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Talent Identification and Talent Development in Junior-elite Football in the UK: An Introduction

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Talent Identification and Talent Development in Junior-elite Football in the UK: An Introduction

The idea, shape, and size of this special issue was first conceived approximately 24 months ago, following numerous discussions with academic colleagues and practitioners working in both grassroots and professional football. Specially, these discussions centred on the current state of talent identification (TI) and talent development (TD) systems in junior-elite football. We are, therefore, delighted to present a collection of original, empirical studies pertinent to the perennial issues associated with TI and TD in junior-elite football. This issue offers an insight into the often messy and conflicting nature of TI and TD. By doing so, we believe this special issue will be of interest to sport practitioners and scholars working in football-related talent research.

Somewhat unusually, we have opted to offer two forewords to this special issue, which offer a combination of applied considerations and theoretical positioning from two of the foremost authorities: Nick Levett, Talent ID manager at the Football Association (FA); and Professor Richard Bailey, senior researcher and writer in residence at the International Council of Sport Science & Physical Education (ICSSPE), Berlin. Both Nick and Richard have kindly reflected on their own positions working, researching, and writing about talent. The editorial team would like to thank Nick and Richard for their input and the time they have given to support this endeavour.

There have been a number of developments in the world of football over the last two decades regarding talent identification, development, and management. For example, changes in European law (i.e. the Bosman ruling), changes in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) governing rules (i.e. home-grown player numbers), and a whole host of other changes to national-level rules. In England, there

have been numerous changes since the inception of the Premier League in 1992. Perhaps the two most significant developments to junior-elite football, in the United Kingdom (UK), included; (1) the inception of an academy system, instigated through the FAs Charter for Quality;¹ and (2) the advent of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).² These changes have resulted in far-reaching implications, ranging from capital developments to enhancements in formal coach education.³

Whilst the Charter for Quality established academies, the EPPP is the current guiding framework for academies. Whilst the EPPP considers a wide range of issues from the elite environment to education, there are areas that are still, somewhat, lacking clarity and detail. For example, the talent identification and recruitment section suggests that there is “a case for developing nationally coordinated research to assist all clubs in their recruitment strategies”.⁴ This statement is followed by a list of seven proposed areas of research: (1) physiological parameters; (2) relative age effect; (3) psychological profiling techniques; (4) measuring players’ motivation; (5) measurement of decision making potential; (6) technical abilities; and (7) addressing failure rates.

Given the seven years preceding this special issue, we were somewhat surprised to have been unable to locate a growing body of literature aligned to these themes. There have, however, been welcome advances in some areas. In their scoping review of the potential sociological predictors of talent in football, Reeves and colleagues examined four issues, as proposed by Williams and Reilly⁵: (1) hours in practice; (2) coach-child interaction; (3) parental support; and (4) education. Their review provides insight into these key constructs before summarising issues for applied practitioners as well as providing future research direction.

There has been much discussion and debate surrounding ‘what’ scouts and talent recruiters are perceiving whilst observing performers, especially at younger ages.⁶

There has been some criticism of the so called ‘gut’ instincts and a ‘coaches eye’⁷ as substantial justification for the selection, retention, or release of a player. Given the size and scale of the youth football industry, and the substantial investment that is made by clubs into academy infrastructure and resources – recommended to be between £2.3m and £4.9m per annum for a category one academy,⁸ it would appear prudent for clubs operate more substantive identification processes than mere reliance on individuals’ subjective opinions. Reeves et al. have provided two studies that examined the nature and function of talent in junior-elite football: one study adopting a case study perspective and offering an in-depth consideration of a single academy; and their second study considers the phenomenon of TI from multiple category one academies perspectives. It could be argued that clubs should have a clear blueprint and definitive underpinning philosophy that drives their recruitment processes and procedures. Indeed, part of the EPPP requirements is for clubs to articulate and evidence the club’s mission, vision, values, playing philosophy, recruitment strategy, player development pathway, and a host of other issues. However, with approximately 50% of all academy registered players leaving the system before they’re 16 years of age,⁹ the likelihood of a professional contract is stark, and the evidence of an effective player development system, somewhat, lacking.

Given the difficult environment in which junior-elite players exist, Dowling and colleagues have examined how professional development phase coaches in the UK work on the development of individual players whilst also focussing on the management of a broader team; all while operating in a competitive league structure (i.e Premier League 2). This study highlights issues associated with role clarity for coaches working with this particular level of player from stakeholders such as the Premier League, and coaches’ respective clubs, where there still appears to be dissonance

between academy and first team environments. The theme of better understanding the notion of *being* in talent environments is further explored by Clarke, Cushion and Harwood. Their study explores how junior-elite footballers understand their notion of self, and how being selected as a talented junior footballer affects their identity. They identify that there is a lack of understanding around the talent development pathway within junior-elite football, and that being socialised into an academy culture leads to conformity as opposed to motivation to develop.

The notion of so called relative age effects (RAEs) has occupied a number of column inches in both sport and educational journals over the past two decades but, as yet, there have been no immediate solutions for dealing with the problem. Within this issue, we present how one Premier League academy has experimented with the biological age banding (bio-banding) of training as opposed to the standard chronological age banding, in an attempt to eradicate this discriminatory practice. For instance, Reeves et al., in this issue, offer the first study to consider the use of bio-banding within junior-elite football training. Whilst these endeavours certainly have some merit and application, we caution against such approaches being seen as a panacea for effective talent identification and development.

Over the last 12 months The FA have launched a series of education programmes for those involved in talent identification and development, from volunteer parents at grassroots, to sporting and football directors. These courses, like the advent of the Talent Identification Department at The FA – despite its 150-year existence, are overdue. As alluded to already the process of talent identification and recruitment in football has been shrouded in mystery and subjective opinion for a number of years and, in some quarters, continues in a similar vein. Larkin and Reeves propose that there may be a need for re-positioning the notions of talent identification and talent development,

with particular focus on delineating the two respective issues and providing much clearer operation and definitional clarity for academics and practitioners alike.

Papers included in this special issue provide both applied and theoretical issues for greater consideration in junior-elite football. As such, it provides a genuine contribution to the current literature, whilst simultaneously offering insights and avenues forwards for applied practice and research. Indeed, this special issue offers a timely and meaningful focus for policymakers, academics, coaches, talent identifiers, recruitment staff, administrators and national federations on real-world issues in junior-elite talent identification and talent development.

Notes

1. The Football Association Technical Department, “The Football Association Technical Department, ‘Football Education for Young Players’”.
2. Premier League, “Elite player performance plan”.
3. Howie and Allison, *The English football association*.
4. Premier League, “Elite player performance plan”, 75.
5. Williams and Reilly, ‘Talent identification and development in soccer’, 665.
6. Larkin and O’Connor, *Talent identification and recruitment*.
7. Christensen, “*An eye for talent*”; Miller, Cronin and Baker, *Nurture, nature*.
8. Premier League, “Elite player performance plan”, 102.
9. Premier League, “Elite player performance plan”, 76.

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