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

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

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## 26 Abstract

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

40 *Keywords:* early specialisation, coaching, qualitative

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

138         At present, early specialisation is happening within British soccer academies as part  
139 of a long-term strategy to improve the quality of home-grown players (The Premier League,  
140 2011). In recognising this trend, this paper focuses upon supporting the adult practitioners  
141 who influence the experiences of players specialising early within elite youth soccer. In  
142 accordance with Ford et al. (2012), the aim is to apply theoretical principles to explain the  
143 potential implications of early specialisation practices, rather than evaluating their efficacy  
144 for elite youth soccer players. Therefore, the case studies, deliberately chosen for their  
145 dramatic character and potential to effect change in coach-behaviours, are presented to  
146 emphasise psychosocial implications associated to early specialisation.

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

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

#### 161 **Methodology**

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

#### 166 **Philosophical Assumptions**

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



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

### 178 **Ethical Considerations**

179       Following institutional ethics approval, several steps were taken to ensure that the  
180 rights and interests of participants were upheld throughout the collection of the data which  
181 informed the case studies. Of primary concern, given the nature of the paper, was the  
182 representation of the academy coaches. Informed consent was obtained from the manager of  
183 each academy. From the outset, coaches were aware that the first author was a participant-  
184 observer conducting research within their academy, and that their practices may be  
185 discussed publicly, albeit anonymously. Coaches were made aware that they could  
186 withdraw consent at any time without penalty, and that observations, (featuring their  
187 sessions) would not be considered. Field notes were emailed to coaches on completion to  
188 give them a further opportunity to withdraw any observations relating to their sessions; none  
189 chose to do this. Having taken time to build rapport with the academy coaches, the lead  
190 author was able to openly discuss his observations with the participating coaches, and in  
191 doing so confirm accuracy of field-notes, discuss contradictions in knowledge, and offer  
192 applied suggestions (see Christians, 2008). This approach, termed “member reflection”  
193 (Smith & McGannon, 2017), helped to reduce feelings of covertness, provide some level of  
194 qualitative rigour, and maintained the relationships with participating coaches (Palmer,  
195 2017). Regarding player involvement, the first author was introduced to players during  
196 training with the role of observing sessions and assisting the coach. It was agreed with the  
197 director of each academy that loci-parentis of the players would be assumed by the football  
198 club. This was deemed appropriate given the unobtrusive method of data collection.  
199 Pseudonyms were used for both players and coaches throughout the case studies. In  
200 deciding which case studies to feature, the universal utilitarian approach of which stories

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

### 205 **Participants**

206 Three UK football academies were involved in the current study, with field note  
207 observations occurring at each. The academies were solicited on the basis that each was of  
208 category two academy status and were geographically commutable for the first author. Each  
209 academy agreed to the first author assisting with training sessions and adopting the role of  
210 participant-observer. The participants in case study one and two included academy players  
211 and academy coaches, whilst case study three included academy coaches and other academy  
212 talent development staff (i.e., head of scouting, head of safeguarding, and education). The  
213 academy players featured within the case studies were all male and aged between seven and  
214 15 years old. Not all players who were observed feature in the presented case studies. The  
215 adult academy staff members were also all male, and all over the age of 20. The coaches all  
216 held a minimum of a UEFA B coaching license, with many holding the UEFA A coaching  
217 license<sup>1</sup>.

### 218 **The Case Study**

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

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

### 235 **Observation**

236 Systematic observation was used as the method for data gathering in this study.  
237 Fundamental to observation is the need to understand the cultures of the entity being  
238 studied. To achieve this, protracted and systematic observations are necessary. In the  
239 current study, the researcher remained in situ for an entire academy season at each club  
240 (July-May) and attended three training sessions per week with each session lasting between  
241 90 and 120 minutes.

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

**Commented [KR1]:** Have added this section to clarify the case type.

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

#### 258 **Data analysis**

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

**Commented [KR2]:** Have edited this section rather much. See if you find it more in line with the reviewer comments. I have included the study they recommend ☺

**Commented [KR3]:** Winchester, G., Culver, D. & Camiré, M., (2011). The Learning Profiles of High School Teacher-coaches. CANADIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION 34, 4 (2011): 216-233

**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.

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

## 276 **Results**

### 277 **Case Study One: “Five Minutes of Development Wasted!”**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

333 **Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.**

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

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

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

#### 357 **Case Study Two: The Phantom Professional**

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



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

375 Psychological *need thwarting* is a term to describe actions or behaviours that  
376 contribute to or directly reduce the satisfaction of an individual's basic needs (Ntoumanis,  
377 2012). Basic psychological needs theory, a sub-theory of Self-determination Theory (SDT),  
378 proposes that individuals' strive to satisfy the three basic needs of: relatedness, competency,  
379 and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are satisfied, the individual benefits  
380 from greater well-being and better health, in contrast if they are not satisfied, it can  
381 contribute towards ill-being and ill-health (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Briefly, *autonomy* is  
382 satisfied when an individual feels responsible for their own actions, *competence* is enhanced  
383 through a feeling of effectiveness within a given social environment, and finally *relatedness*  
384 becomes satisfied when an individual possesses a sense of belonging to that particular social  
385 environment (Ntoumanis, 2012; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, Thorgeresen-  
386 Ntoumani, 2011).

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

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

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

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

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

433 **Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.**

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

442 2. Autonomy-supportive environments are recognised as one of the most important  
443 contributors to the promotion and maintenance of players' long-term self-determined  
444 motivation (Hendry et al., 2014; Kingston et al., 2018). In their study, Kingston et al.  
445 (2018) observed that when conditions supported autonomy in training (e.g., ownership over  
446 decisions, opportunity to share opinions, open-ended questions, players led team talks etc.)  
447 it contributed towards positive player behaviours (e.g., increased work rate, overcoming

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

451 **Case Study Three: Retain or Release?**

452           10:00am and the meeting is about to get started. Justin, head coach of U12,  
453 is hosting an evaluation meeting with all academy staff regarding the status of the  
454 U12 players. Justin moves through the spreadsheet. In the far-left column are the  
455 players' name, with the following columns providing one bit of information relating  
456 to that young players technical, tactical, psychological, and physical performance.  
457 Each row is colour coded: red, amber, or green. The latter, those in green, are  
458 designated as the highest performing players within the age group, and in Justin's  
459 words: "those that have a good shot at making it". Amber players are the players  
460 who are not excelling but are doing well. However, red indicates a struggling  
461 player, a player whom is likely to be released imminently from the academy. Justin  
462 moves swiftly down the list, reeling off the players in the order they are written,  
463 adding more information and posing rhetorical questions as he moves through: The  
464 rest of the room is full of talent development staff (coaches, the lead coach and the  
465 head of recruitment). All lean forward and look intensely toward the white board to  
466 where the colour-coded list is. Justin scrolls down, increasing his pace as he moves  
467 through the amber players. The first green player is reached, Troy: "What can we  
468 say, he's just soaring above everyone- he's a *real* player... [pauses half  
469 gesticulating, almost trying to find words] ...there isn't much else to say." Will, the  
470 assistant coach to the U12 also tries to describe Troy: "He's just, oh, something  
471 else... flying". Justin continues down the list, stopping at an amber player:  
472 Nicholas. Nicholas has positive remarks written across his technical, tactical, and

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

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

522 other players who are better than him in that position. Why are we discussing him?

523 We should just get rid.” Rhys added to this conclusion: “we must be brutal.”

524 Physical assets are important to soccer success, but can also be overestimated

525 (Unnithan et al., 2012). The relative age effect (RAE) is a phenomenon that has received

526 considerable attention, particularly within the youth soccer literature (Cobley, Baker,

527 Wattie, & McKenna, 2009; Musch & Grondin, 2001). RAE is understood to be an

528 unintended selection of the physically and cognitively mature players (compared to their

529 relative younger peers). RAE has resulted in a selection pattern within elite youth sport,

530 where players born within the first three to six months of the calendar year predominate

531 (Unnithan et al., 2012). Several studies have found RAE to occur in the selection of higher-

532 level youth soccer players (Auguste 2011; Sæther 2015). Crucially, this may suggest that

533 RAE is also a problem within youth soccer academies, with such biases contributing toward

534 potential talent being wasted (Unnithan et al., 2012).

535 In the case study, Nicholas appears to fall foul of the tendency to use physical

536 attributes as a basis for predicting his trajectory as a soccer player. In sports strongly

537 affected by RAE at youth level, like soccer (Cobley et al., 2009), talent academies might

538 waste potential by devaluing relatively younger players who are yet to mature (Jiménez &

539 Pain, 2008), as illustrated by the coaches’ evaluation of Nicholas. In the dialogue above,

540 Adrian asserts that Nicholas should be released given his physical status. Interestingly, the

541 discussion turns to finding evidence to disprove Adrian’s claim that “I have not, and can

542 anyone else recall a player who is Nicholas’s shape who plays professional soccer?” While

543 Justin’s counterclaim: “... saying he is not going to grow is just an assumption, I do not

544 think we can let him go based on that ...” became mute. Focus had turned to refuting the

545 “rule” that Adrian forwarded, and thus suddenly, Nicholas’ future became dependent upon

546 players that had gone before him and the memory and testaments of the coaches in that

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

549 As for the coaches' evaluation of Joseph, the perspective of a dual career emerges.  
550 Dual career can be understood as the combination of a sports career and education or work  
551 (The European Union, 2012). When evaluating Joseph, the coaches identified him as one of  
552 the top three players only seven months ago but are now considering him as a player who  
553 could be facing release from the academy. This is a remarkable development, especially  
554 when considering the academic demands and challenges that Joseph may have faced since  
555 his initial appraisal. Such demands may well account for his fluctuation in performance, yet  
556 this was not considered. Sensitivity to Joseph's holistic development was conspicuous by its  
557 absence. Rather, the discussion turns to hypothesising about Joseph's ambitions in school.  
558 The negative reaction to Joseph's academic commitments from coaches is somewhat  
559 unsurprising given previous literature has highlighted that youth soccer players often report  
560 difficulties in pursuing academic goals whilst being an academy player (Brown & Potrac,  
561 2009). Academia, alongside a sport career, is often seen as an unwanted distraction despite  
562 recent literature favouring a holistic development of elite youth athletes (Henriksen &  
563 Stambulova, 2017). Literature has suggested it is important that athletes have commitments  
564 that extend beyond their athletic endeavours in order to facilitate attainment of a career in  
565 elite sport. Indeed, Christensen and Sorensen (2009) found education to be beneficial for  
566 certain players, primarily, those with good academic abilities who were living at home, and  
567 were in proximity to both the club and school. Therefore, the academy staff who readily  
568 question a players' positive commitment to education (as in the case of Joseph) appear to be  
569 at odds with recent talent development literature (e.g., Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017).

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

Commented [KK5]: Reference required



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

578 **Practical suggestions for the elite youth coach.**

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

592 2. As discussed previously, academic pursuits are often seen as an unwanted  
593 distraction in professional soccer. Thus, despite literature previously emphasising the  
594 benefits of dual-careers to elite athletes, dual-career initiatives are seldom seen in soccer.  
595 Thus, the extent to which academies focus on developing the entire human (a holistic  
596 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

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

### 629 **Conclusion**

630 The primary aim of this paper was to engage the academy coach to reflect upon their  
631 own practices through the critical analysis of three case studies. The accompanying  
632 theoretical analysis may help direct reflections to avenues that practitioners may not have  
633 been previously cognizant of, which may facilitate a deeper understanding of the coaching  
634 environment. Recent research (i.e., Chase & DiSante, 2017; Difiori et al., 2018) recognised  
635 the gap in knowledge concerning early specialisation, and provided suggestions for  
636 practitioners. Such research is encouraging and has further helped to bridge the theory to  
637 practice gap within talent development. Practical suggestions in the current paper were  
638 therefore provided to support the coaching practitioner. Future research should continue to  
639 challenge the high-quality coaching practitioners housed within elite youth soccer  
640 academies, providing critical yet supportive information to enhance their development and  
641 in turn the development of elite youth soccer players. Echoing the sentiments of Donnelly  
642 (1993), let the successful young soccer players be the product of the academy, not the  
643 survivors.

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