

A photograph of three young boys in FC Barcelona football kits walking on a paved sidewalk. The boy in the center is slightly behind the other two, looking back over his shoulder with his hands raised. The boy on the left is walking towards the left, and the boy on the right is walking towards the right. They are all wearing red and blue kits with yellow accents. In the background is a white building with large windows. The title 'YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN FOOTBALL' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN FOOTBALL

Lessons from the world's
best academies

Mark Nesti and Chris Sulley

ROUTLEDGE

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN FOOTBALL

The identification and development of talented young players has become a central concern of football clubs at all levels of the professional game, as well as for national and international governing bodies. This is the first book to offer a comprehensive survey and assessment of youth development programmes in football around the world, to highlight best practice and to offer clear recommendations for improvement.

The book draws on original, in-depth research at eight elite professional football clubs, including Barcelona, Ajax and Bayern Munich, as well as the French national football academy at Clairefontaine. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach, including psychology, coaching and management studies, and covers every key topic from organisational structures to talent recruitment and performance analysis to player education and welfare. Written by two authors with extensive experience in English professional football, including five Premier League clubs, this book is important reading for any student, researcher, coach, administrator or academy director with an interest in football, youth sport, sports development, sports coaching or sport management.

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For Arthur Piggott RIP – he loved his football

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Chris Sulley

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INTRODUCTION

A number of developments have occurred during the past decade or so that have resulted in a great deal of interest in the health of youth football. It seems that almost everyone at some time or other has had something to say on the matter. Politicians, media commentators, academics and educators have joined those in the game itself to offer advice and identify what needs to be done. At an international level, FIFA, UEFA, ECA and most national governing bodies of football have carried out research, funded studies or employed consultants to help bring focus to their work with young players at amateur and professional levels of the sport.

Despite this, or maybe more worryingly, partly as a result of these efforts, the area appears to be full of contradictory views, competing diagnoses and radically different prognoses. The only thing it seems that all agree on is that there is a crisis and the status quo is no longer an option! Maybe one of the difficulties faced by football is that it can be very hard to separate mere assertion and speculation from genuinely evidence-based information. The cacophony of noise, whilst full of the best intentions, has arguably led to an impasse. Of more concern, it often appears that very little of real substance has changed, and in some places one gets the feeling that it is business as usual. However, this is not sustainable, not least because the future of the game literally depends on change and the young.

We hope that this book does not contribute more confusion and unhelpful suggestions by providing material that does not relate to the reality of developing youth footballers. Conversely, we hope that we have not been guilty of merely describing what is already well understood. Our overarching aim is to provide a critical account of what we have seen and experienced over many years' involvement in the professional game so that some clear recommendations can be made on the way forward. This work is not based on a set number of research studies, and neither is it derived solely from reflections on our applied experiences. What we have presented represents a synthesis of research findings, as well as ideas that have emerged

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from our practical engagement and professional roles we have occupied. We also believe that it is important to draw on theory and academic concepts to support our analysis to enable us to examine contentious proposals and positions that have been advocated and established by others in this area.

However, this is not meant to be the final word on youth development in professional football, and neither is this an attempt to address the topic from every possible academic discipline. To do this would require us to sacrifice depth for breadth. Therefore, we have decided to restrict ourselves to a social science perspective since this allows us to interrogate the story of youth development from an individual, organisational and cultural perspective. It is our belief that the insights offered by management theory, coaching studies, psychology, socio-psychology and, to some extent, cultural studies are most useful in assisting us to better understand the challenges we are currently facing.

Our hope is that we can offer a convincing argument that there are particular qualities and activities that represent best practice, and that these should become aspirations and eventually a reality for all in the near future. The exact and precise mechanisms to achieve this will depend upon the availability of resources and local and national conditions. Beyond this level of variation we will suggest that there are universal factors that must be attended to and put in place to increase the likelihood of achievement. One of these is that clubs must have a vision that drives their work in the area of youth development, and this must be owned and constantly renewed by the key stakeholders. The vision should be used to guide the club to produce players who can meet the demands of how the club wishes its first team players to play. This must not remain as a loose and merely philosophical aspiration; it must be articulated clearly in terms of what the club expects in relation to mentality, technical requirements, tactical acumen and physical parameters.

Tradition is another important word. The clubs we have encountered which contain many elements of best practice often have strong traditions. These could be more accurately described as living traditions, in that they are constantly being renewed to ensure they meet the present conditions. This type of tradition is something that serves a very specific purpose and is not merely about 'how things have always been done.' Rather, this is seen where clubs do not ignore their past, but strive continuously to bring it alive by embracing new ideas and behaviours that help them to drive towards their vision. Such traditions are not defensive, rigid or brittle and used to defend against needed change and innovation. They are malleable and dynamic and allow individuals and organisations to welcome new ideas and practices that build on the proven successes of a tradition. A living tradition helps clubs to avoid remaining in the past, relying on former achievements and trying (usually unsuccessfully) to reproduce these in very changed circumstances (Magee, 2002). A tradition that is a synthesis between the old and the new also lessens the temptation to constantly change things in order to be up to date and modern. This is sometimes even carried out at the expense of tried and tested philosophies and practices. The responsibility for maintaining the traditions that effect youth development at the club rests with everyone involved, although the senior staff will have the most

important and influential role in this task (Gilson et al., 2001). The best clubs ensure that their traditions impact on everyone and everything; they also expect their leaders to defend and nurture their traditions in good times and bad!

The big issues

A number of very important themes are woven throughout the book. These are the importance of education, coaching, sport science and medicine, playing time and facilities. Education refers to football-specific, academic and general. It is for players, staff, coaches and parents. The best clubs place a great deal of attention on this aspect of their work. All agree that it is vital to delivering their goals of more and better equipped young players. Each club has taken a serious approach to this part of their duties, as can be seen from the planning, resources and energy that are committed to its success. A further striking commonality is that they seem to recognise that education is a long-term process. Their aim is to engender authentic learning, the type of learning that is permanent. This is because the learned content has become part of a person. This is in contrast to short-term information acquisition, something that is often paraded as true learning, but which usually fails when it's needed in practice.

Coaching is obviously one of the fundamental tasks that needs to be carried out. The best practice we have seen ensures that the coaching is guided by a thought-through philosophy that links closely to the everyday practice of all staff. Whilst the detail of what is coached and how this is conveyed to the players may vary considerably, there tends to be a common approach to the general role of the coach as the young players progress towards the first team professional environment. The usual pattern we see is that coaching moves from a more player-centred and less authoritarian style to a more directive and didactic approach as the players get older. However, in the best practice clubs this is not the general pattern. First, it seems that their philosophy is always player centred in that everything is done with their needs in mind, and not those of the coach or the system. Second, the coaching style becomes less, not more, didactic as the player develops; however, this does not mean that things become easier for the player! In fact, the reverse is true because the coaches tend to allow the players to find the solutions to the tactical, technical, physical or mental challenges they place in front of them. Feedback and focused advice are offered, but the expectation is that the players will become, in effect, their own coaches as they move through the ranks. It is also noticeable that the coaching is oriented towards placing the players in ever more stressful and potentially anxiety-inducing situations. This reveals that being player centred does not mean that players have an easy time, or that they are not placed in difficult circumstances.

The other very important issue relating to coaching is around the attitude towards practice time and how much of this amounts to deliberate practice (Ford and Williams, 2011). In our experience, most clubs fall far short of the 10,000 hours rule (Ericsson, 1993), and much of the work done could not be termed deliberate practice. In fact, some of the very best clubs in the world for youth development