Case Studies from Elite Youth Soccer: Reflections on Talent Development Practices

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Abstract

With early specialisation being common-place within elite youth soccer, knowledge of the psychosocial implications associated with talent development practices would be of considerable use for the coaching practitioner. The current paper uses case studies as a platform to discuss potential psychosocial implications of early specialisation, and further, offers practical suggestions for the elite youth soccer coach. Three case studies were chosen; each is an account of observations that took place within a British soccer academy. Themes of the case studies included: adult-led structures in early specialisation, awareness of need thwarting coach behaviours, and the retention or release of players. The case studies were deliberately chosen to prompt discussion, reflection, and action. Following the presentation of each case study, a theoretically driven discussion is formulated. Practical suggestions are then provided to assist in the management of talent development practices within elite youth soccer, and to further enrich the experiences of players. Concluding thoughts and areas for future research are briefly discussed.

Keywords: early specialisation, coaching, qualitative

Case Studies from Elite Youth Soccer: Reflections on Talent Development Practices

Early specialisation in elite youth sport remains a heavily debated topic (Haugaasen, Toering, & Jordet, 2014), and to date no authoritative position has been asserted as to whether specialisation or diversification should take precedence in the development of young athletic talent (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009). Whilst some influential sporting bodies have chosen to actively discourage it (e.g., the national basketball association [NBA]; DiFiori et al., 2017), the English Premier League (EPL) made the decision to encourage early specialisation within elite youth soccer in England and Wales (see the Elite Play Performance Plan [EPPP], The Premier League, 2011). With two of the highest grossing sport leagues in the world applying opposing viewpoints on early specialisation, consensus as to whether early specialisation is the correct pathway for young athletic talent remains unclear. Without a consensus, early specialisation within elite youth soccer is likely to continue on its current path. Therefore, this paper considers the potential psychosocial implications for young soccer players who engage in early specialisation. Through the presentation and analysis of short narratives, this paper will seek to challenge the elite youth soccer coach to reflect upon their own practise, and consider the implications that early specialisation can have on the well-being of their young players.

Early specialisation is conceptualised as: (a) an early start age in a single sport; (b) early involvement within sport; (c) early involvement in intense training; and (d) early involvement in competitive sport (Barker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009). One benefit of early specialisation is the extended amount of practice time that an athlete can accumulate; this is deemed to be the singularly most important aspect of talent development (Law, Côté, & Ericsson, 2007). In contrast, some have deemed such early specialisation as unnecessary (DiFiori et al., 2017) and even immoral (de Vasconcellos, Riberio, & Dimeo, 2009). In support of this stance, research has identified a range of maladaptive psychosocial implications associated with early specialisation, for example: increased likelihood of

injuries (Maffulli, Baxter-Jones, & Grieve, 2005), increased dropout (Wall & Côté, 2007), burnout (Gould, Udry, Tuffrey, & Loehr, 1996), lower self-confidence (Wankel & Mummery, 1990), and greater risk of reduced well-being (Noon, James, Clarke, Akubat, & Thake, 2015).

Recognising the potential maladaptive effects of early specialisation, Côté (1999) proposed the development model of sport participation (DMSP) to help navigate individuals through their participation in sport (Côté & Erickson, 2017). According to the DMSP there are three phases: sampling years (ages six to 12), specializing years (ages 13-15), and investment years (ages 16 and over). It is within the sampling phase that much of the early specialisation and diversification debate centres. Epstein (2019), for example illustrates the contention surrounding this period through comparing Tiger Woods' (Golf) and Rodger Federer's (Tennis) entries into sport. As Epstein (2019) described, both athletes could be credited as the most successful sportspersons in modern history, however, each had considerably different journeys into their respective sports. While Woods solely played golf from just a few months old, Federer played a variety of sports (e.g., soccer, skiing, basketball) before focusing on tennis during adolescence. Epstein (2019) highlighted that Wood's story is a rarity, with many elite athletes having diversified prior to committing to a single sport.

Despite a considerable amount of research and anecdotal evidence supporting early diversification (e.g., Bailey et al., 2010; Côté & Erickson, 2017), talent identification and development programmes, such as the professional soccer academies of England and Wales, continue to recruit players at the earliest opportunity (Unnithan, White, Georgiou, Iga, & Drust, 2012). As a consequence of the introduction of the EPPP in 2012, elite youth soccer academies in England and Wales have become increasingly structured and systematic in targeting the holistic development of their young players. All soccer academies competing

in the English leagues are audited and categorised with a rating of one to four, one being the highest category. A key aim of the EPPP is to increase the amount of training hours for the academy player (The Premier League, 2011) with the intention of creating expert soccer players, earlier. Such an approach replicates Simon & Chase's (1973) assertions that long-term development towards expert status requires ten-years of deliberate practice (Bailey et al., 2010; Noon et al., 2015). This is characterised by goal-directed tasks that are completed in a serious manner for the purpose of a specific goal, with rules and feedback being provided by an adult (Ericsson, 2016).

Consequently, seven to eleven-year olds, signed to either a category one, two, or three academy, must now participate in a minimum of three-hours a week of coaching. To obtain category one status, four to eight hours of coaching is expected of the academy at the foundation phase; incentivising academies to invest in more coaching for this younger age group, and directly promoting early specialisation. Critically, given the financial capital that academy players can bring a football club (Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Unnithan et al., 2012), it is in the best interest of an academy to recruit players as early as possible such that the individual player has the maximum time to accumulate deliberate practice hours, and also, to prevent competitor clubs from registering the player as their own asset. The directives of the EPPP and similar frameworks across Europe (see Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Nesti & Sulley, 2015), coupled with the profitable rewards of successfully developing young soccer talent in Europe, have contributed to the move towards early specialisation in elite youth soccer.

One noteworthy study by Hendry, Crocker, and Hodges (2014) started to unpack the early diversification and early specialisation debate within British soccer academies. From their research, the authors found there to be no association between academy players' accumulated hours of play during childhood and their current (intrinsic and autonomous)

motivation in the academy, findings very much at odds with the postulates of the DMSP (Côté, 1999). However, the oldest (U17) players participating in Hendry et al.'s (2014) research did demonstrate a negative relationship between number of years in the academy and their self-determination. Hendry et al. (2014) suggested that it was the prolonged exposure to, rather than the nature of deliberate practice sessions that was potentially detrimental to players' motivation. Although the U17 age group may be unique, given their recent transition into the professional development phase (see, EPPP) and the increased demands placed upon players (e.g., full-time contracts, financial gain, competitiveness), Hendry et al.'s (2014) findings emphasise the lack of consensus regarding whether early specialisation or early diversification best suits elite youth soccer players. What is clear however, is the importance of supporting a player psychologically when they commit over an extended period to the soccer academy.

At present, early specialisation is happening within British soccer academies as part of a long-term strategy to improve the quality of home-grown players (The Premier League, 2011). In recognising this trend, this paper focuses upon supporting the adult practitioners who influence the experiences of players specialising early within elite youth soccer. In accordance with Ford et al. (2012), the aim is to apply theoretical principles to explain the potential implications of early specialisation practices, rather than evaluating their efficacy for elite youth soccer players. Therefore, the case studies, deliberately chosen for their dramatic character and potential to effect change in coach-behaviours, are presented to emphasise psychosocial implications associated to early specialisation.

The objective here was to engage the soccer academy coaches, critically discussing elements of practices within youth soccer academies, with a focus upon the associated implications of early specialisation. In line with the approach taken by DiFiori et al. (2018), suggestions are offered for academy practitioners to assist in managing issues associated

with early specialisation in an elite youth soccer academy setting. Practical suggestions are provided with the objective of reducing the epistemological gap between coach knowledge and coach behaviour (Partington & Cushion, 2013). Given that reflection does not simply result in change (Cushion, 2018), responsibility falls upon the coaching practitioner, to transfer their reflections of the following case studies into action. Through insight into the potential psychosocial consequences of early specialisation, coaches are encouraged to reflect upon their own actions (retrospective reflection-on-action; Gilbert & Trudel, 2005), and be open to readily change their own coaching behaviours (reflection-in-action, Gilbert & Trudel, 2005; Whitehead et al., 2016) with the aim of supporting the psychological development of their players as they journey through the soccer academy.

Methodology

The data presented in this article are of qualitative origin, based on the wish to explore, interpret and understand meaning ascribed to soccer academies. To achieve a sense of meaning and the lived world of soccer academies, systematic observation was applied as the method.

Philosophical Assumptions

This study adhered to the philosophical assumptions of hermeneutics as understood by Gadamer (2013). The ontological starting point of hermeneutics is that all humans are understanding and interpretative beings (Gadamer, 2013). The methodological standpoint of hermeneutics encourages methods in which human understanding and interpretation of reality are basic conditions for the acquisition of reliable knowledge. Given the closed-door nature of soccer clubs and the dominance of "legislative" sport coaching literature (c.f. Cronin & Armour, 2017), the adoption of a hermeneutic philosophy was deemed necessary to understand and interpret the lifeworld of the soccer academy. With this, an attitude was adopted by researchers to see the (academy) world "afresh" (Finlay, 2014), enabling

identification of the essential features of an academy environment that epitomised issues associated to early specialisation.

Ethical Considerations

Following institutional ethics approval, several steps were taken to ensure that the rights and interests of participants were upheld throughout the collection of the data which informed the case studies. Of primary concern, given the nature of the paper, was the representation of the academy coaches. Informed consent was obtained from the manager of each academy. From the outset, coaches were aware that the first author was a participant-observer conducting research within their academy, and that their practices may be discussed publicly, albeit anonymously. Coaches were made aware that they could withdraw consent at any time without penalty, and that observations, (featuring their sessions) would not be considered. Field notes were emailed to coaches on completion to give them a further opportunity to withdraw any observations relating to their sessions; none chose to do this. Having taken time to build rapport with the academy coaches, the lead author was able to openly discuss his observations with the participating coaches, and in doing so confirm accuracy of field-notes, discuss contradictions in knowledge, and offer applied suggestions (see Christians, 2008). This approach, termed “member reflection” (Smith & McGannon, 2017), helped to reduce feelings of covertness, provide some level of qualitative rigour, and maintained the relationships with participating coaches (Palmer, 2017). Regarding player involvement, the first author was introduced to players during training with the role of observing sessions and assisting the coach. It was agreed with the director of each academy that loci-parentis of the players would be assumed by the football club. This was deemed appropriate given the unobtrusive method of data collection. Pseudonyms were used for both players and coaches throughout the case studies. In deciding which case studies to feature, the universal utilitarian approach of which stories

would provide the greatest good for the greatest number (i.e., be of best benefit to the academy players) was employed (Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012), but only to the point that it would not be detrimental to the participating coaching practitioners, as this would undermine the aim of the paper.

Participants

Three UK football academies were involved in the current study, with field note observations occurring at each. The academies were solicited on the basis that each was of category two academy status and were geographically commutable for the first author. Each academy agreed to the first author assisting with training sessions and adopting the role of participant-observer. The participants in case study one and two included academy players and academy coaches, whilst case study three included academy coaches and other academy talent development staff (i.e., head of scouting, head of safeguarding, and education). The academy players featured within the case studies were all male and aged between seven and 15 years old. Not all players who were observed feature in the presented case studies. The adult academy staff members were also all male, and all over the age of 20. The coaches all held a minimum of a UEFA B coaching license, with many holding the UEFA A coaching license[1].

The Case Study

According to Yin (2014) the case study is best described as: "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth, and within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 14). This study uses multiple cases to learn about the unique environment of soccer

[1] UEFA are the governing body of soccer for the continent of Europe. UEFA coaching badges are recognised internationally, with UEFA B and UEFA A licenses considered to demonstrate high levels of coaching competency.

academies in the UK. Multiple or collective case studies are when several cases are used in order to learn about a phenomena, a population, or a general condition (Yin, 2014).

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Although case studies are common and widely discussed in a research context, they often remain misunderstood (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Usually generalisation is the most widely debated topic concerning case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). Much of the overall discussion stems from difference in opinion about epistemology, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reach an agreement. Thus, when working with case studies, it is crucial that the author present the paradigm that defines the study (as well as the overall aim). This study employs Kvales' (1996) idea of analytical generalisation which emphasizes a well-considered evaluation of the results of a given case study, and how these results may apply as guidelines in other similar situations. In this current paper, three different case studies are interpreted and elaborated on individually.

Observation

Systematic observation was used as the method for data gathering in this study. Fundamental to observation is the need to understand the cultures of the entity being studied. To achieve this, protracted and systematic observations are necessary. In the current study, the researcher remained in situ for an entire academy season at each club (July-May) and attended three training sessions per week with each session lasting between 90 and 120 minutes.

Participant observation was adopted for this study. This is characterised by observation taking place in familiar surroundings for those being observed (Thorpe, 2012). Further, within participant observation there should be scope for different types of social actions between researchers and the environment (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Beside data collection, participant observation was chosen due to the unique ability to: (a) provide unfettered access to unique environments; (b) build a relationship with the observed actors;

(c) asking appropriate questions; (d) get an intuitive understanding of the data; (e) capture and address relationships that are unavailable using other qualitative methods; and (f) describe a practice (Thorpe, 2012). The observer was physically positioned within sessions on the side of team talks or next to players or coaches, while balancing the challenge of participating and researching at the same time (Labaree, 2002). At each academy, the researcher did not start to make field notes until late October. This allowed time for the researcher to become acquainted with the environment and to build relationships with the coaches and players. In addition to normalising the researcher's role, this potentially supported the integrity of the observed interactions (Thorpe & Olive, 2017). Field notes were made after each session rather than in situ.

Data analysis

Observations were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 145 pages of single-spaced raw text. The data analysis followed a two-step method for organizing and interpreting qualitative data (Winchester, Culver & Camiré, 2011). The first step was the reading and rereading of observation notes, where meaningful text segments or raw data units were identified and coded. These units represented a single idea or piece of information based on the authors' interpretation. The first step resulted in distinct observations from different cases being stitched together (Winchester et al., 2011) in which distinct episodes emerged. The second step was the "creation" of narratives from the observations. The narratives were constructed by going through data specific to each case and turning it into a collective story (Denison, 1996). This was achieved after multiple readings of the transcripts and plots were identified and compiled into vignettes. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 7) describe plots as when "events and actions are drawn together into an organised whole by means of a plot. A plot is a conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed". For example, some transcripts

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Commented [KR4]: Polkinghorne, D., 1995. Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In: J. Amos Hatch and R. Wisniewski, eds. Life history and narrative, London: The Falmer Press, 5–23.

featured a plot centring on the *phantom professional*, an elusive persona incomprehensible to the young footballers. Resultantly, three narratives were presented: (i) five minutes of development wasted!; (ii) the phantom professional; and (iii) retain or release?

Results

Case Study One: "Five Minutes of Development Wasted!"

> The players gathered around Aaron, 15 in all; a mix of six, seven, eight year olds. "That's not good enough!", began Aaron, "You're wasting time outside of the practice not gathering the balls quickly enough. *That's five minutes of development wasted!* [emphasis added]" I looked at the players as Aaron said that last line: "five minutes of development wasted". I looked to see if they could comprehend that. Some looked down at their feet as though they were being told off and others looked around at the other players. Aaron was deadly serious, looking down on the players, glaring across the group waiting for players to make eye contact with, holding his gaze. He continued, "that's five minutes less development you have to becoming a professional". The practice restarted. The players played as they had in the previous practice; moving the ball quickly, demonstrating skills, lots of energy lots of noise and quickly brushing off any mistakes they made. They seemed to love playing and love the practices. After the session, I walk back over the pitch with Sebby, one of the youngest players in the group. He started to show me some tricks and I showed him one or two he could practice. Upon saying goodbyes for the session, I asked Sebby what he was doing that afternoon, his reply: "well I have this new toy my mum got me that I'm going to play with."

The presence of six or seven year olds in elite youth environments, as described above, is becoming commonplace in the ever-more competitive world of elite sport. With talent identification and development often starting before the age of nine ("pre academy";

Larkin & Reeves, 2018), and the frequency and contact time between coaches and academy soccer players increasing (see Nesti & Sulley, 2015), coaching practitioners need to be aware and make a distinction between a child participating in an elite sport programme and perceiving that child to be a small adult (Donnelly, 1993).

Aaron's *serious* approach to a child's career, although probably driven by good intentions, draws parallels to previous concerns that children are indeed treated as small adults (Donnelly, 1993). The emphasis from Aaron (an adult), and the clear despondence of the players (children) to Aaron's coaching-debrief supports concerns previously voiced by Grupe (1985):

> Children would never think on their own accord of subjecting themselves to an organised form of sport aimed for long-term performance, and to organization of their daily, weekly, and yearly schedules as is required in preparation to achieve top performance. (p. 10)

From their reactions (i.e., looking down or looking away), the players do not appear to comprehend what Aaron is implying. While supporting Grupe's assertion that a child would not volitionally engage in long-term planning of their sporting career, it is only when talking to Sebby after the session (about his afternoon plans to play with his new toy), that the contrast becomes clear.

Sebby is living a dual-life, one as a child and the other as an academy player on a talent pathway to professional sport, a circumstance aligned to the "disappearance of childhood" (Postman, 1982). This *loss* was one concern of early specialisation postulated earlier by Grupe (1985), others included: (a) exposure to excessive psychological and physiological stress; (b) becoming detached from the larger society; (c) denied important social contacts and experiences; and (d) facing a type of abandonment at any stage in their career/life. Indeed, Donnelly (1993) explained that children will still attempt to create

opportunity and space to *be* children and so Postman's (1982) assertion may be a dramatic reflection of reality. However, Aaron's surveillance of the players and subsequent condemnation of the young players for messing around whilst fetching balls arguably stunts opportunities for the players to express their childhood selves, and therefore is of concern according to Côté, Erickson, and Abernethy (2013). Côté et al. (2013) highlighted that sport environments that do not include both adult-led and peer-led structures may be less-favourable to players' motivation for continued participation. Supporting the motivation of young athletes is recognised as being integral to long-term development in elite youth sport (DiFiori et al., 2018), and thus is a priority for academy soccer coaches (Kingston, Wixey, & Morgan, 2018).

Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.

1. When speaking to young players, coaches may find talking about events of relative immediacy (e.g., next competition, tournament or parents evening reviews) more engaging for younger players. Moreover, coaches should (and many do) endeavour to get to know their young players and their lives outside of the academy. A coaches' knowledge of their players may prompt them to provide more individualised and contextualised feedback, thus engaging their motivation rather than merely emphasising the end goal of early specialisation as a control measure (Ford et al., 2012).

2. Structural changes, within the academy programme, like those proposed in previous literature (i.e., Chase & DiSante, 2017; DiFori et al., 2018; Donnelly, 1993) could alleviate concerns regarding early specialization. Specifically, this could include opportunities for deliberate play (Côté, 1999), with research (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2002; Loy et al., 1995) supporting the tenet that deliberate play can be favourable towards elite success within the earlier years of athletic development (Côté, 1999). Soccer academies could look to incorporate opportunities for their younger players to engage more in activities that are

closely aligned to the groups' age (chronological or biological) and maturation status. Activities might occur in subtle ways such as during water breaks, warm-ups, integrated into training practices, or through strength and conditioning related games. More overtly, clubs could utilise the *school (day) release* programme (where players will spend a day per week at the academy studying and training in lieu of attending school), and offer opportunities for players to engage in a range of sports or activities. Such activities, whether physical or not (e.g., learning sport nutrition through cookery classes), would also contribute towards the holistic approach that soccer academies frequently claim, but don't always uphold (see Stratton, Reilly, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

Case Study Two: The Phantom Professional

> "Do you want to be a professional player?" That phrase rang around the pitch. It is not a new phrase; I have heard many times before. However, this time I observed the players' reactions. Clive pointed to the stadium lights that could be seen in the distance: "If you want to be a professional you need to get this right." The players knew where the stadium was, hardly any looked. They looked a bit beaten up, drained almost. Hands on waists with no eye contact; they generally looked miserable. Clive said it again: "do you *want* to be a professional or not?" It was rhetorical, but almost felt threatening. It was followed by a thick silence, and then a final rhetoric from Clive: "you wouldn't be here if you didn't want to be a professional soccer player." This *professional standard*, that Clive used to compare the players' performance to, had become the enemy. You could see it; the players looked sick of being compared to the *phantom* professional. The professional, who the players apparently aspired to be, appeared to just deflate them. I watched. These players are 14 years old, some 13, is the jump too far? Can they really be

expected to embody a professional when they have not even played up a year group yet? The expectations of the players became almost unattainable.

Psychological *need thwarting* is a term to describe actions or behaviours that contribute to or directly reduce the satisfaction of an individual's basic needs (Ntoumanis, 2012). Basic psychological needs theory, a sub-theory of Self-determination Theory (SDT), proposes that individuals' strive to satisfy the three basic needs of: relatedness, competency, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are satisfied, the individual benefits from greater well-being and better health, in contrast if they are not satisfied, it can contribute towards ill-being and ill-health (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Briefly, *autonomy* is satisfied when an individual feels responsible for their own actions, *competence* is enhanced through a feeling of effectiveness within a given social environment, and finally *relatedness* becomes satisfied when an individual possesses a sense of belonging to that particular social environment (Ntoumanis, 2012; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, Thorgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

Throughout the duration of the training, the players were prescribed goals, particularly the goal of becoming a professional soccer player. The players may have their own aspirational goal of becoming a professional, however, the decision by Clive to prescribe goals for them in this context could have a significant impact upon their psychological experience (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 2002). According to SDT, controlling coach behaviours can contribute to a change of an individual's locus of causality, which refers to an individual's need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2002). When an external locus is present (i.e., a coach imposing goals to be a professional soccer player, or negatively comparing young athletes to an unknown [phantom] professional) a person's sense of autonomy may be undermined, along with their intrinsic motivation. Once external goals are highlighted, as in the narrative above, player behaviours can be driven by a feeling

of obligation rather than intrinsic motivation (Ntoumanis, 2012). Through rhetorical questioning, Clive inadvertently monopolized the discourse between coach and athlete, further thwarting the player's autonomy. Such controlling coach behaviours have also been identified as a significant moderator in the thwarting of an individual's basic need for autonomy (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Ntoumanis, 2012).

Returning to the narrative, Clive's use of the term *professional* translates a standard of performance to the players. However, upon making this statement the players are given an ultimatum: achieve the standards of a professional soccer player in that current practice, or not. Failure thus manifests itself within the practice. The player's competency is now to be measured against that of a professional; an unknown entity. Some of the players in Clive's session are 13 years old. The youngest professional player in English Premier League history was 16 years and 30 days (Harvey Elliot); at the very best, they are being asked to compare themselves to a 16 year-old. The relatedness that any of the players previously had to the environment may have been diminished through Clive's intervention. Although not the most salient of the three basic needs (Ntoumanis, 2012), relatedness is integral for optimal athletic success particularly given the commitment young athletes demonstrate towards their elite sport environment (Gilchrist & Mallet, 2017). By posing the end goal of becoming a professional player, whilst simultaneously *loading* the prospect of failure on the player, Clive may have reduced the player's feeling of security within that academy environment.

Clive's discourse is potentially need thwarting (Ntoumanis, 2012), yet this was probably the result of his passion and desire to help players improve, and indeed he may have had the best intentions. Clive is an ex-professional soccer player who has his own aspirations, targets to meet, and habitual standards. Clive may also be attempting to satisfy his own basic needs when coaching, for example by wanting to feel effective and competent

whilst working towards his own goals and possessing a feeling of security in his academy role (Stebbings & Taylor, 2017). Guzman and Kingston (2013) found that satisfaction of basic psychological needs of coaches increased the likelihood that they (the coaches) in turn would be supportive of player needs. Elite youth sport organisations may consider adopting Martindale, Collins, and Daubney's (2005) suggestions to ensure the talent development environment more effectively supports the coaches' basic needs. For example, the academy may want to prioritise player development over *early success*; a feature of the environment that may be more supportive to Clive's satisfaction of competence because it is not solely based upon the (often uncontrollable) result of competition. Thus, consideration of *both* the academy players' and the academy coaches' basic needs is important.

Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.

1. Within the case study, there appeared to be some incongruence between Clive's communication regarding the professional and his support for the basic psychological needs of the players within his session. One approach to help address this conflict would be for Clive to have provided an explicit rationale for his statement regarding the professional player (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Perhaps using standout players in older age group(s) as exemplars could enhance the motivational impact of such coaching discourse. Rationale creates meaning for individuals (Assor et al., 2004), and in this instance it may have given the players opportunity to internalise Clive's challenge, and respond more effectively.

2. Autonomy-supportive environments are recognised as one of the most important contributors to the promotion and maintenance of players' long-term self-determined motivation (Hendry et al., 2014; Kingston et al., 2018). In their study, Kingston et al. (2018) observed that when conditions supported autonomy in training (e.g., ownership over decisions, opportunity to share opinions, open-ended questions, players led team talks etc.) it contributed towards positive player behaviours (e.g., increased work rate, overcoming

mistakes, increased intensity of sessions). Coaching practitioners can look to promote similar psychological environments through providing opportunities for players to make meaningful decisions within their practice.

Case Study Three: Retain or Release?

10:00am and the meeting is about to get started. Justin, head coach of U12, is hosting an evaluation meeting with all academy staff regarding the status of the U12 players. Justin moves through the spreadsheet. In the far-left column are the players' name, with the following columns providing one bit of information relating to that young players technical, tactical, psychological, and physical performance. Each row is colour coded: red, amber, or green. The latter, those in green, are designated as the highest performing players within the age group, and in Justin's words: "those that have a good shot at making it". Amber players are the players who are not excelling but are doing well. However, red indicates a struggling player, a player whom is likely to be released imminently from the academy. Justin moves swiftly down the list, reeling off the players in the order they are written, adding more information and posing rhetorical questions as he moves through: The rest of the room is full of talent development staff (coaches, the lead coach and the head of recruitment). All lean forward and look intensely toward the white board to where the colour-coded list is. Justin scrolls down, increasing his pace as he moves through the amber players. The first green player is reached, Troy: "What can we say, he's just soaring above everyone- he's a *real* player… [pauses half gesticulating, almost trying to find words] …there isn't much else to say." Will, the assistant coach to the U12 also tries to describe Troy: "He's just, oh, something else… flying". Justin continues down the list, stopping at an amber player: Nicholas. Nicholas has positive remarks written across his technical, tactical, and

psychological boxes. Justin noticed his physicality: “Nicholas’s weak area is his physical corner. He is overweight and not as mobile. Looking at his mum, she’s of a shorter squatty stature, so will he grow? I don’t know [leaving that statement hanging in the air]. He’s very good in every other area however, that is just our concern at the moment, looking forward.” Adrian, the head of recruitment, interrupts Justin as he looks to move on: “Is he one of your starting centre backs?” Justin pauses, then answers: “No, not at the moment.” Adrian replies candidly: “Then why are we wasting time on him?” Justin stopped himself from answering too quickly. Adrian is higher up in the academy hierarchy. Adrian continued impatiently: “I cannot remember a player, with Nicholas’s shape now, who’s made it. I cannot think of one. Therefore, I am unsure why we’re wasting time with him, and he is taking up a squad place, when I can go to the local clubs and get a physical specimen and then train them up. We shouldn’t waste time on a lad who is not going to grow, and whose not in your starting 11.” Justin jumped in at this point: “But that is a massive leap, we do not know that he’s not going to grow.” A rumble of discussion occurred across the room between coaches. Then Adrian spoke once more: “So Nicholas is not even in the centre back position now in the starting 11, yet a player who is not going to be a centre back is? So, he is not going to grow, he is not in the starting 11 now, let’s get rid [release him].” Justin repeated himself: “But saying he’s not going to grow is just an assumption, I do not think we can let him go based on that.” Adrian replied: “but I have not, and can anyone else recall a player who is Nicholas’s shape who plays professional soccer?” Justin looked jarred that his point was not getting across, whilst the rest of the room watched the to-ing and fro-ing of comments. Justin tactically moved on (without making a conclusion in the current situation). “Well, let’s move on to Joseph anyway, the red.” Justin took a deep in

breath, looking disappointingly at the board. "Joseph is struggling. He's fallen behind. Am I saying he should be released? I do not know … you know he was a green seven months ago, one of the top three." Adrian rapidly interrupts: "But he's not now?" Justin: "No, he's not." Peter, the Under 13 coach, who also scouted him added to the conversation on Joseph: "He is like Noah (another player, who turned down a scholarship to study at 6th form). They both attend the same school, and I think you will have a problem when he gets to 16." Des, the assistant academy manager, then posed a question: "has anyone seen a player like Joseph before, and coached them through?" Another coach, Damian, answered from the back: "I have not seen a player like him, but I used to go to the rival grammar school to the one Joseph goes to. If we do keep him, we have to be aware that the school will be pushing him towards university. He is probably planning his academic career during the day, then playing soccer to become a professional player at night. Either way, we need to be transparent with a player like Joseph and talk to him about careers, how a professional career might look like for him." The room appeared split at this comment. Some coaches were actively nodding along as Damian spoke, whilst others looked put off by such a remark. Rhys, the Head of Coaching spoke up: "I saw him the other day at City. He played well and seemed to be effective out-wide… good dribbling." Justin: "yeah he was to be fair." Rhys: "but you have him down in the technical aspect as poor at dribbling, and you see him as a nine [centre forward]? And the aspect that you say he's good at, holding the ball up as a nine, we don't play him there because he's not as good as other players?" Justin looked reflective and accepted this point. Adrian joined, agreeing with Rhys: "again, his assets, from what you're telling us, are in the nine position. However, we have two

other players who are better than him in that position. Why are we discussing him? We should just get rid." Rhys added to this conclusion: "we must be brutal."

Physical assets are important to soccer success, but can also be overestimated (Unnithan et al., 2012). The relative age effect (RAE) is a phenomenon that has received considerable attention, particularly within the youth soccer literature (Cobley, Baker, Wattie, & McKenna, 2009; Musch & Grondin, 2001). RAE is understood to be an unintended selection of the physically and cognitively mature players (compared to their relative younger peers). RAE has resulted in a selection pattern within elite youth sport, where players born within the first three to six months of the calendar year predominate (Unnithan et al., 2012). Several studies have found RAE to occur in the selection of higher-level youth soccer players (Auguste 2011; Sæther 2015). Crucially, this may suggest that RAE is also a problem within youth soccer academies, with such biases contributing toward potential talent being wasted (Unnithan et al., 2012).

In the case study, Nicholas appears to fall foul of the tendency to use physical attributes as a basis for predicting his trajectory as a soccer player. In sports strongly affected by RAE at youth level, like soccer (Cobley et al., 2009), talent academies might waste potential by devaluing relatively younger players who are yet to mature (Jiménez & Pain, 2008), as illustrated by the coaches' evaluation of Nicholas. In the dialogue above, Adrian asserts that Nicholas should be released given his physical status. Interestingly, the discussion turns to finding evidence to disprove Adrian's claim that "I have not, and can anyone else recall a player who is Nicholas's shape who plays professional soccer?" While Justin's counterclaim: "… saying he is not going to grow is just an assumption, I do not think we can let him go based on that …" became mute. Focus had turned to refuting the "rule" that Adrian forwarded, and thus suddenly, Nicholas' future became dependent upon players that had gone before him and the memory and testaments of the coaches in that

room. Thus, they unintentionally confirmed a tendency towards RAE that is common in youth soccer (Cobley et al., 2009).

As for the coaches' evaluation of Joseph, the perspective of a dual career emerges. Dual career can be understood as the combination of a sports career and education or work (The European Union, 2012). When evaluating Joseph, the coaches identified him as one of the top three players only seven months ago but are now considering him as a player who could be facing release from the academy. This is a remarkable development, especially when considering the academic demands and challenges that Joseph may have faced since his initial appraisal. Such demands may well account for his fluctuation in performance, yet this was not considered. Sensitivity to Joseph's holistic development was conspicuous by its absence. Rather, the discussion turns to hypothesising about Joseph's ambitions in school. The negative reaction to Joseph's academic commitments from coaches is somewhat unsurprising given previous literature has highlighted that youth soccer players often report difficulties in pursuing academic goals whilst being an academy player (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Academia, alongside a sport career, is often seen as an unwanted distraction despite recent literature favouring a holistic development of elite youth athletes (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Literature has suggested it is important that athletes have commitments that extend beyond their athletic endeavours in order to facilitate attainment of a career in elite sport. Indeed, Christensen and Sorensen (2009) found education to be beneficial for certain players, primarily, those with good academic abilities who were living at home, and were in proximity to both the club and school. Therefore, the academy staff who readily question a players' positive commitment to education (as in the case of Joseph) appear to be at odds with recent talent development literature (e.g., Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017).

Commented [KK5]: Reference required

The retain or release tale suggests that the process of talent development in soccer is largely guided by gut feelings or stigmas, shaped in-part by archaic perspectives of how to

support a player's individual development. The narrative illustrates a somewhat unclear selection process informed by prior experiences (of previous players) and decisions being made by individual coaches (entangled in a brutal and vociferous culture). Concrete evaluation of tactical, technical, or mental assets are rarely emphasized in the dialogue. Rather, attention focuses upon the physical attributes and the potential issues of leading a dual career.

Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.

1. An individual's physical and mental development is highly unpredictable, therefore academies must become more open to the realities of adolescent growth by integrating different pathways for players to compete within. One such method is entering bio-banded competitions where players compete against those of similar physical stature (Cumming et al., 2018). Through bio-banding competitions, players (like Joseph), who face contract termination due to their lack of size are given a positive arena to compete within whilst simultaneously younger players of a greater physical stature are also provided with more challenging competitive environments (Cumming et al., 2018). To assist coaches in removing the potential taboo that could ensue from encouraging smaller players to "play-down", greater transparency toward both players and parents regarding the nature of such competitions is recommended. Specifically, coaches could promote bio-banding competitions as part of an individualised talent pathway; contributing to the holistic development of players within elite youth soccer academies.

2. As discussed previously, academic pursuits are often seen as an unwanted distraction in professional soccer. Thus, despite literature previously emphasising the benefits of dual-careers to elite athletes, dual-career initiatives are seldom seen in soccer. Thus, the extent to which academies focus on developing the entire human (a holistic approach) and promoting the development of a broader identity (Stambulova & Wylleman,

2015) remains questionable. Academy environments are acknowledged as a difficult arena in which to foster dual-career initiatives (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014). Driven by the club's aim to increase the revenue of each academy player (as assets), a culture emerges whereby players are expected to "live, breath, and eat soccer" (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 1295) often to the detriment of other social or educational pursuits (Brown & Potrac, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014).

Given the potential maladaptive psychosocial consequences of the one-dimensional identity (see Brown & Potrac, 2009) coaches are urged not to devalue the positive aspects of dual-career, particularly if a player has such interests. Furthermore, the realities of early specialisation may mean that players must balance elite youth soccer and their studies throughout their entire educational career. Therefore, rather than seeing dual-career as a threat to their aspirations for the player, coaches could instead be more sensitive and understanding to fluctuations in performance levels through the school year (e.g., leading up to or during examination periods). By adopting such a position, the coach might support the cognitive and personal growth of the player, which may in turn enhance their soccer development in the long term. As suggested by Damian, coaches should openly discuss academic careers outside of soccer with players; whether this is to inform guidance on career planning or purely as a platform to get to know their players better.

Limitations

Although there was no intention to make wide ranging assumptions of all elite youth soccer academies, the individual academies discussed, or indeed the every-day practices of the highly qualified coaches featured, the use of only three case studies limits the generalizability of the case studies. These three cases were chosen for their stimulating scenarios and potential for readers to critically engage with the content. However, future research could adopt Cronin and Armour's (2017) approach and employ horizontalism

across diary extracts to determine patterns, rather than select instances. This may provide a more representative interpretation of early specialisation and talent development practices within youth academies. Such an approach may also positively alter the presentation of data. Despite the case studies providing a *warts-and-all* portrayal of practices associated with early specialisation, a greater breadth of information would benefit the research area. This would support talent development practices across a wider spectrum of situations rather than the insightful, yet piecemeal, contribution such case study designs provide to the field.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper was to engage the academy coach to reflect upon their own practices through the critical analysis of three case studies. The accompanying theoretical analysis may help direct reflections to avenues that practitioners may not have been previously cognizant of, which may facilitate a deeper understanding of the coaching environment. Recent research (i.e., Chase & DiSante, 2017; Difiori et al., 2018) recognised the gap in knowledge concerning early specialisation, and provided suggestions for practitioners. Such research is encouraging and has further helped to bridge the theory to practice gap within talent development. Practical suggestions in the current paper were therefore provided to support the coaching practitioner. Future research should continue to challenge the high-quality coaching practitioners housed within elite youth soccer academies, providing critical yet supportive information to enhance their development and in turn the development of elite youth soccer players. Echoing the sentiments of Donnelly (1993), let the successful young soccer players be the product of the academy, not the survivors.

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