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Hill on a Mountaintop: A Longitudinal Study of the Relative Age Effect in an English Premier League Soccer Academy

While the relative age effect has long been established in soccer, little is known about the attrition rates of relatively older and relatively younger players once they have been recruited for an academy. Using birth date and retention data for 288 players from 2006 to 2014, we conducted a longitudinal study at a leading English Premier League Soccer Academy to compare the attrition rates of relatively older and younger soccer players from when they entered the academy (Under 9s) up to the Under 15 age group. To determine the extent to which relative age effects were due to selection bias rather than a pre-existing junior team age bias we also examined birth date distributions in the regional teams from which the large majority of academy players were recruited. Last, we conducted semi-structured interviews with four senior members of the academy (three head coaches, one senior recruitment officer) to examine their perceptions of (a) awareness of relative age effects at the academy, (b) challenges and constraints associated with relative age, and (c) measures used to account for relative age. Analysis of the birth date data at recruitment revealed significant quartile asymmetry, $\chi^2_3 = 130.47$, $p < .01$, reflecting a very large relative age effect (H1:H2 ratio = 4.0) that was much greater than that found in the 691 Under-8 team players in the regional leagues (H1:H2 ratio = 1.3). Regarding retention, the 'half life' of H1 players from 2006 to 2014 was found to be twice that of H2 players (H1 = 6.0 years, H2 = 3.0 years). This means that the relatively small proportion of younger players who were initially recruited were then further disadvantaged in terms of progression, with H2 players particularly likely to be released one year after joining the academy. These results will be discussed in relation to common themes emerging from the interviews that highlight the need for a strategically driven, organisational approach to addressing what is a complex and multi-faceted issue.