Sports Talent Management

Stanton Chase International, an Executive Search and Leadership Consultancy, is entrusted with the search for world class leadership talent across most major industries. The Sports Talent Management sector is no exception: the aim is to find great talent and high-potential candidates, both eager and qualified, to be developed into management positions and to continuously increase the bench strength of the team.

Talent Management: Transition from Youth to First Team Football

The process of successfully integrating talented young players from a club’s youth setup to their First Team is something of an enigma. Some countries excel in the process, consistently producing elite players year after year, while other countries find the process extremely difficult.

In order to develop and prepare young players to make the transition from youth football to competitive First Team football, a variety of club professionals are required to fill essential roles. From my experience working within the game, I believe that there are five crucial roles within every club: (1) Academy Manager, (2) Youth Coach, (3) Head Coach, (4) Club Captain, and (5) Director of Football.

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1) The Academy Manager is responsible for ‘coaching the coaches’ while also supervising the development of youth players with a long-term perspective and birds-eye view. One of the most important aspects of this role is overseeing a player’s development within their final academy years as they progress towards the First Team – U16, U17 and U19s.

2) The Youth Coach (U19, U20 or U21) works on a daily basis with the potential First Team player and is often the most important person in the club for any young player (coach-athlete relationship). The Youth Coach is the one closest to the players; they usually have a longstanding working relationship and are capable of predicting the player’s chances of progressing to the First Team. Therefore, it is vital that the U19 coach is respected and listened to by the Head Coach, and that these two coaches should ideally have a strong relationship and understanding of what each other expects and strives for in terms of playing quality, player potential, player style, formations used, as well as personal characteristics such as the player’s behavior and personality.

3) The Head Coach is, understandably and without question, a key figure as well! Are they able to see into the future? Are they brave enough to include the youngster in training sessions, give them the opportunity to play in a pre-season friendly, or even in the early stages of cup competitions? Do they pick an established substitute to replace the youngster when the team is winning, or do they purposely fast track the youngster, building up his First Team experience? These are just some of the situations faced by the Head Coach on a daily basis, regarding the inclusion of any young player. However, the most important thing to remember is that each decision made can and will have a direct impact on the player’s short and long term progress.
4) The Club Captain is often responsible for overseeing the players in the First Team’s dressing room and on the training ground. The Club Captain is expected to keep an eye on the younger players, even ‘protecting’ them in certain situations, to help make the youngster feel at ease and settled in. The Captain is also tasked with teaching the younger players vital lessons on and off the pitch about what is expected and required in the ‘professional full-time game’.

5) The Director of Football is a tactician responsible for implementing the objectives at the beginning of the season, while constantly adhering to a long-term strategy and vision. In my opinion, introducing home-grown players into the First Team should be part of every club’s philosophy. There is no healthier way of strengthening a squad than a kid from the Academy making it all the way to the Flagship. The Director of Football should challenge the Head Coach’s player wish list and debate with them about whether or not a youngster could fill the team’s requirements – instead of taking the easy option to bring in a tried and tested (and often expensive) player from another club.

Players brought in from other clubs are usually allowed the luxury of a few weeks, sometimes even months, to ‘settle in’. However, the Director of Football and the Head Coach do not usually provide the younger players with the same privilege and time to settle in. I believe it is the obligation of the Director of Football and the Head Coach to protect all the players, especially when a debutant does not fit the bill and is initially branded “not good enough”. The decisions made by the Director of Football and the Head Coach can massively influence a player’s career; they need to decide whether to demote the young player to the youth team for a period of time, or perhaps to loan the youngster out to a lower league club.

In my opinion, the roles and responsibilities involved in aiding the transition from youth football to First Team football, while demanding and challenging, are not insurmountable. Talent Management can learn a lot from looking at how successful football teams in top football countries manage this transition.

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