Capturing the development experience in professional football – case studies on post-academy career transitions

Littlewood, Martin, Richardson, David, Gilbourne, David

Research Institution for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, England

Introduction

The development of young players in elite level English football has been a pronounced feature within the industry for many years. Players that graduate to the 1st team will have progressed and experienced the transition from Academy player to professional player. The present paper concentrates on the young player's transition from Academy to young professional. Specifically, the paper draws attention to how two young professional players (from different English Premiership football teams) were confronted with similar challenges when they embarked on loan periods. The management of the loan experience and the subsequent influence on career development and progression is also explored. The players' experiences are reviewed through reference to literature that explores football culture, social support (Richardson et al., 2004) and within career transitions (Wylleman et al., 2004).

Methods

The post-Academy career experiences of two young professional football players were explored through the deployment of a qualitative methodology and are presented as case-study accounts. To ensure contextual similarity the study design was guided by a number of inclusion criteria. Specifically, each player must have progressed through to a 'young' professional from the club's Academy system, with each of the players' clubs being in the same domestic playing league. In-depth individual semi-structured interviews (Dale, 1996) were conducted with the players in the 2002/03 season. Case-study research should seek to emphasise the uniqueness of the 'single case' in question (Stake, 1998) and consequently, individual data sets were developed through the use of repeat semi-structured interviews through the course of the season. The interview framework sought to explore each player's individual perceptions of their post-Academy transitional experiences. The structure of the interviews permitted a flexible approach to the questioning process in order to facilitate open and free-flowing dialogue (Dale, 1996). Initial interviews sought to establish rapport and explore the contextual background to each player's experience. Further interviews explored each player's development and progression during loan periods. The repeat interview protocol allowed emerging themes, identified during earlier interviews, to be revisited, expanded upon and (if necessary) revised. This procedure required data from one interview to be analysed before the next interview could take place. During this exercise, triangulation between researchers ensured that developing themes were critically discussed (Patton, 1990). Via narrative forms of representation vignettes are used within the case studies that capture and permit the participants to speak for themselves (Wolcott, 1994).

Results

The complexity of the post-Academy career experiences of the two young professional football players was evidenced. Positive aspects of the transition included selection for reserve team, systematic development methods that the players associated with (familiar) life in the Academy structure. However, subsequent patterns that emerged from the data set suggested marked differences in the managerial strategies that were employed by the internal support systems within the players' respective clubs. These variations were specifically connected with the players' individual loan periods. Issues that featured prominently included clarity over the rationale of the loan period and support systems within the players' respective clubs. These variations were specifically connected with the players' individual loan periods. Issues that featured prominently included clarity over the rationale of the loan period and communication and feedback strategies employed by both donor and host club.

Discussion/Conclusions

It was felt that the provision of a more coherent and structured approach to the management of one of the loan experiences might have enabled a smoother post-Academy transition period (see Wylleman et al., 2004). In a general sense, (some) professional football clubs may need to consider embracing appropriate intervention strategies that aim to deal with the psychological issues that may manifest themselves through an (unsuccessful) loan experience, and as such, a number of sports practitioners may therefore be implicated in this process. Embedding specific sport career transition services and/or educationally based programmes (Wylleman et al., 2004) more explicitly within the developmental phase within an Academy system, may facilitate the advancement of skills that players need for the future such as coping strategies, critical reflection and goalsetting. The responsibility for the implementation of these occupational practices ultimately lies with the funding agencies of youth development related schemes, professional football clubs and their internal support systems (i.e., coaches, sports psychologists) (see Richardson et al., 2004). Yet, specific sub-cultural issues and perceptions that are an inherent feature within professional football may be factors that impede change within the environment.

References

Wylleman, P. et al. (2004). Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 5, 7-20