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John P. Selwood

Philipp Daldrup

Mark Driscoll

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THE IMPACT OF NIKE PROJECT 40/GENERATION ADIDAS PLAYERS ON MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER

Carrie W. LeCrom, John P. Selwood, Philipp Daldrup, & Mark Driscoll

Carrie LeCrom, Ph.D., is the Director of Instruction and Academic Affairs at the Center for Sport Leadership at VCU.

Jay Selwood is the Soccer Program Manager at the Maryland SoccerPlex in Boyds, Maryland.

Philipp Daldrup is a Marketing Manager at BASF Coatings GmbH in Münster, Germany.

Mark J. Driscoll, M.Ed., is the Assistant Box Office Manager at the John Paul Jones Arena in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Abstract

Created in 1997, the Nike Project40/Generation Adidas program encourages soccer players to leave college early to sign professional contracts with Major League Soccer teams, guaranteeing them a 3-year salary with two one-year options. In theory, if the best players are being chosen to this program each year, they should be outperforming those who are drafted to MLS teams but are not a part of the program. By comparing the top draft picks within and outside the program, researchers hoped to determine whether Nike/Adidas players were having a different impact on the league than their counterparts. Results showed that, of 15 statistical categories analyzed, only three resulted in a statistically significant difference between groups. Though Nike/Adidas players were outperforming players who were not a part of the program, they were not doing so at a rate to justify the claim that they have a greater impact on the league.

Keywords: Major League Soccer, Nike Project 40, Generation Adidas, MLS SuperDraft

Introduction

Soccer has long been known as the world's sport, with popularity far exceeding that of any other sport across the globe. However, this has never been the case in the United States, where soccer competes against favorites such as football, basketball, baseball and hockey. Though youth soccer in the U.S is on the rise, its popularity is lacking when it comes to the professional level.

However, Major League Soccer (MLS) in the U.S. has been growing and thriving over the past few years. Established in 1996 with 10 teams, the league has grown to 18 teams in 2011, with two more teams set to be added in 2012 ("MLS expected," 2009). Additionally, nine of those teams have their own soccer-specific stadiums, with two more currently under construction, showing the expected longevity of the league. That said, professional soccer in the U.S. still offers little competition for the European, African, and South American leagues across the globe.

Some argue that the lack of popularity begins with the structure of youth soccer. The European soccer model, specifically the English Premier League, has a long history of signing talented youth to contracts before graduating high school. According to Lee Robinson, the Head of Sports Science/Education at Premier League West Bromwich Albion FC, there are two primary objectives for English academies when signing youth players: The

first is to create players who can play for senior teams, and the second is to sell them to the larger, more prominent clubs (Eisenmenger, 2008). English Premier League clubs accomplish these objectives by bringing children as young as ten years old into the system and working with them until they are prepared for the professional level.

Major League Soccer, in comparison, identifies talent at a much later age, currently requiring each of their clubs to field one U-15/16 and one U-17/18 team through the U.S. Soccer Development Academy (created in 2007). However, some of the more prominent clubs like DC United, Chicago Fire and New York Red Bulls have teams ranging from U-12 to U-20 (Eisenmenger, 2008). Despite this pipeline, most of the MLS players have a college degree; this varies greatly from the English Premier League, where teenagers sign for lucrative contracts and college is not seen as a necessity.

There is debate in the academic and professional community as to whether early talent identification (like the English Premier League academy system) produces better world-class athletes than talent identification that occurs later in an athlete's career (more closely mirroring the MLS's system). Though many of the youth sports academies have shown to produce more competitive teams, and are growing in popularity around the globe, recent research has "questioned the efficacy of traditional talent identification and talent promotion programmes *[sic]* in which children are recruited at an early age" (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr & Philippaerts, 2009, p. 1371). Reinforcing this change in thinking, in preparation for the London 2012 Olympics, UK Sport implemented a 'mature-age talent identification' program to complement their traditional strategy of identifying Olympic athletes at a young age (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr & Philippaerts, 2009).

Irrespective of which strategy produces the best results, it is clear that talent identification is of importance not only to national governing bodies, but clubs and leagues as well. The systems and models used to identify talent are ever-evolving and are commonly driven by an interest in succeeding in sport at either the national or international level (Cooke, Cobley, Till, & Wattie, 2010). Ever concerned with growing the game of soccer in the U.S., not only in regard to talent and international competition, but also fan popularity, Nike Project 40/Generation Adidas was created in 1997. Originally a venture between MLS and U.S. Soccer, and sponsored by Nike, the program's sponsorship was transferred to Adidas in 2005 (and will be referred to solely as Generation Adidas from this point forward). The talent identification and development program encouraged players to leave college early, forgoing collegiate eligibility to sign professional contracts with MLS teams. Encompassing approximately 10 underclassmen per year, Generation Adidas guarantees players a 3-year salary with a MLS team with two one-year options. Aside from the ability to draft the best young players, the league also benefits from the Generation Adidas program, as these players do not count against team salary caps, which often means that they are the first ones drafted in the MLS SuperDraft each year. Additionally, players in the program are offered college scholarships to continue their education after their professional careers end (Steinbach, 2009).

Though the hope of the Generation Adidas program is to grow American talent and keep the players here in the United States when they begin their professional careers, there are still benefits to these players taking their talents overseas, namely, transfer fees from international clubs. Perhaps the most internationally recognized Nike Project 40 signee was Freddy Adu, the 14-year old phenomenon who signed a Nike Project 40 contract in 2004 with MLS's DC

United, worth over three million dollars (Mickle, 2007). The benefits of signing Adu at such a young age paid immediate dividends for MLS. His stardom was instantly felt through appearances on The Late Show with David Letterman, CBS's 60 minutes, MTV's Total Request Live, and national sponsorship commercials. Adu also increased revenue and exposure on the field where he was an amazing draw, boosting home attendance by ten percent, as well as averaging more than 6,000 additional fans per road game (Mickle, 2007).

Although Adu's stardom is debatable, his value to MLS is not. In 2007, at the age of 18, Adu signed with the Portuguese club Benfica who paid MLS two million dollars in transfer fees for his rights, according the Associated Press (2007). Other Generation Adidas players who were purchased by European clubs include Demarcus Beasley in 2004 ($2,500,000 transfer fee), Clint Dempsey in 2006 ($4,000,000 transfer fee), and Jozy Altidore in 2008 ($10,000,000 transfer fee). The grooming and sale of the United States' most talented players may seem counter intuitive, but for a league as young as MLS, this return on investment represents stability and growth, increased infrastructure, league expansion, and further partnership with major sponsors and media members (L'Hote, 2007).

It seems that the creation of Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas is a crucial aspect of MLS's current plan to find young American talent before the major European clubs do. Although the current $65,000 to $125,000 Generation Adidas contracts may seem small when compared to what international players receive, they immediately put the players in the top quarter of contract value in MLS (Jennings, 2009).

Although there have been articles written about the financial impact garnered from European clubs paying transfer fees to MLS for Generation Adidas players, there is little that shows the statistical impact of these players compared with the other, non-Generation Adidas players with whom they are drafted. The hope is that the following research can provide the necessary statistical analysis to determine the value Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas players have on MLS and United States soccer. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to determine whether Generation Adidas players perform better than their non-Generation Adidas counterparts who are drafted in the MLS SuperDraft.

Method and Design

Participants

Research was conducted by examining the pool of Generation Adidas players from 2002 – 2006, compared to the top MLS draft picks in the same years. The size of the Generation Adidas pool of players each year determined how many MLS players they were compared to. For instance, in 2002, there were seven Generation Adidas players, so the top seven non-Generation Adidas players drafted in the MLS SuperDraft were used as a comparison. In 2003, there were 13 Generation Adidas players, so 13 MLS players were used as a comparison group. Overall, a total of 102 players were included in the study, which breakdown as follows: 29 Nike Project 40 players (2002-2004), 22 Generation Adidas players (2005-2006), 51 MLS contract players (2002-2006).

The years studied ended in 2006, as this gave players the opportunity to statistically prove their impact on Major League Soccer. Had the pool of players continued through 2008 or 2010, the players would not have had much time to compile the statistics necessary to show a trend. Though four years is not an extremely long time frame, "the average rookie player in MLS can expect to play for only two and a half seasons…over half of the players who enter

the league in a given season are out in two years, and less than 20% of that incoming class are still in the league after five years" (Boyden & Carey, 2010, p. 6). Given this fairly short career span of MLS players, the researchers felt that a 4-year window was sufficient to show a trend. Goalkeepers were originally examined in the analysis but eventually removed because of the very small number of goalkeepers in MLS, in addition to the fact that their statistics are so different from field players that it is difficult to make a comparison.

Procedures

Upon selecting the sample, statistics were gathered on each individual player including: age when drafted, position played, games started, appearances, minutes played, goals, assists, shots taken, shots on goal, penalty cards, ejections, total number of MLS seasons played, and whether or not the player played in a European league. These individual statistics were chosen because all of them (except whether the player played in Europe) are the standard statistics that are collected on each player throughout each game and the entire season. Though some of them might not necessarily illustrate how effective or productive a player is (such as number of penalty cards or ejections), the researchers felt it was important to analyze them in conjunction with the other statistics, as they are always reported for players who play in the MLS as measures of overall performance. Statistics were compiled for each player from the year he was drafted through the beginning of the 2010 season. Because players drafted in 2002 would likely have higher statistics than players drafted in later years, the statistics were converted into a per season variable, resulting in the following: games started per season, appearances per season, minutes per season, goals per season, assists per season, shots per season, shots on goal per season, etc. Statistics were collected through the Major League Soccer homepage and individual team sites.

Analysis and Results

To make a performance comparison of Generation Adidas players to non-Generation Adidas players, t-tests were utilized to compare the two groups in each statistical category. Statistical significance was set at the $p = .05$ level. The means and medians in each statistical category were calculated, and on first glance it did appear that the Generation Adidas players were performing better than the non-Generation Adidas players, when it came to both mean and median scores (Table 1).

Table 1

Mean and Median Score Comparisons of Players

	Means		Medians	
	Generation Adidas Player	Non-Adidas Player	Generation Adidas Player	Non-Adidas Player
Age when Drafted	18.9	22.2	19.0	22.0
Draft Slot	11.1	12.3	9.0	11.0
Starts per MLS Season	12.0	10.2	12.9	7.7
Games Played per MLS Season	15.3	13.7	17.1	12.2
Minutes Played per MLS Season	1077.3	925.8	1148.1	844.3
Goals Scored per MLS Season	1.4	1.3	0.5	0.3
Assists per MLS Season	1.5	0.9	0.8	0.3
Shots per MLS Season	13.6	11.6	8.5	4.3
Shots on Goal per MLS Season	5.9	5.1	2.5	1.8
Cards per MLS Season	1.9	1.8	1.6	1.3
Ejections per MLS Season	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0

In the age category, Generation Adidas players were younger than their counterparts, which is inherent in the way the Generation Adidas program is set up, because it forces the players to leave college early and turn professional at a younger age. In the draft slot, and the cards per season and ejections per season categories, a lower mean or median is better, as players want to be drafted earlier in the draft and want to have fewer cards and ejections per season.

In two of these three categories (draft slot and ejections per season), the Generation Adidas players did have lower means and medians. In all other categories, a higher mean or median translates to a better impact per player, as more starts, games played, minutes played, goals, assists and shots translates to a better overall performance in the MLS. In all categories, the Generation Adidas players performed better, on average, than the non-Generation Adidas players. However, upon further analysis (t-test), the only categories that resulted in statistically significant differences were age, assists per season, and ejections per season (Table 2).

Table 2

T-test Results

	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Age when Drafted	-10.819	100	0.000	-3.333	0.308
Draft Slot	-0.937	97	0.599	-1.468	1.567
Starts per MLS Season	0.874	100	0.252	1.771	2.025
Games Played per MLS Season	0.639	100	0.115	1.417	2.218
Minutes Played per MLS Season	0.744	99	0.190	133.022	178.810
Goals Scored per MLS Season	0.214	100	0.405	0.101	0.471
Assists per MLS Season	1.881	100	0.035	0.576	0.306
Shots per MLS Season	0.523	100	0.881	1.733	3.310
Shots on Goal per MLS Season	0.425	100	0.964	0.671	1.581
Cards per MLS Season	0.199	100	0.246	0.076	0.383
Ejections per MLS Season	-1.950	100	0.007	-0.109	0.056

At the p = .05 level, there was a significant difference between the draft age of Generation Adidas players and non-Generation Adidas players. Generation Adidas players were drafted at an average age of 19, while their counterparts were approximately 22 when drafted. This should be obvious given that the purpose of Generation Adidas is to get the best young players to turn professional at an earlier age, therefore they are leaving college early to play MLS, while most other players drafted by MLS teams have already completed their full college eligibility.

Assists per season also saw a statistically significant difference between Generation Adidas and non-Generation Adidas players, with the Generation Adidas players having a higher mean assists per season than their counterparts (1.5 versus .09, respectively). Finally, the non-Generation Adidas players were ejected from games more often than the Generation Adidas players, which was a statistically significant difference (.2 ejections per season versus

.1 ejections per season, respectively). In all other statistical categories, although there was a difference in the means and medians between the two groups, the differences between the means were not strong enough to be statistically significant. Therefore, the players only differ in performance when it comes to assists per season and ejections per season.

In additional analysis, a t-test was conducted to see whether more Generation Adidas players or non-Generation Adidas players left MLS to sign contracts to play in Europe. There was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups, so there is no evidence that Generation Adidas players are more likely to eventually play in European leagues.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test whether players who signed Generation Adidas contracts had more of an impact on the MLS than non-Generation Adidas players. Researchers expected that Generation Adidas players would have a markedly better impact on the MLS than their non-Generation Adidas counterparts. The results of the study do not support this theory. Although Generation Adidas players did have better mean and median statistics in every category analyzed, only three categories showed a statistically significant difference. The three categories noting significant differences were age, assists, and ejections per season.

In assessing impact within the league, among the three statistically significant findings, assists is the only statistical category that has much bearing on the game. The age at which a player enters the draft bears little meaning on his impact on the league, and although ejections could alter a game, the mean ejections per season was only .1 and .2 for the Generation Adidas and non-Generation Adidas players, respectively. Assists can certainly indicate how well a player is performing, but given the fact that no other statistical category showed a significant difference, assists alone is not sufficient to say that one group of players is outperforming the other.

Limitations

Though this research accomplished its goal of comparing Generation Adidas to non-Generation Adidas players in the MLS, further research is needed to extend its findings. The study was limited by the fact that it only included players who were drafted in 2002-2006. The authors' concern was that including players drafted more recently than 2006 would not allow them to have a long enough time frame in which to have a statistical impact. Therefore, the time frame of the study was fairly short, leaving room for future studies as the Generation Adidas program continues.

Additionally, the reasons mentioned above also limit the study's sample size. A total of 102 players (51 per group) were included in the study, which was determined by the size of the Generation Adidas pool in each year included in the study. For parity sake, the same number of non-Generation Adidas players was selected each year for comparison. Again, monitoring the Generation-Adidas program and the MLS players into the future will not only allow for future research but also provide a longer period of time in which to see a trend.

Implications and Conclusions

By determining a current Generation Adidas player's worth through statistical analysis and comparison with other players, Major League Soccer can better determine that player's value when it comes time to take the option on his Generation Adidas contract, create a new contract, or negotiate transfer fees. Realizing these values could help the league increase

revenue, with the goal being the ability to match contract offers from clubs in Europe and South America. Ideally, this could be true not only of the Generation Adidas program, but of all players in the league. Measuring players' effectiveness statistically is a useful way of determining what factors should be assessed in the selection process of Generation Adidas players, as well as in the draft selection process for all MLS teams.

This study attempted to do just that, statistically compare players' effectiveness between Generation Adidas and non-Generation Adidas players. The results showed that the Generation Adidas players are not currently outperforming their non-Generation Adidas counterparts who are drafted to MLS teams. Hopefully the lack of difference in performance shows that all highly-drafted MLS players are performing well in the league. But, as Generation Adidas players are hand picked as the top young players in the country, should they be outperforming those drafted in the same year to the MLS? The successfulness of Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas can be measured in many ways, and if one looks at it since its inception, the majority of players who have been a part of the program have had an impact on MLS and other leagues around the world. Without knowing the goals and strategies employed by the Generation Adidas program at this date in time, it is difficult to say whether the program is having success overall. Looking purely at the on-field statistics of players in the program and outside the program, it is clear that the effectiveness of MLS players in the two groups is fairly equivalent.

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MANAGEMENT WHITEPAPER

Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to determine the value Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas players have on Major League Soccer (MLS). Established in 1997, the Generation Adidas program aims to keep the best young talented soccer players in the United States, but little information has been published on the effectiveness of the program, especially when comparing Generation Adidas players' performance in the MLS to MLS players who are not part of Generation Adidas. Therefore, analyzing how well players are performing compared to their non-Generation Adidas counterparts is of importance to the league and to the program's sponsors. Managers and administrators in other professional leagues who are involved in analyzing the performance of athletes might also have interest in this article.

Issue

MLS in the U.S. has been growing and thriving over the past few years. Established in 1996 with 10 teams, the league has grown to 18 teams in 2011, with two more teams set to be added in 2012. Additionally, nine of those teams have their own soccer-specific stadiums, with two more currently under construction, showing the expected longevity of the league. That said, professional soccer in the U.S. still offers little competition for the European, African, and South American leagues across the globe.

In an effort to grow the game of soccer in the U.S., not only in regard to talent and international competition, but also fan popularity, Nike Project 40/Generation Adidas was created in 1997. Originally a venture between MLS and U.S. Soccer, and sponsored by Nike, the program's sponsorship was transferred to Adidas in 2005 (and will be referred to solely as Generation Adidas from this point forward). The program encouraged players to leave college early, forgoing collegiate eligibility to sign professional contracts with MLS teams. Encompassing approximately 10 underclassmen per year, Generation Adidas guarantees players a 3-year salary with a MLS team with two one-year options. Aside from the ability to draft the best young players, the league also benefits from the Generation Adidas program, as these players do not count against team salary caps, which often means that they are the first ones drafted in the MLS SuperDraft each year. Additionally, players in the program are offered college scholarships to continue their education after their professional careers end.

Though the hope of the Generation Adidas program is to grow American talent and keep the players here in the United States when they begin their professional careers, there are still benefits to these players taking their talents overseas, namely, transfer fees from international clubs. Perhaps the most internationally recognized Nike Project 40 signee was Freddy Adu, the 14-year old phenomenon who signed a Nike Project 40 contract in 2004 with MLS's DC United, worth over three million dollars. The signing Freddy Adu at such a young age paid immediate dividends for MLS, through media coverage and increased revenue and exposure on the field where he was an amazing draw, boosting home attendance by ten percent, as well as averaging more than 6,000 additional fans per road game.

Although Adu's stardom is debatable, his value to MLS is not. In 2007, at the age of 18, Adu signed with the Portuguese club Benfica who paid MLS two million dollars in transfer fees for his rights. Other Generation Adidas players who were purchased by European clubs include Demarcus Beasley in 2004 ($2,500,000 transfer fee), Clint Dempsey in 2006 ($4,000,000 transfer fee), and Jozy Altidore in 2008 ($10,000,000 transfer fee). The grooming and sale of the United States' most talented players may seem counter intuitive, but for a league as young as MLS, this return on investment represents stability and growth, increased infrastructure, league expansion, and further partnership with major sponsors and media members.

It seems that the creation of Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas is a crucial aspect of MLS's current plan to find young American talent before the major European clubs do. However, little information has been published on the value, effectiveness, and longevity of the Generation Adidas program. Is it working? Have these players been outperforming their non-Generation Adidas counterparts once they become MLS players? These questions and more are those that motivated the authors to undertake this research.

Summary

By statistically measuring the impact of the Generation Adidas players compared with the other, non-Generation Adidas players with whom they are drafted, the authors sought to evaluate how well the program is working. Utilizing the years 2002 – 2006, authors compared to the top MLS draft picks from the Generation Adidas program with those who were not a part of the program. Overall, a total of 102 players were included in the study. The statistical categories analyzed for each player were age when drafted, position played, games started, appearances, minutes played, goals, assists, shots taken, shots on goal, penalty cards, ejections, total number of MLS seasons played, and whether or not the player played in a European league. The statistics were converted into a per season variable, to account for the fact that some had played in the league longer than others.

In summary, upon initial glance, the Generation Adidas players were outperforming others on the field, as their average starts, games played, minutes played, goals, assists and shots were higher than the non-Generation Adidas players, and their draft slot, cards per season and ejections per season were lower than the non-Generation Adidas players. However, upon further analysis, the only categories that resulted in statistically significant differences were age, assists per season, and ejections per season, meaning that in every other category (games started, appearances, minutes played, goals, shots taken, shots on goal, penalty cards, total number of MLS seasons played, and whether or not the player played in a European league) the difference between the Generation Adidas players and non-Generation Adidas players were so small, they essentially had no effect on measuring which group performs better in the MLS.

In regard to the three variables that did result in statistically significant differences, even those might not be enough to say that one group is outperforming the other. Age does not have much bearing on the game and player performance itself, and given the inherent nature of the Generation Adidas program, it is obvious that those players would average a lower incoming age than the others (18.9 and 22.2, respectively). Generation Adidas players did average a statistically significantly lower number of ejections per season, but the averages were 0.1 and 0.2 ejections per season, respectively. The number is so low that is it not a statistical category that would have too much bearing on the game itself. Finally, assists per season was the final category where there was a statistically significant difference between Generation Adidas and non-Generation Adidas players. The Generation Adidas players were outperforming their counterparts, 1.5 to 0.9 assists per season. This is the only true category where the argument can be made that the Generation Adidas players are having a better impact on the league than the other players.

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to test whether players who signed Generation Adidas contracts had more of an impact on the MLS than non-Generation Adidas players. The results of the study, in general, do not indicate that one group is outperforming the other. Although Generation Adidas players did have better mean statistics in every category analyzed, only three categories showed a statistically significant difference (age, assists, and ejections per season). In assessing impact within the league, among the three statistically significant findings, assists per season is the only one that has much bearing on the game itself.

Hopefully the lack of difference in performance shows that all highly-drafted MLS players are performing well in the league. But, as Generation Adidas players are handpicked as the top young players in the country, should they be outperforming those drafted in the same year to the MLS? The successfulness of Nike Project 40 and Generation Adidas can be measured in many ways, and if one looks at it since its inception, the majority of players who have been a part of the program have had an impact on MLS and other leagues around the world. Therefore, it is not fair to say that because Generation Adidas players are not outperforming non-Generation Adidas players on the field in the MLS, they are not well selected or the program is not successful. The authors would suggest that more research be conducted, and the effectiveness of the Generation Adidas program be measured in other ways in order to draw a broader conclusion on whether the program is accomplishing its goals.

Discussion/Implications

By determining a current Generation Adidas player's worth through statistical analysis and comparison with other players, Major League Soccer can better determine that player's value when it comes time to take the option on his Generation Adidas contract, create a new contract, or negotiate transfer fees. Realizing these values could help the league increase revenue, with the goal being the ability to match contract offers from clubs in Europe and South America. Ideally, this could be true not only of the Generation Adidas program, but of all players in the league. Measuring players' effectiveness statistically is a useful way of determining what factors are the most indicative of future performance, which could not only help in the selection process of Generation Adidas players, but also in the draft selection process in general for all MLS teams.