

# PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FOOTBALL ACADEMIES ACROSS TWO CULTURES

– *Written by Amanda Johnson, Qatar*

I worked as lead physiotherapist for the Manchester United Academy for 10 years, before moving to a similar position in Qatar at the Aspire Academy. These experiences have given me a unique perspective on how youth players are developed in two very different environments. Both institutions are trailblazers and it is interesting to reflect on the differences, similarities and the challenges that prevail in the two environments, to develop future footballers.

There have been a number of significant changes in the football world over the past 20 years, particularly in the area of youth development. In 1998, the 'academy system for youth players' was introduced into English professional clubs, replacing the old 'football schools of excellence'. It was argued that a more regulated and consistent

environment would help develop young players in a safer manner. The players would normally attend their own local school and train at the club, both after hours and at weekends. Before the academy system, a player could not sign for a professional club before the age of 15. Now, the academy system allows recruitment of players as young as 8 years old. These players remain in the schoolboy section of the academy until the age of 16 when, if they are talented enough, they may be invited to join the U18 full-time squad. In contrast, Aspire Academy is a full-time education institution that sits side by side with a top class sports facility, offering seamless access to high-level coaching across several sports as part of the core curriculum. There are as many as 150 boys recruited for both environments, aged

8 to 16 years in England and 12 to 18 years in Qatar.

## PLAYER RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

The restraints in the recruitment process for Aspire Academy are exemplified by the small population of Qatar. The number of boys who are of the age to be recruited to Aspire (and are involved in football in any meaningful way) is limited. It is therefore important that all avenues of scouting and recruitment are explored to minimise missing any talented players – particularly small, late-developing players.

There are also idiosyncratic player recruitment difficulties within the English system. To start with, the catchment area for recruiting players in England is probably not as great as people believe.



The regulations stipulate certain travel distances; players from 7 to 9 years old should live no further than a 1 hour drive from their home to the academy. Players from 12 to 16 years old should live no further than 1.5 hours. Travel distance is checked before registration is allowed. This factor has major ramifications for areas that have a large number of academies, such as in the North West of England or the London region. The main reason is that it means a number of clubs are recruiting from the same area, which can lead to stiff competition for the most talented players. The majority of players attend training after their regular school day, but a way around the official 'distance stipulation' is for the players to be invited by the club to be part of a boarding school scenario. Players, having

accompanying enrolment into a dormitory setting, are educated in a local school (one affiliated with the club) and eligible for registration at that club. This is a growing trend in major clubs. The preferred option at Manchester United during my tenure was for the players to board with local families rather than a dormitory setting, as the club felt that young players were better off in a more normal 'family environment' setting. This enabled talented players to have extra daytime sessions and also to cut down on the amount of travelling required to attend training sessions.

The number of players a club can recruit in England is limited by the regulations governing academies. For the U9 to U11 age groups, clubs are allowed to recruit up to 30 players. For the older U12 to U16 groups,

this is reduced to 25 per age group. In *Aspire*, players may be part of the feeder system from the age of 9 and then may be invited to join the school at approximately 13 years old. The number is, to a certain degree, governed not only by the class size, but also the number of players deemed talented enough to join the academy. Therefore, both establishments work under challenging circumstances as far as recruitment availability and effectiveness is concerned.

#### SCOUTING AND DEVELOPING PLAYERS

Approaches to scouting, recruiting and developing young players vary widely in football, not only between different countries, but between different clubs within the same system. In England all clubs follow their own ethos, as devised by the club or academy manager. At Manchester United, skill and composure, as well as speed, were considered as primary facets of talent and potential, but other academies may prioritise size and target the biggest best boys they can find for their age-group. The first-line scouts are usually local coaches, physical education teachers or sometimes even a father who has had his own son playing for a local team. The scouts would recommend a player to an academy, who may invite him for a trial or send a club scout to watch him play. In England, many clubs have local junior teams affiliated to them, acting as feeder clubs for promising young players.

In the old 'school of excellence system', recruiting young players was far less complex than in the academy system. Most

of the players who signed for professional clubs at 15 or 16 years of age had already passed through puberty and a number would be fully mature. The club scouts would have an indication of the potential end-height stature of the player at full maturity. This would be especially relevant if they were looking for players for specialist positions, such as goalkeepers or central defenders, where stature may be a key factor and a prerequisite from the coaches. In this respect, professional football lags far behind the smarter player recruitment strategies of many other sports.

Few scouts have formal training regarding the potential influence of growth and maturation on future players. The scouts may see a big, fast 7- to 8-year-old player who dominates and scores a number of goals, and disregard the small and quietly efficient player on the wing, who may have a much lesser influence on the game. The dilemma is this: the small player may be less spectacular in that moment, but may be a late maturer playing against the big early maturer, whose future progress may be less. There may be as much as 6 years' biological maturity difference between the two players. In fact, the big 7-year-old may well later turn out to be the smallest player by 17 to 18 years old, having been left behind by the late maturer in the late teenage years. The problem is, this is very difficult to predict. Consequently, this has perpetuated the 'relative age effect', where (particularly

in team sports), it is seen that the birth date distribution of signed players is heavily biased towards the first 6 months of the selection year. A recent study (carried out on the academy players at Manchester United and Aspire Academy students) showed that late birthdays and late developers were far less likely to survive the academy system, compared to their early maturing peers. Even if they are selected, few of these 'lates' make it through the system to U16.

#### COACHES

Coaches are busy supervising academy games and training, and yet are asked to make a final decision regarding trial players – despite only getting to see the boys who are recommended by the scouts. Unfortunately, as things stand, coaches rarely have the opportunity to look at smaller players, who are not given the invitation to trial at the clubs. The majority of players join an academy at 9 years of age and it is very difficult for older players to 'break into the system'. Therefore, even though the 'relative age effect' has been debated by sports science and medical staff in numerous ways for many years, there has been little tangible change. Consequently, there are still a large number of late developers with the potential to be successful players when they reach full maturity who will, sadly, remain unseen by coaches – having been overlooked by scouts who remain blind to the potential of



growth and maturation to foster the later flowering of young talent.

#### CONTRACTS AND MATCH SCHEDULING

Committing players through signings and contracts is another key aspect to the planning and strategising of development of young talent. In England, when joining an academy, a player and his parents sign a



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contract that is renewed annually. At the end of the year, the parents will be informed if the club wants to retain or release the player. If a player is released, the club, if requested, will help the player find a new club. If the club wants to retain the player, but the parents wish for him to go elsewhere, the club must agree. The club holding the registration will charge a fee to the other club, depending on how long the player has been at the academy and the valuation of the players' potential. This regulation was introduced to try to prevent a player from being enticed away from one club to another. Anecdotally, I have heard of a number of 'incentives' that have been promised to parents, such as employment as scouts, new cars and houses and full-time contracts – all to entice a player to move clubs. Needless to say, such behaviour is against the existing regulations. In the end, if an agreement cannot be reached between the clubs, they will go to arbitration and a panel will sit to decide the fee. If a wealthy club is looking to sign a player from a smaller club in the lower leagues, the larger club will be means-tested and will pay a much larger fee than if the transfer was going in the opposite direction. The player cannot leave the club and join

another club, unless he is released by the club holding the registration.

The academy regulations limit the number of games that can be played for each age. This ensures that talented players are not overplayed. This sort of strategy should control the game-time and minimise load-related injuries, something that has, until recently, been a significant and detrimental aspect to the previous system. Generally speaking, the clubs control the number of games played.

In contrast, in Qatar, this type of regulation does not exist. At Aspire the majority of players are full-time students at the school and will remain at the school until graduation. They train and play games for Aspire during the week, but then play for their clubs at weekend. This can often result in players playing up to three games per week. In combination with the potential for inadequate recovery strategies and training, if the game-intensity is high and sustained, this can quickly lead to overuse injuries.

#### MANAGING YOUNG TALENT

There are benefits in successful management and signing of young talent. Players can expect to be in a controlled

environment, with a high standard of coaching and quality medical support for any injuries that may occur. It is important to remain aware of possible pressure that may be put on the player from the parents (often labelled 'pushy parents'), the coaches and even the players themselves. My experience is that this is a bigger problem in England than in Qatar. Supportive parents have a key role to play. Conversely, some parent factions – with misguided over-ambition for their child – can also be one of the most difficult aspects of the job to deal with and threaten the simple youthful enjoyment of playing football.

There is a noticeable contrast between the parents at an academy in England and those in Qatar. In the majority of cases in England, the parents will do anything for the boy to be retained at a big club, even if the player himself wishes to move. By contrast, in Qatar it appears more common for parents to be concerned that a full education curriculum, in addition to eight sessions of football a week and games at the weekend, might prove too demanding for their sons. As a result, parents may withdraw their sons voluntarily from the Academy.



Failing to impress and being ‘released’, can be extremely distressing for the player. And invariably this is just as traumatic and upsetting for the parents, many of whom will have sacrificed much along the way. A few of the wiser parents may be more realistic. Realising that the bigger club may not be the best environment for their son, they will look to a smaller club, with less pressure and perhaps more game-time opportunities. A number of parents can become hostile and aggressive when they are told that their son will be released. Some might take it personally – many parents live their lives vicariously through their child and see the child’s release from the club a reflection on themselves. Many parents are also misguided to the point that they believe that once their son has been signed at 9 years of age, progress to the first team is a foregone conclusion. Either one or both parents watch every kick of every session and game and can quickly perceive themselves as experts. It seems they invariably believe their son is the best player and it will only be a matter of time, in their opinion, before the child makes it through to the first team – where great wealth and status will flow.

Guarding against over-expectation for young players with potential is a keystone of the youth development at Manchester United. The club would make a big point at the start of every season telling the parents that some players will be released every year and that this is in no way personal and there is no guarantee that their son will make the cut. Out of all the multitude of boys entering the academy at age 9, probably only about five will be still in the system and kept on at U17 level, and if only one of these makes it into the first team, then that is considered a good outcome from a scouting, recruiting and development staff perspective.

Despite all the care that is taken by the club, there is increasing evidence that many parents find it very difficult to accept when their son is released. There has been a substantial rise in the number of instances where a club is threatened with legal action following a young player’s release. In one case, following a boy’s release, his parents sued the club medical staff for poor medical care of the player, which in their eyes, prevented him from recovering from injury completely. The parents declared that

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this ‘poor’ treatment resulted in the player being at a disadvantage compared to his peers – which (they argue) resulted in him being released. On another occasion, a club was sued for the emotional abuse of a boy who was released at 12 years of age. The parents maintained that he was unable to go back to school, as he couldn’t face his classmates and blamed the club for creating this situation by releasing him. Such can be the unhealthy heightened expectations for young athletes.

In Qatar we almost have the reverse situation. The training sessions at Aspire take place during or just after school hours. And as the boys are transported to and from school, the parents very rarely witness training or games at Aspire, though they may watch their sons play for the clubs at weekend. Parents in England are likely to regard football as a prospective future career. In Qatar, parents seem to view football as part of a balanced school/sport curriculum. The parents’ focus is for boys to continue on to university or some other further education after graduation. Parents are normally happy for the Aspire Academy staff to take complete care of their sons, with an update on a regular basis. This contrasts with parents in England who attend every training session and game and often demand a detailed update on medical care for every session. Qatari parents are obviously very proud if their sons represent

Qatar, but they don’t see sport as a de facto future career; it appears the exact opposite in England.

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDICAL, SPORTS SCIENCE AND PERFORMANCE STAFF

The relationship between the medical and sports science, and coaching staff is critical in the development of a player in any environment. It needs to be one of trust and good communication, particularly for the specialist position of goalkeeper, which is very different to the outfield player. Goalkeeping coaches have very specific requirements for recruits, including extra athleticism and good stature. The tallness factor can pose a problem, particularly when the players are recruited at 9 years of age. As already discussed, a big 9-year-old can turn out to be a small 16-year-old, when compared with his peers.

There are a number of ways that predicted end height stature can be measured, some more accurate than others. Anthropometric measures can be taken. At Manchester United and Aspire Academy, an annual wrist X-ray is taken, to estimate information regarding skeletal age and predicted end-height stature. At Manchester United, we found that if we had 3 consecutive years of similar estimated height, we would be within approximately 2 to 3 centimetres difference from the player’s actual mature

height. This was crucial information for coaches, particularly if we had the results of 9- to 11-year-old players. It enabled the coaches to make a decision about whether the player was kept in the academy as a goalkeeper or changed to another position because his height would prevent him from progressing. In the Premier League, the coaches were looking for players who have the potential to be 188 cm tall at the minimum. If a player's predicted height on a regular basis was less than 188 cm they may consider changing his position. He would have to be an exceptional player to succeed if he was shorter than this, as most managers want a goalkeeper with a robust presence and imposing physical stature behind their defenders.

X-ray information was useful on a number of occasions, particularly with one player who was released from a club academy at 12 years of age for being too small as a goalkeeper. The player had great athletic ability and following predicted height measures it was estimated that he had the potential to be an acceptable height. Years later he played for both the first team and his country. This also occurred with a number of outfield players, who were late developers with concern over their relative small stature at the age of 16 (when a decision is normally made about whether the players are offered a full-time contract). But because we had their maturity status and end-height predictions, the club was happy to sign the players, knowing they would be still be growing for a few years to come.

At Manchester United, the medical staff and coaching staff worked closely to establish individual 'prehabilitation' training programmes, particularly for young goalkeepers. The coaches would highlight movement patterns that they expected the players to be able to perform and then strengthening and general exercises. Using pulleys, elastics and weights, in functional patterns, the physiotherapy team would develop a bespoke programme. The coaches and physiotherapists together developed functional profiles for individual players and diaries were kept by the players for the home routines that they were given. All staff worked together to monitor individual development and progress.

A major challenge with Qatari athletes is their nutrition and hydration status, in addition to their poor sleeping habits. There is an abundance of fast food in Qatar, with every outlet offering a delivery service – and the athletes take full advantage. Their hydration status is nearly always poor. This isn't helped by the environment; even though players tend to train outdoors in the late afternoon, in the summer months, the temperatures can still be around 36 to 40°C. Players also have poor sleep patterns as they have a habit of staying up until the early hours, playing computer games or messaging friends. All these issues are magnified during the holy month of Ramadan, when they do not eat or drink during daylight hours. Players will train late in the evening and then not eat until the early hours. They will then stay up until just before dawn to eat breakfast before trying to sleep. This pattern for 28 days disrupts training programmes, which have to be altered to take into account the condition of individuals.

#### SUMMARY

There is an increasing trend for many youth athletes to strive to reach elite level sport in adulthood. Yet even in our modern society with all the available excellent equipment, facilities, coaching and medical support, there are many challenges to overcome in trying to meet expectations and achieve success. Through increasing wealth and opportunity, many modern cultures are falling into increasingly sedentary lifestyles, including unhealthy diminishing levels of activity and robustness in children, and an increasing preoccupation with social networking and all things technological. These are challenges to all staff involved in the development of youth athletes, as is increasing screen-time and technology culture, which diverts the attention of more and more youngsters, with 'traditional' daily development activities such as playing football in the street or at the park disappearing in many places. In most high-performance environments, the coaching and medical/science staff are working more closely together, but the impact and outcomes of this effort may dwindle if the raw material is lost to poor recruitment or, in many places, ever-increasing trends towards slothful modern living.

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