THE EFFECT OF TEAM COMPETITION LEVEL ON YOUTH FEMALE SOCCER PLAYERS' TRAINING ACTIVITY AND RESPONSE

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Soccer players' evolution from youth to professional standard of competition is multifactorial and complex in nature. Success in soccer can be attributed to circumstantial chance that effectively align innately talented players with optimal training environments over an extended period necessary to fulfill an individual's athletic potential (Baker & Wattie, 2018; Howe et al., 1998). Social structural constructs by which footballers experience the sport such as specific club organization, coach, team selection and parental guidance can vary yet have a significant net effect on talent development (Buchheit M, 2023). Consequently, early chronic exposure to higher quality training and level of competition may be deemed advantageous for footballers (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

While extensive training is fundamental in obtaining professional-level soccer performance our current understanding of training activity, response, and adaptation remains limited. Soccer clubs invest intensely in talent development by strategically partnering players with their most competitive-level teams, league competition, and experienced coaches. A soccer club's team standard of play and competition in part dictates players' training environment. Players' exposure to "quality" team-based soccer training and subsequent adaptation may together play a significant role in talent development. Thus, soccer players' response to various coaches' tactical formations, training aims, methodological structure, and in-practice activities warrant further exploration.

The purpose of the literature review section of this dissertation prospectus is to provide an examination of talent identification and development in soccer. An emphasis will be placed on describing current soccer training practice, namely the use of small-sided training activities to

mimic the physical, technical, and tactical demands of competition. Finally, female soccer training will be examined, and a theoretical model of talent development based on soccer players' team standard of play will be presented that warrants original investigation.

Talent Paradigm in Soccer

It is often assumed that exceptional sport performance depends on presence or absence of "natural talent". The talent account in sport performance has been extensively debated (Baker & Wattie, 2018; Gulbin et al., 2010). For the purposes of this review, we will assign four properties to the talent account that theoretically persist on a continuum and are maintained in youth through professional level of sport evaluation: 1. Talent is at minimum partly innate. 2. Full effects of talent may not be completely evident at an early age, but there will be some advanced indications, allowing trained coaches to identify the presence of talent before remarkable mature levels of performance are demonstrated. 3. Early indications of talent provide a basis for predicting players who are more likely to succeed 4. Only a minority are talented enough, enabling explanation for differential levels of success in sport (Howe et al., 1998).

Over the lifespan of footballer's playing career talent demonstrated through performance undergoes detection, identification, development, and selection processes that will directly and indirectly determine their current competitive state, upward and/or potential downward trajectory in the sport. While interconnected, each of these talent processes are distinguishable. Talent detection refers to the discovery of potential prospects who are currently not involved in a soccer club structure or an active member of a competitive-level team. Talent identification refers to the process of recognizing current footballers best suited for high-level competition. This practice

requires soccer coaches, scouts, and sport scientists to predict future performance over various periods of time by assessing physical, physiological, psychological, and sociological attributes alongside technical tactical skill. Talent development entails an appropriate training environment necessary to cultivate footballers' athletic potential. Talent selection involves choosing the most appropriate individual or group of individuals with the prerequisite levels of performance for inclusion within a given football team. A talent paradigm and theoretical framework in soccer has been recently proposed (Williams et al., 2020) (See Figure 1.0). This model highlights two key components of football's evolutionary cycle: 1. Soccer players' talent and performance is temporal yet continuously under evaluation 2. Soccer players' demotion, sustainment, or advancement is at least in part dependent upon respective level of competition and training environment.

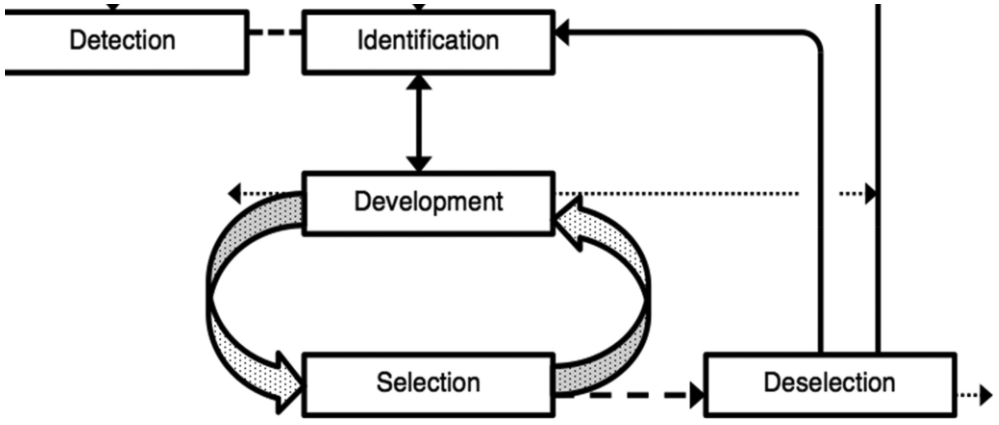

Figure 1. Key parts of the identification, selection, and development process in soccer. The arrows indicate possible player pathways; with heavy dashed lines indicating interlinked concepts and light dashed lines indicating exit or entry routes (Williams et al., 2020).

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