macho culture with masculine norms and traditions (Parker, 2001; Reilly et al., 2003; Littlewood, 2005), that may impact a young player's behaviour. Parker (2001) identified that professional football environment plays a key role in the shape of the youth trainees' identity, both through 'official' and 'unofficial' institutional norms, values and assumptions (e.g., authoritarian club culture, coaching style and strategies).

Bourke's (2002, 2003) research on motives and career planning of youth Irish players who moved abroad, also provides some perspective about the lives of individuals that enter the football industry at youth level. In her work, Bourke noted that entering and coping with a foreign culture can lead to a 'cultural shock' (i.e., a psychological phenomenon that may lead to feelings of fear, helplessness, irritability and disorientation). Nevertheless, players tended not to be too concerned with the reality of moving to a new club in a new country prior to their departure. However, during the early adaptation to their new environment, players reported difficulties in coping with the absence of family, close friends, and adjusting to (in some cases) living alone. Moreover, whilst craving the pursuit of a professional career, they also identified some personal difficulties in, for example, not getting along with the manager/coach and the (perceived) pressure to perform. Even not directly reporting to the players' transition from youth to professional, Bourke's findings allow a better understanding on the player's experiences during the move to a different culture, context, and environment.

Similarly to Bourke's findings, Baker and colleagues (2003) referred that an athlete's development can be affected by environmental constraints that can be broad (e.g., cultural or social factors) and/or narrow (e.g., coaching factors). Youth players' behaviour, emotions and attributes are usually influenced by the surrounding environment and its culture (Reilly et al., 2003 – see figure 1.6).

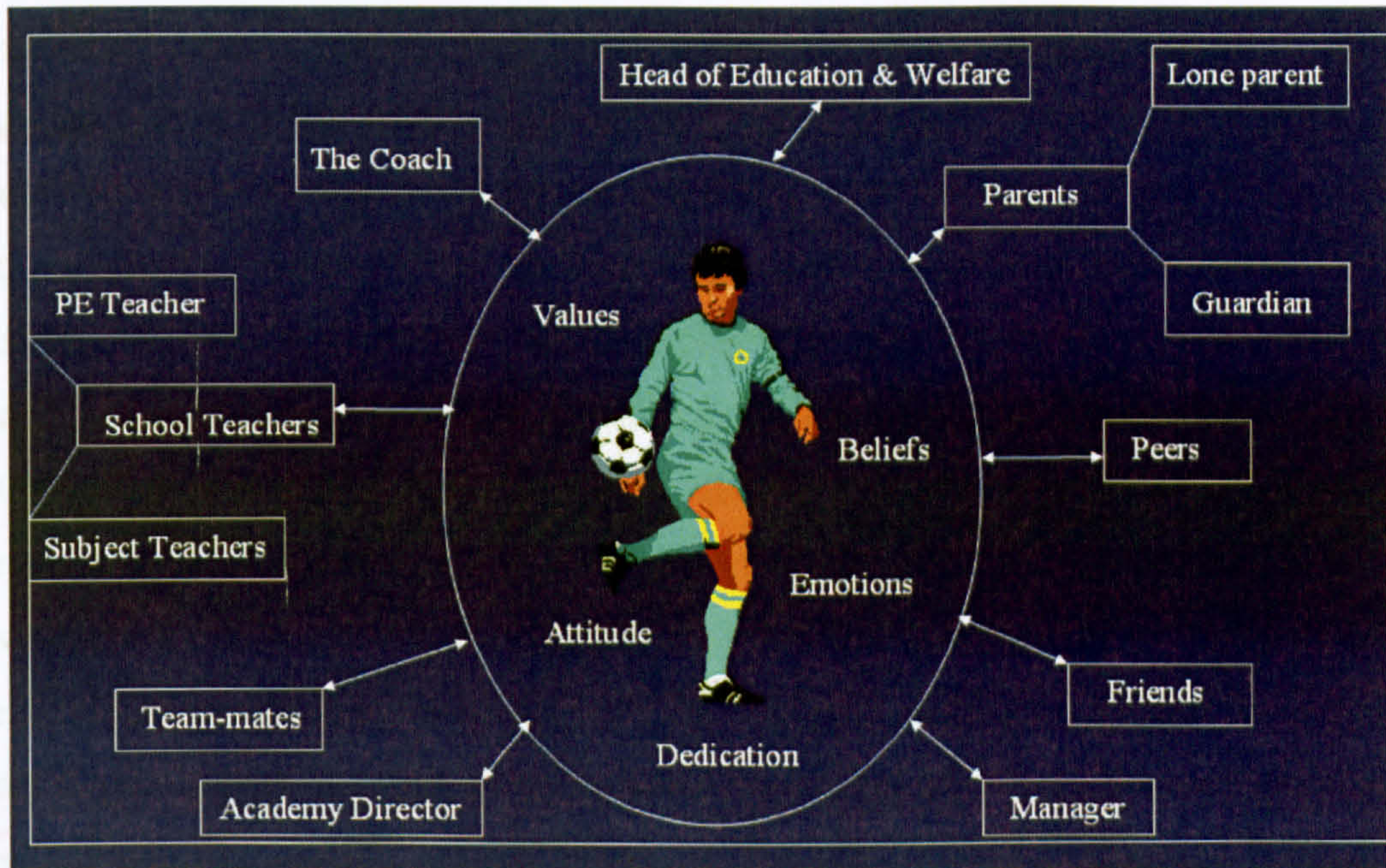


**Figure 1.6:** Significant others that may influence a young player's values, beliefs, emotions, attitude and dedication toward sport performance at any given time (Adapted from Reilly et al., 2003, p.316)

In Salmela's (1996) research about expertise development, coaches (not from football) consider that the main goal was to create a suitable environment where athletes could improve their performance. Fletcher and Hanton (2003, p.190) call the attention specifically to sport organisations about the environment provided to their players, *"sport organisations that are serious about supporting performance at an elite level would do well to pay careful attention to the environment within which their performers are operating"*. Research has showed that a supportive learning environment, effective practice and high quality coaching can help to overcome the initial ability levels (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Howe et al., 1998; Helsen, Hodges, Van Winckel & Starkes, 2000; Durand-Bush and Salmela, 2001; Williams and Ericsson, 2005; Williams and Richardson, 2006). This is evidenced by Durand-Bush and Salmela (2001, p.285) who stated that *"...we cannot change our genetic makeup, but we can change our environment to make it as conducive as possible to improving performance..."*

Furthermore, van Rossum (2001) suggested that on their own, youth players would not be able to achieve their full potential, needing the presence of significant others within the environment to give advice, support, and companionship. It has been suggested that youth players would benefit from a structured and coherent development approach with elements of psychological and sociological support (e.g., reflective practice, counselling, behavioural and lifestyle skills), which may aid a player's, practitioner's and/or club's understanding of the complexity of such a critical transition (Richardson et al., 2005; Littlewood, 2005). According to Wylleman and colleagues (2004), it seems pertinent to focus our attention on the role that significant stakeholders play in the development of the athletic career. Those significant stakeholders can be part of the academy environment such as coaches, academy managers, welfare officers, sport psychologists, doctors, physios, team mates, but also from the surrounding environment, like parents, family, friends, and/or school teachers (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Williams & Richardson, 2006).

#### 1.7.2.1 – Coaches' Role on Youth Development

Within the academy environment, coaches seem to have a significant impact on the players' quality and quantity of practice during their development. Moreover, coaches assume an important role in shaping athletes' psychosocial experiences in the sport domain (Smith, Zane, Smoll & Coppel, 1983; Brustad, Babkes & Smith, 2001). Borrie and Knowles (2003) noted that coaches have much more responsibilities nowadays than just directing practical sessions. They suggested that coaches must also be aware of the performer's overall social and psychological development. For that, coaches must integrate physical, technical, tactical, psychological and sociological knowledge in the context of youth development. In that sense, Côté (2006) considers that the coaching role must also include being a role model, leader, psychologist, teacher and friend. Therefore, the coaches' behaviour, involvement (Carlson, 1993; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), amount of time spent with the players, and the development of a (possible) close relation (Williams & Richardson, 2006), seem to contribute for the coach critical

role in helping to nurture and develop elite players. On a daily basis, coaches are responsible for creating a stimulating learning environment (Baker et al., 2003; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004) that promotes skill development as well as psychosocial support (Allen & Hodge, 2006).

Jowett and Cockerill (2003), and Stratton and colleagues (2004), defended that coaching is a two way process between coaches and players, based on affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains, where both coach and athlete influence one another, and that should be developed in long-term planning. The coach-athlete relationship is usually very complex (Allen & Hodge, 2006; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke & Salmela, 1998; Martens, 1990), dynamic, and constantly in mutation (Potrac et al., 2002), due to their personalities (Schinke & Tabakman, 2001), and challenges regarding the youth athletes growth and development (Liukkonen, Laakoo & Telama, 1996). This perspective seems to come in line with Côté's (2006) view that the coaches' learning environment provided to athletes varies according with their age, development level, and goals to be attained. This relational change between coaches and players during the youth development process has been mentioned by some researchers. More specifically, authors such as Bloom (1985), Salmela (1996), Côté (1999), and Durand-Bush and Salmela (2001) reported that the role of the coach changes between the beginning stages of development and the moment when the youth athlete reaches the higher levels of performance. In the first stages of development the coaches seem to be more caring, offer praise for progress achieved (Bloom, 1985), kind, cheerful (Baker et al., 2003), positive, supportive and motivating (van Rossum, 2001). Nevertheless, during the development process and especially in the later years, coaches seem to be more subject oriented rather than human-relations oriented (Liukkonen et al., 1996; Stratton et al., 2004), being less concerned about the 'person' and more about the specialization of training and the athlete's future professional career (van Rossum, 2001). This coaches' approach led them to behave differently with their athletes according to their actual performance and not with their potential (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). As a consequence of coach perspectives their characteristics are also different, presenting a highly skilled and

sophisticated knowledge (Baker et al., 2003), disciplined, respecting, demanding, more focused on perfection and precision of the execution (Bloom, 1985). In his research with dancers, van Rossum (2001) considers that during the youth development process the pleasure and concern about the dancer doesn't disappear completely, but that *"it has been 'defeated' by rather functional, and result-oriented teacher qualities"* (p.192), where the interest is not the person but the professional career. According to Liukkonen and colleagues (1996), with the increase of player's age, it appears that humanistic elements in coaching behaviour decrease.

The coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important influences over the athlete's development (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), therefore building an effective relationship is crucial for the athlete's satisfaction, motivation and improved performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Research with former elite Olympic medallists, the coach-athlete relationship was characterised by the athletes as close, based on trust, respect and belief in each other (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). These results support Gould and colleagues (2002), and Vernacchia and colleagues (2000) findings about the importance of coach-athlete relationship. Moreover, athletes perceived the importance of shared knowledge, goals, understanding, support, encouragement, and consistency within the relationship. Similarly, Olympic skiers from Norway showed a desire for a caring and supportive training environment (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002). Generally results showed that athletes desired a more caring and supportive environment.

Specifically on football, a case study developed with one professional coach in the United Kingdom, reinforced the idea that coaches praise the development of a positive learning environment, and that players respond better to coaches that encourage and support them (Potrac et al., 2002). Graham Taylor, former England National coach, *"repeatedly emphasised the need for a coach to 'connect' with his or her players, with the ability to gain the latter's 'trust' and 'respect' being regarded as crucial"* (Jones et al., 2004, p.28). In addition, Jones and colleagues (2004) mentioned that coaches believed that a caring climate allowed a positive,

relaxed, and effective working environment to maximise the player's potential, including their determination and effort.

The potential impact of the coach on the athlete's socialisation is immense (Richardson, 1999), though frequently coaches demonstrate a lack of patience and understanding about their athletes, hindering a possible good relation amongst them (Martens, 1990). Yet, coaches are not the only ones to provide emotional sustenance. According to Sosniak (1985b), and Wylleman and colleagues (2000), coaches need to coordinate their support with others significant stakeholders (e.g., other academy staff, parents, peers, school teachers) that can play an important role on talented youngsters development (Reilly et al., 2003).

#### 1.7.2.2 – Other Development Stakeholders

Learning is normally an interpersonal activity, not something done in isolation (Sosniak, 1985b). As mentioned previously, the coach alone is not able to fulfil all the youth athlete development needs, so it is necessary the presence and intervention of a range of experts in different areas (e.g., medical, academic, social, psychological). According to Reilly and colleagues (2003), the relations established by these significant stakeholders may have an impact on the youth perception of values, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and dedication towards football. In their within-career transitions' research with horse riders, Pummel and colleagues (2008) mention that frequently they only needed someone around them to provide emotional support, or give advices regarding to technical issues. Even regarding to horse riders, which represent a very different sport and type of environment, it appears that it's important for the youth athlete to have someone around to turn in case of need, even just to feel that they are not alone in that journey (i.e., youth development process). These authors also highlight the role of team-mates, older, and more experienced athletes, who might be very helpful to youth athletes in their developing process through a mentoring system (Pummell et al., 2008). Older athletes can be very important not only because they are seen by youth athletes as role models, but also due to the richness of advice that they

can provide as a consequence of their personal experiences in youth and professional environments (Hanton & Jones, 1999). Some players might have experienced some of the difficulties that youth athletes face, which allow them to better understand and support the youth athletes. Moreover, team mates may also provide support and encouragement through modelling (Gould et al., 2002). The youngsters' relationship with peers can have an important impact on his/her psychosocial development. In fact, peer acceptance is considered complementary to friendship with regard to the youth psychosocial development (Brustad et al., 2001). On the other hand, athlete-peer relation can also be tense, disruptive, and prejudicial (Pain & Harwood, 2007). As Woodman and Hardy (2001) noticed in their research with UK Olympic athletes, tension between athletes was the most cited theme within team atmosphere.

To Kay (2000), family is the key agent in the process of nurturing talent. Sloane (1985), have a slightly different perspective, because even considering the role of 'home' as a crucial support in the long process of talent development, the author reinforce that it's just one piece of the picture. Similarly to coaches, parental support also changes during the different stages of development: moving from a supportive, shared excitement, interest (Bloom, 1985), leadership role (Baker et al., 2003) during the *initiation or early years*; passing through a phase of sacrifices, restricted activity (Bloom, 1985), more socially orientation (Williams & Richardson, 2006), great commitment (Baker et al., 2003), and an increase on time, financial and emotional support (Sloane, 1985; Coakley, 2001), during the *development or middle years*; and ending with a less active role (Baker et al., 2003; Williams & Richardson, 2006) on the *perfection or later years*, mainly providing 'advices' on their future career (Bloom, 1985). Generally, parent's involvement is higher in the initiation phase than later (Wuerth et al., 2004), although more and more athletes perceive parental support as something relevant during all their athlete lifespan (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), even when athletes move into the perfection or mastery phase (Côté, 1999).

Parental support is fundamental during youth athletes' career and success (Wylleman et al., 2000), although their involvement can be either beneficial or disruptive. The positive emotional support and sport-related advice from parents seems to increase the chances of youth athletes reaching a higher career phase, with successful athletes reporting a higher amount of parental involvement than less successful ones (Wuerth et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Parent's involvement can serve as motivation and encouragement for the athlete's effort (Sloane, 1985), the same way that stimulate certain values related to the importance of achievement, hard work, success, and persistency (Csikzentmihalyi, Rathunde, Whalen & Wong, 1993; Côté, 1999). However, parent involvement can also be disruptive in two ways: under-involvement (lack of support) or over-involvement (increasing the levels of stress and anxiety of the youth athlete). The latter in some cases can be an obstacle to clubs and academy staff during the youth development process. Nevertheless, both ways will have an impact in the athlete's satisfaction, participation, and performance (Hellstedt, 1987; Côté, 1999). The family, and more specifically the parents, must give unconditional love and support with no pressure (Gould et al., 2002), providing their sons with a refuge from the pressure of competitive sport, mainly due to some excessive demands associated to the professional environment (Bakker, Whiting & van der Brug, 1993).

The sport psychologist is another significant stakeholder within the environment that can play a valuable role assisting the player (e.g., induction of the player within the club, helping them to settle down, help them understand the club's philosophy, help them to deal with injury and recovery), as an educator/teacher (Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990), or being the support person that in some cases develop an emotional bond with the players (Singer, 1996). He can also assist the coaches, which requires the need to create a positive working environment between them (Giges, Petitpas & Vernacchia, 2004).

The quality of the relationship between the sport psychologist and athletes (Petitpas, Giges & Danish, 1999), the ability to build rapport giving concrete suggestions and creating a positive environment (Gould, Murphy, Tammen &

May, 1991), and the individual characteristics of the practitioner will play a decisive role on the overall effectiveness of the support (Partington & Orlick, 1991; Andersen, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2004; Nesti, 2006). In the search for the most adequate characteristics that a sport psychologist must possess for an effective support, various authors refer: being personable (friendly and easy going, fun and someone who fits with everyone); good communicator; genuine; encouraging; good service provider, knowledgeable and experienced in the specific sport and sport psychology; good listener; self-understanding; able to build rapport; good perception of individual differences; truly interested; and someone that athletes feel they can share their concerns (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Neff, 1990; Dorfman, 1990; Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996; Petitpas et al., 1999; Andersen, 2000; Petitpas, 2000; Andersen et al., 2004; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). To Gould and colleagues (2002), generally the sport psychologist must be a good listener, able to foster/nurture a positive mindset and a sense of consistency, help provide the right opportunities and environment for learning, guarantee support and individual attention, and when necessary deliver psychological techniques. Furthermore, due to the unique nature of professional sport environment (i.e., highly challenging, volatile and unpredictable), Bond (2002) highlights the need for the sport psychologist to be flexible, adaptable, and above all opportunistic and ready for the unexpected.

According to Ravizza (2002), before having an impact in the sport domain, the sport psychologist needs to earn the athlete's trust and respect as a person. In that sense, Balague (1999) and Ravizza (2002) mention that in their applied work, they adopted an approach where athletes realise that they were concern not only with the 'athlete' but also with the 'person' behind the athlete. Athletes like to feel that people care about them, which seems to be related with a popular medical saying: *"People will not let you care for them until they know you care about them"* (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush & Doell, 2002, p.265).

Even regarded as important the presence of all these significant stakeholders (i.e., coaches, parents, peers, sport psychologists), there is a lack of exploration about their actual working practices, responsibility, and impact towards youth players'

development (Stratton et al., 2004), mainly on the psychosocial support in football. Therefore, this research intends to provide a critical insight of the impact of the different stakeholders on a player's psychosocial support and preparation for the transition to the professional environment.

### 1.8 – Psychosocial Support and Performance Enhancement

Considering the significant business perspective of professional sports, highly paid athletes are seen as valuable assets, carefully selected, developed and protected. That led to the increase of sport psychologists delivering a various range of services, such as performance enhancement consultation, clinical or counselling interventions, and psychological testing (Gardner, 2001). Performance environment is multifaceted, with performance being dependent on a variety of different aspects (Pain & Harwood, 2007). According to Weinberg and Williams (2001), with the increment on the athlete's level, physical differences tend to become less significant because less skilled and gifted players (usually) drop out from competition. Consequently, it will be the minor adjustments and differences at a psychosocial level that may determine which athletes are successful. Several studies have been developed to test the effectiveness of psychological interventions with athletes. A review of these studies by Greenspan and Feltz (1989), and Vealey (1994) revealed that psychological interventions and mental training programmes were positively associated with enhancing athletic performance.

Even being identified as important for player's performance enhancement, psychosocial development and support still seems misunderstood by athletes and other practitioners within sport (Bull, 1991; Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Gardner, 2007). This perceived lack of knowledge on sport psychology seems to contribute to the appearance of certain difficulties or barriers to the entry and acceptance of sport psychologists. In their research with coaches and academy directors within English football, Pain & Harwood (2004) clustered some of those barriers in two blocks: external and internal (see figure 1.7).

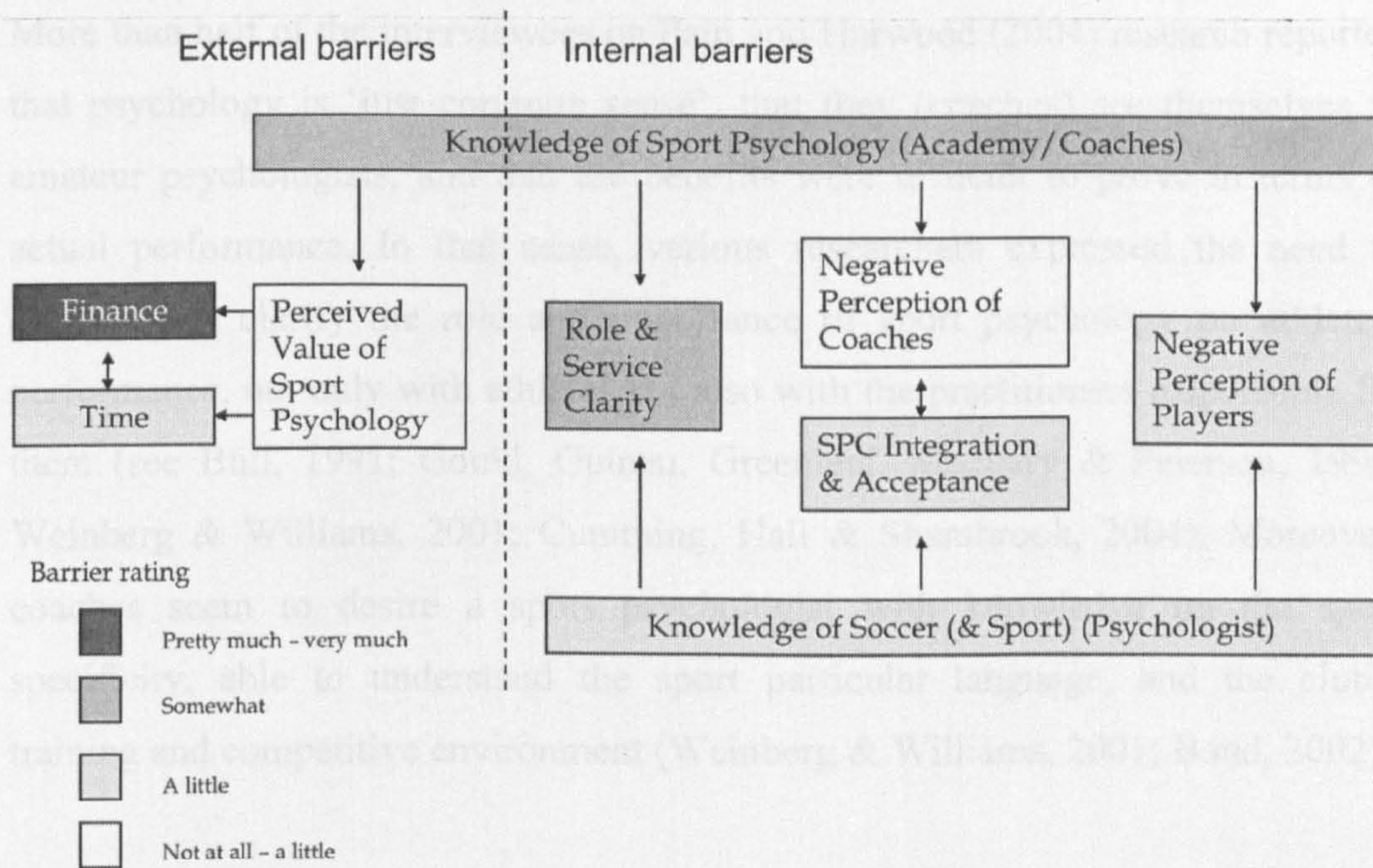


**Figure 1.7:** Internal and external barriers to the sport psychologist entry at English football clubs (Adapted from Pain & Harwood, 2004, p.824)

Weinberg and Williams (2001) presented seven of the most common problems faced by the consultant throughout sport psychology delivery: 1) overcoming player reluctance about participating in a mental training program; 2) lack of time spent with individual athletes in a team setting; 3) gaining the trust of the athletes; 4) making sure athletes systematically practice their skills; 5) consultant's lack of knowledge about the specific sport; 6) maintaining contact with athletes throughout a competitive season; 7) getting full cooperation from coaching staff/organization. Moreover, other barriers were also referred in literature: financial constrains (Gould, Tammen, Murphy & May, 1989; Kremer & Marchant, 2002; Pain & Harwood, 2004); lack of knowledge and/or negative perception about sport psychology from players and practitioners (Partington & Orlick, 1987; Bull, 1991; Pain & Harwood, 2004); and lack of role and service clarity (Perna, Neyer, Murphy, Ogilvie & Murphy, 1995; Kremer & Marchant, 2002; Pain & Harwood, 2004).

A lack of sport psychology knowledge has been identified as the main barrier for sport psychologists within the sport environment (Weinberg & Williams, 2001).

More than half of the interviewees on Pain and Harwood (2004) research reported that psychology is 'just common sense', that they (coaches) see themselves as amateur psychologists, and that the benefits were difficult to prove in terms of actual performance. In that sense, various researchers expressed the need to educate and clarify the role and importance of sport psychology on athlete's performance, not only with athletes but also with the practitioners responsible for them (see Bull, 1991; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery & Peterson, 1999; Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Cumming, Hall & Shambrook, 2004). Moreover, coaches seem to desire a sport psychologist with knowledge on the sport specificity, able to understand the sport particular language, and the club's training and competitive environment (Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Bond, 2002).

Another major barrier, especially in professional sports, relates to confidentiality issues. According to Pain and Harwood (2004), it is necessary that sport psychologists (or others responsible for similar role) guarantee full confidentiality to the players. Initially, this could seem something logical, understandable and easy to do, however these practitioners face a deontological problem (Perna et al., 1995). Being hired by the institution (club), the sport psychology 'needs' to report all his findings to the employer, although when consulting a player he has ethical issues regarding the player's privacy. This is a dilemma faced by the sport psychologist that can destroy the relationship with the players and/or institution. Biddle, Bull and Seheult (1992) stated that even paying and requesting the services of the sport psychologist, the club is not necessarily the client. To avoid the appearance of any barriers at this level, its decisive to clarify the expectations, role and responsibility of the sport psychologist within the institution (Perna et al., 1995), and the best way to do it is negotiating with coaches and other managerial personnel the extension of the confidentiality (Gardner, 2001; Bond, 2002). This may also contribute to a better acceptance of the sport psychologist from the coaches, and consequently increase the trust from the players.

### 1.8.1 – Approaches in Psychosocial Support Delivery

In their research with Olympic athletes, Gould and colleagues (1999) identified mental skills, strategies (e.g., use of the same routines), physical, social, and environmental factors as determinants for Olympic performance. To these authors, successful teams participated in mental skills training (MST), and used that mental preparation to be highly focused and committed. Traditional sport psychology considers that performance enhancement is attained through the teaching of psychological skills such as relaxation, mental rehearsal, positive self talk, and goal setting (Andersen, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2001). Within this perspective, the most widely practiced approach to performance enhancement in sport psychology appears to be MST (Morris & Thomas, 1995). Bull (1989) in his research with ultra-distance runners presented a four phase framework for the role of a sport psychology consultant: I) establishing a rapport with the athlete; II) formulating a psychological profile; III) evaluating the demands of the athletic pursuit and planning an appropriate mental training/program; and IV) ongoing evaluation of progress and crisis intervention. Bull also indicated that practitioners may have to withdraw their support and let athletes evolve and grow by themselves, remaining available for consultation when necessary.

After reviewing the MST literature, and changing ideas with a range of experienced sport psychologists, Thomas (1990) elaborated a seven phase performance enhancement process in applied sport psychology: 1) orientation of the applied practice; 2) sport analysis; 3) individual/team assessment; 4) conceptualisation; 5) psychological skills training; 6) implementation; and 7) evaluation. Later, Petitpas (2000) talking about his personal experiences mentioned that in his applied work, he followed a 'traditional counselling framework': a) build rapport; b) define the problem; c) set goals; d) learn new skills; e) test skills in vivo; f) evaluate level of goal attempt; g) end of the relationship.

In any case, MST should be planned, implemented and supervised by qualified consultancy sport psychologists, but it should also be the responsibility of the

coach as the person that works closer with the athletes (Weinberg & Williams, 2001). According with the same authors, ideally the implementation of a MST programme should be a combined work developed by coaches and sport psychologist. Research developed with young children appears to indicate that sport performance can improve due to mental imagery rehearsal (Orlick & Zitzelsberger, 1996; Weinberg, Butt, Knight, Burke & Jackson, 2003). The earlier the athletes began to use mental skills, the more proficient he/she might become (Munroe-Chandler, Hall, Fishburne & Shannon, 2005), though real benefits will only come from a long-term systematic MST programme in a similar way to the development of other skills (Seabourne, Weinberg, Jackson & Suinn, 1985; Cumming et al., 2004).

A broader approach to sport psychology work was presented with the life development intervention (LDI) by Danish and colleagues (1993). These authors emphasise the need to do more than just deliver MST, teaching life skills to assist players improve not only their performance, but also to deal with the demands of life issues. Sport psychologists need to expand their view on aspects that affect an athlete's performance. Research has highlighted that some of the most common psychological barriers to an athlete's success include their lack of knowledge of the self, lack of skills, hesitancy to take risks, lack of social support (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993), cognitive (self-doubt, low self-confidence, low self-esteem), affective (anxiety, disappointment, shame), behavioural (giving up, pushing too hard, poor communication), and cognitive (low motivation, lost of interest) (Giges, 2000). Furthermore, many performance difficulties of athletes are related with broader life issues such as the coach-athlete relationship, dealing with financial matters, family problems, adapting to new roles, interpersonal relationships, girlfriends, or moving into a new environment and culture (Orlick, 1989; Neff, 1990; Dorfman, 1990; Loehr, 1990; Ravizza, 1990; Poczwardowski, Sherman & Ravizza, 2004). In his research with professional hockey players, Botterill (1990) believed that wives, families, and friends were very important for the player's lives, making that what was happening away from the ring was probably as important, or even more to what was happening in training or

competition. Similarly, in their research with champion figure skaters, Gould and colleagues (1993b) appointed relationship issues, expectations and pressures to perform, psychological and physical demands, environmental demands, family problems, and life direction concerns as sources of stress. Such issues, whether physical or mental, are not strictly athletic related but viewed as life issues with possible impacts on players' performances (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1992). There are clearly a number of challenging life events that are unlikely to be solved only by the use of MST (Gardner, 2001; Jones, Hanton & Connaughton, 2002; Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Nesti, 2006), and therefore require a broader approach to supporting athletes at different stages of their careers.

Some practitioners consider that collecting comprehensive data is beyond the scope of their professional roles (see, Halliwell, 1990; Ravizza, 1990), whilst others defend that it is a necessary, more comprehensive and holistic approach to understand the athlete (Andersen, 2000; Bond, 2002). Corlett (1996) presented a philosophical reflection on applied sport psychology practice, doing an analogy with the ancient Sophist and Socratic ideologies from Athens. He suggested that Sophist practitioners are mainly technique driven, where the only (or primary) concern is to overcome any interference with the athletes' performance, concentrating on immediate results, with little reference to helping athletes understand and/or addressing the root cause of the issue. Typically, a Sophist approach would tend to rely more on mental skills training (MST) techniques to eliminate the 'symptoms'. Conversely, the author described a Socratic practitioner as one that would never be satisfied with any solution for the immediate problem. More specifically, a Socratic practitioner more than 'hiding' a problem aspires to eradicate the source of it. For that, the Socratic practitioner encourages rigorous personal examination and improved knowledge of the self (Corlett, 1996).

Considering the traditional sport psychologists approach, Corlett (1996, p.88) has accused them of relying excessively on *"technique based symptomatic relief"* in detriment of the athlete's well-being. Similarly, Salter (1997) reported a concern with applied sport psychologists becoming obsessed by MST, technique and

measurements instead of helping the development of the athlete's self-knowledge. These concerns led to a person centred approach, more linked with a Socratic humanistic ideology. This perspective highlights the need to remain with the real 'lived world' of the athlete. With this approach, goal setting and (most) other mental skills interventions would have a more subtle and subdued place within the sport psychologists collective approaches, with a need to consider that practitioners are dealing with a 'person', their life and possible existential crisis consequent of their lives (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). Sport psychologists and even other practitioners (e.g., coaches, club directors) need to understand that the elite athlete is a 'person' as well as a sportsman (Bond, 2002). Even being elite athletes, what they do in sport is inseparable from who they are as a person (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). The lack of support makes athletes doubt their competence, decrease their personal control, and experience *some* anxiety (Brustad et al., 2001). Specifically when working with elite athletes, sport psychologists must help them stay at the top as long as possible (Salter, 1997). According to May and Schneider (1995), authentic empathy and presence by the sport psychologist counsellor during turbulent moments is crucial for the success of the athlete. Therefore, existential psychologists consider that the practitioner's personality is vital for the relational dynamic with the athlete (Nesti, 2002). To Bond (2002), the role of the applied sport psychologist is to understand, assist, and support the development of the whole person, considering the interaction between the demands from the sport and athlete's personal life. That way, Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) proposed that psychologists must adopt a more humanistic and caring approach, increasing the athletes' trust, offering a holistic view on the human condition, and helping the athlete to survive in a challenging world. To these authors, rather than a divergent philosophy, it is possible to conciliate a performance with a caring agenda. Although, despite several calls for sport psychologists to consider the importance of other skills aside from MST (Andersen, 2000; Andersen et al., 2001; Nesti, 2006; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006), it seems that techniques and interventions remain the main sport psychology and performance enhancement service delivery within elite level professional sport (Nesti, 2006).

### 1.8.2 – Psychosocial Issues within Football

According to Thelwell and Maynard (2003), and Thelwell and colleagues (2006), MST training programmes help football players to improve and increase their performance consistency. Being more receptive to educational work and interventions at younger ages, early interventions may help players to accept and understand easily the importance of MST for their development and performance (Pain & Harwood, 2007). Moreover, providing youth footballers with relevant strategies for coping with challenging situations on early career stages may help them during similar situations later in their careers (Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2005). Salmon and colleagues (1994), and more recently Jordet's (2005) research, showed that the use of imagery in football can be associated to an increase of player's performance.

Nevertheless, within the academy environment, one-to-one work with players goes beyond MST and deals with more personal issues, normally on an informal and ad-hoc basis (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005). In their research in elite youth football, Holt and Dunn (2004) identify four major psychosocial competencies: discipline (i.e., dedication to the sport and willingness to sacrifice); commitment (i.e., strong motives and career planning goals); resilience (i.e., ability to use coping strategies to overcome difficulties); and social support (i.e., ability to use emotional, informational, and tangible support). To the authors it is the interaction between the four that contributes to football success. Tough, social and emotional support is seen as an essential supplement to the existential, technical, tactical and physical curriculum that dominates player development (Richardson et al., 2004).

Due to the unique and idiosyncratic culture of elite professional football world (Lazarus, 2000; Parker, 2000; Potrac et al., 2002), players show some fear to be stigmatised by their coaches and/or team-mates as 'weak' or having some psychological problems just by being seen talking with the sport psychologist (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel & Lounsbury, 1997; Pain & Harwood, 2004). In that sense, players must feel that the coach believes and supports the work of the sport psychologist (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). However, even being careful to not be

seen, Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) reported that football players talk frequently with sport psychologists about outside performance based topics, leading psychologists to be housed in a more 'lifestyle' type role or personal orientation interface with players. Therefore, a cultural shift towards a more humanistic, caring, and supportive (i.e., social and emotional) perspective may benefit the player's well being and performance (Richardson et al., 2004; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). However, a cultural shift is not easy in such a traditional environment, mainly when first team staff already perceive the academy environment as too supportive (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010).

In summary, this research highlights a new conceptual shift, where research on sport psychology development and/or applied practice has moved from a more mental skills development base (MST) towards a broader approach (lifestyle issues and focus on the person) (Danish et al., 1993). Woodman and Hardy (2001) were the first to empirically demonstrate that organisational structures are crucial to understand the psychological demands that the sportsman experience, which goes beyond the psychological performance base. The recognition that the elite athlete is also a 'person', and that their performance is affected by life issues (Bond, 2002; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Nesti & Littlewood, 2010), led to a need to understand the broader cultural and social context in order to contribute to athlete development, enhancement and satisfaction. Recent literature (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) explores the cultural issues within sport psychology. Although this is a welcome addition to this body of work, the text focuses on cross-cultural issues, and sport psychology delivery in different countries. The broader concept of culture within this context has not been critically addressed, and therefore remains unexplored within the academic community.

## 1.9 – Mapping the Research Journey, Clarifying Aims and the Structure of the Thesis

This research aims to explore both player and practitioner perspectives of the organisational structures, philosophies and working mechanisms that impact the transition of youth football players to the professional environment. Moreover, it aims to explore youth player's psychosocial support and development in preparation for such a transition. In order to achieve this overall aim, the research encompasses two studies, with the latter study adopting a phased representational approach. The following section offers a brief overview of the nature of each study and associated aims. Furthermore, the section identifies the appropriate research methodologies and time line during the research pathway. At the end of the section, Figure 1.8 represents the research journey incorporating the two studies and their specific aims.

### 1.9.1 – Study One: Organisational Structure, Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development within Elite Football Clubs (*February 2006 to May 2007*)

The previous literature highlighted the lack of knowledge on organisational structures and managerial practices within professional sport organisations, and specifically in professional football clubs (Gammelsæter, 2006). Study One aims to contribute to a better understanding of European elite professional football clubs' management practices and organisational structures. Additionally, it aims to explore how those structures and management practices impact the youth players' transition from youth to the professional environment. The study includes twenty-six elite football clubs (i.e., with UEFA European Competitions experience) from five European countries (i.e., England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). Aiming to explore the youth players' preparation and transition to the professional environment, it was decided to develop an interview with the person responsible for the youth department (i.e., HYD).

Twenty-six HYD/AM (or equivalent) from elite professional football clubs across five European countries were interviewed. Due to the lack of research with professional football clubs it was important to let the participants express freely their toughs and perspectives. The use of semi-structured open-ended interviews allowed an in-depth understanding of the environment through the eyes of the participants (Scanlan, Ravizza & Stein, 1989b; Dale, 1996). The semi-structured interviews followed an interview schedule that was deductively developed alongside previous literature, conceptual themes (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001), and with respect to informal contact with a selection of youth development staff within professional football. Interviews were undertaken by the researcher over a period of fifteen months, between February 2006 and May 2007.

The more business perspective associated to professional football clubs reshaped the club's philosophies, structures, and working practices in order to become more effective and competitive in a very demanding environment (Gammelsæter and Jakobsen, 2008). Knowing that the organisational structure and philosophies have a major impact on the working practices, and consequently on the effectiveness of the organisation (De Knop et al., 2004; Slack & Parent, 2006), Gammelsæter (2006) shows his surprise and concern due to the lack of empirical research on organisational structures within professional football clubs. Therefore, the first specific aim intends to contribute for the lack of research in this area,

**Aim 1 – To explore the management practices and organisational structure of elite European professional football clubs.**

The business perspective also influenced the recruitment of players to the professional team. Clubs tend to invest in more 'finished' and recognised players in order to obtain immediate sportive results and increase merchandise sales (Maguire & Pearton, 2000), which led to a lack of readiness and/or even willingness to prepare youth Academy players for the professional environment (Richardson et al., 2005). The lack of emerging new youth talents and the perceived reluctance of investment in youth development programmes by some

clubs (Richardson et al., 2005), led governing bodies either at national (e.g., national FA) or international (e.g., UEFA, FIFA) level to implement some measures to rectify the situation. Due to some of the new measures and the increased values of youth players, clubs will be encouraged to invest more in youth academies, talent identification and development (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Reilly et al., 2003; Vaeyens et al., 2005). The second specific aim, intends to explore the youth department structure, alongside the importance and investment of professional football clubs in the youth development,

**Aim 2 – To explore the respective youth philosophies and structure of elite European professional football clubs.**

Even investing more in youth development programmes, frequently youth talented players do not achieve the expected level when playing at professional level. The transition from youth to professional environment as been identified has a critical development period, decisive for the player's future career (Richardson et al., 2005; Vaeyens et al., 2005). The provision of a structured and coherent approach with elements psychological and sociological support (e.g., reflective practice, counselling, behavioural and lifestyle skills) may help the youth players deal with such a critical transition (Richardson et al., 2005; Littlewood, 2005). Though, no research has been done on the specificities of the crucial youth football players' transition from youth to the professional environment, neither on the psychosocial support within professional football teams (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). The third and fourth specific aims look to explore the complexity of youth players' transition from youth to professional football environment, and at the same time contribute to a better understanding on the psychosocial support provided to youth players in their preparation for such transition,

**Aim 3 – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;**

**Aim 4 – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.**

### 1.9.2 – Study Two: Ethnographic Engagement within Six Elite European Football Clubs (*August 2007 to April 2008*)

The analysis of the results from Study One, allow an insight about the clubs' organisational structures, philosophies and working practices of different elite European football clubs. However, those findings reported solely to the different HYDs perceptions, mainly focus on what they say they do. Therefore, aiming to explore the day-to-day working practices of professional football clubs, more specifically regarding the youth development and the young players' transition to the professional environment, in Study Two an ethnographic approach was adopted. The ethnographic approach is considered the best way to truly capture the human behaviour within the environment (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005).

From the results obtained in Study One the twenty-six clubs were clustered according to specific criteria (e.g., club structure; youth development structure; communication between youth and first team; youth and first team sharing or not the same training facilities; having or not a reserves team; presence or not of a sport psychologist or similar). At the end of this process, it was possible to identify seven different realities. Unfortunately, none of the clubs from one reality showed availability to develop Study Two, leaving the sample with only six clubs. The author followed the highest youth team of each one of the six clubs on a daily basis for a period of one month – from August 2007 to April 2008. During that period, thirty eight semi-structured interviews were undertaken with different participants: six HYD, seven coaches, one technical coordinator, one head of recruitment, three sport psychologists, four teachers, one internal assistant, eight first team players, and seven youth players. The ethnographic process sought to understand the players and staff members' perspectives on the culture and real working practices within each one of the six environments (Wolcott, 1995; Tedlock, 2000).

The representation of the results of Study Two will be presented in two parts. Study Two Part I will focus on the various semi-structured interviews developed

during the ethnographic engagement to capture the academy staff and players' perspectives regarding the day-to-day working practices and the transition period from youth to professional environment, while Study Two Part II will represent specific and/or significant episodes from daily delivery practices, allowing the reader to 'see' the environment reality through the eyes of players and practitioners (Tedlock, 2000; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Krane & Baird, 2005).

Wylleman and colleagues (2004) consider pertinent to focus our attention on the role that significant stakeholders play in the development of the athletes' career. More specifically, Gilbourne and Richardson (2005) consider that within football setting, practitioners have a big impact in the way players perceive psychosocial support. Therefore, Study Two will continue to explore **aims 3** and **4** although from a more applied perspective. Moreover, it was incorporated one fifth specific aim to respond to the need to develop research on the psychosocial support within professional football (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010), mainly on the way that the support is delivered on a daily basis and its impact on the athlete's successful outcome (Petitpas et al., 1999); in the particular case of this research, the youth players' transition from youth to the professional environment,

**Aim 3 – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;**

**Aim 4 – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.**

**Aim 5 – To (better) understand and further explore the day-to-day practices utilised in the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments.**

## CHAPTER 2: STUDY ONE

**Organisational Structure, Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development within Elite Football Clubs**

Study One specific aims:

**Aim 1** – To explore the management practices and organisational structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 2** – To explore the respective youth philosophies and structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.

*In season - February 2006 to May 2007*

## CHAPTER 3: STUDY TWO

**Ethnographic engagement within six elite European football clubs**

**Study Two, Part I** – General approach to the reality within the six different clubs

**Study Two, Part II** – Specific and significant episodes of daily delivery practices

Study Two specific aims:

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments;

**Aim 5** – To (better) understand and further explore the day-to-day practices utilised in the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments.

*In season – August 2007 to April 2008*

**Figure 1.8:** The Research Journey

# CHAPTER TWO

## CHAPTER 2: STUDY ONE

**Organisational Structure, Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development within Elite Football Clubs**

Study One specific aims:

**Aim 1** – To explore the management practices and organisational structure of elite European professional football clubs;

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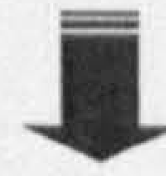
*In season - February 2006 to May 2007*



## CHAPTER 3: STUDY TWO

**Ethnographic engagement within six elite European football clubs**

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*In season – August 2007 to April 2008*

## 2.1 – Introduction

The competitive and typically entrenched traditions of professional clubs tend to manifest in the production of closed 'secretive' environments, with their own specific culture (Parker, 1995). Traditionally it has been difficult for researchers to enter into such environments. This research aims to 'overcome the walls of these environments' and provide a better understanding of youth player development practices within elite professional football clubs. Specifically, this research concerns the youth players' psychosocial preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environment. Study One aims to explore the management practices and organisational structures of European professional football clubs, and the club's philosophies concerning the development, location and positioning of youth football within the organisation itself. Study One, also aims to explore the complexity of the transition from the youth to the professional environment, more specifically the youth player's preparation for what Richardson and colleagues (2005) describe as the post-academy transition from a psychosocial perspective. The specific aims of Study One are detailed below. Each aim is explored through a number of elite professional football clubs from a range of European countries in order to capture a pan-European perspective of practice.

Study One incorporates the following specific aims:

**Aim 1** – To explore the management practices and organisational structures of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 2** – To explore the respective youth philosophies and structures of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.

## 2.2 – Methodology

Hoepfl (1997) stated that qualitative research, using a naturalistic approach, is the most appropriate methodology to gain a more context specific understanding of a particular setting. Furthermore, qualitative data is rich, providing depth, detail, and allows people to understand the reality of the field (Scanlan et al., 1989b; Pummell et al., 2008). In this regard, the author adopted a qualitative position in order to explore and understand the organisational structures and management practices within professional football clubs.

### 2.2.1 – Qualitative Approach

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.17) defined qualitative research as *"any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification."* From a more practical approach, qualitative research *"...is a systematic empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a bounded social context. Given any group, role, community, or locus for human interaction, it is a way to define and answer the primordial question 'What's going on here?'"* (Locke, 1989, p.2). With respect to the comments of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Locke (1989), in order to understand *what is going on* in elite European professional football clubs, it seems pertinent to allow those practitioners working within the club express themselves, and articulate their experience and knowledge of the field. According to Jones and colleagues (2002), one of the main advantages of adopting a qualitative method is that it allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding and gain detailed information about the participant's personal constructs and experiences, and therefore characterise the surrounding environment.

Interviewing is considered to be the most common, but also powerful, way to understand human beings and their behaviour (Fontana & Frey, 1994). According to the same authors, there are a wide variety of interviewing techniques. The most common interview technique includes the individual, face-to-face verbal interchange. The exploratory nature of this research, and the requirement to

acquire the real perspectives and experiences of the practitioners required the adoption of a semi-structured interview type, without pre-determined themes or perspectives that might influence the participants' answers and/or feelings, and letting 'the doors open' to the urgency of any relevant issues. In this research the procedure adopted aligns with what was defended by Côté and colleagues (1993). These authors identified a combined protocol of semi-structured interviews and content analysis as the dominant qualitative template used in sport and exercise psychology. Moreover, this protocol is an exemplar of a qualitative framework that facilitates an in-depth understanding of the participants (Biddle et al., 2001) and their environment.

### 2.2.2 – Sample

The sample for Study One consists of twenty-six elite professional football clubs, across five European countries, namely England (n=6), Portugal (n=5), Spain (n=9), France (n=2), and Sweden (n=4). In order to be included in Study One, and to be considered as an elite football club, each club had to be an established *professional* entity playing in the top league of their respective country at the time Study One was undertaken. Whilst not a pre-condition of selection, twenty of the clubs were involved in European Competitions in the seasons 2005/06 and/or 2006/07. The other six clubs all had previous European competition experience. As previously outlined, the football environment is a typically closed environment, traditionally suspicious, and/or sceptical about the presence and/or role of 'outsiders' (Parker, 1995). Such scepticism is heightened when more than one club (in some cases rival clubs) participate in the same research. In this regard, and in order to initially gain access to such environments, it was imperative to offer and guarantee confidentiality both within and outside of each professional club with regards to data collection, recording and the subsequent presentation of this work.

The clubs were invited to participate in the research by letter. The letter briefly explained the aims of the research and what was expected of, and from, them in order to participate. Specifically for Study One, twenty-six Heads of Youth

Development (HYD), Academy Managers (AM) (or equivalent), one from each club, were interviewed using semi-structured formal interviews (Scanlan, Ravizza & Stein, 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Biddle et al., 2001). It should be noted that during this time the author made numerous presentations to the respective governing body officials of Europe and respective nations in order to facilitate access and engagement in the Study. Furthermore, it was during this time that the author was awarded the prestigious João Havelange research scholarship from FIFA to support the research.

### 2.2.3 – Constructing the Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was designed to explore each club's organisational structure, philosophy, working practices and environment. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to afford the HYD/AM the opportunity to express freely their thoughts and beliefs. According to Scanlan and colleagues (1989b), the oral nature of open-ended interviews allows the participants to express freely their feelings instead of responding to defined categories. Such a relaxed and informal approach allows an in-depth understanding of the participant's thoughts, feelings and perspectives.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to support the interviewer, using the guidelines set out by Gould (1990), and procedural works developed by Scanlan and colleagues (1989a). Due to the practical perspective of this research, it was important to create an interview guide based not only on academic knowledge, a consequence of a thorough review of relevant literature (Patton, 2002), but also one that incorporated elements of craft knowledge from the author's and supervisory team's extensive experience in this area. Moreover, the interview schedule was further enriched through informal talks with players and staff members from a range of professional football clubs. The interview guide was pilot tested (Janesick, 1994) with six academic colleagues who also worked at, or had previous experiences as staff and players, within professional football clubs. Through peer triangulation (McFee, 1992; Janesick, 1994; Biddle et al.,

2001) and pilot work, the initial guide was continually refined until a final version of the interview schedule was achieved (see table 2.1).

**Table 2.1:** Summation of the interview schedule.

| **Phase 1 – Introduction**<br>Importance and explanations about this interview (expected time, aims, interview structure, and reinforce confidentiality). |
|---|
| **Phase 2 - Youth development club ideals and philosophies**<br>Aims: Break the ice – explore participant's sporting background; explore the HYD role and personal perspectives about the ideal youth coach and player. Club aims, decision making process, and philosophies regarding youth development (Quarterman & Li, 2003; Richardson et al., 2004; Stratton et al., 2004). |
| **Phase 3 - Clubs organisational structure**<br>Aim: To explore of the club's organisational structure: facilities, departments, financial issues, staff organisation (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Quarterman & Li, 2003; Stratton et al., 2004). |
| **Phase 4 - Working mechanisms**<br>Aim: To explore the working mechanisms within the club and the club's youth structure: nature of staff relationships, staff development, communication, players' organisational support and recruitment (Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Holt, 2002; Wilkesmann & Blutner, 2002; Quarterman & Li, 2003; Reilly et al., 2003; Stratton et al., 2004). |
| **Phase 5 – Within-career transition from youth to professional environment**<br>Aim: To explore the player's promotion and within-career transition from the youth to the professional environment. Player's characteristics, main barriers, and preparation for a positive transition (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Stambulova, 2000; van Rossum, 2001; Richardson et al., 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). |
| **Phase 6 – Psychosocial support and development**<br>Aim: To explore perceptions of psychosocial aspects of the youth development programme, and locate the staff responsible for such aspects. Clarify the role and practices of the appropriate practitioners responsible for the development of psychosocial competencies (e.g., sport psychologist, education and/or welfare personnel) (Gould et al., 2002; Potrac et al., 2002; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Richardson et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). |
| **Phase 7 - End of interview**<br>Clarification and appreciation for their time and knowledge |

Phase 1 of the interview schedule aimed to establish some rapport with the interviewee clarifying any possible doubts about the research (Scanlan et al., 1989a). Each participant was previously briefed about the research and the aims of the interview, but it seemed pertinent to reinforce such information and use it as starting point to 'break the ice' with the interviewee. Again, the participant was

reminded about the nature and confidentiality of the interview and research process.

To help 'break the ice', eliminate any nervousness that might exist, and allow the interviewee to become more comfortable (Roulston, deMarrais & Lewis, 2003), the interview began with some very gentle, general and familiar questions. Phase 2 initially focused on the interviewee's sporting background, role and responsibility of their position at the club, and personal perspectives about coaching ideology, ideal coaches and players. The focus of the interview then moved on to the club's philosophies, aims and working practices regarding the youth department.

Phase 3 explored the club's organisational structure from a general perspective, which encouraged the description of the club's structure, departments, facilities, and personnel working within the club environment. Phase 4 aimed to explore the working mechanisms and practices of the different departments and personnel identified previously on phase 3. The latter part of these phases explored the club's structure, philosophies and working mechanisms that have an impact on the club's environment on a daily basis. Indeed, the participants were encouraged to articulate and describe examples of day-to-day scenarios and practice throughout the interview.

Phases 5 and 6 focused on the transition from the youth to the professional environment. Phase 5 explored directly the participant's thoughts on the demands of, and requirements for, a positive transition from the youth to the professional environment. Specifically, the players' characteristics, main barriers and support mechanisms were explored. Phase 6 explored the players' preparation for the transition with specific concern to the psychosocial support and development provided by the club.

The final phase of the interview offered the participant an opportunity to highlight any other pertinent issue(s) that were not discussed during the interview. This

phase enabled the participant to respond to, clarify and/or extend any aspects of the interview schedule. Finally, the author reinforced the value, importance and appreciation of the participant's contribution to the research.

### 2.2.4 – Interview Procedure

The researcher visited each one of the clubs for a minimum period of one week. During this time, the researcher collated a range of secondary data sources concerning strategic and operational policy, and practice documentation (e.g., directly from personnel staff and/or through the club's internet site). Moreover, it allowed the author to observe the daily practices of the club and develop some informal links, communication and relationships with different personnel and/or players (Hoepfl, 1997). Intentionally, the more formalised, semi-structured interview with the relevant individual was conducted in the latter part of the researcher's week in residence. In this regard, it was anticipated that the researcher would be able to create and generate some rapport with the interviewee, and also provided the researcher with an opportunity to, even superficially, glean some contextual knowledge concerning the club's environment. This more contextual and experiential knowledge of the club's environment allowed the researcher to probe some of the aspects mentioned by the HYD/AM, and clarify specific points observed (Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza, 1991; Patton, 2002).

Twenty-six individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Biddle et al., 2001) with HYD and/or AM (or equivalent) were undertaken by the researcher over a period of fifteen months, between February 2006 and May 2007. All the interviews were recorded using a dictaphone. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. The more informal and semi-structured interview approach afforded the researcher, and the participant, the opportunity to be flexible, and allowed probing areas of particular relevance, unexpected answers and/or pertinent issues that emerged (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). In this sense, too much rigidity in the interview process may

prevent the successful capture of the participant's experiences and perspectives (Côté, Salmela & Russell, 1995; Côté & Salmela, 1996; Dale, 1996; Biddle et al., 2001; Krane & Baird, 2005).

### 2.2.5 – Data Analysis and Representation

Biddle and colleagues (2001) highlighted the importance of providing a detailed set of procedural explanations to enhance the credibility of the interview process. This procedural concern should also be evident during the data analysis process (e.g., Hanton & Jones, 1999). In this regard, the procedural guidelines of a range of authors undertaking interpretational interview studies were considered (Scanlan et al., 1989b; Gould, Eklund & Jackson 1993a; Gould, Jackson & Finch, 1993b; Côté et al., 1993; Côté & Salmela, 1996). The subsequent analysis procedure adopted is detailed below:

1. First, all interviews were listened to and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The interviews in Portugal and Spain were developed in Portuguese and Spanish respectively. In those cases, after the transcription, the interviews were also translated by qualified personnel, being then checked by the researcher. With all interviews transcribed in English, they were read several times by the researcher and by the supervisory team to ensure familiarity was established with the transcriptions and the participants. This yielded 340 pages (almost 244,000 words) of single spaced text. This was essential to provide a faithful representation of what happened during the interview; avoiding any assumptions and non-contextualised perspectives that might underpin the research (Roulston et al., 2003).

2. The transcriptions were then analysed using content analysis procedures (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Hanton and Jones (1999, p. 6), defined content analysis as: "*... [the] procedure that allows the investigator to organize raw data into interpretable and*

*meaningful themes and categories and allows these to emerge from the quotations."* As advocated by various qualitative researchers, it was decided to adopt a combined approach of deductive and inductive procedures, (see Patton, 1980; Scanlan et al., 1989a; Schwandt, 1997; Meyer & Wenger, 1998; Patton, 2002). The analysis started deductively based on the pre-determined quotes used in the interview schedule guide and associated literature, continuing inductively with emerging quotes from the interviews (Scanlan et al., 1989a).

3. The process involved the coding of large amounts of data into blocks that represented a common theme (Côté et al., 1995). The process began with identifying a basic unit of analysis (a raw data theme), namely a quote that clearly identified a subjective experience. First order themes were then identified by clustering the quotes around underlying uniformity's (common threads), which in turn became the emergent themes (Biddle et al., 2001). This process entailed comparing and contrasting each quote with all other quotes and emergent themes to unite quotes with similar meanings and separate quotes with contrasting meanings (Biddle et al., 2001).

4. The clustering process continued comparing and contrasting the obtained first order themes, identifying new higher-levels themes (2nd and 3rd order themes). This process of clustering continues until it was considered impossible to create a higher theme level (Biddle et al., 2001).

5. During the clustering process, a tagging system (see Krane, Andersen & Strean, 1997) was employed in order to retain the confidentiality of the participants. Relevant contextual verbatim quotes and consequent themes/headings were 'tagged' and aligned to the various countries and clubs (i.e., 'P' – Portugal; 'EN' – England; 'E' – Spain; 'S' – Sweden; 'F' – France; 'M' referring to the HYD and/or Academy Manager, followed by a letter that corresponded to the different number of clubs within the same country. For example MA, P identified the HYD (or Academy Manager) of Portuguese club A.

6. In accordance with procedures employed by Scanlan and colleagues (1989b), quotes vary in descriptiveness due to a participant's ability to articulate the sometimes complex nature of their answers. Subsequently, some themes did not neatly pass through all the ordering levels but instead were carried directly through to become higher-level themes.

7. The clustering process was first carried out by the researcher, and then discussed with the three supervisors in order to provide trustworthiness, and credibility (Manning, 1997; Sparkes, 1998; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Biddle et al., 2001). The discussion between the researcher and the supervisory team (comprising of experienced qualitative researchers), also known as the triangulation group, aimed to reach agreement on the final form of each quote and theme (Scanlan et al., 1989b). In line with Côté and colleagues (1993), the researcher presented the final interpretational analysis to the triangulation group with a detailed rationale to substantiate the emergence, alignment and positioning of the relevant themes and structures. Any disagreement required a review of the transcript, a re-positioning or rewording of the theme(s) until consensus was reached. By providing more than one view of the data, the triangulation procedure (Côté et al., 1993) reduced the potential bias of the researcher. Thus, the quotes identified and themes created were thought to be more accurate representations of the participant's perspective.

Study One is eminently an exploratory and generally descriptive study. In this regard the following results and discussion are presented using the themes emerging from the general rubric of, primarily deductive, rigorous content analysis. The principles of, an initially deductive approach, to content analysis offered general themes that are represented through sections (i.e., A and B) and constitute the subsequent headings presented in the results and discussion section. This section adopts a thick descriptive approach that contains extensive verbatim quotes from the respective HYDs. This descriptive approach attempts to provide a more fluid understanding of the participants' respective viewpoints. Moreover, all participants were HYDs, so they all shared the same management level.

### 2.3 – Results and Discussion

Due to the vast amount of data collected, the data was grouped according to pre-determined deductive themes (i.e., evidenced in the interview schedule) and other (more inductive) themes that emerged during the interviews. The following results capture the relevant (but not exhaustive) issues that emerged from the interviews and secondary data collated. Data reflecting the relevant themes are presented alongside pertinent verbatim quotes of the respective participants, in order to keep the results faithful to the participants' words.

This results section is divided in to two sections. Section A relates to the clubs' philosophies, organisational and management practices. Section B provides an analysis of the HYD/AM perspectives concerning the player's preparation and transition from the youth to the professional environment.

#### 2.3.1 – Section A: Organisational Management Practices and Philosophies

This section aims to identify different and/or similar club organisational structures, organisational working mechanisms and communication, and the purpose and philosophy towards youth development.

##### 2.3.1.1 – Organisational Structures

In the following section the clubs' organisational structures are represented in two phases. Firstly, the general club structure is outlined followed by a subsequent delineation of the youth development structure.

###### 2.3.1.1.1 – General Club Structure

It was evident that the clubs operated within one of two distinct general organisational structures. Structure A (n=18) identified a 'sports director' that operated as a link between the Executive Board and each of what appeared to be two distinct football departments (i.e., youth and professional). Some HYDs (n=14) mentioned that the first team was the 'engine of the club', and everything else moved around it. In such cases the HYD reported that it was the sports

director who was closer to, and more concerned with, the professional department, typically leaving the control of the youth department to the HYD. Most HYDs (n=10) appeared to understand and accept this position. Structure B (n=8) also identified an Executive Board but it appeared to be (more) directly responsible for both the youth and professional environments. Usually two vice-presidents from the Executive Board were responsible for the respective football departments (i.e., one for the youth and another for the professional department). Neither of these distinct organisational structures could be associated with any particular country or culture (see Figure 2.1).

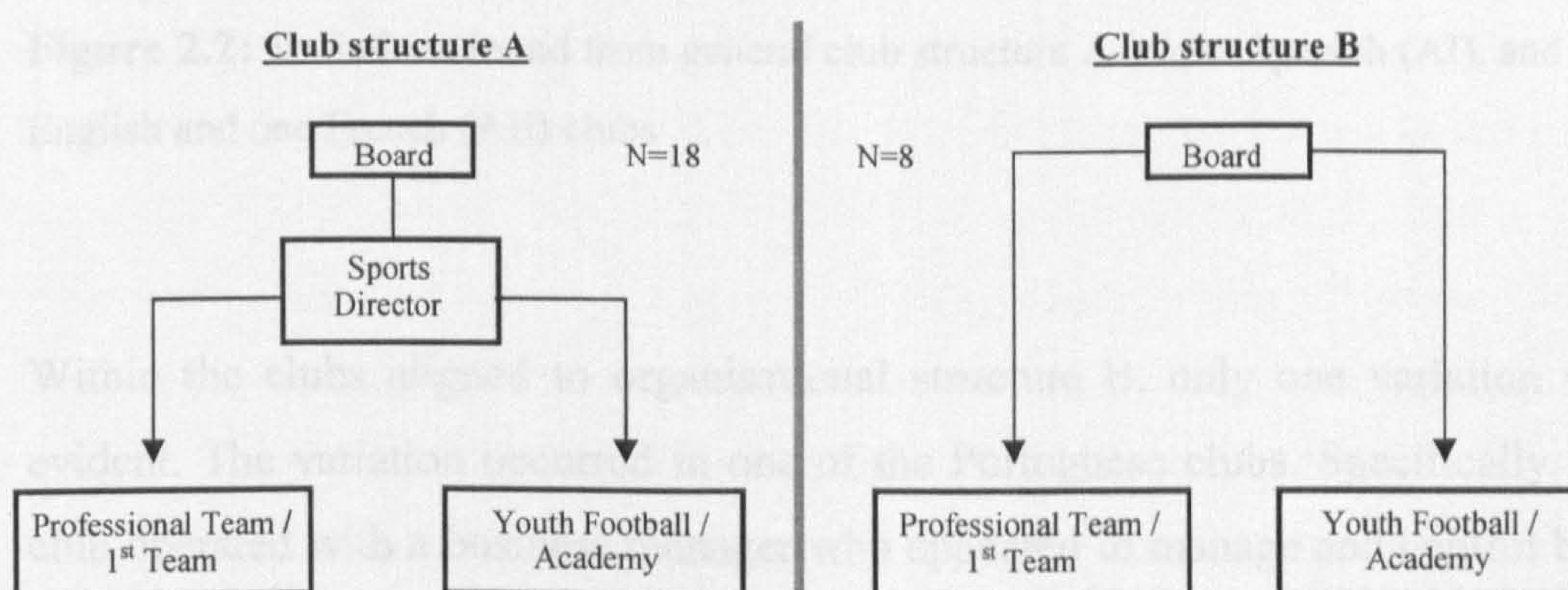



**Figure 2.1:** Representation of the two types of club structure evidenced within the twenty-six clubs across five European countries

Within the previous general club structures, some clubs presented some specific variations. For example, in one Spanish club, with a club structure aligned to model A, it was possible to identify the presence of a general sports director (GSD) and an assistant (see figure 2.2, club structure AI). In one informal conversation, the Spanish HYD mentioned that the presence of the GSD was merely an image strategy because he was a former football star at the club. It was reported that, in essence, the GSD did not fulfil an effective role and that his appearance was only linked with the professional team. Interestingly, and still related to club structure A, the first team manager was identified as the direct line manager to the youth department (i.e., HYD or AM) in *only* two clubs (i.e., one English club and one French club; see figure 2.2, club structure AII).

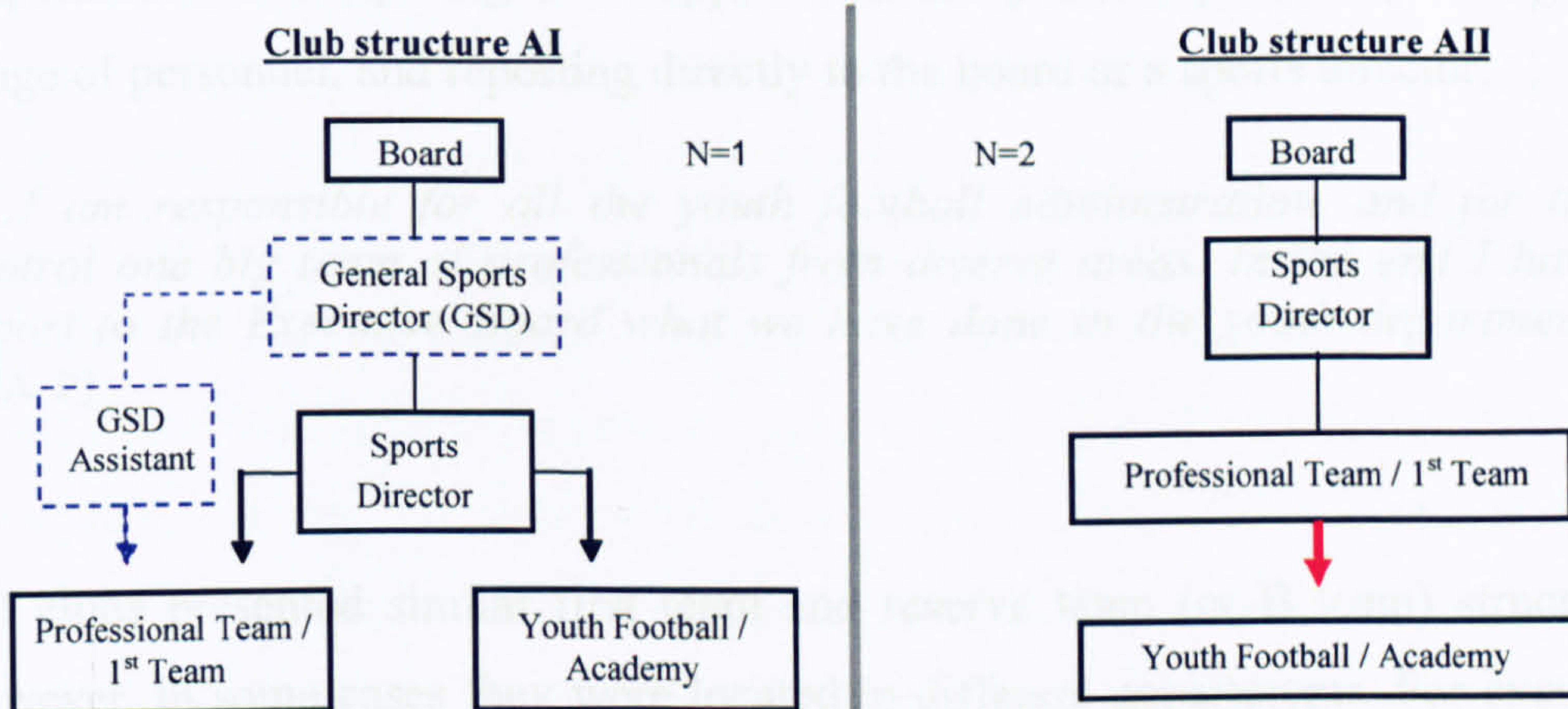



**Figure 2.2:** Variations found from general club structure A in one Spanish (AI), and one English and one French (AII) clubs

Within the clubs aligned to organisational structure B, only one variation was evident. The variation occurred in one of the Portuguese clubs. Specifically, the club operated with a business manager who appeared to manage and control both the professional and youth departments (see figure 2.3). This business manager tended to control (and rule) his department as a small enterprise with a specific intent to ensure both a positive sporting performance alongside positive financial returns.

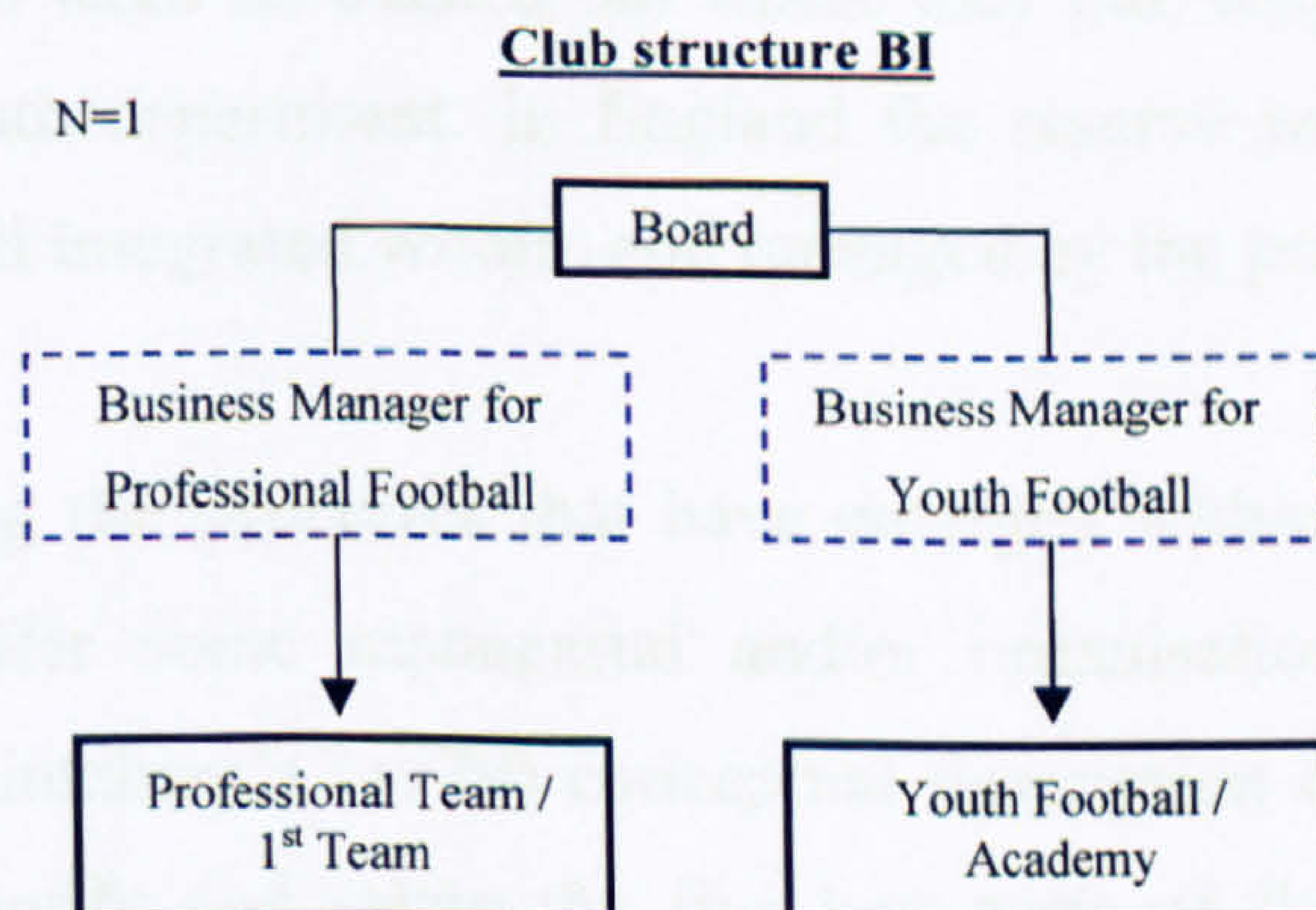



**Figure 2.3:** Variations found from general club structure B in one Portuguese club (BI)

It appeared that regardless of structural schematics, the HYD was the main person responsible for everything that happened in the youth department; managing a range of personnel, and reporting directly to the board or a sports director:

*"...I am responsible for all the youth football administration, and for that I control one big team of professionals from diverse areas. In the end I have to report to the Executive Board what we have done in the youth department..."* (MA, P)

All clubs presented similar first team and reserve team (or B team) structures, however, in some cases they were located in different departments. For example, in Spain, France and Sweden the reserve team (team B and in some cases team C) were under the supervision of the HYD and were subsequently located within, and managed by, the youth department. The professional department was solely concerned with the first team whilst the youth department embraced all the teams from the reserves down to the youngest playing level. The only exception to this group of clubs (i.e., where team B was located within youth department) was found in one Spanish club where team B was located in the professional environment. The reason for this apparent anomaly was that the team B played in the Spanish Second Division (Liga Adelante); a professional league that stipulates that all players must have a professional contract. It was noted that this club also possessed a team C that was integrated in, and managed by, the youth department. In Portugal, few team Bs existed but where they did, they were considered to be part of the youth department. In England the reserve teams (i.e., equivalent to team B) were all integrated within, and managed by the professional environment.

After describing the structures that have emerged within this research, it seems pertinent to offer some managerial and/or organisational theoretical context. Considering Mintzberg's (1979) conceptual description of the organisation, it is possible to identify and relate the five key parts of the organisation with the organisational (and development) structures emerging within the clubs: *strategic apex* – chief executive and chairman; *middle line* – sports director and the coaches; *operating core* – the players; *technostructure* and *support staff* – all the

elements that work within the club and operationalise the daily practice. From a formal perspective, in structure A, the decision-making power appeared to be located within the strategic apex of the club. Subsequently, two distinct departments, (i.e., professional and youth), appear to operate at the same hierarchical level (i.e., the first team is not directly responsible for the youth department). The sports director acts as the intermediate (i.e., a guarantor of communication) between the strategic apex and the other departments. On a daily basis, it seems that the professional department assumed the priority role, with both the strategic apex and sports director co-habiting within the professional environment. Typically, the youth department, and specifically the HYD, was responsible to the board of directors (i.e., not to the first team management). In structure B things are slightly different, with the strategic apex defined by two of its members occupying responsible roles within each one of the football departments (i.e., professional and youth). Within this structure, the first team reports to one member of the board, whilst the HYD reports to another member of the same board. This structure seems to be associated with a 'formal' distance between the two distinct football departments. Nevertheless, on a daily basis, the working mechanisms, patterns and practice seemed to be dictated more by the different type (and character) of personnel working within the clubs, than any specific country's and/or club's structural (or cultural) influence. For example, and independently of structure type (and/or location), it seemed that a 'distance' existed between the first team and the youth environment. This distance could be described as either physical (i.e., two distinct training facilities), cultural (i.e., distinct operational practices) or both. Specifically, three situations were evidenced:

1. When sharing the same training facilities, youth and professional departments were located in different physical buildings (n=18). The predominant rationale for this was the perceived requirement to 'protect' the first team players and to stimulate and/or motivate the youth players to 'fight' to enter into a professional environment;

2. In one Spanish club (i.e., MB, E) the youth department and the first team shared the same training facilities however, whilst still appearing to be managed by the youth department, team B (or the reserve team) resided within the professional environment (n=1);

3. In the third example, the first team and the youth players used different training facilities (n=7). This situation, and the consequent (physical) distance between the youth players and first team seemed to contribute to the presence of distinct game and operational cultures. Subsequently, dissatisfaction was evidenced amongst the youth staff members as to their association, relationship and in some cases perceived lack of belonging to the first team.

**2.3.1.1.2 – Youth Development Structure**

After offering a general perspective about the clubs' structures, it seems pertinent to focus on another aim for Study One, to explore the specificity of the youth department structure. As mentioned previously, the measures implemented by some national and international organisations, such as UEFA and/or the National Football Associations, appear to have led to the existence of similar organisational structures or homogeneity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) amongst professional football clubs across Europe. However, within the global organisational structure, distinct sub-organisational or department structures were evident (also see Gammelsæter, 2006). All English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish clubs (n=22) seemed to favour the identification of different departments (e.g., technical, medical, operations, socio-psychological, educational) similar to that outlined by Stratton and colleagues (2004). This structure adopts a more 'traditional' hierarchical organisational structure. Each one of these departments had a 'head of department' or designated responsible individual, who answered directly to the HYD (see figure 2.4). Nevertheless, final decisions were always reserved for the respective HYDs: *"...I have all the responsibility, and I am the one who has to show my face to the board, so I will always have the last word..."* (ME, E)

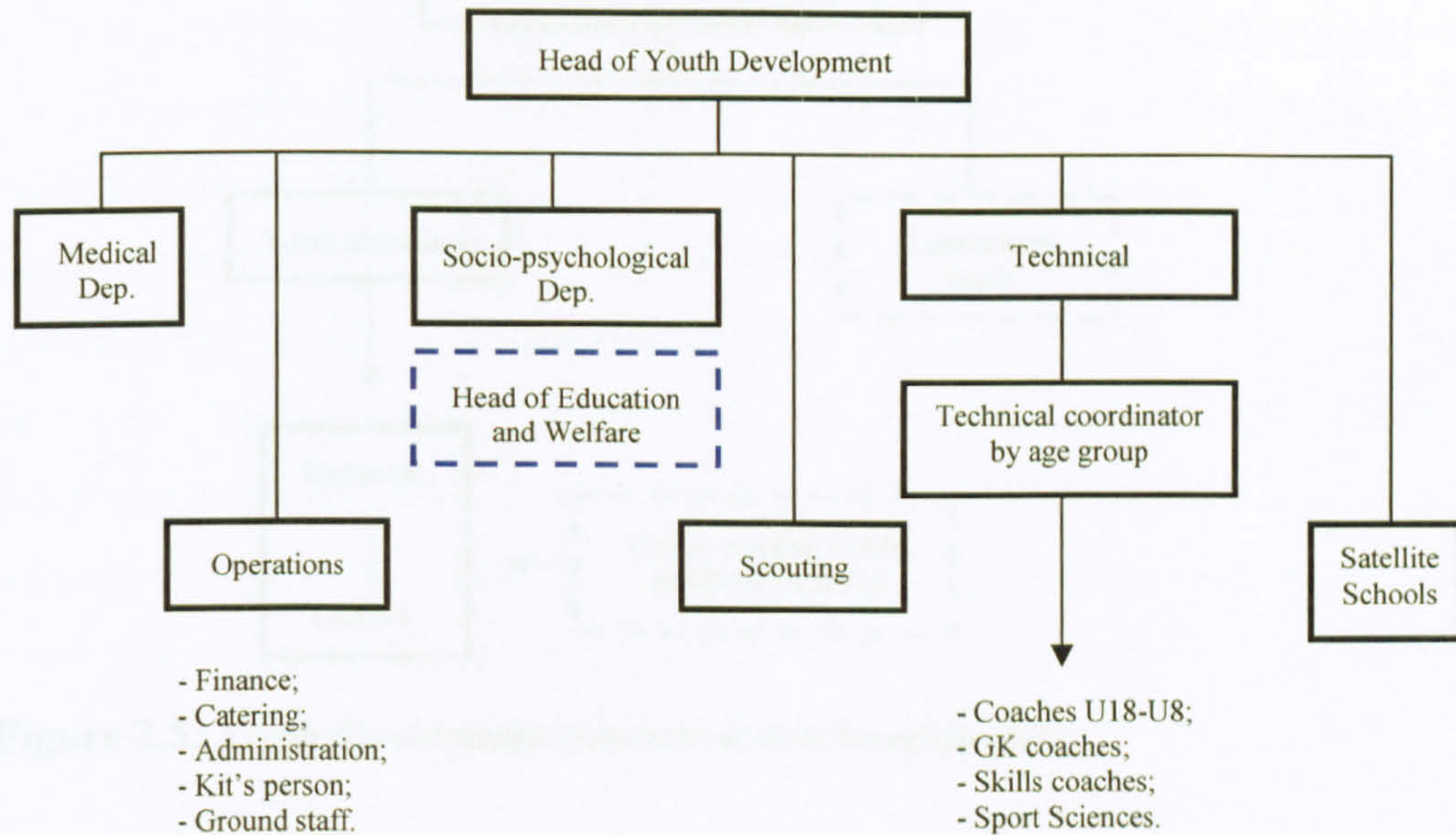



**Figure 2.4:** Youth development structure within English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish clubs

Swedish clubs were the only ones to operate with age group personnel teams, including a coach, an assistant coach, and one director for each of the respective age group teams (see figure 2.5). Frequently the assistant coach assumed the role of fitness coach. Typically, the club possessed one goalkeeper coach for all of the youth teams (i.e., under 8s through to under 19s). It's important to mention that two of the four Swedish clubs identified that they were preparing a re-structuring plan for the youth department. This re-structuring included the change of the structure from age group personnel teams to a departmental organisational structure (including technical coordinators per age group, operations, educational, medical and scouting departments). Interestingly, in one of the Swedish clubs the players trained in mixed age groups. For example, the under-21s, under-19s and under-18s trained together with three or four coaches present in each training session.

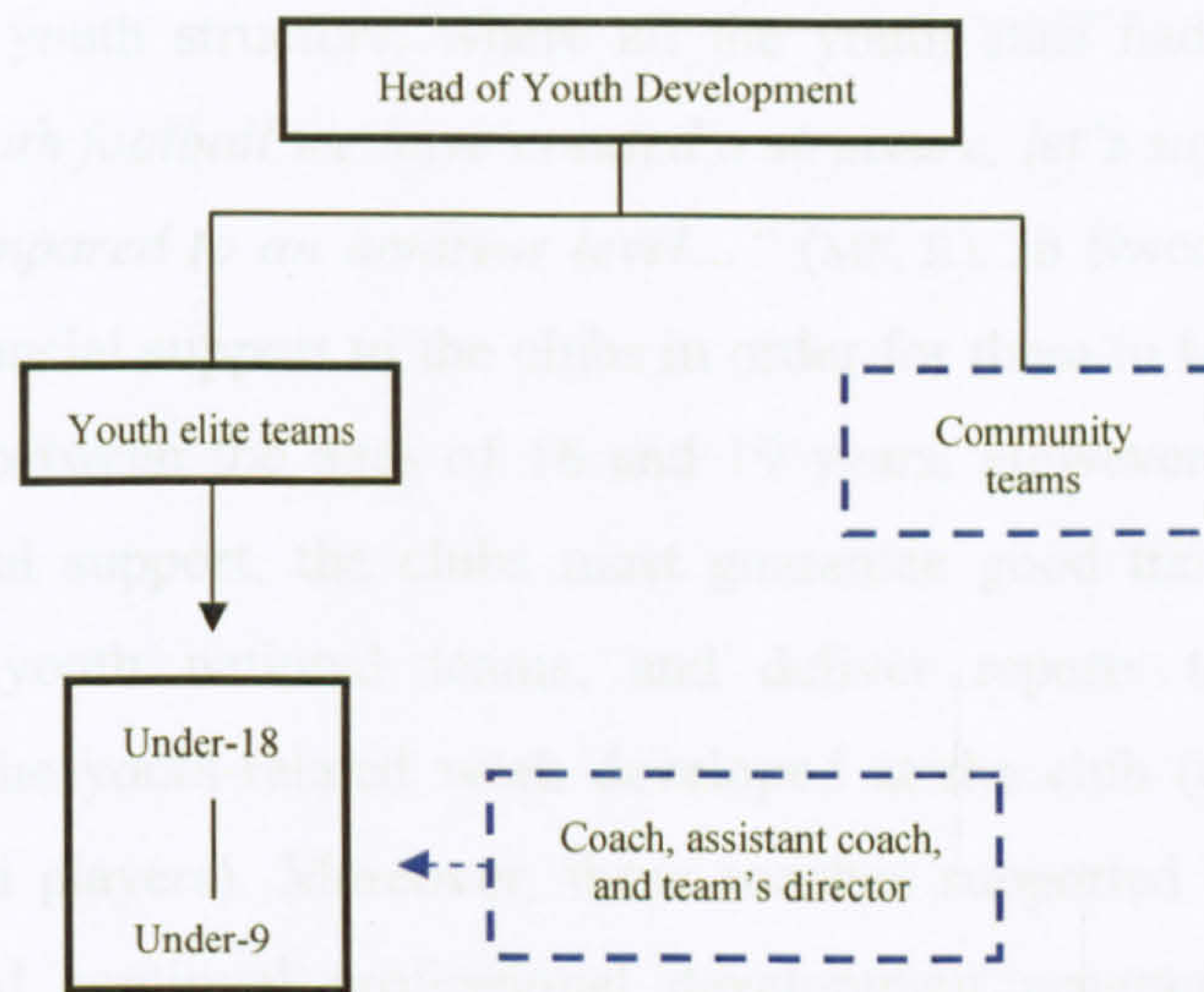



**Figure 2.5:** Youth development structure within Swedish clubs

It was noted that whilst most clubs operated within similar departmental and/or areas of responsibility with similarly named staff, the presence of 'full-time' contractual staff was low. Typically, the number of full-time youth staff employed ranged between 2 to 5 per club. Even being elite professional clubs, full-time contracted staff only appeared to occupy highly responsible positions, such as the HYD, technical coordinator, and/or fitness coordinator. In the main the youth coaches tended to be on part-time contracts. When full-time coaches were employed, they were (usually) associated with the top-age youth teams and also tended to assume other 'generic' and strategic responsibilities. For example the role of technical coordinator, alongside their role as a coach:

"*...the coaches have their work and then they come here, because the club cannot afford to pay a coach to be full-time. The coach of team B is full time, and I don't think that it's necessary to employ anyone else... it's not worth it...*" (MD, E)

Such a part-time existence may impact an individual's dedication, commitment and time spent in the club. Similarly, a part-time, short-term contract existence may also hinder an individual's ability to develop coaching practices and may also be associated with heightened levels of role/job insecurity. From the twenty-six clubs, only four clubs (two French and two Spanish) presented a full-time

professional youth structure, where all the youth staff had full-time contracts: *"...in the youth football we have created a structure, let's say a very professional structure compared to an amateur level..."* (MF, E). In Sweden, the Swedish FA provides financial support to the clubs in order for them to have at least one full-time coach between the ages of 16 and 19 years. However, in order to receive such financial support, the clubs must guarantee good training facilities, have players on youth national teams, and deliver reports to the Swedish FA concerning the youth-related work developed at the club (e.g., development of practices and players). Moreover, these coaches supported by the Swedish FA, 'must' attend continual professional development programmes every year to improve and recycle their practices.

As noted previously, each club identified 'similar' youth staff positions. However their specific operational roles and responsibilities appeared to vary (slightly) within each club. Indeed, each club was 'hostage' to a particular way of working according to the distinct practitioner skill base, philosophy and culture of the club. It seems pertinent to highlight some significant practice variations. The HYDs tended to adopt either a more managerial and strategic role or a more 'hands-on' operational and practical approach:

*"...an academy manager can just be coaching all the time, or can be sat at a desk all of the time, and some are in the middle..."* (MD, EN)

*"...due to the club's particular culture, the academy manager's background, experiences, and expectations, he might structure his job to what actually suits his weaknesses and strengths..."* (MA, EN)

Similarly, coaches (even within the same club) adopted different approaches. In some clubs the coaches only came to the club to manage a team, whilst in others they also assumed other responsibilities such as coaching groups of players according to their playing position: *"...there's one exclusive day that we work by lines, and there's a coach from one of our teams that assumes the training responsibility..."* (MC, E). Other coaches were also employed in a scouting

capacity, or assigned to *watch* particular players: "*...the coach during the weekend must see four, five or six matches, where they do a report that refers to some interesting players...*" (MF, E)

According to Skinner (2005), an individual's behaviour may affect the group phenomenon and the organisational environment. Similarly, an individual's behaviour is susceptible to organisational socialisation (Potrac et al, 2002), and can be subsequently changed and ultimately aligned, to the culture and practice of others within the same environment. This might explain why, within similar formal structures, different practical and/or operational approaches existed in different clubs. Whilst distinct individual working practices amongst different club environments may be evident, it is important that everyone is aware of their own purpose. Indeed, good management practice (e.g., HYD) seems crucial to guide and control the youth environment to ensure effective practice and, ultimately, generate role satisfaction within and between all the staff members. Moreover, it is necessary to clearly define the organisational structure, responsibility, and authority (Rogers, Li & Ellis, 1994) to avoid role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, and lack of knowledge and responsibility (Jamal, 1985; Seegers & van Elderen, 1996). Surprisingly, the majority of clubs (n=19) did not appear, or at least were unable to articulate, a clear and/or well-defined list of roles and responsibilities for all of their staff. However, almost all HYDs recognised the importance of such strategic and operational procedures, and the need to 'create' guidelines as soon as possible.

In summary, an 'apparent' similarity in the formal (general) club structures and youth development departments existed amongst all of the clubs within Study One. These similarities existed independently of country and/or culture. Despite the similarity in their formal structures, the working practices seemed to vary from club to club. This variation in practice was, in the main, due to the different practitioners' responsibilities, skill base and the specific culture associated with each particular environment, either club and/or football departments (i.e., professional and youth).

### 2.3.1.2 – The Purpose of Youth Development Programmes

As previously mentioned, there is widespread concern over a lack of emerging young talent in UEFA Federations and an apparent reluctance to invest in youth development programmes. These concerns have caused *corrective* measures to be introduced by both national and international organisations. Given UEFA's requirement that, for the 2008/09 season and beyond, each club (playing in UEFA competitions) should include in their squad four players from their own academy and four others from clubs of the same national association (UEFA, 2005a), it was relevant to explore the clubs' aims for youth football.

All clubs (n=26) made it clear that the predominant aim of the youth development programme was to develop players for the first team. In line with the sentiments of Bourke (2003), Richardson and colleagues (2004), Williams and Richardson (2006), and Laurin and colleagues (2008) all clubs recognized other benefits of the development process, such as the players personal development, and the potential for financial reward:

"*...two fundamental points...develop players to feed our professional team...have a positive impact at the personal and social development of the youngsters. We could have here a third one, but it is not possible in our market, to make worth (profit) with the sales to others clubs in a national market...*" (MA, P)

Stratton and colleagues (2004, p.201) stated that "*...academies aspire to develop players for the first team or (at least) generate income through the sale of 'marketable assets'... and also develop the 'whole' individual.*" Only the Swedish clubs offered a sense that their purpose was to develop players for the Swedish National side:

"*...The big aim is to have 50% of the professional squad coming from the academy, the second is to help Swedish football to develop because we can't live by ourselves here in our club, we have to be involved in a good Swedish soccer environment. We also have to contribute to the Swedish soccer development. The third goal is that the players that are here in the academy, will remember our academy as the best time in their life...*" (MA, S)

It seems that all the clubs intended to develop and promote players from their youth environment to the first team. Surprisingly, four HYDs stated that they did not know about the new changes from UEFA: *"...We don't know anything about the changes from UEFA..."* (MC, E) The majority of the clubs (n=22) said that they would not make any changes to their practice. Specifically, clubs reported that they were doing a *good job* already, and that they already had the requisite number of players required by UEFA in their first team:

*"...No changes... We believe that we are going in the right way... From youth we have five [players in the first team], because the demand in the first division is high...slowly we intend that the youth football player go up, first because we want to help the first team and then to give a meaning to the youth..."* (MD, E)

Six HYDs welcomed UEFA's intervention, typically stating it as a motivational measure: *"...I see it has a perfect idea, because it's going to give motivation to the players...they know that they will have to fight, it is going to depend on them..."* (ME, E) Four other HYDs stated that UEFA's intervention would also reinforce and secure their position within the club and, more importantly, within the minds of the executive board: *"...I think it's the best thing that could have happened, because it reinforces our work with the directors and the people that run the clubs that it's got some value..."* (MC, EN).

In summary, the results evidenced a general consensus as to the aim of the youth development programme. Specifically, clubs (generally) seek to develop players for the first team, contribute to the player's personal development, and obtain financial profit through the sale of players. The Swedish clubs were the only ones to present a more national orientation towards the development of their players (i.e., the desire to help develop Swedish football and the Swedish national side).

#### 2.3.1.3 – Organisational Working Mechanisms and Communication

After outlining the existing permutations for an elite professional football club's organisational structure alongside the location and aims of the respective youth development programmes, it seems pertinent to explore the established communication and player development processes and pathways operating between the two environments. As noted previously, the results identified physical and cultural distance between the youth and the first team environments. Similarly, three distinct operating practices appeared to exist within these environments:

a) One where the older youth team players (i.e., under 18s) trained in the same facilities as the first team (N=16). However, this did not necessarily mean that the youth teams trained alongside or even at the same time as the first team: "*...If we train in the same place as the first team it would be possible for the first team coach to look to the youth training and observe some players, but training in different places [shakes the head in disapproval]...*" (MA, P);

b) The contact between the youth and professional environment was co-ordinated through the sports director with no apparent 'direct' contact between the HYD and the first team manager (N=12): "*...If the sports director thinks that a player is ready to go further, the first team coach doesn't need to have all the decisions...*" (MA, E);

c) In some clubs it seemed that there was no regular or formal contact between the first team and the youth environment (N=10). A lack of regular and/or formal contact was even more evident in the seven clubs where the first team and youth environments existed in different geographical/physical locations.

One English HYD offered a sense of the reality that he had experienced within the youth development programme:

> "*...a perfect situation (for me) is where the first team and the academy speak a lot, they all watch players, they all sit down...The reality for me, is that will probably never happen because of the demands at the first team level, they really just don't have the time...*" (MA, EN)

Essentially, such different organisational practices seemed to be independent of the general club structure. It appears that it is not the general club structure that dictates working practices, rather, it is the way in which practice is operationalised that affects the relationships and communication networks that evolve and exist between the professional and youth departments. Typically, relationships and practices between practitioners of the different football departments (i.e., youth and professional) are culturally specific and traditionally entrenched. For example, even when sharing the same training environment, the communication between the youth and the professional environments was not always regular, informative or effective. It was perceived that an apparent lack of communication or the inconsistency of the contact (i.e., between the youth and the first team environments), especially in the third scenario (i.e., where physical distance existed), seemed to contribute to the appearance of different 'game cultures' (e.g., attacking versus defensive strategies, a passing style versus a long ball style) within the same club: "*...the youth area has a strategy, has a model, has a philosophy, and the professional football has another model, another strategy and another philosophy...*" (ME, P) Consequently, the lack of communication and contact between the two environments caused dissatisfaction within the staff members: "*...if there's no communication and interest, what are we doing here, where are we going?...*" (MD, E) Such examples of discord and discontent, support the need to postulate that a good communication process is important for a successful organisation and subsequently enhances staff satisfaction (Kimberly & Rottman, 1987; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; Wilkesmann & Blutner, 2002). According to Woodman and Hardy (2001), it is important that all members of the organisation are aware of, and strive towards achieving a common goal.

Moreover, it is necessary to encourage precise, clear and direct communication between all levels of management to avoid misunderstandings about the common goal (Rinke, 1997). It would appear that between the first team and the youth department at least, communication is dependent on the first team coach's perception of, and attitude towards, the value of the academy or youth department: *"...With some [first team managers] communication is good and with others there's no communication... it's going to depend on them (the first team manager)..."* (MC, E). The results indicated that, in a formal structural sense at least, the first team manager was the direct line manager of the HYD in only two out of the twenty-six clubs: *"...I'm in communication with the first team manager. It's a flat, horizontal organisation..."* (MC, EN). In some clubs it was apparent that, even without the existence of a formal structural relationship or proximity between the first team manager and the HYD, when they did share the same environment *informal and ad hoc* discussions between the first team manager and the HYD were evident: *"...The coaching staff of the academy and the first team get changed in the same room every morning, so there's constant feedback and communication about who is doing well, who is progressing..."* (MD, EN).

The results evidenced three positions of communication between the professional and the youth football environments operating within the clubs: training in the same facilities as the first team; all contact through the HYD and/or the Sports Director; or no regular formal contact. This 'perceived' lack of communication and/or inconsistency of contact seemed to contribute to the appearance of different 'game cultures', and some consequent dissatisfaction within the staff members. Informal and ad hoc organisational practices existed independently of any formal organisational structure. Such 'loose' (and informal) management practices appear to be an endemic part of football culture and are not peculiar to one particular country or club (also see Parker, 2000).

### 2.3.2 – Section B: Player Transition from the Youth to the Professional Environment

The previous section explored the club structures, philosophies, working mechanisms, and its impact on the transition of youth players to the professional environment, from a more structural and managerial perspective. This following section aims to identify the different HYD's perspectives on the preparation, support and transition of players from the youth to the professional environment, focusing on the player. The results highlight the barriers or difficulties that may hinder the player's transition to the professional environment, as well as the attributes that might better facilitate such a transition. Furthermore, this section explores the psychosocial support provided to the players to face the challenging transition to professional environment.

#### 2.3.2.1 – Barriers or Difficulties Experienced during the Youth Players' Transition to the Professional Environment

The different barriers or difficulties that might hinder the youth players' transition to the professional environment were categorised as either external or internal. The external barriers are those consequent of the surrounding environment and uncontrollable, whilst the internal are those that are predominantly under the responsibility of the player.

##### 2.3.2.1.1 – External Barriers to the Youth Players' Transition to the Professional Environment

The most important external barrier experienced and reported by almost all of the HYDs was the apparent *lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development* (N=20). Such a lack of belief in, and/or reluctance to turn to, youth was evidenced by the infrequent number of opportunities afforded to the youth players to actually play in the first team. This concern was expressed categorically by one Portuguese HYD who stressed that, *"there are coaches that simply don't invest in youngsters... instead, they prefer to invest in older, foreign players with doubtful quality..."* (MC, P). This barrier can be related to the need to obtain

immediate results as a consequence of the business perspective of professional football clubs (Maguire & Pearton, 2000), which contributed for a higher investment of coaches in recognised players (Richardson et al., 2005), decreasing the investment and opportunities given to youth players.

Associated to this lack of trust, reluctance and belief from the first team coaches, some *organisational barriers* (N=16) were also mentioned. Twelve HYDs reported the existence of an 'invisible wall' between the youth and the first team, *"we might develop young players, but then there's a wall that doesn't allow you to provide the next step"* (MD, E). The growing squad size evident within a number of clubs also appeared to discriminate against the young players, *"the first team squad is full of players, some with high quality others earning huge wages and they must play... the space for youth players is much reduced"* (MI, E). This situation led to the implementation of some measures by UEFA, limiting the squad size and imposing the presence of home-grown players within the European competitions (UEFA, 2005a). More concerning appeared to be the lack of appropriately managed support to facilitate a smooth transition, *"player's should receive more support when moving to the first team... we support and develop them in youth and frequently they are left abandoned with the first team, someone should take care of them"* (MC, S). Similarly, HYDs reported that (typically) the first team staff did not appear to appreciate that a youth player arriving with the first team squad is still experiencing a phase of progressive development, *"in the first team they use elite models, I am not saying that those are bad, but there are models where there's no space to understand that youth players are still developing"* (MD, P).

These two barriers seem to confirm the need to provide players with an appropriate and supportive environment, in order to facilitate their progression to a new and (more) demanding environment (Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Richardson et al., 2004; Williams & Richardson, 2006; Fulham, 2006). With respect to what constitutes a more appropriate and suitable environment to promote a positive

transition from the youth to the professional environment, one Portuguese HYD called for a more progressive and structured approach:

> "*...the ideal situation is a transition through a loan or reserves team, where players will have a progressive demand increase. It could also be the first team, but for that it's necessary that there is a good reception structure with mature and experienced players, who integrate youngsters, not only in the dressing room, but also helping the coach to better manage the squad...*" (MA, P)

The club's lack of willingness, or inability, to prepare youth players for the elite environment (Richardson et al., 2005), alongside some organisational stressors such as sport organisation policies, poor administration and planning (Pain & Harwood, 2007), may have resulted in the presence of the internal organisational barriers presented earlier (e.g., invisible wall between youth and first team, and/or inappropriate transition support). Though, in some cases, the lack of a smooth and progressive competitive environment through a reserves team (or team B) was not a consequence of the club's policy, but the championship structure and national FAs regulations. In 2006, José Mourinho and Rafael Benítez (Chelsea FC and Liverpool FC football managers respectively) showed some frustration and criticised the lack of competitive matches played by the reserves teams. To these coaches, youth players need to earn experience by playing in more competitive leagues and against older and experienced players (Fifield, 2006). In this regard, players are not able to either evolve or become ready to play in such a competitive championship as the Premier League (Richardson et al., 2005; Fifield, 2006). The different national FA's must realise that some of their regulations and championships structures (e.g., not allowing reserves team to play in professional leagues, or organising reserves championships with few competitive matches), might be hindering the youth player's preparation for the professional environment. In that sense, it might be necessary for the different FAs to consider or produce some changes, in their directives, to avoid hindering the youth players' development and transition to the professional environment.

Two other external barriers affecting the players' transition were also reported by the HYDs namely, *fortune and/or luck* (N=10), and *poor advice from family*

*and/or football agents* (N=5). Probably consequence of the previous barriers (i.e., lack of trust from the first team coach(es), and organisational barriers), luck and/or fortune was perceived as a crucial factor for the player's transition, *"a lot of times it depends on the 'luck' factor... be there in the moment they need a player in your position... if the player performs well in the first team, he might stay there. It's tough, because sometimes it can be a question of luck or bad luck, but that's the hard reality"* (MG, E). By fortune and/or luck, the HYDs considered the absence of youth players' injuries (also mentioned by Reilly et al., 2000), injuries or bad performance from first team players, lack of first team players in training due to National Squads games, or luck to be in the club when the first team coach needs a player in his position (also mentioned by Richardson & Reilly, 2001). In other cases, HYDs considered that some families and football agents put unrealistic ideas into the youth players' heads, making them lose the notion of reality and causing erratic, inappropriate and often mis-guided decision-making, *"parents and football agents can be a huge problem... often they believe that the kid is the new Maradona, and they put that on the players head... and the players might start believing that he is something that he is not"* (MD, E). As Côté (1999) mentioned, parents are important to the athlete's development. However, if the behaviour and influence is incongruent with the player's 'real' position, then, even if they are unaware, they may be hindering their sons' future.

#### 2.3.2.1.2 – Internal Barriers to the Youth Players' Transition to the Professional Environment

The players' apparent *lack of readiness to face the professional environment* was reported by fifteen HYDs, whilst ten HYDs mentioned the player's *difficulty to deal with the new lifestyle and professional social environment*. The move to professional environment may be associated to a new social lifestyle that requires a lot of ability from players to deal with:

*"I think that with the social pressures of football, a player must live like a monk to be successful... the mental requirements are immense... the image, the high*

*wages, the women, fast cars, an entirè new lifestyle. If youth players lose their modesty, they will soon be out of the path."* (MF, EN)

Twelve HYDs noted that a player who *lacked maturity* (i.e., not yet ready to behave like, and assume the responsibility of, an elite adult sportsman) was also unlikely to progress successfully. Most of the HYDs (N=18) believed that nowadays youngsters have a much easier life, without needing to fight for what they want, which made them more immature and 'weaker' facing the highly pressured and demanding professional environment. One Spanish HYD reported that in the last couple of years, he had seen *"players with seventeen years and, forgive me the expression, they shit themselves in their trousers every time they have to make a decision, and not only on football decisions"* (MA, E). Furthermore and related to the previous internal barriers, six HYDs also identified the *player's character* (i.e., lack of humility, lack of responsibility, inadequate lifestyle habits, difficulty to relate with team mates, and/or felling inferior to the other professional players) as a barrier for the youth players' transition to the professional environment.

The players' move from the youth to the professional environment is a critical event marked by some sources of stress such as sport career/lifestyle pressures, identity-related and social-related changes, which requires a personal adjustment (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1995; Brewer et al., 2000; Giges, 2000; Wylleman et al., 2004), with a consequent effect on the player's character and self-identity. The player's adaptation to the different changes and challenges experienced within the surrounding environment (e.g., psychosocial, psychological, academic), may also impact on the athletic performance (Rees & Hardy, 2000; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008). Consequently, the player's lack of ability, or lack of preparation, to deal with these different constrains will undoubtedly have an impact on their future career (Richardson et al., 2004).

In summary, findings highlight that in their pathway to becoming a professional footballer, players face a crucial transition from the youth to the professional environment. During this period, a player may experience some challenges, barriers or difficulties which may hinder their progress. These findings present some synergy with the challenges faced by athletes in the transition from the *Development* to *Mastery* phase (see Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), or transition to *high-achievement and adult sports*, and the transition *from amateur to professional sports* (Stambulova, 1994, 2000). More specifically, in this research eight main barriers were identified by HYDs as a threat to the youth player's transition from the youth to the professional environment (see table 2.2): lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development; organisational barriers; fortune and/or luck; poor advice from family and/or football agents; player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment; player's lack of maturity; player's character; and/or players' difficulty in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment.

**Table 2.2:** HYDs perspectives on barriers and/or difficulties for the players' transition to the professional environment

| | Characteristics | N° of answers |
|---|---|---|
| External barriers to player | Lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) on youth development | 20 |
| | Organisational barriers | 12 |
| | Fortune and/or luck | 10 |
| | Poor advice from family and/or football agents | 5 |
| Internal barriers to player | Player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment | 15 |
| | Player's lack of maturity | 12 |
| | Difficulty in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment | 10 |
| | Player's character | 6 |

#### 2.3.2.2 – Players' Attributes that Might Facilitate the Transition to the Professional Environment

Having sketched out the internal and external barriers to the youth players' transition to the professional environment, the following section explores the players' attributes that the HYDs identified as the most relevant in order to overcome those barriers mentioned previously.

When questioned about the attributes that a player must possess to help him progress successfully within the first team/professional environment, the initial and prevalent view of the HYDs (N=15) was that it was difficult to define and measure: *"...this is the difficult part, how would you describe it, these are the X factors..."* (MA, EN). However, all participants highlighted the need for the youth player to have a good balance between the different sports related skills (i.e., physically strong and quick, technically gifted, tactically clever, and psychologically strong), *"...without good sport skills [i.e., balance between technical, tactical, physical, and psychological] there's no chance to get to the first team..."* (MB, P). This appears to typify the standard, generic characteristics present within most talent development literature (see Borms, 1996; Williams & Franks, 1998; Helsen et al., 2000; Reilly et al., 2000; Reilly et al., 2003), although it does not clearly identify the attributes needed to progress to the professional environment. In addition, the HYDs suggested that if a holistic foundation was not evidenced (i.e., balance between the four sport related skills), then the player would never achieve a place in the first team. This seems to align with what has been defended by many researchers regarding the importance of creating a learning environment based on a holistic development of the 'whole player' (see Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Richardson et al., 2004; Fulham FC, 2006; Williams & Richardson, 2006).

Furthermore, eleven HYDs also consider that for a player to reach the professional environment, they must have something, a *special attribute(s)* that will make him different from all others and valuable to the squad and/or club. Curiously, very little has been mentioned about this issue within sport psychology or performance

research. When asked to identify some 'special attributes', the eleven HYDs mentioned that it is not easy to say clearly, but it could be something physiologically specific for a playing position (e.g., being very tall and strong if you are a centre back); technical attributes (e.g., high technical skills); or even a psychological attribute (e.g., leadership and/or mental strength). However, 'speed' appeared to be the most valuable 'special attribute' in modern football, according to eight HYDs. The apparent HYDs' difficulties in identifying and defining what they consider a special attribute, mainly regarding the psychological ones, could potentially hinder the development of some of those attributes.

Nevertheless, the HYDs reported extreme faith and trust in their youth development processes. In essence, they appeared to believe that a player who reaches the B team (or reserves) in their club, passing through all of the development stages and consequent evaluations, has the minimal physical, technical and tactical skills to make it within the first team environment:

*"...a player, to get to our team B, must pass a number of evaluations which guarantee a minimal quality on the physical, technical and tactical aspects. Then to get to the first team is all about the little details and mainly their personality or psychological skills..."* (MG, E)

Interestingly, although the HYDs mentioned that a youth player should have a good balance between the four different sport related skills (i.e., physical, tactical, technical and psychological), they only consider their youth programmes to guarantee the first three. However, as stated previously by one Spanish HYD (MG, E), at the elite level it will be the 'little details', mainly regarding the psychological attributes, that will make the difference. This perspective was also referred by Weinberg and Williams (2001), who stated that with the increment on the athlete's level, physical and technical-tactical differences tend to become less significant because less skilled and gifted players (usually) drop out from competition. Consequently, it will be the minor adjustments and differences at a psychosocial level that may determine which athletes are successful. Even in the professional environment, elite managers highlight the fact that psychological issues will be decisive to success. For example Sven-Göran Eriksson once said

that, *"talent is only a prerequisite for success. If you look at the top footballers, playing ability among them is very even... So it's the mental differences which will decide who the real winners are."* In this sense, the HYDs should be concerned by the fact that their clubs' youth development programmes prepare their players for the first team environment physically, tactically and technically, but not psychologically. Nevertheless, the HYDs mentioned some attributes that they consider part of those 'little details' decisive to reach the professional environment, which were grouped in *player's psychological attributes*, and *positive work ethic*.

**2.3.2.2.1 – Players' Psychological Attributes**

The most mentioned psychological attribute was the player's *game intelligence/ knowledge* (N=17), defined by the *"player's ability to know their role in the pitch"* (MD, EN), and *"make efficient and correct decisions from an independent and autonomous way (even under pressure)"* (MA, P). Followed by the players' *self-believe/self-knowledge/self-esteem* (N=14). These HYDs considered that in order to progress successfully in and through the professional environment, players must be self-aware and able to identify their *good skills* (i.e., player's main qualities and attributes), alongside recognising their own personal limitations. Fundamentally, it was reported that players must always believe in themselves, *"...it's necessary that the player possesses a higher self-esteem. If he doesn't have self-esteem and if he doesn't believe in his capacities, no one will..."* (MB, P). The *players' character* (N=13), being humble, responsible, with good values, strong personality, mature and with good social/lifestyle habits, was the third most rated psychological attribute. Within the player's character, special or significant attention was paid to the player's personal responsibility in embracing sound social and lifestyle habits: *"How can a coach trust a player that has irresponsible attitudes and an 'abnormal' social lifestyle?"* (MD, P), and player's maturity: *"More than the technical skills, they shouldn't shake, be afraid... players should be mature to play in a full stadium like in a training ground"* (MA, P).

Interestingly, it appeared that the notion of game intelligence/knowledge was the most highly rated psychological attribute required by a young player in order to progress successfully. The notion of (football) game intelligence has only had limited coverage in previous research. In this research, game intelligence is described by one HYD as the ability to *"...make decisions from an independent and autonomous way, and that those decisions were the most efficient according with the situation experienced by the player..."* (MD, P). Although not specifically related to football, Gould and colleagues (2002) in their research with Olympic champions reported the emergence of a new concept as one of the most mentioned attributes for performance enhancement, namely sport intelligence. To these authors, sport intelligence includes the ability to analyse, being innovative, being a student of the sport, making good decisions, understanding the nature of elite sport, and being a quick learner.

The second dominant characteristic reported was the notion of self-belief. Similarly, although again not specifically within football, the notions of self-belief, self-knowledge and self-esteem are consistent with the need for elite athletes to deal and cope with the intensive, heightened pressure and demanding elite competition environment (see Orlick & Partington, 1988; McCaffrey & Orlick, 1989; Danish et al., 1993; Thomas & Over, 1994; Meyers, Bourgeois, LeUnes & Murray, 1998; Vernacchia et al., 2000; Williams & Krane, 2001; Gould et al., 2002). Encouraging a player to continually develop self-belief and self-knowledge in such intense environments would require the provision of appropriate support mechanisms within these environments. For example, Nesti (2002) argued that a counselling support approach may help the athlete to understand him or herself, in order to face and solve emerging problems instead of avoiding them. By eliminating the problem, the athlete might be able to maintain his high performance as well as his self-belief.

*Mental strength* (N=11), *ability to deal with pressures and demands* (N=11), *persistency* (N=10), and *competitive mentality* (N=6) were also articulated by the different HYDs whilst attempting to capture the essence of good psychological

player characteristics. However, even whilst articulating a range of psychological skills it was still apparent that the HYDs found great difficulty in defining exactly what they meant. For example, some HYDs suggested discussing these attributes more closely with the sports psychologist (MB, F) or simply refer to them as *"...you know... it's that thing (putting the fists up)... be tough and strong, mainly here (pointing to the head)..."* (MC, EN). This difficulty in defining different psychological attributes has been evidenced within literature (see Jones et al., 2002; Thelwell et al., 2005).

In current sport psychology literature, the use of the term *mental strength* is usually related to *mental toughness*. In their work with professional football players, Thelwell and colleagues (2005) identified ten attributes considered necessary for mental toughness in football: 1) having total self-belief at all times that you will achieve success; 2) having the ability to react to situations positively; 3) having the ability to hang on and be calm under pressure; 4) having the ability to ignore distractions and remain focused; 5) wanting the ball/wanting to be involved at all times; 6) knowing what it takes to grind yourself out of trouble; 7) controlling emotions throughout performance; 8) having a presence that affects opponents; 9) having everything outside of the game in control; and 10) enjoying the pressure associated with performance. Although, according to the HYDs' perceptions regarding *mental strength* (independently of their difficulty to define it), relate closely to only five attributes referred to by Thelwell and colleagues (i.e., attributes numbers 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9). Furthermore, within the answers of the HYDs a 'new' term emerged, or at least not reported in this sense before (i.e., persistency). To one English HYD (MB, EN) persistency is about dealing with adversities, and continue fighting for their goal (i.e., become a professional football player), *"...football is full of ups and downs and it's being able to cope with those moments, specifically not letting yourself down with the bad ones, that will strengthen your mind..."* This idea was also defended by another HYD, *"...even when things are not going the way we want, the player must never give up, be persistent, and keep the flame alive..."* (MB, P). Although not in direct alignment with *mental toughness*, some synergy appears to exist between the

HYDs perceptions of 'persistency' and three attributes associated by Thelwell and colleagues (2005) to a mentally tough performer (i.e., attributes numbers 1, 2, and 3).

**2.3.2.2.2 – Players' Positive Work Ethic**

Whilst the previous section reports the players' psychological attributes that might facilitate their transition to the professional environment, the following section highlight the players' effort and behaviour towards such a transition.

The players' level of *commitment and hard work* (N=17) was appointed as the most important work ethic related attribute. This result is consistent with what was found by Pummell and colleagues (2008) in their research with event riders. For the different HYDs players must be really committed with what they are doing. The HYDs demanded and expected (always) 100% in every training session, and match: *"the important thing is their daily work, all players have to give 100% in all training and matches, that's the only way to succeed in the first team"* (MC, P), and *"their attitude and mentality to work hard, do a little bit more to improve every day, that makes them keep their drive..."* (MD, EN).

The *desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices* (N=11), both inside and outside of the football environment were highlighted by the HYDs. Most HYDs (N=18) recognised that the pathway to becoming a professional footballer is beset with many challenges that require self-sacrifice from the players (e.g., less time to spend with family and friends, limited ability to socialise and/or go out at night with their friends, restricted lifestyle habits). These challenges can be aligned with some psychological and psychosocial changes experienced by athletes during their development pathway (see Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Stambulova, 2000; van Rossum, 2001; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, even being used by the HYDs, the term *player's sacrifice* appears to be avoided amongst sport psychology literature. In fact, only recently literature

referred to the player's personal sacrifices in order to become a professional player (Nesti, 2007).

The last attribute mentioned by nine HYDs was the *player's aspiration to be consistent* (i.e., be able to maintain a high performance during a long period of time/matches). These HYDs believe that the demanding nature of professional football requires immediacy, and that players must realise that only those players who are able to keep good performances every week are able to survive in such a competitive environment. As mentioned by Reilly and colleagues (2003), the professional environment is a very ruthless and demanding environment with a limited tolerance for failure, *"...when a player is doing well in youth he might be called to the first team... if he performs well he will stay and earn their own space, but if its perform starts going down and the team is not getting more from his presence, he will probably return to the team B... it's hard but it's the real life..."* (MH, E)

In summary, twelve main attributes were reported by HYDs that might facilitate the youth player's successful transition from the youth to the professional environment (see table 2.3): player's game intelligence/knowledge; self-belief/ self-knowledge/self-esteem; player's character; mental strength; ability to deal with pressure and demands; persistency; competitive mentality; hard work/ commitment; desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices; player's aspiration to be consistent; having one special attribute(s); and/or a balance between the different sporting skills (physical, technical, tactical and psychological). The results seem to align with the sights expressed by Bloom (1985), Stambulova (2000), van Rossum (2001), Wylleman and Lavallee (2004), or Pummell and colleagues (2008). Curiously, even identifying and appointing some psychological attributes as essential for the players' transition to the professional environment, the majority of the HYDs appeared unable to define the attributes appointed, which may constitute an obstacle to their implementation and development within the youth development programmes.

**Table 2.3**: HYDs perspectives on the players' attributes that might facilitate the transition to the professional environment

| | Attributes | N° of answers |
|---|---|---|
| | Good sporting skills (balance between technical, tactical, physical and psychological) | **26** |
| | Player's special attribute(s) | **11** |
| Player's psychological attributes | Game intelligence/knowledge | **17** |
| | Self-believe/Self-knowledge/Self-esteem | **14** |
| | Character (responsibility, humble, maturity, good lifestyle habits) | **13** |
| | Mental strength | **11** |
| | Ability to deal with pressures and demands | **11** |
| | Persistency | **10** |
| | Competitive mentality | **6** |
| Player's positive work ethic | Hard work/commitment | **17** |
| | Desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices | **11** |
| | Player's aspiration to be consistent | **9** |

More specifically allied to football, our findings confirm three of the four major psychosocial competencies identified in elite youth football by Holt and Dunn (2004): discipline (i.e., dedication to the sport and willingness to sacrifice); commitment (i.e., strong motives and career planning goals); resilience (i.e., ability to use coping strategies to overcome difficulties). The fourth one, social support (i.e., perceived emotional, informational, and tangible support) was not directly mentioned here in the attributes. However, without an appropriately managed social support programme (i.e., one that enables players to understand, embrace, develop and evolve such psychological capacities) then players will be forever a hostage to self-development and (typically) adopt reactive response to dealing with intense and difficult situations as, and when they arise. Similarly, more recent research developed with Dutch players, revealed that goal commitment, engagement in problem-focused coping behaviours, and the ability (and willingness) to seek and engage social support were the psychological factors

associated to a successfully progression of youth players into professional football (Van Yperen, 2009).

#### 2.3.2.3 – Players' Psychosocial Preparation and Support for the Transition to the Professional Environment

Given that it was reported that young players require a range of psychosocial attributes in order to progress successfully to professional environment and that, implicitly, an appropriate social support mechanism was alluded to, this section identifies how the players are prepared and supported during this transition. Furthermore, this section identifies the staff and other people (e.g., parents, family, friends) responsible for the psychosocial support, alongside the presence, role, and receptivity of the sport psychologist (or similarly aligned professional) within the club environment.

All HYDs considered that their club provided holistic support to the youth players during their development, namely sport-related issues, medical, psychological, and social support. Furthermore, eighteen HYDs stated that the club also provided academic (scholarly) support to the players, mainly through the inclusion of teachers within the structure, or developing links with official public schools. According to Wylleman and colleagues (2000, p.144), *"...the availability of social support (i.e., the exchange of resources between individuals intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient) and social support networks (e.g., friends, family, team-mates) has been shown to play a strong mediating role in the occurrence of transitions, as well as to influence athletes' adjustment to athletic transitions..."* It is recognised that the youth athlete could benefit from an environment that offers a range of different human and material resources, which better prepare the players in their development (Lavallee & Andersen, 2000; Richardson et al., 2004).

Most HYDs (N=18), considered that academic and/or scholarly development was important in facilitating the development of the player as a 'well rounded person'.

The educational aspect of the player's development was also seen as preparation for the player's life away from football. It seems important to highlight that in some cases this academic support was only offered to players living under the responsibility of the club (i.e., living in the club facilities, apartments, residences, and/or digs). Strangely, whilst education was espoused to develop the 'whole person' it did not appear to feature as an explicit component of, or an essential prerequisite for, successful progression as a footballer. Given that game or football intelligence was identified as a key psychosocial attribute it would appear logical to attempt to develop a football performance intelligence to better facilitate successful progression 'in football', as well as providing a potential exit strategy 'out of football'. Then, in this regard, eleven clubs have programmed a series of workshops with players concerning health issues, lifestyle habits and nutrition that are perceived to be relevant to life as a professional footballer. In two of the English clubs, such workshops were included in the club's welfare programme. Eight clubs referred to a Player's Manual that identified the club 'mystique' or philosophy, objectives for their development, norms of conduct and behaviour guidelines. Other themes such as individual responsibilities, health habits, drugs, and/or nutrition were also (generally) detailed in this manual.

The development of workshops and Manuals also target the players' parents. Ten of the eleven clubs, who have a programme of workshops with players, also present workshops and meetings with the parents, while eight developed a Parent's Manual. The meetings, workshops, and the Manual intended to clarify the parents about the work developed within the club, what is expected from both players and parents, the best way to help their sons achieve their objectives, and the most appropriate conduct/behaviour to have in terms of family, school, and club. Those meetings and workshops with parents occur until players reach eighteen years of age. HYDs believed that after eighteen years of age, the player should be independent and responsible, and in that sense there is no reason to continue developing sessions with parents. One Spanish HYD (MI, E) considered important to integrate the parents within the development programme, "*...we develop some meetings with the parents...they are very important for the players, and crucial to their development both as persons and players. We explained what*

*we expected from them, their sons and what's their role in the development process...is better to have them as allies (smiles).*" The HYDs' position on the parental involvement and support during the athlete's lifespan seems consistent with literature (see Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). To the HYDs, players become more independent when they reach eighteen years old and parents turn less influential. This seems consistent with Bloom's (1985) view that parental involvement decreases during the development pathway, mainly in the perfection phase.

The majority of the clubs (N=21) alluded to the fact that they have no 'formal' mechanisms to prepare young players specifically for the transition from the youth to the professional environment. For example, only fifteen of the twenty-six clubs were able to present a written psychosocial programme to develop with their players. However, they believed that their preparation for the next level was implicitly embedded within their daily practices. This seems to reinforce the influence that the club's 'official' and 'unofficial' norms and values, context, environment, and culture may have on the socialisation and development of youth players, both at a personal and athletic level (Parker, 2001; Bourke, 2002; Littlewood, 2005). Fifteen clubs organised meetings between first team coaches and players, former star players developed within their academy, and other sport personalities who come to talk with youth players about their personal experiences, demands of elite sport, relationships with the press, good lifestyle habits and various other themed sessions that implicitly refer to being in, dealing and coping with professional environment. Furthermore, six clubs implemented a 'mentoring system', where a player from the first team was responsible for the integration of the youth player into the first team environment. Such a mentor scheme was similarly championed by Pummel and colleagues (2008) within their transition research with event riders.

It was apparent that measures to assist players in their transition to the first team were not confined to the internal mechanics of the club. All the clubs with players living under their responsibility, tended to move them out of the hostel/residence

to more independent (but sometimes shared with one or two other players) flats when they reached eighteen years of age. The aim of such a move is, *"...a way of hold the players responsible and adjust them to the reality they may enter...they are individuals in stand-by...and at any time they could be included in the first team, so they have to live and to behave as first team players..."* (MD, P) This measure, in association with the decision to stop making sessions with parents after the player turns eighteen, seems to be part of a broad strategy to make players more independent and responsible for themselves.

Specifically focusing on the psychosocial attributes development, the HYDs offered a range of different perspectives or practices: a progressive approach to developing psychosocial attributes from a general to a more individualised intervention; conscientious individual development through player self-knowledge, *"...all players write down how they believe they are... what they think they need to improve, things in that they are good... which are the individual targets of the year for him..."* (MA, E); giving tasks and responsibilities to the players to develop their emotional control, *"...we look at jobs, roles and responsibilities - looking after boots, cleaning the changing rooms, help putting the material for the session, organising set-pieces... we want them to be able to handle mistakes, and not be afraid of failure. We want them to be able to keep control of their emotions..."* (MD, EN); and mental skills training, for example using imagery *"...from the age of nine, before the training, they sit down in the dressing room or out on the field if it's a good climate... they shut their eyes and they try to concentrate. They relax their muscles and they create an image of what they are going to do...the coaches do this before the training, after training, and sometimes during training also..."* (MA, S)

It seems that clubs adopted psychosocial practices, albeit somewhat sporadically and ad hoc, that embraced a mix of both MST and more subtle social and counselling approaches. Whilst recognising the importance of the development of the athlete's self-knowledge and providing the player with implicit social support, clubs still appear bound, even dominated, by the perceived 'need' to use MST

techniques and interventions (Andersen, 2000; Andersen et al., 2001; Nesti, 2006), even when at an elite level MST represents no more than 5-10% of the sport psychologist role (Nesti, 2006) and elite athletes already appear to possess excellent mental skills (Gould et al., 2002).

#### 2.3.2.3.1 – Staff Responsible for the Psychosocial Support

At an operational level, almost all HYDs (N=21) considered that players should have someone to talk to about their problems and support them. The HYDs reported that their preference would be for the coach or someone from the technical team to adopt such a position. In this regard, it was perceived that they would be better placed to encourage and promote psychosocial support as they are working directly with the players every day. HYDs recognised that some issues might be sensitive and that players do not always wish to talk with the coach or part of the technical team as they are afraid of being considered 'weak'. The players' fear of sharing their doubts and concerns, or seeking support, appears to be a consequence of the traditional 'masculine', demanding and ruthless culture of the professional football environment (Parker, 2001; Reilly et al., 2008). In this regard, some participants indicated that the presence of a sport psychologist or similarly aligned professional might be important in supporting the players, *"...the first step ideally is through the coaches... if they prefer they can talk with the sport psychologist, me, or any other member of the staff. The important thing is that they realise that independently of the person, we are here to help the players in what they need."* (ME, E)

Ten clubs claimed that everyone on the staff played a role in the psychosocial support and development of youth players. It was recognised that, generally, the coach was the person with the most direct influence over the players. All the other staff have the potential to influence and contribute to their development, *"...the major influence is under the responsibility of the coach, having the support of the psychologist, directors and the coordinator..."* (MD, P) Whilst a 'collective responsibility' position is to be applauded, it can lead to the erroneous perspective

that psychology is just common sense and that everyone is able to deliver it, in contrast with other disciplines (Pain & Harwood, 2004). This situation was captured in the words of one Spanish HYD who stated: *"...In the theme of the psychosocial competencies we are all in. In the physical aspect, I cannot say anything, it's the fitness coach, in the technical-tactical aspect is the coach, but in the psychological issue we all enter..."* (MC, E)

It seems that more clubs are integrating sport psychologists within their club, and there were even two clubs (one Spanish and one Portuguese) who presented a team of sport psychologists, *"in this club we believe in the importance of sport psychology for players' development and performance, that's why everyone including the president supported the integration of a sport psychologists team."* (MI, E)

Coaches' impact on the youth players' development is highly recognised, mainly due to the time spent with players (Williams & Richardson, 2006), being a role model, leader, teacher, friend (Côté, 2006), and creating a positive learning environment to stimulate the players development (Jones et al., 2004), including their psychosocial competencies (Allen & Hodge, 2006). In this regard, it was perhaps not surprising that the clubs saw the coach as the main vehicle for the players' development and support. However, learning is normally a complex interpersonal activity (Sosniak, 1985b), and the coach may benefit from the support of other important stakeholders. The results here appear to confirm that whilst the desire is for the coach to be the main vehicle of influence over players' psychosocial development, clubs are beginning to become aware that this approach is often impractical (i.e., as coaches are not typically trained in such aspects) and perhaps more effective when different personnel work together in order to provide a more effective support package (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Reilly et al., 2003; Williams & Richardson, 2006).

### 2.3.2.3.2 – Presence and Role of the Sport Psychologist within the Club

The following section concerns the specific nature and use of sport psychologists (and/or aligned practitioners) within the respective youth programmes. From the twenty-six clubs included in this research, only three (ME, P; MH, E; MI, E) have a sport psychologist working with the first team as well as in the youth department, and five stated that they didn't have any support from a sport psychologist. One HYD (MD, S) suggested that the club would contact a psychologist only for specific situations (for example in the previous season after the death of a youth player). Two of the five clubs without a full-time resident sport psychologist (MA, P; MC, E), mentioned that someone from the staff would assume a similar role, perhaps without even realising it.

From the twenty-one clubs who have a sport psychologist working within the club, sixteen mentioned that he/she was integrated within the youth structure, whilst in five clubs they work as outside consultants. It was apparent that the role of the sport psychologists and predominant area of influence varied according with the club, independent of the country. Moreover, the role and location of the sport psychologist within the club changed with time and increased knowledge from the staff regarding his/her work, *"in the beginning he was more linked with the medical department, but now we decided that his place is inside the technical area"* (MB, P).

Of the sixteen clubs with a sport psychologist working within the youth structure, six were only responsible for the non-sport related personal and social issues (e.g., academic guidance, supervising player's general behaviour in school and club facilities, contact with teachers and family, and providing support to new players in the club, especially to those coming from outside the region and becoming more formally the responsibility of the club), *"...in this moment there are two women, but their mission is a little apart from the sports issue, it would be more extra-sports. Managing topics like schools, speaking with parents, manage the residence... we have players in a residence although we do not own it..."* (MB, E). The other ten practitioners were concerned not only with the non-sport related issues but also with performance issues. In some cases, the sport psychologist is

seen as another member of the technical team, being present regularly and working closely with coaches and players. According to the HYDs, this situation allows a better knowledge of the club's environment and closer relations with staff members and players, facilitating the sport psychologist intervention. This seems to confirm Gilbourne and Richardson's (2005) perspective that the best way to conduct sport psychology in football is through the coaches' work, based on regular contact and communication. Moreover, HYDs reinforced the importance of the physical presence of the sport psychologist on a daily basis, *"...before working on the field he/she needs to work with the coaches and, for that, it should be someone permanent and that win their space through the years...it cannot be like a sporadic doctoral consultation..."* (MA, P). This perspective supports the sport psychologists claim that they should spend more time and be more embedded within the club (Danish et al., 1993; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Andersen et al., 2004), in order to better understand the different practitioners, the athletes, and the specificity of the sport environment (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005; Gardner, 2007).

In twelve clubs, the sport psychologist's responsibility lay not only with the players' support and analysis, but also extended to supporting the coaches. These clubs considered that the coaches were also *human beings* and as any other person they had their own issues. If the club wants the best of them, then they must also benefit from the support of the sport psychologist, *"the sport psychologist should support coaches as well as players. The idea is that he [sport psychologist] flows through the facilities, watching, listening, talking, and then gives us information to help the people within our academy"* (MB, P). Similarly, Giges and colleagues (2004) reported that coaches, like players, have many responsibilities and pressures to perform, and being 'also a person', they would benefit from the support of sport psychologists to help them face those challenges and be more effective.

Conversely, five clubs stated that their sport psychologist was an external advisor, and that their main role was to provide workshops to educate coaches and other staff members to work and develop the psychosocial competencies with players.

In this model, the sport psychologist did not appear to have much contact with the players (except when a particular situation that the coaches were not able to deal with), and only visited the club two or three times per year, *"...we also have a little external help, but he [sport psychologist] lives in Stockholm... so he comes here once or twice a year to develop a course with us, with our coaches."* (MA, S)

The following figure (see figure 2.6) summarises the sport psychologists' location and role within the club's youth department.

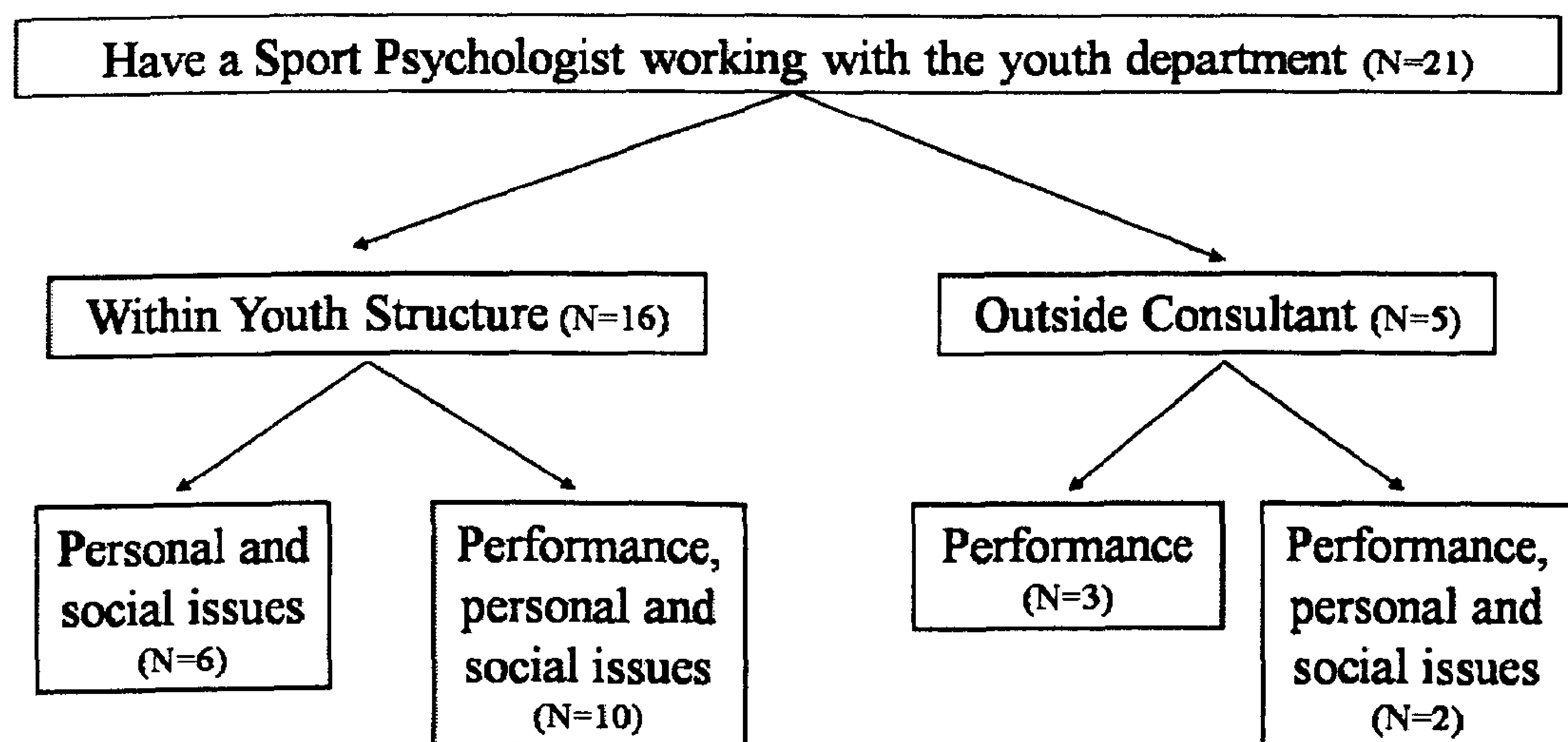



**Figure 2.6:** Sport psychologists' location and role within the youth department

**2.3.2.3.3 – Sport Psychologist Acceptance within the Club**

Whilst it was reported that sport psychology was becoming a more readily accepted part of professional football, albeit predominantly in the youth environments, their entry and acceptance appeared to be far from straightforward, not being consensual amongst the different youth staff, and in particular between the youth coaches.

All HYDs mentioned that initially, everyone on the staff showed some resistance to the presence of the sport psychologist. It was reported that this was primarily a consequence of their lack of knowledge about their work, *"a lot of people asked me who that person (the sports psychologist) was, and if it was really necessary"* (MB, P). Similar experiences surrounding this lack of support for, and knowledge

and understanding of, sport psychology was highlighted by Pain and Harwood's (2004) research with coaches and academy managers. In this Study, one English HYD (MC, EN) stated that, following his experience in the field, coupled with his knowledge of other European club practices, it was typically the younger staff that tended to have a higher desire to learn, and were consequently more open to the appearance of sport scientists (and sports psychologists) within their club. This HYD perspective confirms the closeness and traditional entrenched culture of professional football clubs, sceptical to 'outsiders', 'academics' and new practices (see Parker, 1995, 2001; Pain & Harwood, 2004). To Gardner (2001), any innovative aspect within the professional sports environment requires a period of learning and adjustment. Gardner's perspective appears to be shared by one Spanish HYD who considered that everyone within the club will sooner or later accept the sport psychologist if he/she adopts a *"good entry strategy and practices"* (MI, E). Specifically, this Spanish HYD clarified that a 'good entry strategy' means that the sport psychologist must enter the environment smoothly and progressively, using discrete and natural approaches based on what is expected from them, and not what *they* want to implement immediately. This way, he considered that the sport psychologist *"cannot desire to be the protagonist, but someone willing to support both coaches and players in their needs to improve, and be more successful...the protagonists are the players and the leading role is for the coach"* (MI, E). Such a more measured and subtle approach to practice is consistent with Bond (2002), who considered that sport psychologist should realise that they are in the club to help players and coaches improve their performance, working as a support. The sport psychologists should not consider themselves, nor claim to be, the *sole* person responsible for success.

It was reported that the coaches can be one of the main barriers in the acceptance of a sport psychologist within a youth structure. Whilst the coaching staff appeared to recognise the importance of psychology for the players' development, they typically *"refute all the solutions that we present them with"* (MA, P). As expected, five HYDs recounted that usually those coaches with an academic background seemed to perceive the sport psychologist as a positive acquisition

(i.e., someone that might help them improve the players' development), and usually attempted to integrate (or at least include) them within their technical teams. Conversely, coaches without an academic background, based on more traditional playing and coaching experience with limited exposure to academics, see the sport psychologist as a threat, being "*someone who comes to control their work and report it to me [HYD]*" (MH, E). Although with time, in confirmation of the notion that innovative aspects tend to require a period of learning and adjustments (Gardner, 2001), the majority of the coaches seemed to embrace the presence of the sport psychologist, and consider them as someone who "*might help with such an obscure area [sport psychology]*" (MF, E).

In the clubs where the sport psychologist was only responsible for the non-sporting issues, coaches were not perturbed by their presence at all. In this regard, the sport psychologists were not perceived to threaten their existence (also see Pain & Harwood, 2004). From a practical perspective, this situation tended to contribute to a reduced level of communication between the coaching staff and the sport psychologist. For example, "*...here the sport psychologist is concerned about non-sportive issues and doesn't influence the coaches' work...that way they don't mind each other, but their relationship is characterised by a certain distance...*" (MB, E)

After considering the HYDs' perspectives on the sport psychology (and/or sport psychologist) acceptance within the club and the relationship with the coaches, it seems pertinent to explore the relation with the players. According to the HYDs, players usually do not understand the benefits that sport psychology can bring to their development. This seems to confirm a general lack of knowledge from the players regarding sport psychology (Pain & Harwood, 2004), reinforcing the need to educate the players about its importance (Bull, 1991). HYDs seemed to suggest that when players have been exposed to sport psychology (and/or the sport psychologist) during their early years, then they tend to develop a better knowledge and understanding about the potential benefits, and consequently tend to be more open to their presence within the club. In contrast if players are only

exposed to sport psychology later in their development, they tend to be more sceptical and resistant to its benefits. This seems to align with Weinberg and Williams (2001) who stipulate that the early implementation of a psychological programme is essential for the development of a strong psychological skill base. Furthermore, considering the player's fear of talking with a sport psychologist therefore being seen as weak and not ready, *"the closer you get to the professional environment, or the latter of the youth teams, the resistance is higher, and players prefer a certain distance between them and the sport psychologist"* (MH, E).

In summary, whilst not in any 'formal' and/or written sense, HYDs refer that clubs tend to support and prepare players (i.e., psychologically and socially) for the transition to professional environment through their daily practices. It was evident that the predominantly influential character within these environments is the coach. However, data suggests that other staff members (including the sport psychologist) may also contribute to (or influence) the psychosocial development of youth players. Almost all clubs reported that they had a sport psychologist within their structure. However, the role location and day-to-day existence appeared to vary from club to club. Typically, the sport psychologist's level of engagement was dependent upon the level of knowledge and subsequent degree of acceptance concerning their position and role, by other staff members. Generally, the sport psychologist may be responsible only for the personal and social issues, or can be concerned with the non-sport related issues as well as performance enhancement. HYDs believe that the entry of the sport psychologist into the club is marked by an initial resistance from some staff members, mainly coaches, due to their lack of knowledge on the benefits and role of sport psychology. It would appear that younger staff seemed more likely to embrace the presence of sport psychologists, although sport psychologists' practices and the way they introduce themselves will play a decisive role in the acceptance by everyone within the academy environment. According to the HYDs, sport psychologists must adopt a more reactive and supporting role to coaches and players, instead of being on the front line (see Bond, 2002).

## 2.4 – Summary

The results indicate that all the clubs presented similar formal structures creating a sense that management practice and organisations were being homogenised. Such organisational homogenisation is similar to the notions reported by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). However, and even within apparently similar organisational structures, it was possible to identify some differences within and between the organisational practices (e.g., the role and responsibility of the practitioners, the presence, function and operationalisation of the reserves/ B teams), the pragmatics of the transition from the youth to the professional environment, communication mechanisms (e.g., first team/youth environment), and the dominant presence of a more club orientation towards the development of youth players (i.e., only in Sweden did clubs offer a more national orientation towards developing young players). However, and excluding the national orientation demonstrated by the Swedish clubs, despite the concerns over homogenised structures (and subsequently practice) it appears that there was no evidence of specific philosophies, structures or working mechanisms towards youth development that were peculiar to any particular country.

All clubs noted that the main objective of their youth development programme was to develop players for their first team. In addition, clubs recognised that others benefits were accrued throughout their development (e.g., the player's personal development, and potential financial reward). Such sentiments are in line with Stratton and colleagues (2004, p.201) who stated that "*...academies aspire to develop players for the first team or (at least) generate income through the sale of 'marketable assets'...*" Only the Swedish clubs offered a sense that their purpose was to help develop Swedish football. However, it must be recognised at this juncture, that this more national orientation is perhaps a consequence of the funding system that operates in Sweden and the potential benefits that this philosophy may bring to the club itself (e.g., more visibility of players for financial income, or the human resources support provided by the Swedish FA to clubs).

Despite the clubs' formalised organisational structure, an apparent lack of communication existed between the first team and youth environments. Typically, the first team manager seemed to operate aside from the youth development programme. However, at this stage, it was not possible to determine whether such a position was a consequence of the club's organisation or philosophies, or whether it was a conscious decision by the first team manager himself. This apparent gap between the first team and the youth environments acted as an additional barrier to the players' progression to the first team: *"...if the first team coach doesn't have the minimal concern to watch the kids, he will never know what he might have there..."* (MA, P) However, considering the evident physical and cultural distance, and lack of communication between the youth and professional environments, it might be interesting for clubs to reflect on the youth programmes, the club's true aims regarding youth development, and the subsequent effect that this philosophical gap may have on the coherent progress of youth players into the first team environment. Typically, the clubs' were a hostage to such poor relationships and/or communication between these environments, or as one Spanish HYD described:

*"...sometimes I don't know what we are doing here. We develop good players but our first team manager doesn't take them, so they go freely to others clubs that then come here to beat us...with our own former youth players!..."* (MD, E)

However, the physical, cultural, and philosophical gap alongside the lack of communication between youth and first team, was not the only barrier or difficulty associated with the youth players' transition to the professional environment. It was evident that a lack of trust and/or belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development was a significant organisational barrier (which included the gap between youth and first team). Furthermore, the notions of fortune and/or luck, and poor advice from family and/or football agents were also mentioned as external barriers to the player who might hinder their transition. The HYDs also considered some barriers inherent to the players themselves such as a player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment, player's lack of maturity, player's character, or players' difficulty in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment.

Some players' attributes were highlighted in order to face some of the previous barriers and facilitate the youth players' transition to professional. Generally, HYDs considered that the player must possess a good balance between the different sports related skills (i.e., technical, tactical, physical, and psychological), and a special attribute(s) that will make him different from all others and valuable to the squad and/or club. Additionally, other attributes were also mentioned: some related to psychological attributes such as player's game intelligence/ knowledge, self-belief/self-knowledge/self-esteem, player's character, mental strength, ability to deal with pressure and demands, persistency, and competitive mentality; others related to the player's positive work ethic such as hard work/commitment, desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices, and player's aspiration to be consistent.

All clubs considered that they provided sport related issues, medical, psychological, and social support to their players. Some of them also referred to the fact that they provide academic support (i.e., especially to those players living under the responsibility of the club). The HYDs all recognize that they promote workshops for their coaches, but only eleven clubs stated that they provide workshops for players, and only ten to their parents. Regarding the psychosocial support provided to players, clubs seemed to consider that the coach should be the main vehicle of influence. Although they also recognise that coaches' support might be more effective if surrounded and supported by experts in different areas in the academy. Within those expert personnel, it is possible to find the presence of sport psychologists.

The majority of the clubs presented in this research have a sport psychologist working with the youth department, although their location, role and responsibility varies according to the academy staff knowledge of sport psychology and/or the club specific culture. Again, there was no particular practice that appeared to be country specific, but a more individualised club perspective. This is consistent with Greenspan and Andersen (1995), and Gardner (2001), who stated that the sport psychologist (or similar) role, responsibility, and

mission vary across both setting and level. Our findings suggest that some sport psychologists work within the youth structure, mainly concerned about non-sport related issues (e.g., academic guidance, contact with families, support to new coming players), or concerned with performance enhancement as well as the non-sport related issues. Although as a minority, some sport psychologists develop their practice as an outside consultant, coming sporadically to the club to solve any specific problem situation or to instruct coaches and/or other staff on the best way to provide support to the players. However, the entry and acceptance of sport psychologists within the club was marked by some initial resistance due to a lack of knowledge from the academy staff, and afterwards their acceptance was determined by the daily practices and subtle approach of the sport psychologist. Sport psychologists must adopt a smooth entrance, trying to earn first the trust of coaches and other academy staff (Bond, 2002).

# CHAPTER THREE

## CHAPTER 2: STUDY ONE

**Organisational Structure, Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development within Elite Football Clubs**

Study One specific aims:

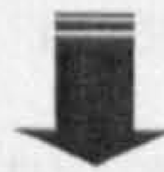
**Aim 1** – To explore the management practices and organisational structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 2** – To explore the respective youth philosophies and structure of elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments.

*In season - February 2006 to May 2007*



## CHAPTER 3: STUDY TWO

**Ethnographic engagement within six elite European football clubs**

**Study Two, Part I** – General approach to the reality within the six different clubs

**Study Two, Part II** – Specific and significant episodes of daily delivery practices

Study Two specific aims:

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments;

**Aim 5** – To (better) understand and further explore the day-to-day practices utilised in the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments.

*In season – August 2007 to April 2008*

## 3.1 – Introduction

The overall aim of this research is to explore and better understand the transition of young football players from the youth environment through to the profess environment. Furthermore, the research explores this particular transition by adopting a Pan-European perspective. Nesti and Littlewood (2010) reported that there was a *real* need to explore the role and evolution of sport psychology support within professional football. In this regard, a particular focus of interest in this research is the level of psychosocial support offered to (and experienced by) young players as they travel along this pathway.

The results from Study One offered the reader a sense of the different structures, philosophies and working practices regarding youth development and youth players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments within elite European professional football clubs. It was evident that there were no specific structures, philosophies and/or working practices that could be associated to any one particular country. Typically, practices appeared to be more concerned with, and influenced by, a specific club culture. In this sense, whilst not neglecting the cross country comparison, it would seem appropriate to further explore the different cultural nuances and practices of specific clubs. Furthermore, this more contextual exploration of specific club practices would seem crucial given the apparent presence of distinct and varying subcultures within these clubs (i.e., specifically between the youth and the first team environments). The presence of different subcultures within the same organisation is not unusual (see Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Golden, 1992; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Wilson, 1997). Given that an organisation's culture is influenced by the norms, values, beliefs and behaviours of its staff (Kotter & Heskett, 1992), it would sound necessary that in order to understand the respective club's philosophies and working practices, we need to explore and experience the daily practices and perspectives of the staff working within the youth academy.

Study Two attempts to extend the findings of Study One and further explore the young players' transition from the youth to the professional environment (Aim 3),

alongside the psychosocial support and development provided to, and experienced by, the young players in order to prepare them for this period of transition (Aim 4). Given that Study One was primarily based on the perceptions of practice offered by the relevant HYDs, Study Two adopts a more intimate approach to understanding the day-to-day practices of elite football clubs (Aim 5). In this regard, Study Two utilises the notions of participant observation and adopts a more protracted period of engagement with selected clubs.

As mentioned previously, transition literature has been mainly concerned with the athlete's career termination and retirement (Lavallee, Wylleman & Sinclair, 2000). More recently, and primarily due to the lack of research on transitions occurring during an athlete's development (within-career), researchers recount the need to explore, in more detail, within-career transitions in order to help athletes become more aware, understand and subsequently travel through such transitions more successfully (Wylleman et al., 2004; Pummell et al., 2008). The within-career transition from the youth to the professional football environment is considered to be a critical period within a youth player's development (Richardson et al., 2005). At this juncture, it would seem pertinent to understand the complexity of this transition, from a Pan-European perspective, alongside exploring how the respective elite clubs prepare and support their youth players through this period of development. According to Krane and Baird (2005), the best way to capture the reality of an environment is to understand and capture the perspectives of those that exist in these environments through their eyes.

Study Two incorporates the following specific aims:

**Aim 3** – To explore the transition from the youth to professional environments within elite European professional football clubs;

**Aim 4** – To explore the psychosocial support and development provided to the youth players in order to prepare them for the transition from the youth to professional environments;

**Aim 5** – To (better) understand and further explore the day-to-day practices utilised in the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the professional environments.

## 3.2 – Methodology

Human behaviour is a composite of interactions between people and their surrounding social culture (Krane & Baird, 2005). In this sense, the authors consider that different social circumstances might lead to different behaviours that can be observed and studied. The quantitative approach has been highly defended by positivist researchers, although ethnographers would claim that experimental approaches tend to fall short in their ability to capture the real nature of social behaviour (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Given that this research intends to explore, understand and capture the day-to-day working practices within the specific culture of elite professional football clubs (i.e., to better understand what they do and why they do it), a more qualitative approach was adopted to allow the author to become immersed in the respective environments and also permit the adoption of more flexible and informal approaches to data collection.

### 3.2.1 – Choosing the Sample

Part of the analysis of Study One grouped the twenty-six football clubs according to certain organisational structure criteria (i.e., club structure; youth development structure; communication between youth and first team; shared or non-shared youth and first team training facilities; the presence, or not, of a reserve team or B team; the presence, or not, of a sport psychologist or similarly aligned practitioner). Study One also indicated that distinct organisational structures, philosophies and/or practices were not the preserve of any one country. After clustering the clubs into groups with similarly aligned structures and/or working practices, it was possible to identify seven different groups. Initially, it was envisaged that, in order to explore the unique culture and practices of different clubs, the researcher would spend time in at least one club that represented each

group. The representative clubs were chosen according to their availability, willingness and expressions of interest in participating in Study Two following the researcher's earlier introductions from Study One.

After this selection process, the sample for the Study Two consisted of six clubs from Portugal (n=1), Spain (n=3), France (n=1), and Sweden (n=1). Three Spanish clubs were represented here due to the different structural and practice situations evident in the Spanish system. The more invasive nature of Study Two also meant that the author was a hostage to the availability and willingness of the clubs to embrace, and take part in, the Study. Unfortunately, this availability and willingness to take part in Study Two was not evident in England. From the six English clubs participating in Study One, none of them were willing to participate in Study Two. Whilst, the lack of engagement from the English clubs in Study Two was disappointing, it also restricted the exploration of a given structural position identified in Study One.

Within the six clubs visited, thirty-eight face-to-face formal and informal semi-structured interviews were undertaken with different subjects: six HYD (M), seven coaches (C), one technical co-ordinator (TC), one head of recruitment (HR), three sport psychologists (SP), three teachers (T), one social assistant (SA), one internal assistant (IA), eight professional players (P), and seven youth players (YP). Of the three teachers, one was responsible for the club's internal school, whilst the other two were responsible for the communication with the school and the players' families. The internal assistant was the person responsible for those players living in the academy residence. It is important to mention that these interviews embraced a range of formal and informal moments that served to gain a better understanding of people, their existence and their practices as well as to seek clarification of certain situations and/or experiences observed on a daily basis.

### 3.2.2 – Ethnography

Understanding people and their practices within each one of the respective six clubs visited, demanded an ethnographic approach. In this regard, Atkinson and

Hammersley (1994) advocate ethnography as the best way to capture the true nature of human social behaviour.

Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) recognised that defining 'what ethnography is' is a fairly complex process. However, the authors cite Watson-Gegeo (1988, p.576) as the most appropriate definition to date: *"the study of people's behaviour in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behaviour."* From a practical perspective, ethnography is usually associated with different forms of social research that mainly explore the nature of a particular social phenomenon (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Similarly, other authors appear to describe ethnography as the ability to understand the culture of a particular group from their own perspective (Wolcott, 1995; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005). Knowing the group's culture, allows the researcher to understand its influence on the people's behaviour, values, and emotions (Krane & Baird, 2005). The underpinning principles of ethnography allow a more long-term and immersed exploration of the daily practices within one specific culture, in this case a professional football club, capturing and recording the voices of daily lived experiences (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Specifically, ethnography offers the researcher an opportunity to see how they (the people) 'go about' their day-to-day business (Adler & Adler, 1994; Gans, 1999). The (normally) inductive and emergent nature of ethnography is associated to an atheoretical position (Frow & Morris, 2000). However, some theory would appear essential to guide the initial observations, assist in identifying appropriate data, guide direct observations and interviews (Frow & Morris, 2000), and demystify the delusion of 'purely' inductive research (Krane et al., 1997; Biddle et al., 2001).

Ethnographic studies generally include intensive, long-term observation and participation in the natural setting (Sparkes, 1992). Jeffrey and Troman (2004) advise that time spent in the field should be determined by the circumstances and purpose of the research. Given the fragile nature of the football environment, characterised by its instability and frequent turnover of personnel, alongside the fact that the research included clubs from different European countries, the author

adopted a compressed ethnographic approach (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). This more condensed approach was adopted in order to reduce the potential difficulties of access and subsequent data collection, caused by changes in personnel, structures, philosophies, and/or working practices. The compressed mode can be characterised by an intense short period where the researcher is located within the research site permanently for anything from a couple of days to one month. Using this approach, the researcher can gain access to relevant places, attempt contact with all personnel and capture the dynamics of the working environment through documenting the visible, less visible and more intangible social structures and relationships that exist. In essence, ethnography involves a lot of 'hanging around', registering every detail that may, or may not, be used in a later analysis (see Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Tedlock, 2000; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Krane & Baird, 2005).

The following section details the researcher's fieldwork approach within the clubs. In order to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the data collection process, the researcher employed a multi-methods approach that included: observations, field diary, research log, interviews, formal and informal document collection (Krane & Baird, 2005).

### 3.2.3 – Fieldwork Approach

An ethnographic approach enables the researcher to establish relationships with different stakeholders and attempt to understand their day-to-day existence, their thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and emotions with respect to the culture of their working environment (Wolcott, 1995; Tedlock, 2000). Specifically, prolonged immersion by the researcher (i.e., one month in each of the six clubs on a daily basis) allowed a better understanding of the cultures and sub-cultures that existed within each of the clubs (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Gans, 1999; Button, 2000; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004).

The first decision to make, even before entering the club, was to select a setting (i.e., a physical location and a particular set of practitioners to follow) within the club's environment to follow (Adler & Adler, 1994). Given that this research focused on the within-career transition from the youth to the professional environment, it was decided that the researcher would typically follow the top youth team (i.e., the youth team closest to the professional environment, and/or the club's team B or reserves). It was envisaged that whilst closely following the top youth team, the researcher would be able to continually observe all aspects of the academy environment, and more specifically, the author was more likely to be exposed to a range of interactions and exchanges with the first team environment.

#### 3.2.3.1 – Entering the Research Setting

The first step of the fieldwork approach is to gain entry to the research setting. Gaining entry (normally) involves building rapport, earning the trust of people, and seeking out, and obtaining, the gatekeeper's sympathy to gain easier access to the field (Adler & Adler, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). This research was particularly challenging for the researcher, due to the fact that it involved six (possibly) different cultures, requiring a constant adaptation to a new environment. Initial introductions and rapport were previously established in the author's weeklong visit that occurred as a consequence of Study One. In this regard, the researcher already had the opportunity to meet a range of different staff, personnel and players from each club. During the visit in Study One, the author was able to identify the gatekeeper that might best facilitate the researcher's entrance and acceptance into the club (Sands, 2002).

Ethnography involves extensive fieldwork and intensive familiarity within a setting and the people within it (Lofland, 1996; Tedlock, 2000; Biddle et al., 2001). The researcher's major concern in the beginning was to avoid creating unnecessary attention. The success of ethnographic fieldwork is to be able to fit and integrate into one social group, maintaining high comfort amongst most (if not all) of the individuals (Krane & Baird, 2005). With this in mind, and knowing

that the researcher was going to follow a specific team on a daily basis, the researcher considered the team's coach as one of the most (if not the most) important gatekeeper in the environment. From personal experience as a youth coach, the researcher knew that coaches do not (normally) care too much to having 'strange people' around watching their work. Therefore, even given the researcher's formal entry approval from the respective HYDs, to avoid any type of conflict, and to offer a sense authority (and control) to the coach, it was decided that before the start of any fieldwork, a discussion with the coach was essential. This discussion was designed to allow the coach to define the best way for the researcher to be introduced, and to settle into the environment. The researcher's presence and subsequent duties undertaken varied from club to club. This variation was not so much due to the culture and specificity of club, but more according to the coach's desires. With the exception of the Portuguese coach, where the researcher was asked to observe the team pitch-side at all times, all of the other coaches allowed the researcher to enter the pitch and stay close to the technical staff. In all clubs (apart from the Portuguese) the researcher received a training kit that helped to facilitate the integration within the club's environment. On a daily basis, the Swedish coach asked the researcher to assume a role similar to that of an assistant coach, whilst in other clubs the researcher helped assist the coach in session pragmatics and layout (e.g., putting cones, carrying bibs and balls), participated in some exercises (i.e., playing and/or coaching/directing it), and/or acted just as an observer. All coaches received the researcher well and allowed frequent conversation with themselves, other coaches, personnel and players.

Typically, ethnographic researchers are labelled as either *the outsider* who doesn't belong to the research setting, or *the insider* who appears to be a member of the environment under study (Ely, 1991; Loland, 2000; Berg, 2001). In Study Two, the researcher whilst being labelled as an outsider was often afforded insider privileges (i.e., through living in and around the environment on a daily basis for one month). Such privileges included developing relationships with everyone from the academy, full access to the training facilities, dressing rooms, and

meetings. This was a significant achievement considering that professional football clubs are typically closed environments (Parker, 1995).

#### 3.2.3.2 – Researcher Experiences within the Setting

In all of the clubs, in the day prior to the first training session, the coach asked the researcher to introduce himself to the group and explain briefly to the players why he was there. This was always an important moment. Specifically, the first impressions tended to dictate the way the future relationship would evolve. In this sense, the researcher made a deliberate decision to eliminate any theoretical details of the work and just introduced himself as a former football player, with some coaching experience. Typically, this introduction was followed up with the fact that we were interested in exploring the young players' preparation for the transition from the youth to the first team environments across Europe. The researcher also informed the players that he was to talk if they wanted to know more things about the researcher or the research. It was agreed that this was an appropriate mechanism to help facilitate the researcher's integration into the group (i.e., team) and the environment. Both in gaining entry and during the researcher's time at the club, the researcher was concerned with behaving in a way deemed acceptable within the environment. In this regard, the researcher sought to be sincere, communicate empathy, break through communication barriers, understand and employ the participants' language, establish and embrace common ground, assist in everyday chores and remain humble (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Moreover, the researcher's personal sports (and football) background, and an ability to talk 'sport', and particularly 'football', in different languages (i.e., English, Spanish, Portuguese and French) appeared to assist the integration (also see Fontana & Frey, 1994). Typically, and independent of the country or a specific club culture, the researcher's integration into the environment evolved through three primary phases: 1) *week one:* the coaches would almost be the only ones who took the initiative to talk to the researcher. However, during this phase it was apparent that they remained guarded and did not tend to express their thoughts freely; 2) *week two:* the researcher would start having a closer and more confident relationship with the coaches, and the players began to approach the

researcher through their own initiative, mainly to know more things about the researcher's personal football experiences and football practices in other clubs; 3) *weeks three and four:* the researcher felt (in most cases) part of the group, where both coaches and players expressed their feelings more freely without any apparent concerns.

Following the creation of a sound rapport with the staff and the players within the club environment, concerns then turned towards not undoing the relationship and/or influencing their daily routines. In this regard, the researcher tried not to explicitly evidence a 'desire to collect data', but more to stimulate informal and friendly conversational moments where ideas and perspectives could be shared. Furthermore, because the mere presence of an 'outsider' may alter the behaviour of the people in the research setting (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), the researcher, who was unable to become invisible, adopted a more transparent position (Krane & Baird, 2005). For example, even though everyone was aware of the reason for the researcher's presence, it was imperative not to be seen as a 'researcher'. Specifically, the researcher did not use a dictaphone (except during more formal interviews settings), a specific notepad or any other means that might destroy or hinder the existing relationships, trust, create hostility, hinder existing access, or damage professional integrity (Mitchell & Charmaz, 1998).

#### 3.2.3.3 – Recording and Collecting Data

In the field, the first observations were mainly to gain a better knowledge and be more familiar with the particular club's environment. It was important to have a clear and concise general perspective concerning the club's culture (Krane & Baird, 2005). Only after this familiarization did the researcher begin to seek out scenes and experiences identified as determinants for the specificity of the research (Adler & Adler, 1994).

The researcher typically followed the team in their day-to-day activities, including training sessions, talks, meetings and matches. In some cases, the researcher was also invited to participate in some of those activities (Hammersely & Atkinson,

1995). This close relationship and proximity, allowed the researcher to collect very rich and detailed information about the *real* practices and perspectives of the different stakeholders (Lofland, 1996; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999; Tedlock, 2000). The data generated from the detailed observations of the environment and/or different stakeholders' actions, shared conversations, and/or specific events/situations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Krane & Baird, 2005), was registered in a field diary (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). As mentioned previously, the researcher avoided taking notes in front of the participants. In this regard, the field diary was (usually) written during isolated daily breaks and during the journey back home. Specifically, notes were taken when the researcher was alone in order to limit, even eliminate, the risk of others either viewing or enquiring about the researcher's writing. From these field notes, a research log was developed by the researcher. The research log described more fully the daily experiences with additional researcher reflections regarding specific aspects observed (Sparkes, 1995, 2002; Berg, 2001). During the time at the club, it was possible to establish informal talks with different personnel and players (Ely, 1991; Hoepfl, 1997), and collect documents and text (both formal and informal) used by the club and delivered directly by personnel staff (see Hodder, 2000). More formal semi-structured interviews were developed with different stakeholders to clarify some issues and/or experiences that had been previously observed (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). Those interviews developed with coaches, professional and youth players, and other staff identified by the researcher as significant for the players' daily support and development, were recorded using a dictaphone. To capture the true feelings and perspectives of the different people interviewed, the interviews were typically undertaken during the last week at the club, after building a level of trust with the interviewees. All of this information supplemented and extended the researcher's daily observations, allowing for a better understanding of the context of a given situation(s) (Malinowski, 1989; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999).

### 3.2.4 – Data Analysis and Representation

The results from Study Two are presented in two parts. Study Two Part I explores the within-career transition from the youth to the professional environments from

the perspective of staff and players within the clubs. These perspectives were mainly collated through the informal and formal semi-structured interviews. In order to differentiate between the different viewpoints of the players, coaches, and the rest of academy staff, the coaches' perspectives are identified using a red font colour, whereas the rest of the academy staff appear in black font. Similarly, the players were split into two groups: professional players - consisting of players already having a professional contract (represented in blue font); and youth players - those players who still have a youth contract (represented in green font). The coding system allows the reader to discriminate between the perspectives of coaches and the rest of the youth staff, as well as between youth and professional players.

Study Two Part II, provides examples of situations and practices observed by the researcher. Such situational context allows the reader to 'see' through the eyes of the researcher (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) how youth players are supported and developed for the transition from the youth to the professional environment on a daily basis.

As with Study One, all interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to guarantee the integrity and contextualisation of the subjects' perspectives (Roulston et al., 2003). Transcriptions were then analysed using the content analysis procedures, similarly to that utilised in Study One (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Biddle et al., 2001). As in Study One, the clustering process was undertaken by the researcher, and then discussed with the three supervisors in order to help establish trustworthiness and credibility (Manning, 1997; Sparkes, 1998; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). The final tables of content analysis resulted from the continual discussions between the researcher and the supervisory team (triangulation), that aimed to reach agreement on the final form and location of each quote and theme (Scanlan et al., 1989b).

Unlike Study One where a more intimate and detailed perspective of the participants was offered, Study Two Part I adopts a more comparative approach.

the perspective of staff and players within the clubs. These perspectives were mainly collated through the informal and formal semi-structured interviews. In order to differentiate between the different viewpoints of the players, coaches, and the rest of academy staff, the coaches' perspectives are identified using a red font colour, whereas the rest of the academy staff appear in black font. Similarly, the players were split into two groups: professional players - consisting of players already having a professional contract (represented in blue font); and youth players - those players who still have a youth contract (represented in green font). The coding system allows the reader to discriminate between the perspectives of coaches and the rest of the youth staff, as well as between youth and professional players.

Study Two Part II, provides examples of situations and practices observed by the researcher. Such situational context allows the reader to 'see' through the eyes of the researcher (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) how youth players are supported and developed for the transition from the youth to the professional environment on a daily basis.

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Unlike Study One where a more intimate and detailed perspective of the participants was offered, Study Two Part I adopts a more comparative approach.

In this regard, the perceptions of coaches and players alike are analysed and presented together. Specifically, the results are presented in more traditional content analysis tables to allow the reader to observe the respective views of the distinct representative groups (i.e., players and practitioners).

**3.3 – Results and Discussion of Study Two Part I**

From the content analysis of the thirty-eight interviews, eight tables emerged: four tables related to the interviews with academy staff that allowed the identification of eleven general dimensions (see Tables 3.1; 3.4; 3.8; 3.10); and four tables related to the interviews with players (both youth and professional) that identified nine general dimensions (see Tables 3.2; 3.5; 3.9; 3.11). Moreover, the eight tables were distributed within four different major areas, each one including one content analysis table of the academy staff and one from the players. Two areas report temporal issues during the player's career: *within-career transition from youth to professional environment*; and *post-academy experiences of youth players*. The other two areas were more structural: *influence of organisational structures on youth development*, and *support provided to youth players during their development*. It is important to note that the results represent the participants' perspectives on players' transition to the professional environment within the four different areas, and they are not necessarily solely based upon what they experienced in their current club. To allow an easier identification of the participants' perspectives and quotations, the coaches will be represented in red, the rest of the academy staff in black, professional players in blue, and youth players in green.

In the following section, each one of the four areas will be presented with the correspondent tables. Due to the extensive data and in order to make the tables more practical and easier to understand, the raw data was removed and first-order categories were associated to a varying number of tags to provide the reader with a sense of frequency and variation of answers. When presenting and later discussing the results, various raw data quotes were used to clarify categories and demonstrate the depth and richness of data (Scanlan et al., 1989a).

### 3.3.1 – Influence of Organisational Structures on Youth Development

From the analysis of the academy staff perceptions on the influence of organisational structures on youth development, with possible impact on the youth players' transition to the professional environment, four general dimensions emerged (see Table 3.1): *positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development*; *informal communication channels amongst youth and first team staff*; *closed and traditional environment resistant to progress*; and *inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development*. The first two general dimensions seem to be associated to a positive impact on the players' transition, in contrast with the latter two.

**Table 3.1:** Academy staff perceptions on the influence of organisational structures on youth development

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Written youth staff role/responsibilities (M, F; M, P) | Formalised role and responsibility | Positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development |
| Positive aspects of staff role/responsibilities clarification (M, S; M, EE; C1, S; C1, EI, C2, EI) | | |
| Formal communication amongst academy staff (SP, F; TC, P; C1, S, C, EE) | Formal communication channels amongst staff | |
| Formal communication between youth and 1st team (M, S; TC, P) | | |
| Formal communication hostage of 1st team coach will (M, S; M, EE; C1, EI; C2, EI) | | |
| Promotion of similar work (M, S; TC, P; C1, S; C2, S) | Encourage coherent practices within the club | |
| Implement a similar language (M, F; TC, P) | | |
| Youth staff consistency and stability (M, S; M, EB; M, P) | Organisational strategies for an effective academy | |
| Youth staff cohesion and proximity (M, F; SP, F; TC, P; HR, P) | | |
| Policy and beliefs regarding youth department (M, S; M, F; M, P; TC, P) | | |
| Informal communication due to coaches' personal relations (M, EE; M, EI; C, EE) | → | Informal communication channels amongst youth and 1st team staff |
| Good communication due to 1st team coach past in youth (C, P) | | |
| Football's closed environment (SP, F) | → | Closed and traditional environment resistant to progress |
| Need to improve club's organisation (C1, S; C, EE) | | |
| Lack of staff role clarification (C1, S;C2, S) | → | Inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development |
| Lack of youth matches' observation by 1st team coaches (C2, S) | → | |
| Distinct coaches led to different mentalities and practices (C1, S; C2, S; C, EE) | Lack of coherent practices from 1st team to youth | |
| Different game cultures within the club (C2, S) | | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Board's results oriented vision for 1st team (C2, S) | Lack of long-term youth strategic plan |
| Club's lack of belief in youth players (C, F) | |
| Club's lack of economical and structural investment in youth (C1, EI) | |
| Youth philosophy conflict within club (C1, S) | Youth philosophy conflict and uncertainty |
| Club's concern to develop players to 1st team (M, EE; M, F) | |
| Club's over concern with winning in youth (TC, P; C1, EI) | |

Through the players' perception on the impact of organisational structures within their transition to the professional environment, two general dimensions emerged (see Table 3.2): *positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development*; and *inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development*. These two general dimensions were also present within the academy staff perceptions, and similarly the first dimension is seen as positive, whilst the second is perceived to have a more detrimental impact on the players' transition to professional environment.

**Table 3.2:** Youth and Professional players' perceptions on the influence of organisational structures on youth development

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Encourage coherent practices from 1st team to youth (P2, P) | → | Positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development |
| Cohesion and proximity amongst everyone in the academy (P2, S; P1, P; YP2,EB; YP, P) | Organisational strategies for an effective academy | |
| Promotion of informal communication amongst 1st team and youth (P1, EB; P2, P) | | |
| Physical and philosophical distance between youth and 1st team (P2, EB; P1, P) | Lack of coherent practices from 1st team to youth | Inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development |
| Poor communication between youth and 1st team (YP, EE; YP, P) | | |
| Coaches' different game perspectives within the club (P2, EE; YP, EE) | | |
| Club's lack of belief /opportunities for youth players (P2, EE; YP,EE) | Lack of long-term youth strategic plan | |
| Investment in youth only due to club's financial difficulties (P2, EE) | | |
| Lack of full time, committed academy staff (P2, EE; P2, EB) | | |
| Coaches' over concern with winning in youth (YP, EE) | → | |

#### 3.3.1.1 – Positive Organisational Strategic Planning Mechanisms with Respect to Youth Development

The presence of more 'Formalised role and responsibility' was identified by seven staff members as a positive organisational mechanism in order to better understand and clarify their role, objectives, and contribute to more effective player development: *"...I need to know exactly what my role is, what is expected from me...that's the only way to do a good job..."* (C1, S). Moreover, a Spanish coach (C2, EI) associated the requirement of clear roles and responsibility with the development of a more coherent common goal:

> *"...he [coach] has a lot of people working for him and he must know how to deal with them. The roles and responsibilities of each one working in the youth environment must be clear... that helps to make everyone work towards the same objective..."* (C2, EI)

This seems to be consistent with what has been mentioned by the different HYDs in Study One, supporting Woodman and Hardy's (2001) perspective about the importance of role clarification in an effective organisation. Moreover, Slack (1997) considered that the best way to clarify staff roles and responsibilities is through the presence of written documents. Whilst more formal development programmes have been in existence for some years, it seems that the clarification of roles and responsibilities has only recently been perceived as a requirement in developing a more effective developmental environment. Accordingly, the results from this study showed that only one (Portuguese) club appeared to possess any such formal (written) documentation that outlined staff roles and responsibilities. However, one French HYD recounted the need and importance to (shortly) develop written documents to formally and clearly identify the role of each member within the youth department: *"...We are developing a document to regulate the role and responsibilities of the personnel here in the club...everyone must know what to do..."* (M, F)

The existence of 'formal communication amongst staff' was another strategy defended by the different academy staff. Two major communication types emerged: *intra-channels*, usually associated to the communication channels

within the academy environment; and *inter-channels*, concerning the communication channels between youth and first teams. It was perceived that there is a need to establish formal communication channels amongst the different members of the staff. However, only one HYD and one technical coordinator referred to the presence of formal communication between youth and first team, and not necessarily between the coaching staff of each department (i.e., youth and first team):

> "*...in January/February I make reports for each youth player that is going to achieve the age of senior player, and I present them in a meeting with the personnel of the professional department...then we discuss the future of those players...but it's the coach from the 1st team who has the last word...*" (TC, P)

The daily basis practices seem to indicate that it is not easy to establish a formal communication between the youth and first team. From Study One, HYDs already let the impression that the physical distance hindered the existence of formal communication between the two departments (i.e., youth and first team). Furthermore these results from Study Two indicate that communication and/or relationship is usually hostage to the first team manager 'will and desire':

> "*...The proximity [between youth and first team] will always depend on the 1st team coach of the moment. The reality is that the connection from the top to here in the youth is very limited...*" (C2, EI)

Interestingly, this communication constrains between the youth and first team staff were not replicated within the academies themselves. In some cases, academies operated as distinct entities with sound intra-channel communication and close and frequent working relationships amongst their staff: "*...On a daily basis I might meet with everyone from the staff. We all work in the same corridor, so it's easy to meet and talk about any subject that is necessary...*" (SP, F) Academies seem to have their own sub-culture within the clubs, supporting the idea that every organisation integrates various sub-cultures, values and/or beliefs (see Golden, 1992; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Wilson, 1997).

According to the academy staff, this close relationship amongst everyone in the academy and the sound intra-channels of communication contribute to a more effective youth player development programme. Communication is seen as essential for the good functioning of the organisation, working as a vehicle for role definition, organisational culture, group cohesion and goal clarification (see De Knop et al., 2004; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Consequently, and in order to stimulate cohesion towards the same goal, there was a desire to 'encourage coherent practices within the club' helping to establish similar practices and a language that everyone within the environment could understand. In that sense, one Portuguese technical co-ordinator mentioned the will to promote meetings and workshops with staff and players in order to reinforce their own club culture and establish a similar football language amongst everyone: *"...we have our own culture implemented within the club...everyone speaks the same football language and understands each other..."* (TC, P)

This idea to encourage coherent practices within the club was also mentioned by one Portuguese professional player, who highlighted the decisive role which similar practices between youth and first team (e.g., training methodologies) may play in helping their adaptation to the first team:

> *"... [proximity between youth and 1st team] allows a similarity in the methodologies which help us in the moment to move to the 1st team, especially in the adaptation to the trainings..."* (P2, P)

When questioned on the organisational strategies that contribute for an effective football academy, both staff and players reported the need and importance to promote a close proximity and cohesion amongst everyone within the academy. The academy staff perceive their cohesion more as being part of unit (see Weinberg & McDermott, 2002), working together towards a common goal (see Woodman & Hardy, 2001). This perspective was evidenced by a French HYD: *"...the key to success is to make sure that the people can work together as a unit...everyone must share the same values and work together to achieve our aims..."* (M, F)

Although the organisational cohesion is recognised by both players and academy staff, it is important to mention that this 'unit' typically refers to the academy environment only, and is not readily extended to the first team. Nevertheless, both professional and youth players stated that the proximity between everyone in the academy is essential for them to feel 'support', 'care', and 'part of something':

> *"...the human relations and the frequent communication between the players and the surrounding people who work in the club, it's decisive for our development and to feel that we are not abandoned and forgotten..."* (P1, P)

Similarly, Jones and colleagues (2004) reported that coaches believed that a caring climate established a positive, relaxed, and effective working environment that maximised the player's potential. Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) also emphasised the importance of a caring climate, referring to the symbiotic relationship between performance and caring agendas in the sport psychologist's practices within football clubs. Even though it is desired by players, this caring climate is not a *typical* feature of professional football, which is normally characterised by a ruthless and masculine environment, as noted by Parker (2001) in his research within English football.

Moreover, some academy staff members also refer the importance of staff job stability and consistency, associated with the presence of a clubs' policy and beliefs regarding the youth department. This seems consistent with Mintzberg's (1979) perspective that the effectiveness of an organisation is based on notions of order, coherency and consistency, alongside the subsequent presence of a clear strategic plan, alignment of strategic goals and working practices (Mintzberg, 1979). It was curious to notice that none of the coaches mentioned any specific strategy for an effective academy, which can be consequence of the perceived inconsistency of philosophies and strategies regarding the youth development, as highlighted on a further general dimension (i.e., *inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development*).

#### 3.3.1.2 – Informal Communication Channels amongst Youth and First Team Staff

In Study One some HYDs believed that sharing facilities was enough to promote personnel relationships amongst staff, in particular regarding youth coaches. Nevertheless, as they recognised both in Study One and in this Study Two, the major communication problem is not amongst youth staff, but between the youth and first team. This idea seems to be confirmed by the coaching staff, which highlights the poor and difficult relationships between the youth and first team on a structural/formal level. The coaches, as a group of individuals within a specific environment, searched for a way to overcome this problem through the establishment of personal relationships between the different staff which, as mentioned previously, will always be dependent on the first team coach will and desire. These decisions on relational matters amongst the different stakeholders can be influenced by the clubs' structure, culture, and or traditions (Parker, 2000; Potrac et al., 2002; Richardson et al., 2004).

> *"...communication between our team and the 1st team is good, not from a formal structural perspective, but due to the good personal relations between me and some elements of the 1st team technical staff..."* (C, EE)

This approach from the coaches seems to fall in line with the informal socialisation process mentioned by Wilson (2001), which refers to the factors influencing organisational culture in general, not necessarily just within a sport setting. Some events might also facilitate the establishment of relations between youth and first team staff. For example in the Portuguese team in the sample of this Study Two, the personal relationship and communication is even stronger due to the fact that the first team coach is a former youth coach at the club.

#### 3.3.1.3 – Closed and Traditional Environment Resistant to Progress

Professional football is typically a closed and traditional environment, sceptical about 'outsiders', not only where researchers are concerned but also regarding practitioners with new ideas and/or perspectives that might reshape the

environment (Parker, 1995, 2000). This perspective seem to be confirmed by three academy staff members, whose perception is that the 'football culture' faith on this 'closure' and tradition might be hindering the progress and efficiency of football clubs:

> *"...football world is very hermetic, and even when they don't know things they don't open the door to experts in order to improve...I think that it's a cultural problem, from the peoples' personal development..."* (SP, F)

Furthermore, some academy staff members defend the idea that clubs should be more open to innovation, and learning with good examples of effective practice. For example, one Swedish coach states that, at a structural level, clubs might learn from enterprises: *"...football is very conservative and need to integrate more new things, in this case from the organisation and structure of enterprises..."* (C1, S) In Study One different HYDs mentioned that there was some resistance by members of the staff to the entrance of sport scientists, bringing new ideas and practices, and typically the youngest staff members were the ones who presented more openness. This seems consistent with the results from Study Two, where only three young staff members within the twenty-three interviewed, questioned the closeness of the football environment. The apparent desire to open the environment to new ideas, and learn from them in order to improve and be more effective, seems consistent with the view of Gilbourne and Richardson (2005) that practitioners may benefit from the association of their craft knowledge to the professional knowledge that can be brought from sport scientists (i.e., collaborative working relationships amongst them may contribute to a more effective working practices).

#### 3.3.1.4 – Inconsistent Philosophies and Working Practices Regarding Youth Development

This general dimension mirrors some of the concerns expressed mainly by coaches and players on the inconsistent philosophies and practices regarding youth development. If on the positive organisational strategic mechanisms the majority of the perspectives were given by different HYDs, in this dimension

coaches and players seem to have a more critical perspective. It seems relevant to highlight that in seven first order categories obtained within this general dimension, in six it was possible to identify players from the same Spanish club (i.e., club EE).

Both staff and players perceived a lack of coherent practices mainly between youth and first team. This situation might be associated to the different mentalities and practices of coaches, and/or may be due to a lack of inter-channel communication alongside a *virtual, philosophical* and sometimes geographical distance between the youth and first team environments, which leads to the appearance of different game cultures within the same club. Interestingly, from the five participants mentioning the presence of different game cultures within the club, three belong to the same Spanish club (i.e., club EE): *"sometimes you arrive to the 1st team training and they want you to do the opposite of what you usually do in the team B, and to do that in one training session is not easy..."* (YP, EE) Moreover, as referred by a Portuguese professional player, in some cases the distance between youth and first team might be due to the club's first team directors' influences and decisions:

> *"...the barrier that sometimes exists between the players from the 1st team and the youth, in a lot of cases is not really a consequence of the player's mentality, but the influences and decisions of the club's directors of the 1st team..."* (P1, P)

Even within the youth department(s) it was possible to identify some philosophical conflicts and uncertainty regarding the purpose of youth development (i.e., to develop players for the first team or win youth championships). This conflict or dilemma was mentioned by both staff and one youth player. As perceptible by the following quotes, the HYDs pass the message to coaches that the most important is to develop youth players for the first team, although on a daily basis youth coaches report that sports directors and/or members of the Board seem more interested in winning:

> *"...the sports director wants the club's teams to win all the time, even in youth, while the HYD had more educational ideas where the performance is more important than the result..."* (C1, S)

*"...developing players for the 1st team should be the main concern of youth development, but unfortunately the clubs are still very concerned about the results obtained in the youth teams, sometimes more than really preparing the players to become professionals..."* (C1, EI)

This dilemma between winning youth matches/championships *versus* developing youth players to the first team is consequence of a bigger issue, the lack of long-term youth strategic planning. It is recognised that the high-stakes and immediacy of elite football business (unsurprisingly perhaps) dictates that the predominant focus of the club is the results of the first team (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). This strategy was evident as both academy staff and players reported a lack of investment by clubs in youth development: *"...some clubs don't care about young players, they don't invest in bringing those players up to the 1st team...it's all about the club policy..."* (C, F) Moreover, the pressure to obtain immediate results and the subsequent reluctance to promote (inexperienced) youth players to the first team was highlighted by one Swedish coach: *"...if the coach puts a young player in and the team doesn't get results, he will be pressured by the press...and in some cases by their own Board..."* (C2, S) It appears that the club's financial position also determines the way in which youth development is perceived. In this sense, clubs with less money (i.e., unable to buy expensive and more finished high profile players) seem to view youth development more favourably as a way of furnishing the first team, but more so to obtain financial return through their sale (Richardson et al., 2004). This rather *forced* perspective generates dissatisfaction within the academy staff and players, who tend to believe that the club *only* look towards the youth players because they do not have enough money to buy high profile, experienced and/or recognised players:

*"...the clubs only invest in youth players when they are facing some economical problems and they can't buy players..."* (C, F)

*"...the club never invested a lot in youth football because there was always money to buy players, now we are facing some economical problems and they have remembered the youth..."* (P2, EE)

This lack of long-term strategic planning, and consequent lack of coherent practices and the philosophical dilemmas within the club regarding the youth

development, mainly mentioned by coaches and players, seems to contradict the 'clarity' given by the HYDs in Study One on the purpose of the youth development programme. To the HYDs it was clear that the main aim of the youth development programme was to develop and prepare players for the move to the first team, although the stakeholders 'on the field' (i.e., coaches, players) don't seem excessively convinced about the real club's commitment towards that goal.

**3.3.1.5 – Summary on the Influence of Organisational Structures on Youth Development**

Firstly, it seems important to mention that there were no significant differences concerning the perceptions of youth and professional players about this issue. In this sense, the results refer to all players, including both youth and professional footballers. The perceptions of both the academy staff and players on the influence of the organisational structures on youth development, generated four general dimensions, two of which were common to both groups (see table 3.3): *positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development*; *informal communication channels amongst youth and first team staff*; *closed and traditional environment resistant to progress*; and *inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development*.

**Table 3.3:** General dimensions emerging from the academy staff and players' perceptions on the influence of organisational structures on youth development

| General dimension | Academy staff | Players |
|---|---|---|
| Positive organisational strategic planning mechanisms with respect to youth development | X | X |
| Informal communication channels amongst youth and first team staff | X | |
| Closed and traditional environment resistant to progress | X | |
| Inconsistent philosophies and working practices regarding youth development | X | X |

Positive organisational strategies were mentioned by various academy staff members, such as the formal identification of roles and responsibility, formal intra

and inter communication channels, and the encouragement of coherent practices within the club. However, these appear to be more hypothetical than real. On a daily basis within the club, the reality appears to be different with (mainly) coaches and players presenting some concerns regarding inconsistent philosophies and practices regarding the youth development. For example, the formal communication inter-channels that were supposed to exist according to HYDs statement, on a daily basis are more informal and ad hoc, relying on the casual corridor meetings or in the personal relationships between youth and academy staff. Furthermore, there is an apparent lack of coherent practices between youth and first team which, according to one player, might make their adaptation to the first team harder. Within the youth environment it is also possible to identify some inconsistent philosophies. According to the HYDs (Study One) the main aim of the youth department is to develop and prepare players for the first team, and according to the youth coaches that is the message that HYDs generally pass onto them. However, within the club there are some Board members and/or directors whose main concern is to win youth matches and championships, contradicting the main purpose of the club's youth development programme. All this inconsistency and lack of long-term strategic youth development plan recognised and accepted by everyone within the club (even those not directly linked with the youth department), contribute to a large uncertainty amongst the different stakeholders about their goal. This may hinder the youth players' preparation and transition to the first team, decreasing the club's youth development effectiveness.

### 3.3.2 – Player's Within-career Transition from the Youth to the Professional Environment

The analysis of the academy staff and players' perceptions on the within-career transition from youth to professional environment led to three general dimensions (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5): *internal and external barriers for transition to professional environment; individual attributes associated with the transition to the professional environment; and organisational strategies influencing a player's transition to the professional environment.*

**Table 3.4:** Academy staff perceptions on the players' within-career transition from youth to professional environment

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Organisational barriers (M, EE; M, P; C2, S, C, EE; C1, EI; C, F; C, P) | Barriers for transition external to the player | Internal and external barriers for transition to professional environment |
| Premature and aggressive transition to 1st team ( TC, P; C, EE; C, P) | | |
| Players on loan submitted to poor practices (C, P) | | |
| 1st team coach as a barrier (M, S; M, EI; M, EB; C, EE; C1, EI; C2, EI; C, P) | | |
| Fortune and luck as a barrier (M, EI; M, EE; HR, P; C2, EI; C, EE) | | |
| Family and football agents pressures (M, S; HR, P; TC, P) | | |
| Lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices (M, EE; SA, EB; T, F; HR, P; C2, S; C, F) | Barriers for transition internal to the player | |
| Lack of readiness to face the professional environment (M, EB; M, EI; M, EE; C2, S; C, F; C2, EI) | | |
| Lack of maturity (T, F; SP, F; HR, P; C1, S; C, F; C, EE) | | |
| Player's character (C1, S) | | |
| Mental strength (M, S; M, EI; M, EE; HR, P; C, F; C2, EI; C, P) | Player's psychological attributes | Individual attributes associated with the transition to the professional environment |
| Self-believe/Self-knowledge/Self-esteem (M, S; M, P) | | |
| Competitive mentality (C, F) | | |
| Ability to cope with pressure (M, P; C, EE) | | |
| Humble / character (M, S; M, EI; TC, P; C1, EI; C1, S; C2, S) | | |
| Game consistency (M, S) | Player's positive work ethic | |
| Hard work / commitment (M, S; HR, P; C1, S; C2, S; C1, EI; C, P) | | |
| Desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices (C2, S; C, F; C1, EI) | | |
| Player's special skill (M, EB; C, EE) | → | |
| Holistic view (M, S; C1, S; C, EE; C1, EI) | → | |
| Distinct coaches facilitate player's adaptations (TC, P; C1, S; C1, EI) | Stimulating environment for a smooth transition to the professional environment | Organisational strategies influencing a player's transition to professional environment |
| Fast track for talented players (M, S) | | |
| Promote a structured and stimulating environment (M, S; C, EE; C, P) | | |
| Training camps with other teams (M, S) | | |
| 1st team as something achievable (C1, S; C2, S) | | |
| 1st team environment with progressive responsibility (M, P) | | |
| Importance of formal contact with experienced players (TC, P; C1, S; C2, S) | Older and experienced 1st team players as role models | |
| Exposure to the professional reality through 'observational learning' (C, F) | | |
| Facilities promote informal contact with 1st team players (C, F) | | |
| Workshop sessions with players as preparation for professional environment (M, S; T, F; TC, P) | Organisational strategies preparing players to professional environment | |
| Early preparation for the professional environment (M, S; C2, EI; C, P) | | |
| Closer attention and control of potential 1st team players (TC, P; SA, EB; C, EE) | | |
| Coaches' strategies preparing players for professional environment (C, F; C, EE; C, P) | | |
| 1st team coach knowledge of youth players (C1, S; C2, S) | Positive impact of 1st team assistant coach presence in youth | |
| Similar working practices and motivation (C2, S) | | |
| Team B/loan as positive for the player's adaptation to professional environment (M, F; TC, P; HR, P; C, EE; C2, EI) | Team B/loan positive impact on player's preparation to professional environment | |
| Importance of following youth players while on loan (TC, P; HR, P) | | |
| Use of a satellite club (TC, P) | → | |

**Table 3.5:** Youth and professional player's perceptions on the within-career transition from youth to professional environment

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| 1st team coach as a barrier (P1, EB; P2, EB; P1, EE; P2, EE; YP, EE; YP1, EB; YP2, EB; YP, P) | Barriers for transition external to the player | Internal and external barriers for transition to professional environment |
| Fortune and luck as a barrier (P1, EE; P2, EE; P1, EB; P1, P; YP2, S; YP, EE; YP, EI; YP1, EB; YP, P) | | |
| Ruthless competition within the academy amongst players (YP, P) | | |
| Lack of commitment (P2, EB) | Barriers for transition internal to the player | |
| Lack of readiness to face high demands and pressure (P2, EE; P1, EB) | | |
| Lack of maturity (P2, P; YP, EE; YP2, EB) | | |
| Lack of self-belief and self-confidence (P2, P) | | |
| Lack of patience (P1, P; YP2, S) | | |
| Player's character (P2, EE; YP, EE; YP2, EB) | | |
| Mental strength (P1, S; P1, EB; P1, P; P2, EB; YP1, S; YP, EI; YP1, EB; YP, P) | Player's psychological attributes | Individual attributes associated with the transition to the professional environment |
| Humble / character (P1, EE) | | |
| Self-believe/Self-knowledge (P2, S; P2, EE; P2, EB; YP2, S) | | |
| Player's special skill (P2, S, P1, EE) | → | |
| Holistic view (P1, S; P1, EE; P1, P; P2, P; YP1, S; YP1, EB, YP, P) | → | |
| Desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EB; YP2, S; YP, EI; YP, EE; YP1, EB, YP2, EB) | Players' positive work ethic | |
| Hard work / commitment (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EB; YP, EI; YP2, EB) | | |
| Distinct coaches as positive (influence) for player's development (P1, P) | Stimulating environment for a smooth transition to the professional environment | Organisational strategies influencing player's transition to professional environment |
| Fast track for talented players (P1, S) | | |
| Move to 1st team as a motivation (P1, P) | | |
| Importance of formal contact with experienced players (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EB) | Older and experienced 1st team players as role models | |
| Exposure to the professional reality through 'observational learning' (P1, EE; P1, P) | | |
| Coaches' strategies preparing players for professional environment (P2, P) | Organisational strategies preparing players to professional environment | |
| Workshop sessions with players as preparation for professional environment (P1, P) | | |
| Early preparation for the professional lifestyle (YP2, S; YP, EI; YP1, EB; YP2, EB; YP, EE; YP, PP) | | |
| Heightened and more meaningful competitiveness on loan (P1, EB, P2, P; YP2, EB) | Positive impact of a 'loan' period on a player's preparation for the professional environment | |
| More visibility within football world while on loan (P2, P) | | |
| Increase player's maturity and responsibility (P1, EB; P2, EE; YP1, EB) | | |
| Importance of following youth players while on loan (P2, EE; P2, P) | | |

### 3.3.2.1 – Internal and External Barriers for Transition to Professional Environment

The youth players' transition to the professional environment may be hindered by the presence of some difficulties or barriers which the players are confronted in the latter years of their youth development. Some of those barriers can be

associated to aspects directly related to the players themselves or under their control, while others barriers that affect the players' transition are usually out of their control. In that sense, the perceptions of academy staff and players on the possible difficulties/barriers which may hinder the youth player's harmonious transition to the professional environment, were clustered in external and internal barriers.

In accordance to the HYDs perceptions from Study One, the first team coach's lack of trust and belief in youth players was perceived as the main external barrier for the youth players' transition to the first team by the academy staff and players: *"...the decisions and investment of the 1st team coach...some coaches just don't trust and give chances to youngsters..."* (C2, EI) The first team coach, being the one responsible for deciding the squad, is usually seen as the main barrier for transition; although it is important to consider that their decision might be influenced by the pressure and need to obtain immediate results which make them invest in older, and more recognised players (Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Richardson et al., 2005).

> *"...the sporting demand means that [1st team] coaches prefer older and more experienced players, who they think can get them quicker results. This means that very few youth players have the opportunity to show their quality in the 1st team..."* (P2, EE)

It appeared that (usually) the last word on the decision for a player to progress to the first team environment was responsibility of the first team coach. Some participants also mentioned that good-luck/fortune was a real barrier (e.g., youth players' absence of injuries, injuries from first team players, being there and fit if called to first team, have the chance to prove value in the first team). Furthermore, the academy staff also referred to the presence of some organisational barriers which may influence the players' preparation and transition to the first team, such as pressure for results in first team, high number and quality of players in the first team squad, distance and lack of communication between youth and first team, and/or no provision of the most appropriate environment for the players' development and progression to the first team. This last issue (i.e., the lack of an appropriate environment for transition), was associated to some restrictive

regulations from the different FAs, mainly about the reserves/B teams. For example, in some countries (e.g., Portugal, France, Sweden), the restriction for the team B to play in national and/or professional championships, led the majority of clubs to terminate these teams and loan the best players to teams playing in more competitive championships. The consequence for youth players could be either a direct transition to the first team which is seen as premature and aggressive, or a loan system to teams were they might be submitted to poor practices hindering the player's return to the club – *"...we have some players that we really believe in and that we send on loan, but the work developed in those clubs is not good enough to prepare them to return to our 1st team..."* (C, P) The poor advices from family and football agents, which may raise players' expectations by filling the players' head with illusions and a desire to get to the first team as soon as possible at all costs, was not mentioned by any player or even coaches, only by other academy staff.

> *"...the presence and influence of football agents, the pressure of the parents for the son to arrive to the 1st team and sign a professional contract as soon as possible, makes the players choose the short route and sometimes the wrong way..."* (M, S)

In addition to these external barriers, some others barriers under the player's control were also identified. To the academy staff, the player's lack of commitment, maturity, and readiness to face the professional environment were the most significant, while players considered the player's character and maturity as the most decisive factors. It is important to notice that within players, the lack of commitment and readiness to face high demands and pressure was only mentioned by professional players, which is probably a consequence of the experiences they had after the transition to the first team; something which the majority of the youth players have not yet felt.

> *"...when you are in the youth department you are protected from the pressure about results and performance, and when you move to the 1st team you are in the spotlight... suddenly you are under fire, and the young players are not ready for that..."* (C, F)
>
> *"...there are players who go and train with the 1st team and then they imagine themselves as the best players in the world..."* (P2, EE)

These results seem to confirm the perspectives of HYDs on the barriers and difficulties for the youth players' transition to the professional environment (also see the results from Study One). Additionally, results seem to indicate the need for the academy staff to better prepare the youth players for the demands and pressures of the professional environment, alongside the player's responsibility to improve their maturity and commitment levels.

#### 3.3.2.2 – Individual Attributes Associated with the Transition to the Professional Environment

Some individual attributes were considered crucial for players to overcome the previous barriers and make the transition to the professional environment: player's mental attributes; player's positive work ethic; player's holistic view (i.e., equally balanced regarding to physical, technical, tactical, and psychosocial skills); and the existence of one special skill which will make the player different from the others. This special skill can be related to one determined position (e.g., speed, height, good game vision), or with a specific psychological attribute. The high number of answers on this particular issue, namely the attributes associated to the players' transition to professional, presumes some sort of reflection from the different practitioners. From the different attributes mentioned in this Study Two, the player's psychological attribute 'mental strength' was the most referred to by both academy staff (n=7) and players (n=8), followed by 'desire to succeed and willingness to make sacrifices' and 'hard work/commitment' related to the player's positive work ethic. The fact that both academy staff and players highly rated the player's holistic view (academy staff n=4; players n=7) when compared with the presence of a special skill (academy staff n=2; professional players n=2), might indicate that they consider it more important to develop players as a whole, rather than relying on one specific attribute:

> *"...to become a professional football player...the player must possess a desire for success, good technique, tactic, physique and psychological background to meet the professional football world demands..."* (C1, E1)

These attributes referred to in Study Two, seem consistent with the ones appointed by the HYDs in Study One, although with different degrees of importance in some cases. For example the player's holistic view, which was the most rated by HYDs in Study One (n=26), is only mentioned by four academy staff (one whom was a HYD), and seven players (both youth and professional) in Study Two. Curiously, the most rated player's psychological attribute selected by HYDs in Study One (i.e., game intelligence/ knowledge) was not even mention by any player or academy staff member in this Study Two. Similarly, on the player's positive work ethic, only HYDs refer to persistency.

### 3.3.2.3 – Organisational Strategies Influencing a Player's Transition to the Professional Environment

Within the pathway to the professional environment we previously analysed the influence of organisational structures on the youth development, and how this general dimension focus on the organisational strategies and practices that might influence the players' transition from youth to professional level. Results showed that the academy staff and the professional players consider crucial the provision of a 'stimulating environment' with stimulus from different coaches, *"...we [players] always learn something new with different coaches, and that helped me to improve...it's good for your development to receive new things from different people..."* (P1, P); and with challenging and competitive situations, *"...if they are good enough, they must go through the next group, where they can receive higher stimulus and competitiveness in order to continue their development..."* (M, S). Moreover, it seems important that the first team is seen as something achievable in order to motivate players, *"...a young player cannot see the 1st team as something impossible to achieve, but at the same time the distance would be a motivational aspect for the youth players..."* (C1, S) The importance of a stimulating and supportive learning environment, alongside high quality coaching in order to allow the player reach his full potential has been defended by several researchers in both football and other sports (see Ericsson et al., 1993; Howe et al., 1998; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Williams & Ericsson, 2005; Williams &

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Richardson, 2006); this research confirms its importance in football, not only during the development but also regarding the transition to the professional environment.

According to the professional players and academy staff, the learning outcomes obtained through the exposure and/or mere observation of older and experienced professional players as role models seems to influence the players' transition to the first team. To one Swedish coach, older players should be available to help youth players, *"...older players should assume the responsibility to help the youngsters, the same way the youngsters should respect and see the older players as role models for them...they can change experiences and learn from each other..."* (C2, S); this seems to come in line with Pummell and colleagues (2008) research with horse riders, who highlighted the importance of establishing a mentoring system where older and experienced players would help youngsters to adapt to a new reality.

Although, as mentioned previously, one Portuguese coach raised concerns regarding the poor practices that youth players might be submitted to while on loan at other clubs (see external barriers for transition to professional environment), loan experience has been perceived as something positive by some coaches and players (both youth and professional). Being on loan allows the players to play more competitive matches, have more visibility, and also increase their maturity and responsibility due to the move to a more demanding and 'real' professional environment:

> *"...almost all the players [team on loan] needed to win the matches in order to receive money prizes to feed their families...this was a different reality to the one I was used to. The experience made me grow, mature and give more value to the conditions that they gave us here at the club..."* (P1, EB)

Nevertheless, it was also mentioned that the loan experience to be perceived as positive is usually associated with constant support and supervision by the origin club. Even being on loan, players need to feel that they were not abandoned by the club as mentioned by one Portuguese head of recruitment, *"...the most important thing is that the players are followed and don't feel abandoned..."* (HR, P) This

idea was also shared by one Spanish professional player, *"...in the beginning during the adaptation phase [club on loan] I had a lot of talks with the team B coach and the HYD...and that was important to me..."* (P2, EE).

The presence of one first team assistant coach within the youth teams, developing some training sessions and helping to implement some methodologies used in the first team, was perceived by the coaches as something positive. Furthermore, the presence of this member of the first team can be an extra motivation to youth players, and also allows the first team coach to have better knowledge about the youth players based in the academy:

> *"...1st team assistant coach coming to the youth...is good in a lot of ways...gives the training and shows the players how they work in the 1st team... [and] his presence is a motivation for the young players... [moreover] he gets a better knowledge of the youth players, and he will inform the main 1st team coach about them..."* (C2, S)

Regarding specifically the player's preparation to the professional environment, some strategies were referred to by both academy staff and players: early preparation for the professional lifestyle and environment, mainly through workshop sessions (i.e., with professional and former players and/or coaches), and coaching strategies on a daily basis (e.g. be tough and demanding with youth players). Furthermore, the academy staff also mentioned that those players considered as potential first team players were submitted to a higher control and attention:

> *"...we have a detailed file on each player, and when we see that they might have what is necessary to reach the 1st team, we start a complementary programme to improve their deficits and make them even better. This might include extra training sessions to practice technical, tactical or physical aspects..."* (TC, P)

### 3.3.2.4 – Summary on the Within-career Transition of Youth Players to the Professional Environment

The academy staff and players perceptions on the within-career transitions generated three general dimensions common to all: *internal and external barriers*

*for transition to professional environment; individual attributes associated with the transition to the professional environment; and organisational strategies influencing a player's transition to the professional.*

According to the participants, the players' transition from youth to professional is associated with various difficulties and/or barriers. Some of those barriers are inherent to the players' will while others are impossible to be controlled by them. Within the answers it is perceptible a similarity between HYDs (Study One), academy staff and players (see Table 3.6), although players seem to perceive less external barriers.

**Table 3.6:** Academy staff and players' perspectives on barriers and/or difficulties for the players' transition to professional environment

| | **Barriers and/or difficulties** | **HYD (Study One)** | **Academy staff** | **Players** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| External barriers to player | Lack of trust and belief from the first team coach(es) on youth development | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| | Organisational barriers | **X** | **X** | |
| | Fortune and/or luck | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| | Poor advice from family and/or football agents | **X** | **X** | |
| | Premature and aggressive transition to first team | | **X** | |
| | Players on loan exposed to poor practices | | **X** | |
| Internal barriers to player | Player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| | Lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices | | **X** | **X** |
| | Difficulty in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment | **X** | | |
| | Player's lack of maturity | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| | Lack of self-belief and self-confidence | | | **X** |
| | Lack of patience | | | **X** |
| | Player's character | **X** | **X** | **X** |

The 'lack of trust and belief from the first team coach(es) on youth development' was the most rated external barrier mentioned by academy staff and players. This was follow by 'fortune and/or luck' to have an opportunity on the first team,

which can also be related to the previous barrier. Amongst the internal barriers, the academy staff highlighted the players' 'lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices', 'lack of maturity', and 'lack of readiness to face the professional environment', while players mention predominantly the 'player's character', and 'lack of maturity'.

To overcome these difficulties and/or barriers mentioned previously, some players' individual attributes were appointed (see Table 3.7). Amongst these attributes, 'good sport related skills', 'having a special attribute', the 'players' mental strength', 'desire and willingness to make personal sacrifices', and 'hard work/ commitment' were those perceived to play a decisive role in the players' transition to the professional environment.

**Table 3.7:** Academy staff and players' perspectives on the attributes that might facilitate the players' transition to the professional environment

| | **Attributes** | **HYD (Study One)** | **Academy staff** | **Players** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Good sport related skills (balance between tactical, technical, physical and psychological) | X | X | X |
| | Player's special attribute(s) | X | X | X |
| Player's psychological attributes | Game intelligence/knowledge | X | | |
| | Persistency | X | | |
| | Character (responsibility, humble, maturity, good lifestyle habits) | X | X | X |
| | Mental strength | X | X | X |
| | Ability to deal with pressure and demands | X | X | |
| | Self-knowledge/self-believe/self-esteem | X | X | X |
| | Competitive mentality | X | X | |
| Player's positive work ethic | Hard work/commitment | X | X | X |
| | Desire to succeed and willingness to make personal sacrifices | X | X | X |
| | Player's aspiration to be consistent | X | X | |

Alongside the player's individual attributes, some organisational strategies were perceived to have an impact on the transition to the professional environment. Firstly, it seems important to surround the youth players with a stimulating and challenging environment, with different stimulus from different stakeholders in order to help the players achieve all their potential. Secondly, it is essential that the youth players see the first team as something achievable that is worth fighting for. Consequently, the promotion of contact between youth and first team players is aided through the development of talks and workshops or merely due to the distribution of the academy facilities (e.g., one canteen for all players, alongside pitches), all of which stimulate informal talks and personal relationships. Even without direct contact, youth players seem to learn merely by observing the older and experienced players, who may be seen as role models. Those youngsters who are perceive as potential first team players by the clubs, receive a closer and detailed attention, and in some cases are sent on loan to more competitive teams and championships in order to receive a higher and more specific stimulus to prepare them for the professional environment. The results seem to indicate that players consider going on loan as something positive that help them play in more regular and competitive matches, meaning more football visibility, but it also helps them grow, mature and have contact with the reality of the professional football environment.

### 3.3.3 – Post-academy Environment Perceptions

From the analysis of the academy staff and players perceptions on the post-academy environment, only one general dimension emerged common to both groups (see Table 3.8 and 3.9): *socio-cultural challenges within the professional environment*. Before starting the analysis on the general dimension emerged in this issue, it seems relevant to highlight the reduced perceptions mentioned by the academy staff when compared with the players. Amongst the players, there does not appear to be major difference between the youth and professional players' perceptions on the post-academy environment.

**Table 3.8:** Academy staff perceptions on the post-academy environment

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Heightened game demands of the professional environment (M, S; C2, S) | Heightened standards of professional environment | Socio-cultural challenges within professional environment |
| Demanding culture of the professional environment (HR, P; C1, S; C, P) | | |
| Environmental challenges within professional environment (HR, P; C, F) | → | |
| Importance of a supportive reception by 1st team players (C2, S; C, P) | → | |
| Lack of post-academy development plan (HR, P; C2, S; C, P) | → | |

**Table 3.9:** Youth and professional players' perceptions on the post-academy environment

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Heightened game demands of the professional environment (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EB; P1, P; YP1, S; YP2, S; YP, EE; YP, P) | Heightened game standards of professional environment | Socio-cultural challenges within professional environment |
| Demanding culture of the professional environment (P1, S; P1, EE; P2, EE; P1, EB; P2, EB; P2, P; YP, EE; YP, EI) | | |
| Athletic identity changes within professional environment (P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EE; P1, P; P2, P; YP2, S; YP, EE; YP, P) | | |
| Environmental challenges within professional environment (P1,S; P1,EE; P2, EE; P2, EB; P1, P; YP1, S; YP, EE; YP, EI; YP1, EB) | → | |
| Player's loneliness and isolation (P1, S; YP2, S; YP, EI) | Hard approach from 1st team players at professional environment | |
| Hard and ruthless reception from 1st team players (P1, S; P2, S; P2, EE) | | |
| Need to prove value and earn respect (P2, S; P2, EE; P1, EB; P2, EB; P2, P; YP2, S; YP, EI) | | |
| Embracing and caring approach from the 1st team players (P1, EE; P2, EE; P1, EB; P1, P; P2, P; YP1, S; YP2, EB; YP, P) | Positive / embracing approach from 1st team players at professional environment | |
| Previous knowledge of 1st team players (P1, S; P1, EE; P1, EB; P2, EB; P1, P; P2, P; YP2, S; YP, EI; YP1, EB) | | |
| Intrinsic motivation to stay on 1st team (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EE; P1, P; P2, P; YP2, S; YP, EI) | Player's intrinsic feelings within 1st team | |
| Player's anxiety when going to 1st team (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EE; P1, EB; YP, EI; YP, EE) | | |
| Lack of post-academy development plan (P2, S; P1, EE; P1, EB; YP1, EB; YP2, EB; YP, EE; YP, P) | Lack of organisational strategies preparing players to professional environment | |
| Lack of preparation to deal with media (P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EE; YP2, S; YP, EE; YP1, EB; YP2, EB) | | |
| Lack of player's preparation for the professional lifestyle (YP, EI; YP, EE) | | |
| Workshop sessions programme not followed as determined (YP, EE) | | |

#### 3.3.3.1 – Socio-cultural Challenges within the Professional Environment

Both academy staff and players acknowledge the high demands of the game and culture within the professional environment, which lead to some athletic identity changes: *"...in the 1st team we train to be a team and it's mainly focused on winning the weekend's match, while in the youth the main focus is the players' development..."* (P2, S) Although, the changes were not only directly associated to the athletic aspects, some environmental challenges were also referred to, such as less time for personal life, social recognition and role, increased independency, or the environment surrounding a first team game, *"...going to the matches of the 1st team is a dream...visit great stadiums, the time passed in hotels, the fans, the journalists...it's a different world, but a great feeling..."* (P2, EB) All these challenges and changes in the youth player's athletic and/or social role consequent of the transition from the youth to the professional environment require a redefinition of their identity. This perspective seems consistent with Schlossberg's Model of Human Adaptation to Transition (1981), which requires that a player to adapt and cope with a transition identifies their own characteristics, the transition specificity, and the characteristics and/or changes of the environment involving the transition. Even recognising the challenges, players considered that to adapt to such a new and different environment is very difficult:

> *"...I think no one is fully prepared to move to the professional football, it's a new and completely different environment...journalists, television, fans... increase your level of respect and responsibility...now you walk on the street and the people know who you are..."* (YP1, EB)

The apparent concern about the challenges of the professional environment from players does not seem to be perceived by academy staff, since only two academy staff members mention them. Similarly, players referred to a positive and embracing reception by the first team players as something very important in their adaptation to the professional environment. To the players, the call to the first team results in mixed emotions involving happiness, illusion, but also some anxiety. Even knowing that they need to prove their value and earn the respect of the first team, players consider that previous knowledge, experience, relationships or just some sort of contact with first team players contributes to their earlier,

easier and more likely acceptance within the professional environment, reducing their initial anxiety:

> *"...I know some of the guys from the 1st team, so it's very relaxing when I go to train with them. Being so close to the big guys is good and I didn't felt so scared by going there and training with them..."* (YP2, S)

This idea of previous contact and knowledge with first team players presented here seems consistent with the previous tables highlighting the positive contact with older and experienced players, which is in agreement with the work developed by Hanton and Jones (1999) and Pummell and colleagues (2008). Contrastingly, a negative reception from the first team players can make the adaptation to the first team harder – *"...they can be very hard on you...on the pitch every time you miss a pass they scream at you..."* (P2, S), and/or contribute to a player's loneliness and isolation – *"...they [1st team players] might give some support, but they are concerned about themselves, and are less benevolent about mistakes...this reality make you feel lonely and isolated sometimes..."* (YP, EI)

The difficulties and lack of readiness felt by players in dealing with the professional environment challenges might be related to an inadequate player's preparation, consequent of the 'apparent' lack of the academy staff perceptions on the youth players' experiences within the professional environment. This situation, associated to a recognised lack of post-academy development plan, seems to suggest a need for the clubs, and specifically the academy staff responsible for the youth players' preparation and transition to the professional environment. More specifically, it should reflect on the needs for the players at this level and probably reshape their strategies in order to focus on the players requirements. This idea is reinforced by the players' perception that the staff at the professional environment believes that just by getting to the first team they are ready for the professional environment and their demands, when in reality they are still developing, needing time to settle down and show their potential:

> *"...even being with the 1st team, we are still developing, and the trainings of the 1st team are not focused on the player's development but on performance...that way it was necessary to make some extra work..."* (P1, EB)

> *"... [1st team coach] should allow us to adapt and establish in order to show our potential. Usually we go for one training session, how can you show something in just one training?.. they should keep us at least one week..."* (YP, EE)

Associated to this lack of a post-academy plan, players also referred to a lack of preparation to deal with the professional lifestyle, and/or media. One youth player mentioned that initially there was a workshop sessions programme to be developed with players from team B and those who were in the first year at the first team, although that programme did not progressed as planned: *"...last year they said that they [club] were going to make around seven sessions to talk about the life in the professional environment...but they didn't pass the first one!!!"* (YP, EE)

**3.3.3.2 – Summary on Post-academy Environment Perceptions**

Even taking into consideration the low answers given by the academy staff regarding this issue, both academy staff and players perceptions on the post-academy environment were clustered in one general dimension: *socio-cultural challenges within the professional environment.*

The player's progression from youth to professional environment is characterised by increased demand/expectation, challenges at different levels (e.g., sportive and/or psychosocial), and a reduced tolerance to failure (see Reilly et al., 2003). Results showed that generally players perceived a lack of organisational strategies preparing them to deal with this new, challenging and demanding environment, mainly in order to face the media and the new social lifestyle. Moreover players believe that the support and embracing relations with first team players plays a decisive role in their adaptation to the professional environment. The fact that the majority of the academy staff does not pronounce on the needs of players within the professional environment, in conjunction with the players perception of lack of organisational strategies preparing them for the new reality, might suggest a call for clubs' staff (not only from youth department) to reflect and probably

redefine their strategies regarding the youth players' preparation for the professional environment, in order to satisfy the player's requirements.

### 3.3.4 – Support Provided to Youth Players during their Development

The analysis of the academy staff and players perceptions on the support provided to youth players during their development led to three general dimensions common to both groups (see Tables 3.10 and 3.11): *interpersonal relationships and emotional support during player's development*; *player's 'social' network support*; and *player's support regarding the psychosocial development*.

**Table 3.10:** Academy staff perceptions on the support provided to youth players during their development

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Caring approach from head of recruitment and teachers (HR, P, T1, P) | Head of recruitment and teachers caring and nurturing support | Interpersonal relationships and emotional support during player's development |
| Empathy relation and better knowledge of players (HR, P; T2, P) | | |
| Presence in good but mainly in bad moments (HR, P; T2, P) | | |
| Academy staff availability to listen and talk with players (T, F; SA, EB; HR, P) | Staff availability and nature of relations within the academy | |
| Importance of trust and honesty within academy relationships (IS, F; HR, P; TC, P) | | |
| Language courses for foreign players (T, F) | Help adaptation and integration of foreign and new players at club | |
| Extra support to players from outside the city (SA, EB) | | |
| Parent's negative behaviour and support (T, F; SP, F; SA, EB; TC, P; HR, P) | Parents emotional support during player's development | |
| Parents concerns' variation (T1, P; T, F) | | |
| Meetings to clarify club's work and parent's role (T, F; SA; EB; TC, P) | | |
| Documents and rules concerning the parents' role (TC, P) | | |
| Coaches' role diversity on player personal development (TC, P; C1, S; C2, S; C1, EI; C2, EI; C, F; C, EE) | Nature of youth coach/ athlete relationship | |
| Positive close relation between coach and player (C, P) | | |
| Different coach/athlete relation in and outside the pitch (C, EE) | | |
| Relation according to the level, personality and situation of player (M, S; SP, F; C1, EI; C, P) | | |
| 1st team coach's concern to win matches (C, F; C, EE) | 1st team coaches' concern to create a results and performance environment | |
| Coaches must possess good managerial skills (C1, S; C1, EI; C2, EI) | | |
| Lack of relationship with professional players (C1, S) | | |
| Club's desire to see coaches as main social support network (M, EB; M, EE) | → | Player's 'social' network support |
| Player's fear to show weaknesses (SA, EB) | → | |
| Personal aspects shared with family, friends and teachers (HR, P; T1, P; T2, P) | → | |
| Early integration of mental training within training sessions (M, S) | Organisational strategies regarding the players' psychosocial development | Players' support regarding the psychosocial development |
| Holistic players' psychosocial development perspective (M, F; SP, F) | | |
| Concepts clarification in order to a better development (SP, F) | | |
| Player's social development due to a combined academy staff approach (M, S; M, P; TC, P; HR, P) | → | |
| Meetings and use of registration sheets (C1, S; C2, S; C, P) | Psychosocial delivery to players by their coaches | |
| Daily application of a mental programme (C2, S) | | |
| Sharing personal experiences (C2, S) | | |
| Formal meetings with players (SP, F; SP, EI) | | |
| Theoretical sessions/workshops oriented towards mental preparation (SP, F) | | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Develop a written document to guide the work with players (SP, EI) | Psychosocial delivery to players by the sport psychologist |
| Psychosocial skills development (M, F; SP, F) | |
| Holistic strategic approach to develop with a team (SP, EE) | |
| Player's personal and academic guidance (SP, EE; M, EI; SP, EI; SA, EB; T1, P) | |
| Specific work developed with injured players (SP, EE) | |
| Physio's room and bus as best locations to talk with players (SA, EB; SP, EE; SP, EI) | |
| Sport psychologist seen as very expensive (TC, P; C2, S) | Sport psychologist barriers for the integration at club |
| Poor connotations and perceptions of sport psychology (SP, F; SP, EE) | |
| General lack of knowledge and appreciation for sport psychology (M, S; SP, F; SP, EE; M, P; C2, S; C, F) | |
| Confidentiality issues regarding the sport psychologist (SP, F; SP, EI) | |
| Find a sport psychologist that understands the football world (C2, S; C2, EI) | |

**Table 3.11:** Youth and professional player's perceptions on the support received during their development

| First-order category | Second-order category | General dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Combined support from different stakeholders felt by players (P1, S; P2, EB; P1, P; P2, P; YP, EI; YP, EE; YP2, EB; YP, P) | Caring and emotional support received by players | Interpersonal relationships and emotional support during player's development |
| Caring support from head of recruitment (P1, P; P2, P; YP, P) | | |
| Parents emotional support (P1, S; P2, S, P1, P; P2, P; YP1, S, YP, EE; YP, EI; YP1, EB; YP, P) | | |
| Academy staff increased concern after going to 1st team (P2, EE, P1, EB; YP, EE) | | |
| Coaches' guidance (P1, EB; P2, P) | Nature of youth coach / athlete relationship | |
| Relation depends on coaches' personality (P1, EB; P2, P) | | |
| Positive close relation with coach (P1, EB; P2, P; YP1, EB) | | |
| Negative close relation with coach (P2, EB; YP, EE; YP2, EB) | | |
| Empathy and supportive approach from coaches (P2, S;P2, EE; P2, P) | | |
| Coaches need to be fair and explain their decisions (YP1, S; YP2, S; YP2, EB) | | |
| Coaches' lack of support and equal treatment to all players (YP, P) | | |
| Coaches must possess good managerial skills (P1, S; P2, EE; P1, EB; YP2, EB) | 1st team coaches' concern to create a results and performance environment | |
| Lack of relationship with professional players (P2, S; P1, EE; YP2, S; YP, EE; YP1, EB; YP2, EB) | | |
| Lack of coach support (P1, S; P2, P) | Reasons for not sharing personal issues with main coach | Players 'social' network support |
| Coaches' lack of understanding of players (YP2, S) | | |
| Player's fear to show weaknesses (P1, S; P2, S; P2, EE; YP, P) | | |
| Team mates misinterpretation (P1, P) | | |
| Family and friends (P1, S; P2, S; P2, EE; YP2, S; YP1, EB; YP, P) | Sharing of personal issues | |
| Sport psychologist (P1, EB; YP, EI) | | |
| Assistant coach (P2, S; P1, P; YP2, EB; YP, EE) | | |
| Player's positive use of imagery (P1, S; P2, S; P1, EE; P2, EB; P2, P; YP1, S; YP2, EB) | Positive impact of psychological methods on performance | Player's support regarding the psychosocial development |
| Self-knowledge (YP, EI) | | |
| Relaxation (YP1, EB) | | |
| Formal meetings between players and sport psychologist (P1, EE; P1, EB) | → | |
| 'Distant' support of a external advisor (YP2, S) | → | |

#### 3.3.4.1 – Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Support during the Player's Development

The perception of both youth and professional players is that during their development they received combined support from different stakeholders which may vary in importance over the years: *"...after 11 years of age, you start having a lot of support from friends and team mates...and later the tips and advices from the coaches and other staff. Although at the same time your family is always there..."* (P1, S) It seems relevant to provide special attention to the Portuguese club, where both academy staff and players mentioned the importance of the combined support given by everyone working in the club on daily basis. It was strategically defined by the club that everyone should contribute to the players' development, on top of that their practices may go further than what is formally defined in their role. This occurs mainly when practitioners believe that their support or experiences might help a player within a specific situation. Moreover, it was the only club, which participants reinforced the important role developed by the head of recruitment:

> *"...the personnel that work in the youth of this club have done a fantastic work, from the scouts, passing from the club directors to the kit man. Everyone give their best in order to help us develop as a football player and as a person...I always had what I needed...a great family and a lot of people who helped me and believed in me..."* (P1, P)

> *"...he [head of recruitment] was, is and always will be an important person for me. He was the one who brought me to the club, he was my tutor... he used to say something to me that I never forgot: 'The future is yours, but you need to work hard and be always humble'...I put a paper in the wall of my room with that sentence, and every time I looked to the wall it was an inspiration for me..."* (P1, P)

This confirms the perspective defended by some researchers that athletes would benefit from the provision of an appropriate and supportive environment, with the presence of different stakeholders contributing to the player's holistic development (see van Rossum, 2001; Stratton et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004; Williams & Richardson, 2006). In some cases, and as it was mentioned by horse riders in Pummell and colleagues (2008) research, players just needed the presence of someone to be around and not feel abandoned:

*"...it's necessary the support of people like the psychologist, the coach, team mates, because if you don't have the support there's one moment where you feel alone and you start questioning your presence here..."* (YP, EI)

Parental emotional support was considered very important for the players (both professional and youth), not only due to the 'efforts' that they make for their sons (e.g., economical, time), but also due to the respect and provision of a 'safe place' from the demanding football environment: *"...my biggest support is my family because there were a lot of hard moments and they always supported me and respect my decisions..."* (P2, S) This seems consistent with Côté (1999), and Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) perspective that parental support is relevant during the entire athlete's lifespan career, including in the mastery phase. The academy staff also referred to the importance of the parental support, although they seem more cautious on the positive effect of parental support. Academy staff members appear to share Côté's (1999) concerns on the disruptive parental involvement on youth development, in that sense clubs develop some meetings and documents to help parents understand their importance in their son's development, and the best way to help them.

Within the interpersonal relations established inside the club, the coach/athlete relation seems to play a predominant role. Both academy staff and players identify a major difference in the player's relation established with youth compared to professional coaches. Even being dependent on the players and coaches' personalities, the players' relation with youth coaches appears to be closer, supportive and based on empathy. In contrast, with professional coaches there is a relational distance with the concern being on performance/results and not on the player himself. Results seem to confirm the changing concern from coaches during the players' development, from a more caring and supporting approach in youth to a more performance/ results approach in the professional environment, as highlighted by various researchers (see Bloom, 1985; Salmela, 1996; Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; van Rossum, 2001; Stratton et al., 2004).

> *"...the youth coach helps the player to achieve and develop their entire potential, making him improve every day...[while] the professional coach job is to use the player's and their potential to win matches, for the competition without any concern about the player's individual development..."* (C, F)

The establishment of a close player/youth coach's relation can be perceived as either positive or negative. The academy staff and some players see a close relation between players/youth coaches as important to help players evolve and achieve their full potential:

> *"...it's important that proximity between the coaches and the players exists, to allow the coach to pass on his message and to clarify his ideas. This will be very important to help the player evolve and improve their potential..."* (P1, EB)

Nevertheless, some other players consider that there are moments where a close relation can also be disruptive, mainly when it affects coaches' judgements and decisions which can lead to unequal treatment to players: *"...in my opinion a coach cannot be a friend of the player...he should always keep a distance with the players so that he doesn't become emotionally involved..."* (YP, EE)

#### 3.3.4.2 – Player's 'Social' Network Support

Similarly to what was defended in Study One by HYDs, clubs desire to see coaches as the main social support for their players, although players present four main reasons for not sharing personal issues with the main coach: 1) 'lack of coach support', mentioned by professional players which can be related with the distant relation between professional coaches and players; 2) 'lack of understanding from coaches', mentioned by one youth player; 3) 'team mates misinterpretation', mentioned by one professional player regarding the fear to be seen by their team mates as trying to influence the coaches decisions; and 4) 'player's fear to show weaknesses', which was mentioned by youth and professional players... and also by one academy staff member. From the four reasons, the fear to show weakness and be seen as not ready to face the professional environment was the most rated one, which is not surprising

considering that the football environment is marked by a 'masculine culture' where there is no place for weak people (Parker, 2001):

> *"...it's hard to talk with the coach; I don't feel comfortable because he might think that I am weak and that I am not ready to be here (1st team)..."* (P2, S)

On a daily basis, players prefer to share their personal issues and concerns with someone not directly linked with the club probably due to the reason presented previously regarding the fear to show their weakness within the club. In that regard, it appears that players prefer to talk about their issues with their parents, friends and/or teachers: *"...I don't share my personal concerns with people from the club, if anything is not going the way I expected, I talk with my best friend...personal things must be kept outside the club..."* (YP, P) Even though it was not mentioned by any academy staff member, players also refer to talking with the sport psychologist or even the team's assistant coach. Players consider that it is easier to talk with the assistant coach, mainly because he is close to the coach but doesn't decide the team on the weekend:

> *"...last year I had a problem and I talked with the second coach of the team...it was helpful, and I feel better because he was my coach but not the head coach...not the one responsible to pick up the players for the match..."* (P2, S)

This mention of the assistant coach by the players might be an 'open window' to be explored by clubs and technical teams in order to make players start trusting and sharing their issues with someone from the club. Even related to sport psychologists, as mentioned by Gilbourne and Richardson (2006), it is necessary to earn the trust of the players to get to them, and the best way to do it is by showing that they care about the athlete as a person. Similarly, it seems that assistant coaches might need to assume a caring approach in order to earn the players' trust.

### 3.3.4.3 – Player's Support Regarding Psychosocial Development

In relation to this general dimension, it seems important to highlight the reduced number of perceptions provided by players, which may be linked with a lack of knowledge on psychosocial support and/or a lack of perceived support in this area. Nevertheless, players mention the use of imagery and some formal meetings with the sport psychologist, probably because it is something visible and easy to perceive. Considering that the academy staff members refer to other strategies regarding the players' psychosocial development than just imagery, it looks necessary to clarify and acknowledge the players about them, as recommended in 1991 by Bull, but that it is still a deficit in football clubs nowadays.

The academy staff seem more aware of the psychosocial support provided to players, although it is important to highlight that the majority of the perceptions were mentioned by sport psychologists. These results seem to support the idea mentioned in Study One on the lack of perceptions from HYDs on the psychosocial support provided to the players. Similarly to what was previously referred about the interpersonal relations and emotional support, the Portuguese club considers that the players' psychosocial development is consequence of the combined daily practices from everyone within the academy environment:

> *"...in the beginning of the season we present to the players three words to guide their daily work: Rigor, Overcoming, and Dedication... [moreover] We want our player to have three characteristics: fighting spirit, mental strength, and self-believe...that is achieved through the combined practices of all academy staff..."* (M, P)

In the Swedish club, the coaches are the ones responsible for the psychosocial deliverance after being prepared by an external advisor who comes to the club to develop sessions with them. The coaches' approach to the players regarding the psychosocial development consists of the application of a daily mental program called CRI (i.e., Concentration, Relaxation, and Imagery) in training sessions and games, individual meetings with players, and the use of registration sheets:

*"...we have a document to tell the players the rules and correct behaviour. We sit individually with each player and fill in a sheet...together we define where he is now, what he wants to achieve, and what he have to do to get there...[then] we talk with the players in the end of trainings, just for a couple of minutes, in order to see how the things are going. We think that it's better to talk frequently with the players in short but objective meetings..."* (C1, S)

In the clubs which had a sport psychologist, usually he/she is the person responsible for the psychosocial support. As mentioned by Danish and colleagues (1995), and Hardy and colleagues (1996), the role of the sport psychologist may include basic cognitive-behavioural procedures and/or techniques, athletic performance, or the delivery of psychological care. In the particular case of this research in football, the sport psychologist approach consists of formal meetings with players, provision of personal and academic guidance, and the promotion of theoretical sessions/workshops with players. On the topic of meetings with players, a French sport psychologist mentioned that he is available to talk with players whenever they want, although his experience tells that unless sent by the coach is rare to see players take the initiative to come and talk with him: *"...usually the players only come here when they are sent by the coach; the percentage of players who came here by their own will is very reduced..."* (SP, F) In that sense, sport psychologists try to make themselves 'in sight and available' at all moments even for brief contacts. Nevertheless, they believe that the best moment to really get to the players is on the bus on day matches, but mainly in the physio's room, where sport psychologists perceive that players usually are more vulnerable and let their 'masculine mask' down:

*"...the best place to catch the players and talk is in the recovery/physios room...the fact that they are in a place where they trust the people, because for a player to let someone touch him is because they trust the person... it seems that a lot of barriers broke and you are able to reach the true player without their mask..."* (T, EB)

Giges (1998), and Giges and Petitpas (2000) have highlighted the importance of brief interventions developed by sport psychologists as part of an ongoing consulting relation, which can have a positive effect on the sport performance enhancement.

In one Spanish club (i.e., EI) there is a team of sport psychologists who developed written documents to guide their work and also to allow the players to follow and register their development. Moreover, in this club the work with players is structured in two big periods, from nine to sixteen years is general work focused on the player's personal development, while after sixteen years of age the concern is with the players' performance. Another Spanish sport psychologist reported that his role so far was mainly developed with injured players:

> "...*With the injured players I make two things: 1) I give a powerpoint presentation explaining that the reactions that they have like anger, disappointment, frustration...are normal when you are injured...injuries are part of their football career like any other thing; 2) giving them a registration sheet where they register all the work developed while they are injured...with this sheet, I try to make them understand that even being injured they continue working very hard...*" (SP, EE)

Even though it is possible to find sport psychologists in the clubs, different academy staff members mentioned some barriers for their integration and practice within the clubs, which is consistent with literature. It was previously mentioned that the football world is a closed and traditional environment not very open to new ideas and or practitioners (see Parker, 2001). In addition to this, the academy staff also add the bad connotation/idea about sport psychology (see Martin et al., 1997; Bond, 2002; Pain & Harwood, 2004), the fact that sport psychologists are very expensive (see Gould et al., 1989; Kremer & Marchant, 2002; Pain & Harwood, 2004), there are some concerns regarding confidentiality issues (see Perna et al., 1995; Gardner, 2001; Bond, 2002), and as the most rated barrier a general lack of knowledge about sport psychology (see Bull, 1991; Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Pain & Harwood, 2004):

> "...*it's very difficult to implement a mental programme in football clubs because the coaches are not very convinced about its importance, and also...because they are afraid of working on something that they don't dominate well...*" (M, S)

As a consequence of the fact that clubs see sport psychologists as expensive, the majority are contracted on a part-time basis or as external advisors. This situation

hinders the establishment of relations with players, which in some cases are restricted to phone calls, *"...we can also talk with the sport psychologist...he was here in the beginning of the season explaining in what he can help us, and in the end he left us his card..."* (YP2, S) Furthermore, as defended by various researchers (see Perna et al., 1995; Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Bond, 2002), two coaches also consider that in order for a sport psychologist to be able to work in football, they must understand the specificity of football world and in their opinion it is not easy to find sport psychologists with that knowledge.

#### 3.3.4.4 – Summary on the Support Provided to Youth Players during their Development

From the academy staff members and players' perceptions on the support provided to players during their development, three general dimensions emerged: *interpersonal relationships and emotional support during player's development*; *player's 'social' network support*; and *player's support regarding the psychosocial development.*

Some players perceived the support received during their development as the results of combined work from everyone within the academy, from the clubs directors to the kit man. This perspective is shared by the academy staff of one Portuguese club. Moreover, parental support is seen by players as important and positive for their development, although academy staff members seemed more cautious about it, referring to the need to educate and clarify parents' behaviour and role on their son's development.

Within the clubs the coach/athlete relationship was considered very important. The relationship was a consequence of the individuals' personalities, and it was perceived as being different between the players' relation with the youth *versus* the professional coach. Usually, the player's relation with the youth coach is closer, supportive, and based on empathy. In contrast, the relation with the professional coach is distant and entirely focused on results/performance.

The fear to be seen as weak and not ready to move to the first team, in such a 'masculine environment', makes players avoid sharing their problems or concerns with people from the club, especially the team's main coach. Consequently, players seem to prefer to share their personal issues with their family and/or friends. Although, some also mentioned talking with the sport psychologist or the assistant coach, which may be seen as an opportunity to increase the 'trust' of players with academy staff personnel. In order to increase their trust, the academy staff needs to adopt a more caring approach for the players to feel that they care about them.

Regarding the specificity of the psychosocial support, it can be delivered by the coach (e.g., through meetings and registration sheets), the sport psychologist (e.g., meetings, workshops, registration sheets), or as a combined approach from the different academy staff members through their daily practices. Even presenting sport psychologists working with the youth department, some barriers that hinder his/her entry and acceptance were appointed: the football world as a closed and traditional environment not very open to new ideas and or practitioners; bad connotation/idea about sport psychology; financial constrains; confidentiality issues; sport psychologist lack of understanding of sport specificity; and as the most rated one a general lack of knowledge about sport psychology. Interestingly, there was an evident lack of perception from players regarding the psychosocial support, which can be a consequence of the players' lack of knowledge on sport psychology or a lack of effective support provided within the club on a daily basis. Nevertheless, it appears necessary to clarify the psychosocial support strategies to players in order to make them more effective.

## 3.4 – Study Two Part II: Reflection on Daily Practices Experiences

As previously mentioned during the methodology of Study Two, the process of ethnography enables the researcher to engage and create a relationship with the participants. This engagement affords the researcher the opportunity to get to know not only the 'appearance' of an environment and the people within it, but also an understanding of their 'true' day-to-day existence, and get closer to their beliefs, motivations, and behaviours (Hammersley, 1992).

The results from Study Two Part I address the different stakeholders perspectives on the day-to-day working practices within their respective professional football clubs. Moreover, these findings allowed the reader to acknowledge the practitioners and players' perspectives with regards to the challenges experienced during the transition from the youth to the professional environment. In addition, the findings also explored the support, working practices, and strategies used to enable the youth player's transition, as well as their adaptation to a new demanding and challenging environment (Reilly et al., 2003). However, the rubric of content analysis adopted in Study Two Part I does not allow for the representation of the daily lived experiences of the researcher, the practitioners and the players. In this regard, in order to allow the reader to 'live and experience' the day-to-day working practices, it seemed pertinent to provide the reader with more meaningful context of appropriate and relevant events and/or practices (Tedlock, 2000).

Study Two Part II, embraces an alternative representation style designed to extend the reader's understanding of day-to-day practices of the football clubs. More specifically, it exposes good examples of youth player support and development towards the transition to the professional environment, alongside areas that require addressing or some improvement. By using an alternative form of representation, this section allows the author to draw on, and synthesise data drawn from the eclectic array of data sources embraced during the author's immersion into these environments (e.g., observations, field diary, research log, interviews, and texts/documents collection). Specifically, Study Two Part II attempts to make

sense of this complex within-career transition by drawing on data from the author's informal interactions with numerous practitioners and players as well as the author's own personal observations, and subsequent reflections.

### 3.4.1 – Representation

The ethnographic approach allowed me to live and experience day-to-day interactions with a range of staff and players. Daily undertakings are typically a hostage to the way in which people behave and typically offer a 'truer' sense of who they are. Study 2 Part II intends to illuminate aspects of practice that might appear 'hidden' from the surface (see Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) or, in this instance, those that may not have been fully captured in Study One and/or Study Two Part I. The following narratives aim to inform 'you', the reader, of what I know, what I saw, and how I saw different situations, whilst not trying to persuade you to accept anything (Mitchell & Charmaz, 1998). Rather, I aim to engage you, and encourage you to reflect on my experiences, with me, and afford you the right to make sense of the experiences and draw your own interpretation (Davis, 2000).

There is a danger in assuming that, just by inserting the 'self' in to the text, the author can capture the true perspectives and qualities of individuals. However, given the richness of the experience and a concern for a particular situation, people or ideas, the author's view should not be neglected (Tierney, 2002). Nevertheless, it is important that even though the story concerns both 'self' (i.e., myself) and the 'other', the 'self' does not dominate the text (Richardson, 2003) and remains the vehicle to a better understanding of a particular situation. Specifically, and as suggested by Tedlock (2000) and Richardson (2003), the author's inner feelings and reflections are easily identified in the following narrative through the utilisation of *italic* font.

The following narratives are not directly associated to one specific club and/or person. The aim is to highlight specific situations, moments or experiences that

may include both staff and players, which may, or may not, be similar in different clubs. In this sense, the clubs, staff and/or players are identified with pseudonyms and may represent an amalgam of experiences from different clubs and/or persons. Moreover, this creative non-fiction approach (see Van Maanen, 1988; Sparkes, 2002) is adopted to protect the identification of the clubs, staff, and/or players within their respective clubs.

My extensive football background alongside the level of engagement and the development of close relationships with the different stakeholders within the environment, were critical in enabling me to capture, in detail, meaningful and relevant practices, moments and characters (Kvale, 2006; Ellis, 2007). However, just being there and taking field notes does not guarantee that these experiences can be translated to a narrative form. Indeed, one cannot assume that just anyone can write in an evocative and meaningful way that makes sense of the experiences of the self and the other (Tierney, 2002). The challenge is to 'craft', 'compose' and even dramatise the writing through characters and story. In this sense, I was faced with the challenge of firstly selecting particular scenes, moments and/or characters that epitomised these experiences and then I had to translate these experiences into a more acceptable and appropriate narrative form (Foley, 2002; Sparkes, 2002). To this end, the narratives presented take on various forms and themes, and attempt to capture pertinent issues. Whilst scenes, characters and landscapes are offered to the reader, I was also able to utilise and integrate large segments of informal dialogue in to the narrative. In some cases this 'dialogue' is a combination of an array of different interactions with different practitioners in different clubs. In this regard, my field notes were critical guides to characterisation and story (Krane & Baird, 2005). In addition, I was able to revert to my dictaphone notes that were taken during quiet and isolated daily breaks. Whilst I confess to getting to know these people really well, the crafting of the scenes and the dialogue was made possible by using the dictaphone at the first available opportunity to record the interactions, situations, and/or different stakeholders voices.

### 3.4.2 – Biographical Positioning

Foley (2002) stated that in order to develop concise and 'defensible' interpretations of the fieldwork, the researcher must first reflect on the 'self and the other relationship'. Moreover, to provide the reader with true copies of reality, the researcher must critically develop a self-reflective stance in order to become aware of his/her limitations as an interpreter, whilst remaining faithful to what happened. Whilst a certain authority is demanded of the author they are also reminded that such authority must be balanced with responsibility and authenticity (Coffey, 1999). Within a postmodern framework, the researcher is more than an instrument to collect data; he is part of the research and should be engaged in the text (Tierney, 2002). That way, a *"text cannot simply transcribe or report... [although] texts in general are inescapably rhetorical"* (Atkinson, 1990, p.15-16). Similarly, Button (2000) considered that fieldwork that purely describes what people do, fails to portray and interpret the reality of practice. In this sense, we need to know why and how people do things in a certain way. According to Richardson (2000), the dilemma of the postmodern author is how to integrate himself in the text, and with what consequences. Nevertheless, Tierney (2002) noted that in order to capture 'personal perspectives' on performance excellence in sport, the best and most coherent way is to write in the first person.

As suggested by Krane and Baird (2005), before sharing my personal perspectives, it seems appropriate to offer the reader some context as to my own value position and personal background. The following section offers, firstly, a biographical insight into who '*I*' am, and where I'm coming from, before offering the reader my insights and interpretations of my interactions with an array of staff and players associated with, and/or a consequence of, elite European youth player development programmes.

I have twenty years experience of the football world. I was a youth player within a youth development programme of a professional Portuguese premiership team. This came to an end when I was eighteen years old. My time within this youth development programme was devoid of any type of support from anyone within

the club. I typically felt 'abandoned'. The only time I felt the 'presence of someone', was when the coach of the under-19 team came to me to say that the Faculty (my education) was taking too much of my time, and that I needed to choose between football or academia. At eighteen years old, without anyone to talk about it within the club, other than the coaches, I had to make one decision that was decisive for my future. Personally, I believed that I was not good enough to become a professional player. I decided to leave the club and started playing at a semi-professional level. At the same time I started coaching youth teams. In line with what happened to me, I witnessed a lack of opportunities for young players to show their potential in the first team. This lack of opportunity was mainly due to the fact that every year a range of new incoming players came to the first team. All these factors contributed to my growing disappointment and disbelief regarding the traditional football environment. I'd lost faith in the the youth development programmes. I guess, my experiences, have guided my desire to explore the purpose of the youth programmes and attempt to improve, or at least get to understand, the system.

These situations experienced during these twenty years, both as coach and as a player at different levels, have furnished me with a football vocabulary and an understanding of the particularities of the football environment. This, I sense, affords me an opportunity to better engage within the clubs, football people and help overcome the initial perspective of an 'academic outsider'.

### 3.4.3 – Development versus Winning

Mjöllnir Football Club is a professional football club playing in their top professional division. The club plays regularly in European competitions (i.e., Champions League and/or Europa League), and is normally a contender for the internal competitions (i.e., national championship and cups). Whilst the first team play in the top league, Mjöllnir FC also operate a team B that plays in the second professional league, and a team C that plays in the national championship (i.e., a non professional league). This structure carries some implications with regards to

the team's management and the players' contractual agreements. Playing in a professional league requires that all players playing in team B must have a professional contract. In this regard, team B is managed by the professional department. In contrast, team C, where only some players have professional contracts, is the responsibility of the youth department.

The HYD (Björn) reported that this structure was ideologically sound in that it contributed to the sustained progression of the youth players to the first team:

> *"...for me, this is the ideal structure to prepare the young players to play for the first team. When a player leaves the under-19s, if he shows signs of being ready to play in a professional league we offer him a professional contract and he goes to team B... If he is outstanding and we can convince the first team coach of his value, he might move directly to the first team. My experience here tells me that this is very rare. Generally they move to team B, and they continue developing in a more demanding and competitive environment. They are then ready to play at any time for the first team if they are needed or if the first team coach so desires.*
>
> *Team C is a team for those players that we believe have the potential to become a professional player but they are not ready yet. In this sense they also experience an increment in the demands of a higher level of football compared to the under-19s, but this is not as high as in a professional championship..."* (Björn)

Oskar, team B's coach, also agreed that this is a very positive structure to help players to become more ready to play for the first team. To Oskar, the opportunity that these youth players have to play in the 'big theatres of football', within a professional atmosphere, playing against good, experienced players (e.g., some former international players with many years of elite level football experience), allows the players to grow up and mature. The following section captures these sentiments.

> Saturday afternoon, after the morning training at Mjöllnir FC academy and a meal in the club's canteen, we left in the team's bus to the city where the match was going to take place the following morning. It was still the beginning of the season, and to some players coming from team C and the under-19s this was their first experience of going to a game the day before and staying away in a hotel as a team. As I sat on the bus, Sören, who is a

young player coming from the under-19s, started talking to me "*...I am very excited you know, I have always dreamed of being a professional player and live these moments; going to a game, the hotel, the fans... and of course, it will be the first game that I am going to play that will be screened on TV... I will have all my family watching (laughs)...*" As I looked around me, it was possible to witness a range of different behaviours amongst the players. Those players who have just moved from the under-19s and team C were all smiles, talking loudly, nervously and twitching as they continued to scan their surroundings. The players who were in this team last year were quiet, bobbing their heads in time with the music on their headphones.

*Listening to Sören talking about his feelings I found myself thinking about the range of new issues that a youth player, making this transition, experiences immediately; just by moving to a higher hierarchical team. I start questioning whether Sören would be able to focus on the game whilst experiencing all of these new issues. Not surprisingly, and especially with it being the beginning of the season, all the players were seated according to their stature and status of the previous year (i.e., under-19s, team C, or already in team B). I believe that it will change in the next couple of months when they start to get to know each other better.*

When we pulled up at the hotel, there were around twenty fans waiting for the team. They may have been few, but they were chanting the name of the club and looking for autographs from the players. I observed the players going from the bus to the hotel. They looked so confident that no one could tell that it was their first experience of this situation. For some young players, a 'new adventure' had just begun. In order to respect the players' concentration towards the match, I refrained from talking too much with them about what they were experiencing. However, the excitement was evidenced through some of the youngest players' behaviours and comments. For example, after the dinner, Sören approached me and said, "*this is great, I gave today my first autograph... have you seen the rooms? This is like living a dream!*"

It was a quiet night. The players retired to their rooms around 8pm. Tomorrow's game was a morning kick-off. After breakfast, Oskar had a talk with the players about the game. His speech was very calm and was

organised in three major blocks; the opponent's analysis (very briefly), what he expected from his players from a tactical perspective, and finally he talked about the environment surrounding the match. In this last block he appeared to direct his speech to the new players in the team, highlighting the importance of focusing on the match and trying to block out the fans' provocations. During the speech, all players were seated in front of him, with their eyes focused on him, then moving slowly as he expressed his tactics on the white board. At this moment, the players were focused.

When Oskar finished his talk, we got on the bus to the stadium with a police escort. The opponents' team was a former premiership club, and there is a big rivalry with Mjöllnir FC. Even though this was team B, the rivalry is still intense; hence the police escort. As we approached the stadium loomed large. It was an impressive place, a 40,000 seater! I could see the opponents' fans waiting for us singing, screaming offensive words and spitting at the bus. The police were fully employed here, holding back some of the fans. It was a very 'hot' reception. As I looked around the bus, the younger players just stared vacantly at the opponents' fans. The older and more experienced players were smiling, "*get used to this boys; welcome to professional football*". They'd seen all this before.

*Previously, I mentioned that the opponents' fans were waiting for us. After being with the team for a couple of weeks, the level of trust and my relationship with the staff and the players had evolved. Going on the bus with them I started feeling part of the group. I have to say that I whilst I may have been influenced by Sören, sitting next to me staring through the window, I started to wonder what was going on in the young players' minds. Last year some of them would have only played in front of no more than one hundred people; mainly players' parents or their family. Now they face a completely different reality. Is this the big time?*

Before the game, Oskar reinforced the players' positions in set pieces, and carefully offered some words of wisdom to every player individually. I could see some of the older players, mainly the captain, also offering some words of advice to the group and in some cases talking individually with some of the youngsters. Conversely to the bus, the dressing room dynamic was more mixed. There were no distinct groups here. Almost all the words

of encouragement were centred on the 'team unit', 'team effort', 'support', and 'hard work'. The first half seemed to just pass me, and the players, by. The score was 0-0. Oskar's calm approach was repeated at half-time as he just made some minor tactical adjustments, and then praised their players for their effort and commitment to the match.

The game was very competitive, with Mjöllnir FC scoring the winning and only goal of the game five minutes before the end of the game. At the end of the game, all the players and coaching staff (me included), hugged each other tight in the middle of the pitch. I could hear Oskar saying, *"this is the spirit lads... fight hard as a team, and no one can stop us."* On our way back to the dressing room, I could see the older players talking with the youngsters saying, *"well done kiddo"* or *"see, with hard work everything is possible"*. Later in the dressing room, Oskar told me that he needed to relax a little after such an emotional and exciting game. He asked me if I wanted to go with him. I didn't know where we were going, but I was very pleased to be invited. A couple of minutes later, we were on the pitch again. As we scanned the (now) empty stands, Oskar said softly: *"...You know, these players don't realise it yet, but today was probably the most important day of their future career. Playing in this fantastic stadium, with such a hostile environment... did you see the police when we arrived? You may not know this, but half of their team are experienced players... I have to tell you that I was a little concerned about the reaction and capability of my players to deal with this. But they were great. They arrived at this stadium as little boys and they go out as football players; ready to face higher challenges..."*

*This episode highlights the importance of youth players being exposed to, and experiencing a taste of the challenge and the reality that the professional environment holds for them as they progress to the first team. As Oskar said, a positive performance in a big stadium full of people, playing against experienced players can be decisive for the future of young players. Being able to experience these challenges, without being directly in the first team, might provide the youth players with a personal background that may better facilitate their adaptation to the even higher demands of the first team.*

On a daily basis, the four teams (i.e., first team, team B, team C, and the under-19s) trained on the same site, at the same time and on adjacent pitches. This close proximity appeared to facilitate the informal communication amongst the staff and the players from the different teams. In addition, the players appeared to move between teams on a regular basis. Frequently players moved from team B to the first team training session. Consequently, this led to some team C players moving to team B. This movement seemed to be a harmonious and cooperative practice. However, Oskar confessed to having mixed feelings about it. He had one major dilemma: he is responsible for developing players and therefore should be happy with their move to a higher team. At the same time he needs to present his strongest team at the weekend to win the match and secure their position in the championship. The latter appears to keep the Board and sports director happy. Whilst recognising, knowing, and accepting that he, and his team B, were a hostage to the whims of the first team and the Board, Oskar seemed frustrated when his players (and by default, himself), were disrespected or just used:

> *"...sometimes it's not easy to know what to do or how to feel. Of course I am happy to see my players moving to the first team. I feel happy for them. It's our main goal here. It's also proof that our work with those young players is good. Nevertheless, we are in a very competitive and professional league and winning is a constant demand. Naturally, I want to have all my best players available. Well (deep breath) that's life... The only thing that really gets me mad is when the first team coach takes my players just to train, knowing that they are not going to be called on to play in the match. That makes my team weaker. Last week he (first team coach) called four of my players over at the beginning of the training session. I could see that they were alone on the sideline just fiddling with the ball until they were needed for only one exercise... unbelievable! If they were only needed for one exercise then they could have trained with us and just gone over when they were required...Anyway, first team guys have the power to do whatever they want, whenever they want..."*

Oskar's dilemma was not isolated. During a coffee after a training session, Oskar, Tobias (team C coach) and I were talking about the pressure to win that existed in the youth environment. Tobias shared his experiences of a match that occurred before I arrived:

> *"...it was the first match, I decided to keep some of the main players on the bench and put the youngsters on to see which players I could count on for*

*the rest of the season. It was a way to give an opportunity to those players who I thought needed more match minutes to improve their confidence. We drew the game one each. I was very happy with the performance of the young players. For some of them it was the first time they had played against grown ups, and they fought a lot... ok, so we didn't win the match, but it was a good performance. I was told by Björn that the purpose of team C was to help players to improve, to develop and to be ready to move to team B (laughs). That's only talk without truth or conviction! At the end of the match there was a director questioning me why I didn't play with the best players and that they (the club) were very upset that we didn't win the match. It was only the first match, but I have no doubts now, if I want to keep my job I will have to think about winning matches and leave player development as a secondary priority..."*

The involvement, influence and input (or some may say meddling) of the directors in the coaches' work with the teams can also include the imposition of certain players and the added pressure to allow them to play. Such an imposition can disrupt the harmonious environment of a team:

During one of Oskar's training sessions with team B he was called by the Sport Director for a quick talk. When he returned, I could see that he was visibly upset. At the end of the training session, he told me, and his assistant coach, that a first team player (Nicolas) was going to join the team B squad. He also explained that the club wanted to sell the player soon, so he needed to be in the starting eleven. Later, Oskar told me how he hated to be put in this type of situation. But, unfortunately, he can't say no. Moreover, he was concerned about the reaction of the rest of the team B players to the situation... we mustn't forget that they are a team of professionals too. There must be more precision, and a clearer expectation of what we are supposed to be about; one that all stakeholders, including the players, are aware of.

*"...this team B is a professional team, and I build it with the notion of group cohesion. I think the players understand this. My sense is that it is this cohesion that has been the secret for such a successful season. So you can understand now why I am so concerned about this situation... I don't like the fact that players are imposed on me, but I can live with it. The team may not understand that, and if I lose their respect... I don't even want to think about that..."* (Oskar)

Similarly, a talk I had with two players at the end of one training session (i.e., Olaf and Marcus) mirrored Oskar's sentiments. Olaf told me that the secret of the team so far was the group; the union between all the players and the way they can play as a team (team cohesion), especially in defensive moments. Marcus also mentioned the fact that they have developed physically, and emphasised the importance of the trust that Oskar had instilled in relation to the team's capacity, *"it's great when you see a coach trust in you and your team mates. We feel so confident, we don't fear anyone; even teams that supposedly are superior in money and have players with first division experience."* Both of the players recognised that they were very happy at the club, and that they have never played in a group with such a team spirit. Olaf said, *"in some clubs, sometimes we are tired and we don't want to go to training, but here I don't feel that because I feel so well here. I want to come in every day. It's a very stimulating and warming environment."* It seems that the environment is very important for the way they feel and perform. The message that Oskar instils and cites as the team's best weapon, group cohesion, has transcended to the players.

The following day, Nicolas was integrated into team B. In the dressing room, Oskar did his best to present the player as a positive addition to the team. He was here to help them to be stronger. If I didn't know the true feelings of Oskar, I would have thought that he was really happy with his new acquisition. Whilst we wandered towards the pitch, Oskar confessed that even though he was not happy with the situation, it was not Nicolas' fault. He would do whatever he could to help the player integrate. Not surprisingly, Nicolas got closer to those players from team B who he had already played with, and who knew him from the first team. For the first time I saw the Sports Director watching the training session. Oskar looked at him standing on the side-line and said, *"look at him controlling. Checking that we are following his orders and integrating his player. I don't mind him coming to see our work, but not just to ensure that his orders are followed."*

As the session came to an end Oskar seemed worried about the players' reaction:

*"...did you see the training today? The players looked crazy, tactically very poor... their attitude... I knew that this was going to happen; they are still digesting the arrival of Nicolas. I organized the training for a game situation to reduce this. If I wanted to do something specific it was not going to be possible. I hope that they will be more focused in the next training session..."*

When I was returning to the dressing room, I realised that Marcus (M) had stayed out to do some stretching. I saw this as an opportunity to explore his feelings regarding Nicolas' integration on the team:

I: How are you feeling?

M: "*More or less. (Looking to his leg)*"

I: Is your leg still giving you some pain? (He was injured in the first week I arrived)

M: "*The problem is not the leg...*"

I: So what's troubling you?

M: "*(Looking to the floor) I don't know how to play like this... I don't know how to play as a winger, I am a centre midfielder.*"

I: Why are you saying that you are going to play as a winger?

M: "*I am not stupid... but it's not fair... we are doing so well... we are strong as a team and now here comes a player from the first team and he takes over the place... He arrives and will play in the starting eleven almost without training. Now the coach is putting a session on just for him, so he know how we play.*"

I: Should you being talking like that? The most important is that you will play, and you must do your best. It doesn't matter where you are going to play.

M: "*Yeah, you're right. I should be happy to continue playing but I know that I will not be able to give my best to the team if I play in that position. I will be much more profitable for the team playing in the middle... that's my place. I know that Oskar is being pressured, but I hope that the team doesn't become penalised by that.*"

*These examples appear to demonstrate a lack of a coherent philosophy regarding the development of youth, and its impact on the player's development and transition to the first team. On one hand the coaches are told to be concerned with developing players to feed the first team. On the other hand they are frequently pressured to win. The dilemma appears to be one of producing winning teams as opposed to developing players. At Mjöllnir FC the coaches are charged with managing teams in publicly competitive leagues. They would appear to be a hostage to results. Yet they would concede that they are there to produce players for the higher level teams and ultimately the first team. There appears to be some confusion between the philosophical aim of the coaches and perhaps the need of (some members of) the Board to see winning teams throughout the club. I understand that in the same way that coaches need to win to keep the Board happy, the Board needs to win to keep the fans happy. However, usually fans from elite professional clubs are not concerned about the level of the team and its aims, only that their club wins. So, in one sense, I think I understand the Board's 'need' to see youth teams winning, yet in another sense I can empathise with Oskar's dilemma. It is complex in team B...*

Mjöllnir FC is a club with what would appear to be, on the surface, an 'ideal (developmental) structure'. This structure allows the young players' to evolve within a thoughtful and progressively demanding competitive environment. The players move from the youth environment to the national championship, and then they experience the reality of a professional league before moving to the top league. Nevertheless, and mainly with respect to the two professional teams (i.e., first team and team B), it appears that the management of these distinct yet cumulative entities is extremely complex. Team B, whilst allegedly being a *developmental* team, plays in a professional league, generates income and has a fan base, similar to the first team. The main difference between the teams is the fact that the first team needs to win to challenge for the top championship title, whilst team B need to win to sustain their existence in the Second professional league and not get relegated. The higher economical return and sportive impact of the first team makes it the priority of the club. It would seem important for the club to clarify this first team priority, identify the aim of the younger aged teams, and determine specific roles for everyone, and their respective departments, within the club. This role clarity should not exclude the members of the Board. In order to be effective, it appears that everyone in the club (i.e., Board, first team, team B and the youth department) must be aware of the club's aims and philosophies, and develop their practices according to this aim(s). On a daily basis, the apparent inconsistencies within the club's youth philosophy, and subsequent practice and political tensions that exist between the respective

personnel, alongside the different layers that operate within the club's organisation (e.g., Board and youth department), appear to hinder the effectiveness of, what would appear to be, an ideal developmental structure.

### 3.4.4 – Personality, Internal Politics and Practice

Football Club Dorado is a professional football club playing in its top professional division. As with Mjöllnir FC, the club plays regularly in European competitions (i.e., Champions League and/or Europa League), and is normally a contender for the national championship.

FC Dorado does not possess a reserve team nor a team B within its structure. However, the club runs an under-21s team that participates in the regional championship. This under-21s team plays one match per week and typically consists of some first team players (i.e., usually under the age of 21 years but sometimes they may include older players), and youth players from the different youth squads. This group of players never trains together (i.e., as a team or as a squad); they just join together to play matches. The under-21s team is coached by one of the first team's assistant managers (i.e., Manuel), with the under-19s coach (i.e., Pablo) as his assistant. The concept employed here is that every player who plays for this team should know, or have had some experience of working with, at least one of the coaches. According to the HYD, this under-21s team is *"a way to allow all players to play at least one game per week, to increase the contact between the youth and the first team, and also to be a window for the first team technical staff to get to see the club's youth players in action."*

On the surface, the concept of the under-21s seems like a good example of a situation that might help promote a smooth and harmonious transition of young players to the first team… However, during the period of time I stayed in the club, I came across certain issues that might influence the effectiveness of the young players' transition.

The following section explores the environmental, practice and personality issues that I encountered at FC Dorado.

On only my second day at the club, before the beginning of the under-19s training session, I had noticed that Manuel arrived together with Pablo. As I stood watching, I could not quite grasp why Manuel was here. I looked around to see the reaction of the youth players, but no one seemed surprised by his presence. It was only my second day, and so it appeared that it was only me that was surprised with Manuel's presence here. Apparently, it was not the first time that he had been there. During the training session Manuel observed, talked with Pablo, and even helped him with the material (e.g., cones, bibs, and balls). Although Manuel was present during the whole session he refrained from assuming any responsibility for any exercises. He also refrained from addressing the group as a whole. However, I did note that occasionally he would pull players aside individually to offer words of motivational wisdom...

Manuel's presence in the under-19s training session intrigued me, I had already been informed about the under-21s situation by the HYD, but I was not aware of Manuel's involvement in the youth set-up. I was curious to know more about Manuel's involvement here. After the session I approached Manuel (M) and enquired about his role. I'd met Manuel previously while visiting the club in Study One. We had a number of exchanges during that week, so I felt comfortable enough to approach him to talk.

> I: I was a bit surprised to see you here. Is this part of your role?
>
> M: *"...this is probably one of the most interesting roles I have ever had in football. I now visit the under-19s training session at least twice a week, and I attend the under-16s sessions once per month. The idea is to help motivate the youth players. It helps them to see that a first team technical staff member is interested in their development. We can also influence, and perhaps change, some of the youth coaches' ideas with respect to the philosophy and methodologies used in the first team. My presence here also allows me to check on the young players so that I can inform and advise the first team manager of the potential for players to move up. Usually this is supplemented with the information that we have on these players from the under-21 matches..."*

I: Today I saw you in the training session, observing and talking with Pablo. Do you ever play a more active role in the delivery of the training sessions?

D: *"...I try... it's not very easy. One of the problems at this moment is that my role lacks clear definition... this concept is something new. It is an idea from our sports director and I am not sure yet what to do. Initially I intended to deliver one training session per week with the under-19s, as I do with the under-16s, to show the players the type of work we do with the first team and the high demand expected... but when I did it the first time, Pablo complained. He told me that he was the coach of the under-19s, and that he didn't want me delivering training sessions that may ruin his weekly training schedule. That's why I have already said to our sports director that before the beginning of the next season I want my role very clear... until then I will just observe (he smiled an ironic smile)..."*

*At the time, especially after Manuel's smile, I could sense that something was not going well between the two of them. His smile told me that things would be different next year...closer to his thinking. Manuel was obviously unhappy about Pablo's complaint regarding his weekly session with the under-19s. I also sensed that Pablo did not particularly embrace Manuel's presence. At this point I felt that I needed to know more, but perhaps from Pablo's side of things...*

The following day, whilst having breakfast with Pablo (P) in the club's canteen, I decided to explore his thoughts about Manuel:

I: I noticed Manuel helping out a little yesterday.

P: *"Yeah..."*

I: Does he have a particular role to play with the under-19s?

P: *"... (Generally) I think his presence is something very positive. His presence motivates the young players, and is a way to keep the first team coach informed and in touch with the youth players we have here. It can also be good if he can add something to the training sessions that perhaps reflect the way they work in the first team... What cannot happen is what Manuel tried to do this year. You know that he came to me one day and said, 'tomorrow I am going to take the under-19s training session'. It can't be like that... he can't just appear one day, without talking to me about whether it's a good day to deliver the training, or whether it fits into the ongoing micro-cycle... Nothing, he said nothing! He just came and climbed all over me. I would be more interested in seeing him developing the young players that are in the first team. Some of them still need to develop... I think that he should spend more time with those players and help prepare them to be first team players..."*

*Both coaches appeared to agree that the presence of Manuel was a positive move for the youth player's transition to the first team. The personal and/or political friction between Pablo and Manuel would appear to be, predominantly, due to a lack of clear understanding about Manuel's role and/or how he should carry out this role. Whilst there is a definite role deficiency, I sensed that there was also a 'power struggle' between Manuel and Pablo. In this sense, Pablo is traditionally in charge here (i.e., with the under-19s) and now he is faced with Manuel, a first team coach, who needs to justify his new role. He is also 'first-team', and therefore has 'unwritten' authority over Pablo... Pablo, may well feel threatened by Manuel's new role. But neither Manuel nor Pablo appeared to be able to, or willing to, discuss their role (and personal) interaction. Personally I believe that the Sports Director should have clearly identified the role and responsibilities when he appointed Manuel to this 'new' role. The bigger issue here would appear to be the consequences that this conflict might play in the youth players' transition to the first team.*

The friction between Pablo (youth) and Manuel (first team) was not my only concern. Alongside this personal tension (mainly as a consequence of poor role definition and communication) I also became aware of inconsistent game cultures within the under-21s team. This inconsistency was a consequence of Manuel and Pablo's distinct philosophical approaches to playing football. My experiences at the next under-21s home game followed my talk with both coaches.

In this game, the under-21s team included five first team players and the rest were youth players. On the day of the match, the coaches and the players met on the pitch two hours before the game. In the dressing room, the first team players dressed on one side whilst the youth players occupied the other. There was no attempt to communicate with, or amongst each other. Due to the huge size of the dressing room, the separation was clearly evident... Even the coaches dressed on different sides of the dressing room. Manuel covered the pre-match tactics before kick-off. He was the only one who spoke. Pablo remained quiet. This is Manuel's team. As Manuel's tactics were delivered, sternly, direct and concise, I noticed some perplexed young faces around the room. Manuel was asking the players to do things that were different from what Pablo had worked on with them during the week. Some young lads looked wonderingly to Pablo, others looked to the floor. Pablo just continued to stand calm alongside Manuel. No signs of disgruntlement...

*At this moment I was left wondering what these young players must be thinking. They have this fantastic opportunity to show their value to the technical staff of the first team, yet, they are being asked to play in a way that is alien to their day-to-day practices. I can imagine the mess that is in their heads. I realise that this is more than a power struggle between Manuel and Pablo, it also appears to be a philosophical conflict as to how you should play the game. They have opposite and conflicting game cultures. The young players were just the unfortunate pawns in their battle...*

As the game progressed, it was noticeable that some of the youth players were having positional difficulties. More than once I noticed them resort to the training methods they had been taught during the week with Pablo. Manuel continued to shout and complain, requesting longer passes or a different type of movement. Most of the time, the players appeared confused, lost and out of position. They lost by three.

At the end of the game, Manuel remained seated on the subs' bench. I too stayed. We both sat silently and vacantly looking at the pitch. I looked across, but I didn't want to disturb his silence. Suddenly he said, *"I am not happy with this situation. Only the first team players understand and do what I ask. The young players? Well, they just play in a completely different way."* Before I had time to ask if he knew the reason, he just stormed off towards the dressing room. I thought it best to stay seated. A couple of minutes later, Pablo appeared on the pitch. I was still sat on the subs' bench. He wandered over to join me. He was visibly upset. He explained, *"even though they are part of the same team, the under-21s look like two distinct groups, the first team players and the youth players."* He continued, *"one team...two groups with two different game cultures and two different philosophies... how can it work? I really don't believe that this will benefit the youth players' development."*

*Once again, Pablo's appearance right after Manuel's departure seems to reinforce the distance between them. This situation is not helpful for the young players. I wondered whether the sports director and/or the HYD were aware of the complex relational and philosophical tensions that surrounded the under-21s. If this continues, the youth players will continue to experience and deal with inconsistent working practices, philosophies and game cultures that will ultimately hinder their transition to the first team.*

After the showers, I walked home with Antonio (youth player) and we inevitably talked about the game and the under-21s.

A: *"...today things went pretty bad. Sometimes going to the under-21s is very hard, I really struggle. You have a coach who wants you to do things that you don't know... in the under-19s we play with the ball on the floor. Here Manuel just wants us to use the long ball... it's not easy to change our type of play like that."*

I: How did you cope with that?

A: *"well, in the first matches I tried to play the way Manuel wanted, but things were not going well... it's not the same to work all week making short passes and then at the weekend use only long ones. Now, I play the way I know. I play the way I've been trained with Pablo. But Manuel and the first team players are always screaming... like I said it's good to be here and be seen by the first team coaches, but it can also be very hard."*

During my time in the club, one of the major themes of conversation with the coaches (i.e., Manuel and Pablo) was the under-21s. The concept of amalgamating players from the different squads to form a team was new to me. No other club, well none that I had visited, possessed such a system. Discussing the concept of the under-21s with various personnel, I got the sense that, even though it was seen as a positive experience for the players' development, there was a general unease and unhappiness about the level of competitiveness of the regional championship. Both Manuel and Pablo confessed that the lower level regional championship didn't really help the young players in their readiness to play in the professional championship. Nevertheless, they believed that it was better than not having anything at all. To Manuel, the ideal solution would be that this team could play in the national championship (at some level) without impacting the professional championship. However, he also recognised that if this happened the national championship would be full of team Bs and this would not be fair to the other smaller clubs...

The (majority of) youth players seemed to view the under-21s team as something very positive. They reported that it provided them with a familiarity (even intimacy) with 'the big boys'. They also knew that they would be seen by the first team technical staff. In other words, it put them in the shop window for the first team call. However, they also reported that the matches in the under-19s national

championship were typically more intense, more competitive and more demanding than those in the under-21s.

The positive sentiments offered by the coaches and youth players about the under-21s environment were not echoed by the first team players. Typically, the majority of the first team players displayed extreme dissatisfaction and disillusionment about being called to play for the under-21s. Firstly, they saw this experience as a demotion, and secondly they considered that the whole experience was a complete waste of time:

> *"...I am a first team player, so why should I go and play with the kids? If they (the first team) don't want me here, then just say it and I will look for another club to play for. Have you seen the matches of the under-21s? What the fuck is that? The other teams are so poor, the game is so slow... sometimes I don't even warm up. In my personal opinion the under-21 matches are a waste of time..."* (First team player)

One of the reasons mentioned by Pablo to justify the mixing of the youth and first team players in the under-21s team was to use the latter as positive role models for the younger players:

> *"...it's important for the youth coaches to have contact with the first team players, especially with those that can add something to their development. There are some players from the first team, usually those who have passed through our youth programme, who like to share their experiences with the youth players. Juan is one of them, he frequently visits the youth dressing room to talk with his former team mates about his 'new life' in the first team... you can see the happiness on the faces of the young players just by talking with a first team player..."*

> *My experience of Juan confirmed Pablo's thoughts that he was a first team player who had good interaction with the youth players. More than once I saw him going to the under-19s dressing room and talking with the youth players. I believe that his advice and presence was very important for the youth players. However, Juan rarely plays in the under-21s. The big question is, are the first team players who play in the under-21s good role models?*

In essence, a reluctance to play (unless perhaps recovering from injury) in a low-level inferior competitive environment is likely to result in dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction from the first team players was evident in some matches (e.g.,

presenting some unprofessional behaviour and/or mistreating youth players). Such unprofessionalism hinders the (potential) positive effect that their presence could have on the youth players' development. This was clearly evident in one of the under-21s matches that occurred during my third week in the club.

In the dressing room, once again the separation between the first team and the young players was evident. As I look to one side I only see first team players and Manuel, if I look to the other side; youth players and Pablo. As the players were changing, there was no communication between them. The conversations and even the banter and laughs were restricted to elements of the same 'group' (i.e., youth or first team players). The talk from Manuel did not differ significantly from the previous game. The only thing that changed was his references to the opponents' team. After the talk, and still inside the dressing room, Pablo asked the players to warm up individually. I adopted my now customary role to warm up the goalkeepers. Looking around, I could see that the young players were also engaging in dynamic warm-up exercises. However, the first team players were shooting at the goal and just chit-chatting. Not a stretch in sight. By his facial expression, I could tell that Pablo was not very happy with that. He told the first-teamers start doing some warm-up exercises. The reaction of one of the players left me astonished; he just laughed and said loudly: "*...I don't need to warm up for a game like this. I don't even know what I am doing here...*" A couple of minutes later, Manuel, who had stayed a little longer in the dressing room, appeared on the pitch. The first team players started their warm up exercises.

*To me this experience captured the poor role models that these players were. In essence, they lacked professionalism, and carried a total disregard and disrespect for the under-19s coach (i.e., Pablo).*

During the match, it seemed that every time a first team player lost the ball they just stopped and screamed at the younger players. This occurred mostly to try to deflect attention away from their mistake... Moreover, the majority of the first team players did not seem to want to pass the ball to the young

players, and extended their screams to any mistake or misplaced pass made by the youngsters. More than once I saw youth players looking to the bench, probably waiting for some support from the coaches. The support never arrived. At half time, I witnessed the first moment of communication between a first team and a youth player. One of the first team players was basically blaming the young lad for a couple of mistakes. I looked around for the coaches to see their reaction. Pablo was not there, he stayed on the pitch doing the warm up with one player who was starting the second half. Manuel just observed, silently. The second half was more of the same, with first team players screaming and disrespecting the youngsters. Near the end of the match, one first team player was sent off for *calling* the referee. Strangely, neither Manuel nor Pablo said anything to the player.

*I have to confess that I was shocked with this horrendous experience. I don't know if I was more shocked with the lack of professionalism of the first team players and their disrespect for Pablo, their behaviour towards the younger players, or the lack of discipline enforced by the coaches (i.e., Manuel and Pablo). I am sure that these were not the type of role-models that the young players needed. Furthermore, if I found the experience horrendous just by watching, I couldn't imagine what the youth players must feel, being treated like this. Welcome to the big time! I had to find out more. Why didn't Pablo, the Head coach of the under-19s, do anything or say anything? It was a disgrace....*

At the end of the game I sought out a coffee alone with Pablo (P) and we talked about the game:

I: What did you think about the match today?

P: *"...I am not really concerned about the game itself, I am more concerned about the lack of professionalism of certain players today. Did you see the way some of the first team players behaved? They don't respect anyone so how can they expect to be respected?"*

I: Can you explain, why you didn't you say anything to them?

P: *"...well first I didn't want to turn the game in a show, and, secondly, I am not the main coach of the team. Manuel is the one who is responsible. It is he who should be seen to do something about it... anyway, I am going to talk with him about what happened because I am not here to be disrespected. We don't need players like these here. Instead of being positive examples and helping the young players, they are just doing the opposite. For me, if they don't want to be here, then the first team manager should strap them with a POLAR (heart rate monitor) and send them on a*

*run to the woods. At least that way they will not come here to ruin the game..."*

*During our talk I could see that Pablo was very angry with what had happened. Moreover, I sensed that he was a little disappointed that Manuel didn't say anything. I got a sense that, from a managerial perspective, some things were not working well; mainly the relationship between Manuel and Pablo. In fact, reflecting on their relationship it was only then that I realised that Manuel had only visited the under-19s training session once during my three weeks. Maybe it was Manuel's way to avoid conflicts with Pablo... one thing I believe, after passing this time with them, I don't believe that the different personalities and game cultures will allow for any future agreement between them.*

From my time spent with FC Dorado it appeared that despite possessing, on the surface anyway, an apparently smooth and harmonious structure and approach towards the promotion of young players to the first team, the pathway for young players is far from harmonious. The structure and approach appear sound yet the operationalisation (i.e., day-to-day practices) hinders the *normal* progression of young players. The lack of role, responsibility, and clarification of power amongst the staff, coupled with a lack of consistent methodologies, philosophies and game cultures between youth and first teams, contributes to staff conflict and an increasing distance between youth and first team departments. Consequently, such a philosophical distance can only hinder the players' transition to the first team.

### 3.4.5 –Genuine Care

Aldam City Football Club, as with the previous two clubs, is a professional football club playing in their top professional division. Again, they are typically a regular contender for the national championship, and are frequently present in the European competitions (i.e., Champions League and/or Europa League). Aldam City FC is also recognised, both national and internationally, as a club who develops and promotes a range of youth players to, and for, the professional football world.

This recognition as a *developer* of youth players to the professional environment seems inconsistent with the atypical structure of the club. Ideally, and as presented in both Study One and Study Two Part I, the young player's transition from the

youth team into the professional environment should occur through a progressively more demanding and competitive environment (i.e., mainly through the reserves or team B). However, at Aldam City FC, the youth players either progress directly from the last youth team (i.e., the under-19s) to the first team, are sent out on loan, or are released by the club. Specifically, there is no reserve or B team environment. The apparent gap between the youth environment and the first team would not appear to offer the young players an internally progressive pathway. The situation is one that is not favoured by the coaching staff, or at least they believe that it is not ideal. One of the youth coaches confessed the painful reality to me over coffee:

> *"...I think the work we develop here is great. But my opinion is that with a reserves team, we could give a little more time to the players to settle down, adapt to the new reality [of the professional environment], and do it always within our methodologies, philosophy and identity... going on loan to other clubs at such a young age, and without finishing their development process here with us, means that we can lose several potential first team players... Anyway, we have to work within our means, and always try to do the best we can, right?"* (Youth coach)

> *After Study One, and with respect to Aldam City in particular, one of the things that I asked myself was how can a club without a reserve team, exposing such young players apparently without much experience to the professional environment, continue to promote so many players to professional football world? What happens on a daily basis that helps the youth players to become prepared and ready for this transition?*

According to the club's HYD, the reason for not having a reserve team was not because they don't believe in its importance, but due to the fact that by not being allowed to play in a professional league, they prefer to loan the youth players to professional clubs in order to enable them to experience more competitive matches. Nevertheless, it was still evident that Aldam City FC was a club that *truly* believed in youth development. As stated by the club's chairman, *"one of the goals is to see the club as a recognised developer of players, not only to feed the first team but also to create a financial income"*. In this sense, and by no means unusual to the elite football clubs, the club invested in a football academy. The football academy and the first team training facilities were shared (i.e., by both the youth teams and the first team). Moreover, it's important to highlight at this point that the first team coach was a former youth coach, and that the person

responsible for the youth department (i.e., the HYD) was also a member of the club's Board of directors.

In an interview to a newspaper, the chairman of the club highlighted the good work developed in the youth department by a 'fantastic team of staff', where everyone was identified in playing a decisive role in the player's development and preparation to become a professional. This idea was also referred to me by the HYD who considered that a club's strategy must be defined by the Board, and specifically the Aldam City FC Board had always believed in, and provided stability for, the youth department to develop their programme. Moreover, he believed that the club's philosophy, written in a document alongside strategies and working practices towards the youth development, influenced and encouraged everyone within the academy to work very closely as a team towards the same goal (i.e., develop youth players to the professional environment).

It was possible to ascertain that everyone in the academy contributed to the players' development. Moreover, the presence of a written document clarifying roles, aims, strategies, and working practices regarding youth development, appeared to contribute to a collective belief and working practice directed towards the same goal (i.e., development of youth players to the professional environment). On a daily basis the coaches, as with most of the other clubs, were the ones with more contact with the players and consequently able to play a decisive role in their development and progression. However, during my time at the club the day-to-day practice of one person (John) captured my attention.

John has been part of Aldam City FC for more than 35 years, making him a symbol of respect and authority within the club. During his time in the club, he played different roles such as youth trainee, coach and scout. Within the club he was one of the strongest believers in youth development. He was one of the founders of the football academy and responsible for developing the initial youth programme. During my time at the club, he was frequently mentioned in discussions that I had with different stakeholders. To allow you, the reader, to 'get

to know' John, as I did, the following section presents some of the stakeholder's opinions regarding John as a person:

> *"...John has a fantastic sense of humour, he loves to tell jokes, and he uses wisely the virtue of storytelling to advise young players. In most cases these stories help them to see situations from a different perspective. Moreover, he is probably one of the best people in Europe in this role..."* (HYD)

> *"...John is a developer... his secret is the way he relates with youngsters, how he listens to them, gives advice, how he understands their problems and helps them manage their difficulties, both personal and sport related, helping them to achieve high standards..."* (Club's youth coach)

> *"...Mr. John was like a father to us. He always had a friendly word, and a considered, caring and generally nice way to say things. Mr. John inspires us... even now I'm in the first team, he still does it..."* (First team player)

> *"...Mr. John is that type of person that you feel comfortable talking with about anything. He was the person who brought me to the club, and today every time I need someone to talk to or to support me I turn to him. Because sometimes things don't go as we expect them to. But he is always there..."* (Youth player)

> *I have to confess that I too was 'conquered' by John's personality. He smiled his way around the academy, with a friendly word to say to most on his way. His ability to tell jokes and stories was remarkable. He appeared to be a true leader who captured the attention and respect of everyone around him. His football knowledge was immense at all levels; not only about the game itself but about everything surrounding the game. I was continually struck by the players' (young and old) continual reference to him as Mr John. They normally call everyone by their first name, but when mentioning John, it was always Mr John.*

The following narrative is an amalgam of various conversations and exchanges that I had with John (J), that attempt to capture his passion, belief, feelings and genuine care for the young players. Specifically, it attempts to capture 'how' he does this:

> J: *"...Aldam City FC is an addiction for me, I have been here for more than 35 years and this is my home. I have been invited to work in other clubs, but I can't... I am part of a big team, with highly skilled professionals, and more than that, friends who like me believe in youth... we are all here to help these youngsters to be prepared for the professional world... if for any reason I left the club, I would prefer to stop working..."*

> I: What's your secret for helping so many players to get to the professional level?

J: *"...secret? There's no secret. Personally I would say that it's important to understand that youth players are also youngsters, and to prepare the footballer you need to develop the person... if you don't do this then you have a problem. I have been a coach with a lot of concern for a player's technical and tactical development, now I am more focused on helping them to grow strong. One of my major concerns is to always be there in the worst or most difficult moments for the player. Because in the good moments there are always a lot of people around him..."*

I: How do you know when a player needs support?

J: *"...one of the things that I am proud of is that I know every player from our academy. Usually I am the first person from the club that the player and his family meet. I insist on being present on his first day at the academy. The same way if they are going to be released, I want to be there. I was released from the under-19s and I know how that experience can be. It can influence the rest of your life... it did in my case. That's probably one of the reasons why I became so attached to youth football..."*

*John was released from the under-19s due to an injury, but he also confessed to me that he believed he was not good enough to be a professional. I saw myself in his words. I too was released at the under-19s level, not due to injury but when I was told by the coach to choose between football and academia. Similarly, I believe that I was not good enough to become a professional player. John was proud to know every player in the academy, be the first contact between the club and the player's family, and mainly be there to help them in their most difficult moments. I recognise that he has a 'genuine care' for his players.*

J: *"...I know that talking to the boys is not my specific task, but if I believe that I can help, I will do it. We are here to sum, not to split efforts. We are here to help the player to be better. I have just started rambling and moved away from your question, how do I know a player needs support? Well, as I told you I know all the players, and as you can see I have a strategically positioned office. All the players pass everyday in front of this big window. I can see them and they can see me... that was the reason why I chose it. You have the field experience, so you know that sometimes when you see a player you can sense that something is not right. I can give you an example. Yesterday I was watching the players going to the training session, and there is a player on the first team that I've known since he was a very small boy, and I could see in his face that he was not ok. At that moment I decided that he might need to talk, but I didn't wanted to pressure him to do it. Sometimes you need to be subtle because the players don't like to be seen to talk to anyone. So, I decided to just 'casually' pass by the player on the corridor and invite him for a coffee. We started talking about the weather and then his family. Slowly the player became more open and trusted me with his concerns..."*

*I already knew about this 'coffee moment' because the player had told me. He'd explained that he was a little upset with the first team coach who promised to play him in the Champions League match on Wednesday night. It didn't happen. The player told me that he met John on the corridor and accepted his offer to go for a coffee, to relax. He said he then felt so comfortable that he shared his feelings with John. In the end the player confessed to me that John helped him understand that coaches are under pressure and sometimes they need to change their options according to particular and perhaps immediate constraints. This was one of John's ad hoc interventions. Even though it is not specifically part of his remit, he exudes 'genuine care' about the players. He can't help it. It's who he is, what he does. He felt duty bound to do what he believes in; to help the player.*

I: From your words I get a sense that your role is more than just preparing the boys. I get a sense that you really care about them.

J: *"...(laughs) guilty! I have always had a fantastic relationship with all of the players. I am always available to listen and to talk with them whenever they need... and I don't charge anything for it (laughs), only their respect and friendship. For me the most important thing is that, in our relationship, and in our talks, we have honesty. We must be absolutely honest and say what we believe is the best to help the player and not what he wants to hear... sometimes we don't realise it, but the players have the capacity to see, and need to see, if we are being frank and honest with them..."*

I: Specifically in the preparation for the transition, what kind of support do you give to the players?

J: *"...during this period my talks with the players are focused on issues concerned with concepts and behaviours that they must have as professional football players. They must earn the respect, trust and friendship of the older players from the first team... these are the type of things that I try to open their eyes to. These things will play an important and decisive role in their permanence on the first team. I know how the professional environment is. I am present at the annual meeting where the future of young players is decided. We from the youth department give our opinion but it's the first team coach who makes the decisions. Unfortunately, the first team people usually don't have the patience to let the youth players grow, and we have to realise that some youth players arrive at the last year of youth with a successful curriculum, with a lot of titles, appearances in the newspapers and knowing that, usually, they are on the starting eleven, both in the club and the National Squad. The problem is that they must be prepared for a change in that status when they move to the professional football environment... and usually they are not..."*

*From John's words, I sense that he is concerned about the lack of a formal transition management or preparation provided by the club. That's probably the main reason why he is so active in his ad hoc approaches to support them every time he senses that they need it.*

I: What do you think could be here to better prepare players?

J: *"...my opinion is that clubs should pay more attention to the new players on the first team, or, at least, those who are transiting there. I think that it might be important to create a parallel course to prepare the players for the professional environment: how to behave, how to talk with the press, things that you can't say, good lifestyle habits... This programme should be led by the first team personnel because youth football doesn't teach anyone to be a professional. Youth football prepares the players with the basis to become professional football players, but it must be the professional environment that teaches the young player how to be a professional. Until this happens I will continue to give advice and tips to the boys. Even if this is not my specific remit... I have to confess to you that there are no recipes of how to do things correctly. Every person is different. My personal experience tells me that sometimes the fact that just giving someone some attention and showing a belief in them might help to change them as a person. Help them understand. For example, we have a player facing some problems at home and today at 8am I knew that he was going to the school on the club's bus. I sent him a message just saying to have strength and that better days would come... he replied thanking me for not forgetting about him, and always being there in the most difficult moments. Doesn't look or sound like anything does it... but this simple (text) message might change the feeling of a person."*

I: Sometimes all of us need someone to 'hold our hand'. To know more about the type of support that you give to players, mainly during this transition, can you tell me about some more examples of your experiences?

At this point, John paused for a moment and then he began to offer his thoughts. These thoughts have been captured below under relevant contextual headings: 'positive loan experiences', 'too small to be a player?', and 'craft knowledge or just a gamble?'.

#### 3.4.5.1 – Positive Loan Experiences

J: *"...I think that for some players it might be good to go on loan. If they have the chance to improve by playing more or learning from others... the most important thing is that the players are followed and they don't feel abandoned. Let me tell you about two different examples of successful loans in different situations; Peter when he was still a youth player and Mark during his transition from the under-19s to the first team.*

*Peter was released from Aldam City FC when he was 14 years old. He was released mainly because he was very small... I always believed in his skills so I spoke with a friend from a nearby club. Three years later my friend, who was my link with the player, called me and said that the player had improved a lot and he was ready to return to Aldam City FC. So I went there to see the weekend match. There were a lot of scouts from different clubs watching the match. After the game finished I went immediately to the dressing room and told the player that Aldam City FC was still counting on him. He told me that his father wouldn't let him go because he (the player) was also working to provide money for the family... At this moment I asked the player if he wanted to return to us and work hard to become a professional footballer. He said yes. So I went to talk with the Board and he became, at that time anyway, the youngest player ever to receive a contract, earning exactly the same amount he was earning in his job... This way his father allowed him to return to the club. After two years he went to play in England.*

*Mark was a bit different. He played for our first team a couple of times when he was still an under-19s player. However, we knew that in the following year he was not going to get many chances. So we [the first team coach and I] spoke with him and he went on loan to a second division team... In the beginning he was not very happy with this because he wanted to play in the first team. Now, he is the first one to admit that the experience was instrumental in enabling him to achieve his actual level. I met with him every week, mainly so he didn't feel abandoned by the club. I have to say that this was my own decision, but with the full support of the club's Board. During these meetings, John told me that by experiencing the reality of other players in other clubs and the difficulties that they faced, for example the need to win a match to receive the bonus in order to pay their bills... made him (Mark) understand that being a football player is not easy, and if you want to be successful you must work hard... and in his case, take the advantage of the conditions at Aldam City FC..."*

From these examples, it was possible to sense that it was critical that the young players had someone who, not only believed in them, but also cared about them. Even whilst on loan at another club, it appeared critical that someone was seen to follow their progress, talk to them, connect with them, and support them. However, in most cases this was not seen as a formal part of John's role.

*I couldn't help but think that these boys were extremely fortunate to have such a 'good' person as John. I think that the respect and trust in John that I gleaned from chatting with players, might be a consequence of their perception of John's genuine care for them. I have come to believe that John, or someone like John, is a decisive factor in the successful transition of young players through into the professional environment.*

### 3.4.5.2 – Too Small to be a Player?

J: *"...yesterday I talked with one of the under-19s players who was training with the first team. I sensed that he didn't look very confident, and his performances were not at the level I knew he could achieve. So yesterday he was passing in front of my door, and I called him just to say hi and ask about his family. When he got in, I noticed that he started staring at the pictures of some of our successful youth players that I have on the walls. 'You might be there soon,' I said. He smiled, but something in his eyes caught my attention... you know! He wasn't right. I looked at him and he seemed unhappy. So I asked him what was going on. He never took his eyes off the pictures. Then he said that he would never be there because he was too small. I smiled and said to him that I had brought him to the club because I believed that he had the qualities to become a good footballer. Then I put my arm around his shoulder and told him the story of two former successful players (whose pictures were also on the wall). They too had who experienced similar feeling to his. At the end of the talk he looked much more confident, I am curious to see him now on the pitch..."*

### 3.4.5.3 – Craft Knowledge or Just a Gamble...

J: *"...I know that this transition is not directly linked to the first team, but I think it evidences the fears of the younger players when they move on to the older teams. We had one player from the under-17s that had been told by the coach that he might go with the under-19s at the weekend... It was an opportunity given to him because of his recent good performances. The player said to the coach that he couldn't go because he felt some pain in his back. When the coach told me this, I called the player to my office to talk with him. Even before he sat down I asked him if he wanted to have a talk man to man, or man to little boy! Sometimes we need hard approaches. When we sat down I saw him looking to the players' pictures on my wall. I thought that this was the best moment to start. 'Do you know why all of these players have got to this level? Because they wanted it more than the others and they made sacrifices for it... And you refuse a chance to go to the under-19s? Perhaps you don't want to be a football player? You have this chance and then you refuse it... So tell me what are you doing here in this club? You are a player with very good qualities and probably a good future, but you need to change your mentality. I am going to give you some advice that you can follow or not. It's your call... I suggest that you go and talk with the coach. Apologize for your behaviour and tell him that you are 'ready for war'. A couple of days later, the coach told me that the player went to talk with him, and that he was going to give him another chance. Of course I never told the coach that I had talked with the player, but sometimes these little approaches can make the difference between winning and losing a player..."*

*These two episodes characterised the ad hoc nature of John's support. In the first episode he presented a more conservative approach based on listening, understanding, and giving advice to the player. However, the second episode seemed, to me, to be a bit of a 'gamble'. What if the boy was injured? Looking out for the boys is not part of his formal role but he felt compelled to do something that he believed was the best for the boy. John used a harder approach that could have been badly received by the player. It is not for me to judge as to whether this was the right approach or not. I wasn't there; I don't know the boy or his circumstances. However, I came to trust John. He must have known this player extremely well to make such a call. In this instance, John's gamble appeared to help the boy come to terms with, and face, his destiny.*

During my time with Aldam City FC I came to learn that you should not judge something just by the way it looks. On the surface, Aldam City FC has an atypical, implausible, perhaps even dis-functional club structure. However, the entire club embraces youth development within its philosophy. This philosophy is matched by similarly aligned day-to-day working practices that appeared to be based on developing personal relationships with evidence of a genuine care for players that oozes from all of its practitioners and in particular from John. It appears that this more personable approach defines the club's development and preparation of young players for the professional environment.

### 3.5 – Summary

In Study Two, some strategies were championed by the academy staff as having an impact on the transition to the first team: 1) the presence of a stimulating and challenging environment; 2) allow youth players see the first team as something achievable and worth fighting for (e.g., training on adjacent pitches); 3) use the first team players as role models (e.g., one canteen for all players, encourage workshops with first team players); 4) implement a (well-managed) loan system to allow players to grow and mature playing regular competitive matches. These strategies were usually associated with the promotion of inter-channel communication and contact amongst youth and first team players (e.g., talks, workshops, sharing the same canteen, or training on adjacent pitches). These positions appear to reflect the importance of sharing the same physical and philosophical space alluded to in earlier sections. Such practices allow the youth players to learn from more senior and experienced role models (see Pummel et al.,

2008). In some cases, clubs prefer to send youth players on loan to teams playing in more competitive and demanding championships. The loan experience was seen as something positive by both players and coaches. However, the loan period is more likely to be perceived as a positive experience when correctly managed (i.e., by appointing someone responsible for following the player's progress, connecting with him, and giving support, advice and guidance when needed). When positive, the loan experience allowed the player to grow up and become more mature, whilst playing more competitive matches and experiencing the reality of the professional football environment.

Whilst considering the existence of, what appeared to be, positive and 'theoretically sound' organisational strategies (e.g., role/responsibilities formal identification, encouragement of coherent practices within the club, and formal inter and intra communication channels), it was evident from both academy staff members and players that, on a daily basis, the reality was different. To them, for example 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. Moreover, 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). This situation seemed to hinder the youth player's development, reducing the effectiveness of the young players' transition to the professional environment.

Similarly to the perceptions of the HYDs outlined in Study One, 'the lack of trust and/or belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development', and the notion of 'fortune and/or luck' were referred to as the biggest external barriers to youth players during their transition to the first team. Amongst the internal barriers a 'lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices', 'a lack of maturity', 'a

player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment', and the 'player's character' were the most frequently occurring barriers. In order to overcome such barriers, some individual attributes were considered to be decisive in the facilitation of the young player's transition to the first team: 'mental strength'; 'desire to succeed and a willingness to make personal sacrifices', and 'hard work/commitment'. These findings seem to align with the demands and complexity of the transition experienced by athletes from the *Development* to *Mastery* phase (see Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), transition to *high-achievement and adult sports*, and *from amateur to professional sports* (see Stambulova, 1994, 2000).

The ruthless nature of the professional football environment increases the player's 'fear' to be stigmatised by their coaches and/or team mates as weak, or not ready to become professional players (Martin et al., 1997; Pain & Harwood, 2004). Consequently, they refrain from sharing their personal issues with people from within their club. However, as evidenced by John, Pablo and Oskar, practitioners who adopt an approach based on genuine care appear to be able to encourage players to trust and share their issues with them. John was the most evident example, mainly due to the fact that he operated within, and perhaps manufactured over time, an environment that believes in youth development. Despite facing some environmental, personal, political, and/or situational constraints, Oskar and Pablo also presented a genuine care for their players. In this regard, players' seem to benefit from the presence of 'good people' within their club, independently of their role. These people know who the player is, they care about them, and develop their practices in the belief that it is in the best interest of the players.

Study Two, primarily through the narrative episodes, tells us that we need to go beyond the club's surface, to seek out and understand the day-to-day practices within the environment in order to understand the distinct and complex journey that a young European football player faces within their respective club. Mjöllnir FC and FC Dorado presented organisational structures that were perceived to be

positive with regards to presenting a progressive and harmonious transition from the youth to the first team environment. However, the staff personalities and political power positioning associated with a lack of role clarity, a lack of communication, and the existence of a physical, cultural, and/or philosophical distance between the youth and professional departments, hindered the effectiveness of these structures (see Rinke, 1997; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; De Knop et al., 2004). Additionally, Mjöllnir FC was further complicated by the complexity of housing two professional teams within one professional entity. The confusion between the notions of development and winning was abundantly clear. In contrast with Mjöllnir FC and FC Dorado, Aldam City FC, a club that looked to be missing a critical structural layer (i.e., an internal post-academy environment) appeared better able to promote their players into the professional football world. Critically, it seemed that a youth development philosophy that was embraced by all practitioners within the club (i.e., youth department, first team and the Board), alongside the presence of 'good people' who possessed a genuine care and supportive approach to player development was better positioned to facilitate and harness player development than any apparently more conducive and coherent structure.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 4.1 – Discussion

The following chapter explores the crucial themes and emergent findings within the thesis. Specifically, the aim of this chapter is to critically reflect on the pertinent issues that have emerged and attempt to consolidate meaning and application. This section also guides the reader through the research journey of the author, and highlights how the various procedural and methodological approaches that were adopted have enabled themes to emerge, and be extended, as the author faced differing methodological and positional challenges (Sparkes, 2002). The author's methodological challenges and reflections are easily identified in this chapter through the utilisation of *italic* font.

*The aim of the thesis was to gain a better understanding of European elite professional football clubs' management practices and organisational structures. For this reason, it was decided that the research should attempt to cover the most representative championships in Europe. This was a major challenge, considering the closed environment typically 'resistant to outsiders' that characterises elite level professional football (Parker, 1995). Nevertheless, and after experiencing a disappointing lack of response from clubs to formal letters of invitation to participate in this research, I decided to follow Sands' (2002) recommendation of identifying key stakeholders in order to facilitate my entry and acceptance within the clubs. To this end, I used contacts from my personal sporting background (i.e., coaches, professional players, or other staff members) to guarantee that the invitation was (at least) read by a significant gatekeeper. In some cases, the interest in the research from the staff within the club led to them providing further contacts in other clubs. Due to this 'chain of personal contacts', this research was able to include twenty-six elite professional football clubs (all with UEFA European Competition experience) from five different countries (i.e., England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden).*

*To date, no consensus or rationale as been achieved in literature in relation to the most suitable sample size (Jackson, 1995b; Hardy et al., 1996; Biddle et al., 2001). Nevertheless, literature associates the sample size to the opportunities to develop interviews with different participants (Partington & Orlick, 1991), or due to the personal contacts opportunities provided by the researcher (Young, White & McTeer, 1994). However, Kvale (1996) considers that a high sample may reduce the quality of the data collected and provide management problems during the data analysis. With no specific guidelines concerning an appropriate sample size, it appears pertinent to consider the words of Sears (1992, in Faulkner and Sparkes, 1999, p.148): 'The power of qualitative data... lies not in the number of people interviewed but in the researcher's ability to know well a few people*

*in their cultural contexts... illuminating the lives of a few well chosen individuals.'*

*Due to the secretive, sceptical and closed nature of professional football clubs (see Parker, 1995; Littlewood, 2005), there is a lack of research concerning the 'real' professional football environment, and the different stakeholders perceptions about it. In this sense, in order to explore the clubs' organisational structures, philosophies and working mechanisms, it was deemed important to provide the interviewees the opportunity to express their thoughts freely. The adoption of a combined protocol of semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Côté et al., 1993), allowed the interviewees to share their true perspectives, making it possible to glean an in-depth understanding of the environmental realities through the participant's eyes (Scanlan et al., 1989b; Dale, 1996).*

The resulting analysis identified that there were two major club structures present within the twenty-six elite European professional football clubs. However, both structures were similar in design, differing mainly by the presence of an additional vertical level. This vertical level was usually associated with the presence of a sports director who appeared to link the board and the two football departments (i.e., youth and professional). In the structure without the sports director, two board members were allocated to each of the departments, one responsible for the professional entity and other for the youth environment. Regardless of this structural difference, both structures seemed to contain and integrate similar staffing structures (i.e., roles and role titles). At this juncture it appeared that the results matched the concerns of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in that structural homogeneity (i.e., the existence of similar club structures) was evident. Moreover, it was proposed that this structural homogeneity was probably the consequence of the guidelines and regulations imposed by both national and international governing organisations (i.e., National Football Associations, and/or UEFA). The structural similarity between clubs was also evident in the youth departments. Indeed, all clubs, excluding the Swedish, favoured the identification of different departmental groups (e.g., technical, psychosocial, educational, operations, medical). This familiar representation of youth staff and their relevant departments aligned with similar reports by Stratton and colleagues (2004). Although presenting similar structures, and with each club being under the scrutiny and influence of their respective national football association, there was

no evidence of specific philosophies and/or working practices or mechanisms that were peculiar to any particular country or structure. In fact, the philosophies and working practices or mechanisms seem to be dictated by the type (and character) of the practitioners, normally influenced by each club's own culture and/or specific departmental sub-cultures (Chick, 2000; Wilson, 2001; Parker, 2001).

Even if we acknowledge that elite level professional clubs are now working more as business enterprises, and that their main concern is with their first team, most HYDs were concerned about the lack of investment (i.e., both financial and importance level) in youth development. In fact, and possibly due to this lack of investment, it was evident that virtual, philosophical, physical (e.g., two distinct training facilities), and cultural (i.e., distinct operational practices) distance existed between the two football departments within the club (i.e., youth and first team). In certain clubs, the lack of communication between the youth and the professional departments compounded this distance amongst them. This distance between departments led to the appearance of different sub-cultures within the same club. The identification of distinct sub-cultures operating under the umbrella of one organisation (i.e., an elite football club) suggested that these elite clubs were not immune to the fact that one organisation (whatever it may be or pretend to be) is unlikely to be monoculture, or one that is able to compresses (and or align) different sub-cultures, beliefs and values (Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Wilson, 1997). When 'isolated' (i.e., without communication with the professional department), the youth department seemed to develop their own sub-culture, with their own philosophies and working practices: *"...the youth area has a strategy, has a model, has a philosophy, and the professional football has another model, another strategy, and another philosophy..."* (ME, P) Whilst harmony and/or indifference may exist within distinct sub-cultures (Wilson, 2001), in this particular case, it is unlikely to be conducive to coherent player progression from the youth to the professional environment. Indeed, the extreme viewpoints evidenced and operating within and between some youth and first team departments would have a detrimental impact on the clubs effectiveness (Jarzabkowksi, 2008; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008).

According to the HYDs, the purpose of the youth development programme is to develop players to the first team, contribute to the player's personal development, and obtain financial reward. These *fine* sentiments were consistent with Stratton and colleagues (2004), Williams and Richardson (2006), and Laurin and colleagues (2008). Only the Swedish clubs referred that they offered a contribution to the development of their national football team. It was reported that this more national orientation was mainly due to a close working relation with (and subsequent funding mechanisms offered by) the Swedish FA.

Considering that the main aim referenced by all clubs was to develop players for the first team, HYDs showed some concern regarding the physical and cultural gap between youth and first team environments. Associated to this organisational barrier, HYDs reported that the *lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development* was the predominant external barrier for the players' transition to the professional environment. These barriers can be partly related to the more business orientation required of a modern professional football club, and the subsequent pressure on the first team coach to invest in recognised players in order to obtain immediate results (Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Richardson et al., 2005). Such a pressure to provide immediate returns limits the opportunity, and/or willingness, of first team managers or coaches to call upon (unfinished or unproven) young players to play in the first team. Two other external (uncontrollable) barriers were also identified as able to hinder player progression: *fortune and/or luck* (i.e., absence of injuries, luck to be in the club when a player in his position is needed in the first team); and *poor advice from family and football agents*. Further, internal barriers (those that are predominantly under the responsibility of the player), were also mentioned. For example, a *player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment*; a *player's lack of maturity* (i.e., not yet ready to behave as an elite sportsman); the *difficulty a player has in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment*; and also the *player's character* (i.e., lack of responsibility, modesty, humility). All these challenges and difficulties experienced by the players during their transition from the youth to the professional environment align with similar challenges and issues

faced by athletes in the transition from the *Development* to *Mastery* phase (see Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), or transition to *high-achievement and adult sports*, and the transition *from amateur to professional sports* (Stambulova, 1994, 2000).

In order to overcome these barriers, the HYDs identified twelve main attributes that might facilitate the players' transition to the professional environment: player's game intelligence/knowledge (see Gould et al., 2002); self-belief/self-knowledge/self-esteem (see Danish et al., 1993; Gould et al., 2002; Vernacchia et al., 2000); player's character (see Holt & Dunn, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004); mental strength (see Jones et al., 2002; Thelwell et al., 2005); persistency; an ability to deal with pressure and demands (see Holt & Dunn, 2004); competitive mentality; hard work/commitment (see Holt & Dunn, 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Van Yperen, 2009); desire to succeed and a willingness to make personal sacrifices (see Nesti, 2007); a player's aspiration to be consistent; possessing one special attribute (see Weinberg & Williams, 2001); and finally players should possess a *balance* between the different sporting skills (physical, technical, tactical and psychological) (see Helsen et al., 2000; Reilly et al., 2003). However, whilst these attributes appear to align with the attributes required for elite level sport in general, they do not appear to explicitly the preserve of the football environment. It seems pertinent to highlight that the notion of *persistency* was also mooted as a requisite attribute for elite football. However, on closer inspection it would appear that, whilst not a direct derivative of *mental toughness*, it would be fair to suggest that the HYDs perceptions of 'persistency' were associated with a mentally tough football player (Thelwell et al., 2005). In fact, the participants' perceptions of *mental strength* (i.e., maintaining emotional control even under pressure, maintaining performance) and *persistency* (i.e., high self-belief, remaining positive and calm under adversity and never giving up), seems to align with the sentiments offered in recent mental toughness research. Similarly, Nicholls and colleagues (2008) in their research with individual and team sport athletes identified confidence and control as the main characteristics of mentally tough

performers. Equally, in their work with Australian football players, Coulter and colleagues (2010), include *self-belief* and *control under pressure* as mental toughness characteristics. This thesis has revealed that mental strength and persistency are perceived to be key determinants for the successful transition of young football players' from the youth to the professional environment.

Whilst psychosocial support was recognised as a key determinant for successful youth player transition and adaptation to the professional environment, the development of psychosocial attributes rarely appeared to be delivered in any consistent, coherent or strategic sense. In fact, *only* eleven HYDs reported the existence of a formal strategy to develop these attributes with the players. However, such psychosocial concepts were typically delivered through one programme of workshops. It was evident that the majority of the HYDs relied on sporadic and ad hoc strategies to develop their players' psychosocial attributes. Furthermore, there appeared to be little attention paid to any progressive approaches to developing such psychosocial attributes and/or competencies (e.g., moving, say, from a general to a more individualised intervention). Typically, psychosocial support and development was portrayed as the responsibility of the conscientious individual, and an environment that, allegedly, encouraged the development of player self-knowledge through task and responsibility allocation. It was viewed that, through such practices, players would (implicitly) be able to develop emotional control. In addition, some clubs also adopted mental skills training (MST) workshops to introduce players to an array of psychological techniques. However, again, such workshops were typically isolated and it was generally left to the player to decide if they wished to engage in, or pursue such techniques. In this sense, in the majority of the clubs, players are made aware of, and *encouraged* to, engage in a self-development approach in order to improve their psychosocial attributes and/or deal with the challenges when they arise, however, there is little, if any, evaluation of the further utilisation or effectiveness of such techniques.

Nevertheless, the different HYDs considered that even though there was no presence of a 'formal' support and development strategy, they believed that they

provide sufficient support to their players (i.e. psychologically and socially), in order to develop and prepare them for the transition to the professional environment (mainly as a by-product of their day-to-day practices). Some clubs claimed that everyone in the academy played a role on the player's psychosocial support. Whilst this 'collective responsibility' is noteworthy, it can lead to the erroneous perspective that psychosocial support is just common sense, and that anyone is able to do it (Pain & Harwood, 2004). The coach was viewed by the HYDs as the main vehicle to deliver psychosocial support to the players. This view appeared to be more a consequence of the fact that it was the coach who spent the majority of time with the players (Williams & Richardson, 2006), as opposed to the identification of any particular skill set that the coach possessed. However, previous literature does recognise that the coach can be a significant role model (Côté, 2006), and should be charged with the responsibility of creating a stimulating learning environment (Jones et al., 2004). HYDs did recognise though, that this approach is impractical as often players' tend to fear the possible performance stigma that may be associated with sharing personal issues with coaches. In this regard, HYDs recognised the need to engage other practitioners (e.g., assistant coaches, sport psychologists, HYD), alongside the coach, in the provision of an effective support package for the players (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Reilly et al., 2003; Williams & Richardson, 2006).

The HYDs perception is that the increasing number of sport psychologists working within football clubs, mostly in the youth environment, is perhaps a consequence of this perceived need to surround the coach with experts in different areas. Our findings suggest that the entry and acceptance of sport psychologists within elite football clubs has been met with some initial resistance. Such a resistance is primarily due to a lack of knowledge regarding sport psychology and its (potential) benefits. The way in which the sport psychologist operates within the football environment is decisive to their further acceptance within the club. The role of the sport psychologist (or similarly aligned practitioner), their influence, status, and level of responsibility will vary across each setting (Greenspan & Andersen, 1995; Gardner, 2001). It was evident that the sport

psychologist (or similarly aligned practitioner) can be responsible *only* for the players' personal and social issues (e.g., academic guidance, contact with families, support to new coming players), solely for performance related issues or operate within a remit that embraces both performance and psychosocial agendas.

*Trustworthiness criteria have been used by qualitative researchers to legitimise methodological protocol and ensure that their findings reflect the reality of the phenomenon under investigation (Krane & Baird, 2005). This 'need' to support the research on concepts of trustworthiness parallels the positivist notions of validity, reliability (Côté et al., 1993; Heron, 1996), and transferability (Hardy et al., 1996). In sport psychology papers, trustworthiness criteria is usually focused on the credibility of the interview process (Biddle et al., 2001) and data analysis (Côté & Salmela, 1996; Meyer & Wenger, 1998). To supplement and refine my interview technique skills, I engaged in an interview training programme offered by the Psychology and Development Research Group at the Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University. The interviewer's technical skills (Rose & Jevne, 1993; Côté et al., 1995) and their cultural and sportive background (Hayashi, 1996; Weinberg, Butt, Knight & Perritt, 2001) have also been linked with trustworthiness criteria. However, qualitative literature does not provide clear guidance about pre-interview training or an interviewer's competency (Biddle et al., 2001). Moreover, during the design of the interview schedule, I developed various pilot interviews (Janesick, 1994), and triangulation with my supervisory team (McFee, 1992; Janesick, 1994; Biddle et al., 2001), to establish a more credible protocol, where reviews and refinements were considered. The triangulation of information sources contributes to establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of the researcher, and his/ her research procedures (Manning, 1997; Sparkes, 1998).*

*Despite the best efforts for rigorous interview process and content analysis, during my weeklong visit I became aware that not everything mentioned by the HYDs in the interviews was translated in their day-to-day existence. However, the methodological approach adopted in Study One did not allow for me to report what I experienced outside of the interviews. At this point, I started to realise that in order to understand the true working practices, more than develop formal interviews, it was necessary to spend some time within the clubs exploring the practitioners' true perspectives, beliefs, values and real daily practices. Therefore, in order to explore the daily practices of a professional football club (i.e., mainly the youth department and the young player's preparation for transition from the youth to the professional environment), I decided to adopt a more ethnographic approach in Study Two. Ethnography is referred to as the best way to capture the true human social behaviour within their own environment (Scanlan et al., 1989b; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005).*

*Due to time constrains, it was not feasible to develop an ethnographic approach with all twenty-six clubs. In this regard, it was decided to cluster the clubs according to the results obtained in Study One (i.e., club structure; youth development structure; communication between youth and first team; youth and first team shared or separate training facilities; the presence of a reserve team; the presence, or not, of a sport psychologist (or similarly aligned practitioner). From the clustering process, seven different situations emerged. It was decided to select one club to represent each of the respective cluster groups. However, if 'getting-in' in Study One was difficult then Study Two, being more invasive, was an ultimate challenge. In this sense, alongside the previously outline clustering criteria, the clubs were selected according with their interest, availability and willingness to participate in Study Two. Unfortunately, it was only possible to explore six of the seven situations, as the clubs from one of the groups were either unable or unwilling to afford me the access privileges required for Study Two.*

*Having six clubs to visit and due to the instability and frequent staff turnover within professional football clubs, it was decided to adopt a compressed ethnographic approach (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). In this regard, I spent one month, visiting daily, with each of the six clubs. Study One allowed me to identify the main gatekeepers in each of the environments (i.e., the coach of the team I was going to follow, other significant staff, and some players from within the group). From my previous experience as a practitioner, and as advocated by some researchers (see Adler & Adler, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Sands, 2002), I knew that the best way to be accepted within an environment was to earn the trust of these determinant gatekeepers.*

*As I was intending to follow mainly one team, and given that I had full clearance from the HYD, the first thing I decided to do was to approach and discuss my presence with the coach of the team. It seemed pertinent to allow the coach to decide the best way for me to be involved and subsequently settle in. This way I hoped to earn the respect of the coach, and made them fully aware that I respected their position and power, and that I did not want to, in any way, undermine their position or become a nuisance to them. I personally believe that this approach fostered my reception by the coaches in all of the clubs. Furthermore, on a daily basis, everyone within the respective academies appeared to accept (and embrace) my presence inviting me to have lunch most days, discuss football issues during coffee breaks, going with them to see the first team matches, and in some cases even being invited to have dinner in their houses with their families. More specifically with the players, my sporting past as a player and my experience visiting other clubs, associated with the coaches' acceptance, allowed me to break the initial ice and earn the trust of the most influential players and consequently the rest of the group. In more than one club I was invited to join the players for dinner and social gatherings.*

*Reflecting on my presence within the clubs, I realise that every club offered a different challenge. Each challenge was a consequence of the different club cultures and practitioner personalities. Such challenges required a constant adaptation and re-positioning of my behaviour. However, in every club I was conscious that I should adopt a friendly persona and a kindly demeanour, one where I was always willing and available to talk with anyone within the club. The fact that I was someone without any direct input into team selection appeared to encourage the players to be more open and share some of their feelings and concerns with me. This was something that personally made me feel good, knowing that I has secured the trust of the different stakeholders (or at least that is what I thought at the time). However, such trust carries with it a number of some ethical and moral challenges. Ellis (2007) suggested that whilst being engaged in a community, it is unthinkable to not develop some sort of friendship and care for the people within that environment. In fact, the trust emerging from a personal relationship can be perceived as an effective means to soften boundaries and obtain disclosure from a person (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kvale, 2006). Kvale (2006) relates this personal relation approach to what Jette Fog's (2004) called the 'Trojan Horse', alluding to the overcoming of the participants' defensive walls and disclosing information that they might not have wished to, not thought they ever would, share. Whilst the ethical implications and/or benefits of friendships between the researcher and the participants have been identified, there appears little guidance to offer researchers in similar positions (Ellis, 2007). Specifically, I experienced a number of confidential encounters that I had to navigate and manage. For example, one youth player told me that he believed he should be in the first team squad and if he didn't play for the first team by the end of the season then he was going to leave the club. Conversely, his coach had told me that he was seen as a potential first team player, but at the moment if he moved to the first team he would not have many chances to play. In this instance, both first team and the under-19s coaches had decided that he should stay in the under-19s and play regularly with the view to moving him on to the first team next season. Nevertheless the player was not informed of this decision. Charged with information from both sides my position was compromised. I found myself asking, 'what should I do?' I couldn't break the trust and confidence that both parties had entrusted with me, but at the same time I could avoid (even solve) a future problem. After reflecting on the situation, I decided to promote a talk between the two. On one hand, I told the player that he should go and talk to the coach, because by doing this he was displaying a sense of confidence and readiness to play for the first team. Whilst on the other hand, I talked with the coach and shared my (personal and professional) view that sometimes players need to be aware of what is going on around them, and used some personal experiences to reinforce this idea. I believed that by being informed about his specific situation, the player would be able to understand why he was not moving to the first team. Moreover, he would be aware that he is part of the plans for the following season, and he could better prepare himself for a more likely successful transition. I am pleased to say that my covert strategy appeared*

*to work. The player went to talk with the coach who explained the situation, and the player accepted his prolonged stay in the under-19s. Today he is an international player for his country, and a regular starting eleven for the first team. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, '...if I was not there, what might have happened to that player? I like to think that I played a small part in facilitating his progression, and perhaps promoted a better understanding for the coach and his future practices.'*

*On a daily basis, I recorded my experiences within the club's environment in a field notebook in order to help me reflect, support and guide my research activity and subsequent journey. Alongside the field notebook, I also developed a research log where I also included some more contextual details about specific situations that I experienced. This more contextual writing was supplemented with more personal feelings, thoughts and reflections. Initially, I used this approach as part of the multi-method approach advocated within a qualitative ethnographic approach (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, I soon started to realise that the information registered in the field notes and research log was contextually rich and extremely valuable. In this sense, I began to believe that it was important, and necessary, to provide the reader with this more personal lens and perhaps a truer lived experience of the day-to-day practices within the football environment. At this time, whilst I knew it was important to write, I was not fully aware of the best way to use and represent this information nor fully aware that I could. However, I was convinced that it needed to be included in this research somewhere and somehow.*

After providing the reader with the most relevant findings from Study One, and some insights into my own feelings and experiences whilst embedded in the ethnographic stages of Study Two, it seems pertinent to return to the findings obtained during this phase of the research.

The findings of Study Two Part I confirmed the HYDs comments regarding the need to operate within positive organisational practices, such as the formal identification of roles and responsibilities, more formal inter (i.e., between the youth and the first team departments) and intra (i.e., within the youth environment) communication channels, and the encouragement of coherent practices within the club. Such thoughts aligned with the critical aspects for organisation effectiveness (see Slack, 1997; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; De Knop et al., 2004). However, both academy staff practitioners and players believed that these strategies were more hypothetical

than real. In fact, they voiced concern over the inconsistent philosophies and practices that existed mainly between youth and first team environments. For example, on a daily basis, the 'formal inter communication channels' appeared to be more informal, with staff relying on ad hoc and per chance corridor meetings. Typically, communication was a hostage to the strength of the relationships between the different stakeholders. Specifically, mutual respect or friendship resulted in better communication whereas little respect or appreciation of the other resulted in poor communication. The results appear to contrast with the good internal communication identified by De Knop and colleagues (2004) within Flemish sport clubs (individual and team sports). Nevertheless, it was evident that there was a lack of *clear task management systems* within the respective Flemish clubs.

Similarly to Study One, it was confirmed that *a gap* existed between the youth and the first team mainly due to a lack of communication, alongside some inconsistent philosophies and working practices. Specifically, the cultural and philosophical distance impacts the consistency and coherency of the messages within the club environment. In Study One, HYDs said that most clubs were concerned with developing players and that this was articulated in the club's aims. However, coaches showed their concern regarding the conflicting messages that were evident within each of the clubs. Typically, they were told by the HYD that the main purpose of the academy or youth department was to develop players independently of match results. However, it was apparent that some directors and/or members of the board pressured coaches for results. Such a situation was highlighted with Tobias (team C coach) at Mjöllnir FC. The inconsistent messages from board and HYD regarding the purpose of youth development provoked an ideological conflict within the coaches. Specifically, a tension exists between, working towards the aim of the academy and develop players for the first team, as requested by the HYD, or to prepare their team to win matches (in some cases at the expense of the player's development). As confessed by Tobias, winning matches and keeping the Board happy might be the best way to retain their job. In their work with professional Belgium football clubs, Van Hoecke and colleagues

(2004) reported that the club's management strategy was a decisive component for an effective organisation. Consequently, the effectiveness of any youth development programme is a hostage to the investment and expectations of the clubs' respective managerial hierarchy (i.e., the first team manager and/or the Board). In this sense, the perceptible Board message inconsistency, unclear and unstable strategy understood by all practitioners regarding the youth department, might hinder the young players' transition to the first team.

The physical, cultural and philosophical distance between the youth and the professional departments was also reported by the players. There was a growing concern amongst the youth players that the Board didn't really believe in them, and that they *only* looked to the young players when there was no money to buy experienced and recognised players. Players' concerns were also extended to the methodologies and daily working practices (e.g., physical distance with the first team players, distinct game cultures) of the two environments. In fact, they believed that the distinct operating practices and philosophies made it difficult for them (i.e., those who actually made the transition) to adapt to 'life' with the first team. Moreover, players considered that there was a lack of strategic intent in preparing them to deal specifically with the new and demanding professional environment. In this regard, it was reported that there was little or no help in dealing with issues such as the media, the new social lifestyle, and the identity changes that they face. Furthermore, it was evident that a lack of guidance on what to expect, and how to cope with the distinct cultural demands of the first team (i.e., heightened intensity, a more ruthless environment, and less tolerance for failure). If we consider the players' apprehension regarding the lack of specific strategies to help them deal with life in the first team, alongside the concerns voiced by the academy staff about the players' challenges in the professional environment, it would appear that there is a need for the clubs' staff (including the professional department and the Board) to reflect on the effectiveness of the practices that (allegedly) attend to the young players post academy experience. The use of more thoughtful and strategic strategies may help young players' to travel more successfully through their transition to the professional environment.

The young players' transition from the youth to the professional environment has been identified as one of the most critical periods within a player's development pathway (Richardson et al., 2005; Vaeyens et al., 2005). This position seemed to be confirmed by the range of external and internal barriers and difficulties that the young players faced during such a transition. As in Study One, the *lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) in the young players, and youth development per se,* was the predominant external barrier mentioned by both the academy staff and the players. Furthermore, Study Two identified two extra external barriers, mentioned by the academy staff. These included the sometimes *premature and aggressive transition to first team* and *players on loan exposed to poor practices* (i.e., player's poor loan experiences, with little or no thought being given to the team hosting them, coupled with a distinct lack of communication with their donor club). The *premature and aggressive transition to first team* was linked to some FA regulations that affected the presence and/or location (e.g., competitive league standard) of the reserve team or team B. Consequently, it was possible to identify major structural differences between clubs regarding their teams that were allegedly fostering and promoting the players' transition. It must be said that the distinct operating practices evidenced here came with both positive and negative connotations. In some cases, clubs did not possess a reserve team or team B. Here, the young players moved directly from the under-19s to the first team, or were exposed to a loan system. The move from the under-19s directly to the first team was seen as premature and too aggressive. Similarly, coaches reported that on loan players were submitted to poor practices that may hinder their progression to first team. In other clubs, we saw the existence of an under-21s team playing at a regional level. This situation allowed the youngsters to play against adult players. However, this championship was characterised by a lack of competitiveness. Further to this, we witnessed a team B playing in the national championships and a team B playing in the second professional league. Both situations allowed the youth players to experience more competitive and challenging matches. However the players who played for the team B in the professional league (albeit the second division) also experienced the demands and lifestyle akin to that of the professional environment. This more professional experience would appear to be a

better match of the demands of the first team and therefore, better prepare them for the experience that playing in the first team holds. The professional team B has, allegedly, a *developmental* aim however, being a professional entity in its own right also has an economical and sporting impact. Thus, such a professional status compounds the dilemma between winning matches or developing players. However, we must recognise that the first team generates more income and is more high profile than team B. Understandably, the club's priority is the first team. The team B is therefore a hostage to the first team where for example, there may be times when their best players are 'called up' to the first team. This in-turn may make team B weaker for the weekend. All of those associated with team B (i.e., coaching staff, players and even fans) must be made fully aware of this and be encourage to accept it (even if it feels uncomfortable). The importance of communicating this message to all the stakeholders of team B would appear to be critical in securing its long term sustainability. The management of the two distinct professional teams, within the same organisation, is an extremely complex task.

Some internal barriers were also mentioned by academy staff and players. Within these barriers the academy staff highlighted the players' 'lack of commitment', 'lack of maturity', and 'lack of readiness to face the professional environment', whilst players referred, predominantly, to the 'player's character', and a 'lack of maturity'. These results compared favourably with those reported by the HYDs in Study One. However, whilst the players' *difficulty in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment* was not referred to in Study Two, the players' *lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices* was exclusive to Study Two. Whilst in Study One some strategies to develop the players' psychosocial attributes were mentioned by the HYDs, here the academy staff reported other strategies that they considered to have an impact on the players' transition to the professional environment: 1) the presence of a stimulating and challenging environment; 2) the need to allow young players to see the first team as something achievable and worthwhile fighting for (e.g., training on adjacent pitches); 3) encourage interaction, and use the first team players as role models (e.g., one canteen for all players and workshops with first team players); 4)

operate a loan system that allowed players to grow and mature playing regular competitive matches.

The youth players' within-career transition from the youth to the professional environment is associated with change and challenge. In an athletic sense, there is a move to a more demanding environment, one that is less tolerant of failure. From a psychological perspective there is a move from adolescence to young adulthood alongside, on a psychosocial level, changes at a relational level and changes in the player's social status. At an academic/vocational level, the players also experience a move into a professional occupation (Petitpas et al., 1997; Wuerth et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004). More specifically, it is possible to offer some contextual European football-based transitional related barriers (i.e., barriers that a young European based footballer may experience as they progress through to the professional environment) to the four levels of Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) athletic development model: *athletic level* – 'lack of trust and belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development'; 'organisational barriers'; 'premature and aggressive transition to first team'; 'players on loan exposed to poor practices'; *psychological level* – 'lack of commitment and willingness to make sacrifices'; 'player's lack of maturity'; 'lack of self-belief and self-confidence'; 'player's character'; *psychosocial level* – 'poor advice from family and/or football agents'; 'player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment'; 'difficulty a player has in dealing with the new lifestyle and professional social environment'; *academic/vocational level* – 'beginning of a professional occupation' (i.e., professional football player). It should also be noted that additional physical and/or environmental (e.g., separate training sites) and cultural and/or philosophical (e.g., game philosophy) levels should be considered during these transitional periods. As recognised, the transition from the youth to the first team already involves some barriers and challenges inherent to a change of circumstances and subsequent existence. If to those challenges we add the physical distance between the youth and the first team, a lack of long-term strategic planning for youth, and a lack of coherent practices and philosophies, the

transition to the first team becomes even more complicated and infinitely more difficult. The physical, philosophical, and cultural distance evidenced within the clubs, contributes to the uncertainty that exists amongst the different stakeholders towards the purpose of the youth department. Consequently, dissatisfaction amongst these staff was evident. Reinforcing the findings from Study One, the stakeholders lack of identification with the club's philosophy towards the youth development, affects the clubs' effectiveness regarding the main purpose for their youth development (i.e., the player's transition to the first team).

Despite the uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the club's philosophy regarding youth development, the different stakeholders confessed doing everything they can to help players. Similarly to Study One, the academy staff members considered that they provided the necessary support to players during their development. Typically, this support included, sporting (sport related issues), psychological, medical, academic, and social support. Moreover, some staff members tended to perceive that psychosocial support was responsibility and consequence of the daily practices of everyone working within the academy, providing the player with an array of different stimulus contributing to the player's holistic development (see van Rossum, 2001; Stratton et al., 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004; Williams & Richardson, 2006). This appears to be consistent with the reality experienced at Aldam City FC, with some players' reporting that the support received was a consequence of the combined work of everyone within the academy, independently of their role.

The impracticality of the coach to be the main social support network for the players, emergent in Study One, was reinforced by some players who consider that a close and friendship relations coach-athlete might impact negatively on the coaches sporting decisions. Moreover, players referred four reasons to do not feel comfortable in sharing their toughs with the coaches: 'lack of coach support', 'lack of understanding from coaches', 'team mates misinterpretation', and 'fear to show weaknesses'. The first two reasons seem to relate to the complex coach-athlete relationship. The coach-athlete relationship is influenced by the respective

personalities of each individual. The results reported here concur with the notion that the coach-athlete relationship evolves over time. In this regard, coaches change their concerns from a more caring and supportive approach during development (i.e., in the youth environment) to a more performance oriented approach as the player progresses to the first team (see Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; van Rossum, 2001; Stratton et al., 2004). Similar, to van Rossum's findings with dancers, it was evident that the coaches changed their perception of players as they progressed from the youth to the professional environment. In these elite football environments, the coach rarely travels up with their players during the transition. However there is a change from one coach to another (e.g., youth coach to reserve team coach or first team coach), it was evident that the coaches who were located within the professional ranks of the club typically adopted different view of the player. It is during this transition that the player was seen more as a commodity, an athlete or a product than a person. In addition to this progressively relational distance between coaches and players during their development pathway, it was also possible to associate a growing fear from the players in their willingness to show weaknesses and be seen as unable to cope with the professional environment. This change is likely to be a consequence of the traditional 'masculine culture' that *still* characterises the elite football environment (Parker, 2001). This relational distance is more pronounced with coaches of higher end teams (e.g., under-19s, reserve/team B, and first team).

Consequently, during this particular transition, players had a tendency to share their personal issues and feelings with people not directly linked with club, such as their parents, family, and/or friends. In fact, the emotional support of their parent(s) was reported by players as very important and decisive to help with this difficult period (also see Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The work of Bloom (1985) suggested that parental involvement decreases during the development pathway, and particularly in the perfection phase. However, findings here show that in these elite European football environments, the parents' emotional support would appear crucial for players to successfully navigate this post-academy transition to the professional environment. Specifically, the caring and loyal approach of the

parents' external support provides the players with a 'safe place' to go; an escape from the ruthless and demanding football environment. This 'need' to look for support outside the club might be related with the little acceptance and impact of the sport psychologist within the academy. Moreover, when the player makes the transition, normally there is no one in the first team environment who is able to support them. This way, the players are 'obligated' to look for external support. The importance of parental support to the players cannot be ignored by clubs. Whilst some coaches cite that parents offer a disruptive divergence to players (e.g., at times offering contrary, ill-timed or misinformed advice to their son), the academy staff must create strategies to 'teach' parents how to help their son's development and attempt to educate and integrate the parent in the development process (Côté, 1999). *Only* ten clubs reported that they have develop Manuals and workshops in order to help parents understand their place and role within their son's development pathway. It was evident that even though these raised parental awareness, they tended to be ad hoc, infrequent and superficial.

Generally, players felt that personal issues and concerns should be kept outside of the academy environment. Similar to the findings of Gilbourne and Richardson (2006), some players did report talking to practitioners (e.g., the sport psychologist, teachers, assistant coaches, and head of recruitment) within the academy environment. During my time at the clubs, I saw players approaching a range of academy staff with personal issues (i.e., other than approaching the main coach). Usually, players adopted a more subtle approach towards these staff with a view to avoiding other players becoming aware of such interactions. For example, in one situation I saw one player delaying his stretching at the end of the training session in order to manufacture a moment to be alone with the assistant coach. Given that players were fearful of showing their weaknesses to coaches, this occurrence seemed a little surprising. However, the different relations and behaviour of the coaches within the technical team might help explain the situation. As reported by one Spanish coach:

> *"...For me the coach must keep a balance between proximity and distance in their relationships with the players, but I don't think that a big distance is*

*positive. I can split my relationship into two different contexts: pitch – where I am usually very cold, demanding, tough, meticulous, and I am always over the players; outside the pitch – I have a closer relationship with them. I am more communicative and friendly. Usually I leave the friendship relationship to my assistant manager... he is the person who has the close relationship and builds a friendly relation with them; he listens to them, and talks about everything... even about their personal lives...*" (C, EE)

In another situation, a player said loudly that he was going to do some extra work in the gym (that resided next to the room of the sport psychologist), in order to talk with the sport psychologist without the other players (and coaches) realising. Similarly, Bond (2002) reported that athletes tend to perceive that talking to a sport psychologist (or similarly aligned practitioner) is a sign of weakness and internal instability. The mere presence of the sport psychologist within the youth environment did not necessarily mean that there was no resistance, or reluctance to embrace the practices espoused by the various sport psychology practitioners. It appeared that resistance and reluctance were a composite of the staff member's lack of knowledge of, and/or an unwillingness to accept, the potential benefits of sport psychology. The sport psychologists also described the difficulties that they faced in explicitly identifying that a player's improvements (e.g., behaviour or performance), were directly linked with their action. Conversely, the other staff (i.e., the coaches) typically reported their concerns over the difficulties of finding a sport psychologist, who possessed football specific (craft) knowledge and the ability to act, behave and survive according to, and within the culture of the football world. These findings confirmed some of the main barriers for the entry and acceptance of the sport psychologist within a club's environment (Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Pain & Harwood, 2004).

*The perceived difficulty of the sport psychologists in gaining entry and acceptance within the club environment, made me reflect on my own experience. I know that I am not a sport psychologist, although I had a psychosocial agenda, so why was I accepted so well? In contrast with the (usual) purely academic knowledge of the sport psychologists, I felt that I was able to combine some academic (professional) knowledge with my football specific craft knowledge. This way, I was able to fulfil one of the coach's desires for a sport psychologist (or similarly aligned practitioner), to possess the knowledge of the sport environment (Weinberg & Williams,*

> *2001; Pain & Harwood, 2004). Furthermore, my coaching background, allowed the coach to speak with someone that understood, well that's what I was left to believe, the demands and pressures inherent in a coaching role (Giges et al., 2004).*
>
> *Possibly my acceptance within the clubs could be different if I was assuming a full time role within the club. Nevertheless, from my experience, it appears that a sporting background, alongside a sound understanding of people (generally), the specificity of the sports environment, and my role within it, may be a determinant to the acceptance of sports psychology, and consequently assist in the development of trust and close relationships with the different stakeholders.*

Similarly, the coaches themselves reported the need to talk to someone who was able to understand them (Giges et al., 2004). Pummel and colleagues (2008) suggested that athletes frequently require someone around them to provide emotional support, listen to them, and make them feel that they are not alone. It is also important that players (and coaches) accept that this person is able to do these things. For example, during the time that I spent within a Spanish club, one young player said:

> *"...in football world clubs don't care about the players. The only thing that they are concerned about is your performance. If you perform well, they like you and everything is ok, but if you have a problem they just don't want to know. That's why my problems I share with my family. Why share my issues with those who don't care about me?"* (Spanish youth player)

This seems a strong statement, from a youth player about the need to feel that practitioners care about him. In this sense, and in order to be accepted by players as someone who can provide emotional support (e.g., John from Aldam City FC), practitioners must bear in mind the needs of the athlete and show a true (or genuine) concern regarding the person as well as the athlete (Corlett, 1996; Bond, 2002; Nesti, 2002). Given that the professional environment typically views the player as a commodity it would appear that this philosophical positioning of practice would be extremely rare. Aldam City FC, and more specifically John's example, shows how the presence of 'good people', one that is able to straddle both the youth and professional environments, with a genuine care and supportive approach to the players, may help the young players become aware of, and

subsequently cope with, the difficulties during their development pathway. Within the sport psychology community, there appears to be little agreement as to a precise definition for what constitutes genuine care. The notion of genuine care in this research adopts a broad perspective to client and practitioner relationship. Similarly, Hill (2001) reported that genuineness, non-judgmental care and empathy, are fundamental elements of a more humanistic approach to sport psychologists (or similarly aligned practitioners). The notion of genuine care was exemplified by John. His genuineness, non-judgmental and empathic approach to player support (i.e., on both a performance and personal level) was evident throughout his narrative. Frequently, these 'good people' over-reach their role and responsibilities, by doing things that they believe are in the best interest of the players. Furthermore, the development of trust and closeness is the preserve of the more caring and supportive practitioners. In this regard, Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) recount that practitioners working within a sporting environment should, where possible, adopt a more humanistic and caring approach. Specifically, there is a need to understand the athlete as a whole in order to help him to survive in such a demanding and competitive environment. Furthermore, these authors believed that it was possible to conciliate a performance agenda with a caring approach. In fact, empirical literature defends that the athlete's performance is influenced by life issues, such as the coach-athlete relationship, adapting to new roles, moving into a new environment and culture, financial matters, interpersonal relationships, girlfriends or family problems (Orlick, 1989; Neff, 1990; Dorfman, 1990; Loehr, 1990; Ravizza, 1990; Danish et al., 1992; Poczwardowski, et al., 2004). However, instead of conciliating a caring and performance approach, it seems that techniques and interventions remain the main sport psychology and performance enhancement service delivery (Nesti, 2006). Furthermore, recent literature, instead of moving towards a more combined approach, appears to continue 'wasting time' debating the purely caring *versus* a purely performance enhancement approach from sport psychologists with elite athletes (Andersen, 2009; Brady & Maynard, 2010).

*After the results presented in Study One and Study Two Part I, I felt that some aspects of practice were still 'hidden' from the surface (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). At this time, I felt that the rigorous approaches adopted in the presentation of the results of Study One and Study Two Part I failed to fully capture the day-to-day experiences that I had witnessed. I was keen to integrate some of the information registered in my field notebook and research log during my engagement within the clubs. The challenge for me at this moment (and my supervisory team that I dragged into this challenge), was to decide what was the most important information to use from my notebook and research log, and how to represent it. The intention was to offer the reader a more detailed perspective on the day-to-day practices within the environment through my eyes, feelings, emotions and reflections. It was important that the representation style was able to 'drag' the reader into the environment, experience and live the scenes, capturing the true nature of the practitioners' behaviour (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). In this sense, I decided to adopt a creative non-fiction approach (Van Maanen, 1988; Sparkes, 2002).*

*Using creative non-fiction narratives, it was possible to offer the reader contextualised practices, situations and characters. Due to the richness of the experience, I included some of my feelings and reflections registered in these moments (Tierney, 2002). The idea was not to influence the reader's interpretations (Davis, 2000), but share the effect that these experiences had on me whilst I was a researcher embedded in the environment. In fact, the interactions with coaches and players, alongside my own experiences in the research setting, allowed me to share and describe the hidden, yet significant, aspects of their experiences within the culture and context of professional football.*

*The legitimisation of a creative non-fiction narrative is related to the capacity to engage the readers emotionally and the ability to offer the reader a sense of data authenticity and credibility (Sparkes, 2002). In this sense, I tried to be as faithful as possible to what I experienced and to the voices of the participants. The authenticity and credibility can be captured by a broader term, verisimilitude. The latter is linked with an evaluation of the evocative power of the writing or the capacity to draw the reader into an experience (Schwandt, 1997). Furthermore, the narrative also needed to be believable and offer a sense of fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Sparkes, 2000). To be believable, the narrative and the events presented must be convincing for the reader to genuinely feel this.*

### 4.2 – Overview and Recommendations

This research set out to explore the organisational structures, philosophies and working practices of elite European professional football clubs. Specifically, the research explored the impact of the respective structures and practices on the transition of youth football players to the professional environment. Moreover, it explored the youth player's psychosocial support, preparation and development towards such a transition. As a result of the lack of research developed within professional football clubs (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010), it seemed pertinent to 'release' the different stakeholders from their silence and 'hear' their voices and perspectives regarding the day-to-day existence within their working environment (i.e., the youth department of an elite professional football club).

Study One explored and represented the perspectives of twenty-six HYDs (or similar) from a number of elite professional football clubs (all with UEFA European Competition experience) from five different countries (i.e., England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). The HYDs voices were then captured through the adoption of a combined protocol of semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Côté et al., 1993; Biddle et al, 2001), constructed and guided by the procedural notions of technical rigour and trustworthiness. Study Two utilised a longitudinal ethnographic approach (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000; Krane & Baird, 2005) to further explore, understand and experience the day-to-day working practices of these environments. Study Two was predominantly concerned with the players' psychosocial support and development offered to the players' during their transition from the youth to the professional environments. In this sense, the researcher was engaged for one month in each of the six clubs that constituted the sample of Study Two, France (n=1), Portugal (n=1), Spain (n=3), and Sweden (n=1). The results section of Study Two was presented in two parts. Study Two Part I, reported the perspectives of the academy staff (n=23) and players (n=15) (including youth and professional) on the preparation and transition of youth players to the professional environment, using a combined protocol of semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Côté et al., 1993; Biddle et al, 2001). Study Two Part II, reported specific and significant

episodes that allowed the reader to 'see' examples of day-to-day delivery practices through the utilisation of a creative non-fiction approach (Van Maanen, 1988; Sparkes, 2002). Through these qualitative methodologies, it was possible to ascertain the stakeholders perceptions about how things are, what they say they do, what they do and why they do it. It was also an opportunity to provide specific narrative vignettes that were better able to 'take' the reader into the club setting and experience the day-to-day working practices.

The results have highlighted the existence of two types of organisational structure. These structures were similar in their design, but differed by the presence of one more vertical level (i.e., a sports director making the link between the board and the two football departments, youth and first team). The structural similarity was also identified in the youth structure, with all clubs (except the Swedish) favouring the identification of different departments. Even though similar organisational structures and staffing profiles (i.e., roles and role titles) were presented, there was no evidence of specific philosophies and/or working practices that where peculiar to any particular country or structure. The philosophies and working practices of each club would appear to be a consequence of the practitioners' individual approaches to practice that, in turn, would also seem to be influenced by the respective club's culture and/or sub-culture. Furthermore, all stakeholders (both in Study One and Study Two) expressed their concern and dissatisfaction with the existence of either a physical, philosophical and/or cultural distance between the youth and the professional departments.

The findings align with career transition literature, and confirm the existence of an array of challenges and difficulties faced by the athlete during his development pathway (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Stambulova, 2000; van Rossum, 2001; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004: Pummel et al., 2008). However, this research, whilst aligning with some of the generic challenges faced by athletes in their development pathway, also identifies the specific challenges and difficulties perceived and/or experienced by football academy staff and players in elite

European football clubs. The perceived difficulties (or barriers) were categorised as either *external*: lack of trust and/or belief of the first team coach(es) in youth development; organisational barriers; fortune and/or luck; poor advice from family and/or football agents; premature and aggressive transition to the first team; players on loan exposed to poor practices; or *internal*: a player's lack of readiness to face the professional environment; a player's lack of commitment and/or willingness to make sacrifices; a player's lack of maturity; the player's character; a lack of self-believe and self-confidence; a lack of patience; and/or players difficulty in being made aware of and subsequently coping with a new lifestyle and identity within a professional social environment.

In order to overcome these barriers, some strategies and player attributes were highlighted. It was possible to ascertain some inconsistency in practice. The players reported specific concerns over their lack of preparation to cope with the professional environment, whilst the HYDs reported satisfaction in their, typically sporadic and ad hoc, strategies used to develop the psychosocial attributes, and the strategies that they (and other academy staff) believed had an impact on the players' transition to the professional environment. This inconsistency appears to indicate the need for some clarification amongst the different stakeholders, of the types of strategies and practices that could be employed, and how, or whether they actually work.

Some individual attributes were identified as playing an important role in the youth players' transition to the professional environment. Amongst these attributes, some were perceived as critical to a player's successful progression. These more critical attributes included 'good sporting skills' (i.e., players were require display an equal balance of physical, technical, tactical, and psychosocial skills), 'special attribute(s)', 'mental strength', 'a desire and willingness to make personal sacrifices', and 'hard work/commitment'. Despite recognising that these attributes were important for the youth players' transition to the professional environment, less than half of the clubs in Study One presented a formal strategy to develop them (i.e., through workshops). This workshop approach may

contribute to raising the youth players' awareness of the professional environment. However, players report a lack of explicit strategies that specifically prepare them to deal with the professional environment. Such player perceptions suggest that the workshops (and other more ad hoc mechanisms) are not effective. In fact, in one club they defined a series of workshops to focus on a range of different issues (e.g., drugs, nutrition, media, football rules). However, the players told me that even though they were scheduled to take place throughout the season they only received one session.

The results of both Study One and Study Two, highlighted that during the players' development pathway the club provides sporting, psychological, medical, academic, and social support. The provision of psychosocial support was reported to be the responsibility of all the academy practitioners. This particular perspective can give the erroneous impression that anyone is able to do it (Pain & Harwood, 2004). The coach seems to be the HYDs practitioner of preference to be the main person responsible for psychosocial support. However, the impracticality of coaches assuming this responsibility was reported. Specifically, players' presented a number of reasons as to why coaches cannot act in this manor. Typically, coaches lacked the skills to offer such support. This was compounded by a general lack of understanding and/or empathy for the young players' situation. Players were also concerned with the misinterpretation of their personal issues by the coach and/or their team-mates with respect to how these issues influenced or affected their performance. Lastly, players were predominantly concerned with a fear to show that they possessed any weaknesses. Again, a reluctance to show weakness, rather than deal with weakness was seen, by the players, as a potential barrier to their future selection. HYDs considered it necessary to integrate other practitioners that, alongside the coach, could provide effective psychosocial support to the players (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Reilly et al., 2003; Williams & Richardson, 2006). This perspective might be associated to the increasing number of sport psychologists working within the club. Though, sport psychologist habit mainly within the academy environment. In fact, from the twenty-six elite professional clubs of Study One sample, only

two presented a sport psychologist working within the professional environment. The role of the sports psychologist and their subsequent responsibility appears to vary according to the setting and or level (Greenspan & Andersen, 1995; Gardner, 2001), being responsible *only* for the players' personal and social issues (e.g., academic guidance, contact with families), or operate in a way that embraces both performance and psychosocial agendas.

Regardless the presence of someone designated responsible for the player's personal and social issues within the youth environment, the evident 'masculine culture' of the football environment (also see Parker, 2001), led players to (predominantly) keep personal issues and inner feelings outside of the club. This practice was even more evident when players progressed towards the more demanding, ruthless, and less tolerant professional environment. Specifically, the players move from a more supportive academy environment, to a more ruthless environment. The more ruthless and intense professional environment (i.e., one in which psychosocial tensions may be heightened) is void of the presence of socially supportive practitioners. Furthermore, it was evident that the players preferred to share their personal issues with someone that they believed had a genuine care for them. During these later development years (i.e., as they neared the professional environment or progressed to it) the players tended to seek out their family for this type of support. However, without disregarding the notion (or likelihood of influencing) performance enhancement, those practitioners that adopt a more caring approach, typically going beyond their formal remit, appear more able to earn the players trust. John's story is an example of this. Frequently players just need to feel that they are not alone and have someone within the club who (genuinely) cares about them (Pummel et al., 2008), and subsequently, in cases of need, will always be there to help. In this sense, players are more likely to become aware, understand and subsequently cope with the challenges that emerge during their development pathway (including the post-academy transition), feel embraced by the club, and be focused on their performance.

Generally, a clear and all inclusive youth philosophy embraced by everyone within the club, alongside the existence of 'good people', seems more likely to be effective in helping the young players to move to the professional environment than any seemingly progressive and harmonious, but ultimately superficial, structure. However, these 'good people' (i.e., presenting genuine care for the player, their well-being, and development; usually using a craft knowledge skill base) need to be strategically positioned and empowered to influence practice. As highlighted in the cases of Oskar and Pablo, even though they had their players at the centre of their thoughts and practices, they were a hostage of the club's politics, relationships and limited strategic empowerment. In this particular case, these 'good people' should be able to straddle the two environments, and understand the complexities and tensions associated to the young players' transition from the youth to the professional environment. Moreover, they must have an ability, which can be craft (or professionally) based, to translate the player context into meaningful practice.

Across the research, the different stakeholder perspectives, coupled with the researcher's experiences and reflections, have illuminated a number of player development challenges within elite European football. Subsequently, such experiences warrant a synopsis of the recommendations for the 'actors' within football world. These recommendations are presented below:

> The respective FA regulations that prevent the location of the reserve team or team B in more competitively demanding championships seems to hinder the youth player's progression. Specifically, players have limited opportunity to play in intense and competitive environments that better match the first team experience. In some cases there was a real concern over the lack of high level competitiveness in the championships where the reserve team or team B was located. In these cases, clubs were more likely to move the young players to the professional environment prematurely, or send them out on loan to clubs where, without adequate management from the donor club, they risked being exposed to poor practices. In this sense, it

may be useful for the FAs to reflect on, and maybe consider some of the regulations in use;

Football clubs should define clearly their aims, as well as the individual aims, roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders under their organisational umbrella. Moreover, in order to be more effective, clubs should structure themselves according with their aims and should be seen to establish sound and fluent communication channels (see Rink, 1997; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Bray et al., 2004; De Knop et al., 2004). This way, everyone within the club will be able to know, understand and embrace the club's aims in order to work towards the same goal;

All clubs stipulated that the main purpose of their youth departments was to promote young players to the first team. If this is to be seen as a feasible aspiration with a more tangible return, then clubs need to recognise the gap that exists between the youth and the professional departments. In this regard, clubs should be encouraged to (re)structure themselves in order to eliminate, or at least reduce, the gap between these two entities. The presence of a physical, philosophical and/or cultural distance amongst the two football departments compounds this situation and creates additional barriers and challenges that further hinder the already complex and demanding transition of young players from the youth to the professional environment;

It appears imperative that the academy staff (including HYDs, coaches and aligned practitioners) reflect on the effectiveness and/or clarity of the strategies that they employ, if any, regarding the awareness, preparation and subsequent ability to cope with their new environment, sporting identity and social status;

The importance of adopting, encouraging and promoting the notion of genuine care should be explored with all practitioners. In this sense, the different practitioners may benefit from presenting a more caring approach

in their practices, without disregarding the performance agenda or neglecting the stark reality of professional football. A caring approach that neglects the fact that elite sport is a *tough place to be* will prevent any athlete from successfully transiting to the professional ranks. A more global understanding of the player and a more caring approach may help players overcome life, as well as sporting, issues that will more likely make them feel more confident, and consequently maintain (or even increase) their performance levels;

The previous recommendation has implications for the training of the respective practitioners. As referred by Bond (2002), the role of the applied sport psychologist is to understand, assist, and support the development of the whole person, however practitioners are still obsessed by MST (Slater, 1997). In that sense, as suggested by various researchers, it's time to move way from MST and start adopting a more Socratic humanistic and caring approach (Corlett, 1996; Gardner, 2001; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Nesti, 2006; Simons & Andersen, 1995). Even, being directly linked with the role and applied training of the sport psychologist, this need to adopt a more humanistic and caring approach can be extended to all practitioners. However, this humanistic and caring principles are absent from the practitioners applied training and personal development programmes, so it urges the need to integrate notions of caring applied support;

Parental emotional support seemed critical for the players during their development pathway and specifically in the latter year of their development, progression and subsequent transition to the professional environment. It would appear that in elite European football the parents are critical provider of psychosocial support to players entering or transiting to the professional environment. Whether this is primarily due to the lack of, or limited presence of, sports psychologists in the professional environment or a consequence of the macho and masculine culture that *still* dominates and defines these environments, it would appear imperative that clubs take not of the extent to which players rely on their parents and families for

support. In this regard, rather than ignore or neglect the role of the parent clubs need to explore more effective ways of, educating, communicating and integrating the parents throughout the developmental pathway (i.e., early years through to professional status and beyond). A more educated and informed parent would more likely be a better ally for the coaches and thus eliminate or reduce the perceived confusion, mixed-messages and general disruption that can be caused by parents.

### 4.3 – Limitations, Considerations and Future Research

The following section highlights some considerations, difficulties and limitations experienced during the development of this research. This section enables the author to reflect on specific conceptual and methodological issues inherent within the research. Initial difficulties in contacting the clubs, gaining access and the infuriating propensity to cancel, re-schedule and/or forget appointments were generally overcome. However, other issues proved impossible to solve. For example, despite the numerous personal contacts of my supervisory team and myself a number of clubs refused to make themselves available to participate in the research or showed no interest in the research at all. Nevertheless, none of the limitations impeded the achievement of the specific aims determined. Some specific considerations and limitations are presented below:

Initially the research aimed to include the most representative championships in Europe (i.e., English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish). In addition, it was hoped that clubs from my own country (i.e., Portugal), the Nederlands (i.e., a country recognised for their youth development), Scandinavia (i.e., Sweden), and an Eastern European country (i.e., Russia) would be represented. Despite the initial difficulty it was possible to include in clubs from five of these nine countries (i.e., England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). Whilst, I had everything arranged with five clubs in Italy, however, the research collided with the corruption case that involved some of the major clubs in Italian football. In this regard, the clubs decided that it was not the best time to develop research with

them. Similarly, everything was arranged to visit three clubs in Russia but my visa application to undertake the research was not granted and thus prevented their inclusion in the research. Four high profile clubs from the Nederlands declined the invitation to participate in the research without offering any specific justification, whilst the German clubs only agreed to participate if the research was undertaken in German. Whilst I can converse in four languages, my inability to speak German prevented their inclusion;

After securing the inclusion of twenty-six clubs, the major challenge was to develop a time schedule that was aligned with the different championship calendars. My schedule was also dependent on the availability of the clubs to receive me. This task was extremely difficult but perseverance allowed for a long, but successful period of work;

It seems appropriate to consider the distinct approaches to content analysis and the subsequent representation of the interview data. Whilst rigorous content analysis procedures were adopted, it was a representational challenge to best capture and highlight the data's contextual richness. Indeed, the way in which the data is represented is equally important as the approach to content analysis. Specifically, whilst the same underpinning principles of content analysis can be undertaken, different types of representation may be adopted. In this research, the data from both Study One and Study Two Part I, was subjected to rigorous content analysis procedures. However, the data was presented differently in Study One as opposed to Study Two Part I. The use of content analysis tables in Study Two Part I allow the reader to identify the possible similarities and differences between groups of participants. The adoption of this more traditional tabular representation of content analysis, whilst not implausible, would have hindered the ability of the author to offer rich contextual data that represented the perspectives of the respective HYDs. In this regard, a more descriptive approach with extensive verbatim quotes was perceived to be the most appropriate way to offer the reader a more fluid, personal and intimate understanding of each of the HYDs' perspectives.

Disappointingly, and despite the best efforts of both my supervisory team and I, it was impossible to overcome the lack of willingness and subsequent unavailability of any of the six English clubs to participate in Study Two. This situation prevented me from exploring one of the clustered groups according resulting from Study One;

As I mentioned previously, I am able to speak four languages, and as with German, Swedish is not one of them. In this sense, even though I was extremely thankful for the effort that most of the practitioners and players took to speak frequently in English to me and during my presence at the club, there were moments where I could not understand what they were saying. However, due to good the relationships that I had established with the different stakeholders, they appeared happy to explain and clarify a point or issue in English if I so requested;

Finally, the last limitation, which is in fact more a frustration, is related to the volume of data collected during the ethnographic engagement that was unable to present in this research. The characteristics inherent to the production of a PhD and/or academic journals limit the use of some of the data collected. To this, I need to explore further publication outlets that will allow for this extremely rich and contextual information to be made available to the readership.

The results obtained in any research can be very specific and focused in nature and subsequently can be directly linked to a specific theoretical position. Conversely, research may attempt to adopt a more global, holistic and/or existential approach to understanding the complexities of an individual's day-to-day existence. Such a broad approach naturally requires an equally broad understanding, reference to and utilisation of a broader range of literature. This thesis has adopted such a broad approach in order to attempt to fully capture the complex array of situations, cultures, personalities, characteristics and environments that may influence and/or impact a player's world. In this regard,

the research alludes to more generic, eclectic and global sport psychology principles. However, it was evident that issues that appeared to align with more refined theoretical constructs did emerge. For example, it emerged that during the player's transition from the youth to the professional environment it was important for the players to possess self-belief and/or self-knowledge. The explicit examination of how and/or whether self-belief and/or self knowledge is or can be enhanced through training and practice within distinct, elite football environments should be the base for future research. Such a specific focus requires reference to more specific sport psychology literature such as Orlick & Partington (1998), Vernacchia and colleagues (2000), Gould and colleagues (2002), Jones and colleagues (2002), or Thelwell and colleagues (2005).

This research focused on the psychosocial support provided to young football players during their transition from the youth to the professional environment. The terms psychosocial and psychological support have been very often misused and misunderstood. The position of this research considered that psychological support is related to an individual's or groups' mental and/or emotional needs, whereas psychosocial support represents a broader and more holistic approach that embraces the individual's or group's social interactions (OVC Support, 2010). Future research should explore the different practitioners' perceptions of these two terms. Specifically, such research would assist in clarifying the differences and/or similarities that exist among and between them. Such research could also help determine aspects of best practice that could be adopted by such practitioners. More specifically, there is a need to develop more studies that adopt a more psychosocial perspective. In this regard, studies that attend to the needs of elite athletes and explore the most appropriate ways to support them within their respective sports and the associated environmental, situational and cultural constructs that impact the athlete's day-to-day existence. Recent literature (Nesti, 2010), highlights the need to understand the specific cultural nuances of professional football in order to provide a more effective support to players.

Similarly, other participants' perceptions and emerging issues from this research ought to be considered as starting points for future research. Outlined below are some possible lines of research enquiry that may extend this work:

According to Mayring (2007), all phenomena are thought to be time and context specific. Moreover, different contexts, cultures and domains carry their own specific characteristics, and to understand them it is necessary to explore each situation individually (Chick, 2000; Quarterman & Li, 2003). Given that this research is based on a Pan-European perspective, and even though it was not evident that specific organisational structures, philosophies or working practices were the preserve of any particular country, it would seem pertinent to explore the '*reality*' that exists in the countries that were unable to be included in this research. Perhaps this research could embrace a different geographical context (e.g., another Continent), or a different sporting level (e.g. compare Premiership with Championship clubs). The different contexts and cultures may offer different organisational structures, philosophies, and working practices;

During the research, more than once youth coach referred to a dilemma between developing players *versus* winning matches (e.g., Oskar and Tobias). This dilemma appears to be (mainly) a consequence of the inconsistency and uniformity of the club's philosophies towards the purpose of youth development and their respective youth development teams. Considering that the effectiveness of an organisation is associated to a clear and common goal embraced by everyone within the working environment (Mintzberg, 1979; Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; De Knop et al., 2004), it would be interesting to explore this development versus winning perspective more specifically with a number of both youth and first team coaches, players and also board members;
Some players' reported the need to have someone who truly cared about them, and that was present to support them when they needed them. Specifically they did not want to feel isolated or alone in these places. These feelings align with the findings of Pummel and colleagues (2008) in their

research with event riders. In this sense, and considering that the recent literature continues to debate whether or not sport psychologists should be more caring *or* performance enhancement focused (Andersen, 2009; Brady & Maynard, 2010), I suggest that future research goes further with this debate and attempts to explore a more combined and flexible approach to practice. Moreover, this research should adopt a more immersed and qualitative approach to be able to listen to the 'voices' of the players, record these voices and represent them more accurately. It is only when we understand their needs that we will be able to offer the desired support to the players and practitioners.

This research primarily concerned the role and practice of elite football club practitioners associated with the development of young player. However, both players and practitioners alluded to the critical role that the parents' played in the provision of emotional support during the players' development pathway. Bloom (1985) suggested that the parents' involvement in the development of athletes (and/or skilled individuals) decreases during their development pathway. This research suggests that, within elite European football, their presence and subsequent importance to players is a vital aspect of their career, even after they progress to the professional environment. In this regard, and in addition to the recommendation to better educate, prepare and integrate the parents within the youth player development process (see p.236), it seems important to consider further research that attend to the role that parents play within the player's development pathway (i.e., specifically within their latter years of development and with specific respect to the post-academy transition and subsequent progression into the professional environment).

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# APPENDIX

## APPENDIX A – Research Invitation Letter to Clubs

Research Institute for Sport and Exercise
Sciences Liverpool John Moores University
Henry Cotton Campus
15-21 Webster Street
Liverpool, L3 2ET
England

E-mail: hrelvax@portugalmail.com;
h.relvas@2005.ljmu.ac.uk

**Contact:** 00 44 (0)151 2314319 (Faculty);
00 44 (0)7914342585 (mobile phone)

Liverpool, January 2006

Dear Mr. ,

My name is Hugo Relvas and I am a postgraduate research student from the Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University, England. The purpose of this letter is to outline the nature of my research and also to invite you to participate in it.

I am a Sport Science and Physical Education graduate (specialization in football) from Coimbra University, Portugal. I was a youth trainee from 1987/98 at Associação Académica de Coimbra (a team who plays in Premier League of Portugal) and after that continued playing semi-professional football. I have the BASIC/UEFA level and I have been a youth coach since 2000.

It's not easy to explain my research by letter, but I'll try to give a general and direct idea. If you have any doubt you can contact me, and I will try to solve it for you.

My Supervising Team consists of Dr. David Richardson, Dr. Mark Nesti, and Dr. Martin Littlewood all lecturers at the Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores' University, England. The present research proposes to explore the organisational structures, philosophies and working practices within elite professional football clubs, from a Pan European perspective. Moreover, it aims to explore the psychosocial support and development provided to youth players, which may better enable the players' transition from the youth to the professional football environment (i.e., 17 to 21 years of age). In order to explore these aims further we would welcome the opportunity to interview the head of youth development managers, coaches, and other (appropriate) staff members who may be responsible for, or who may influence the players' psychosocial support and development.

The research is separated in to 2 studies:

Study 1 – visit the football academy and interview the Academy Director/Head of Youth Development to explore the organisational structure, philosophy and working practices. Furthermore, it will explore the youth players' preparation for the transition to the professional environment.

Study 2 – From the results of Study 1 we will attempt to group the clubs by working practice model. After this we would like to select a club to represent the different models and/or countries and/or cultures/philosophies, and spend approximately 1 month making a longitudinal observation of the working practices of the Academy (e.g., reserve, under-19 or under-18). In this study further informal interviews may be undertaken with coaches, sport psychologist, or others staff members and (possibly) also the players (to know better their perceptions and experiences of the working practices).

**NOTE:** If you are interested and/or intrigued by this study and wish to participate you are not obliged to commit to all 2 studies. In this regard, you may wish to engage with Study 1 and/or 2. However, we would welcome your thoughts and would encourage further discussions in order to clarify the exploratory nature of the study and associated procedures to allow a mutually satisfying relationship to evolve.

In summary, this study will allow a better understanding of the youth development programmes in different cultural realities (i.e., from a pan-European perspective). The cross-cultural perspective will allow an insight of the role of psychosocial support and working practices during, what is perceived to be the one of the most critical periods of a player's development (i.e., the transition from youth football to the professional environment). Furthermore, on completion of the research we will provide a comprehensive global report to your club on our findings and a club specific report (on request). Throughout the studies we guarantee strict confidentiality and professional integrity to your club, staff, players or others involved on the study.

We have already secured the co-operation of number of high-level clubs in Portugal, England, and would dearly welcome your support and input in this innovative and exciting project.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

I look forward to receiving your response in due course.

Yours sincerely,

________________________

(Hugo Relvas - Researcher)

## APPENDIX B – Participant Information Sheet

**Name of researcher:** Hugo Relvas

**Supervisory Team:** Dr. David Richardson, Dr. Mark Nesti and Dr. Martin Littlewood. Liverpool John Moores University

**Title of study/project (Study One):** A qualitative exploration of the transition from youth to professional football across Europe: A critique of structures, support mechanisms and practitioners' roles.

**Participant:** Head of Youth Development

**Purpose of study:** To explore the structure, working mechanisms and philosophy regarding the youth development working practices of elite football clubs from a European cross-cultural perspective.

**Procedures and Participants Role:** An interview will be used to explore your perceptions of the structure, working mechanisms and philosophy regarding the youth development working practices of Top-level football club. A dictaphone will record everything and our discussions will be transcribed word for word. Everything you say will be confidential; your identity will be protected, and when writing up the interview, your name will be protected using a pseudonym (i.e., alternative/fictional name).

**Please Note:**
**All participants have the right to withdraw from the project/study at any time without prejudice to access of services, which are already being provided or may subsequently be provided to the participant.**