

Talent Development in Football—A Holistic Perspective: The Case of KRC Genk

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Interest in talent identification and the development of professional footballers has markedly increased in the past decade. Research in football has primarily focused on individual development and external factors affecting performance. In other sports, research from a holistic and ecological approach has examined successful environments, suggesting that such environments are not only unique, but also share features. Using a single case study design and a holistic ecological approach, this study investigated the youth department of the Belgium elite club KRC Genk (the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy). Results suggest that this environment, in many regards, is consistent with the shared features found in other successful environments in other sports (such as support of sporting goals by the wider environment and support for long-term development). However, three features were also observed as unique. These were (a) cultural awareness, openness, and sharing of knowledge; (b) the club's ability to accommodate a broad diversity of players in the academy; and (c) an openness toward new ideas and learning on all levels of the organization. Collectively, our results indicate that Genk, in some respects, not only shares features with successful environments in other sports, but also bears unique features.

Keywords: cultural competency, elite sport, talent development environment, training environment

Both talent identification (TI) and talent development (TD) play a vital role in the pursuit of excellence in football (Reilly, Williams, Nevill, & Franks, 2000). Football represents one of the most competitive and complex sports when it comes to attaining expertise (Aguilar, Botelho, Lago, Maças, & Sampaio, 2012), making TI and TD in football particularly difficult. Some clubs are more successful than others in developing talented football players, and such successful clubs can be an inspiration for others. In this paper, we present a case study of a successful football academy in Europe.

Football is one of the world's most popular sports, with about 265 million people playing football worldwide (Poli, 2010). In the context of TD, however, only a very limited number of players eventually become professional football players (Kingston, Wixey, & Morgan, 2018). This fact testifies to the significant competition and difficulty in achieving expert level in football (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). Simultaneously, TD in football is complicated by the fact that coaches and talent developers must balance a focus on long-term development with short-term performance goals (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016). For the successful clubs, however, TD in football is a potentially very profitable business strategy (Bailey, Bailey, & Levett, 2019). Professional football clubs buy and sell young players across continents, have strong business organizations, and negotiate large salaries (Storm & Nielsen, 2012). The unique context of football has stimulated researchers and practitioners to ask the complex question of how best to support the development of professional football players.

The TD in football often takes place in dedicated academies. In these academies, key roles such as coaches, teachers, sport psychologists, and other staff work to develop skilled football players and build effective learning environments (Kingston et al., 2018). Some football clubs and academies have a higher success rate than others in terms of developing talented athletes and supporting their transition to the elite level. We advocate that in-depth knowledge of the traits that characterize a successful football academy might serve as inspiration and assist TD academy staff in developing their coaching practice in their important role in TD. Particularly, coaching practice and the skills of coaches are vital for success to both players and coaches in a complex and competitive environment such as a football academy (Kingston et al., 2018).

The TD in Belgian Football and the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy in Genk

The TD research and practice must be contextually sensitized to account for the significant cultural differences between sports, countries, and other contexts. Belgian male football has enjoyed a remarkable success over the past decade on the international football stage. Since 2009, the Belgian football team has soared up the FIFA's world rankings (FIFA, 2019) from number 69 to number 1. The Belgian team was unbeaten through the 2018 World Cup qualifier and finished third in the tournament. Belgian football clubs have enjoyed similar success in preparing footballers for competing at the highest level of professional football (the "Big Five" tournaments in Europe: Premier League, La Liga, Serie A, Bundesliga, and Ligue 1). Examples include Eden Hazard at Chelsea, Dries Mertens at Naples, and Axel Witsel at Borussia Dortmund. This is despite the fact that Belgium has a relatively low population of 11 million people, compared to other European nations dominating football.

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In Belgian football, KRC Genk (henceforth referred to as Genk) has demonstrated success in developing talented athletes and supporting their transition to the elite level. International stars like Kevin de Bruyne (Manchester City and Belgian International) and Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid and Belgian International), who got their initial training in Genk, are not the only visible tokens of the club's successful long-term track record of producing elite-level players. The academy staff focuses mainly on boys'/men's football; however, there are girls'/women's teams in the club, and plans exist for a stronger focus on girls'/women's football. Nevertheless, this study will focus on boys/men where the TD development in this context is more developed.

In Belgian youth football, the 24 highest-ranking youth teams attend the National Royal Belgian Football Association (KBVB) tournament and play matches across Belgium. A criteria-based licensing system exists to determine which 24 clubs are included. Criteria include the number of coaches, the coaches' education and experience, facilities, and other technical demands. At half season, KBVB assesses which eight teams have performed best at U14–U19. All youth age groups within a single club are evaluated as a whole, and their average results determine at what level the club's teams will play for the remainder of the season. The eight best teams then play a championship qualification, and eventually one team is announced as Belgian champion of their age group. In the KBVB youth tournaments, Genk typically performs among the top teams in their oldest age groups (15 years and older). However, the club imposes a strong focus on process rather than results, which is why no list of specific youth team achievements exists in the youth academy.

The TD Environment: A Holistic Ecological Approach

Research in TD in sport has predominantly focused on the individual athlete (e.g., Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and on external factors (e.g., Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Stambulova, 2007). To account for the contextual and holistic nature of TD in the real world, Henriksen and colleagues (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a, 2010b) proposed the holistic ecological approach (HEA) in TD research as an integrated perspective and method. This perspective shifts research attention away from the individual athletes and on to the whole environment in which they develop.

The athletic talent development environment (ATDE) is defined as a dynamic system comprising: (a) an athlete's immediate surroundings at the microlevel where athletic and personal development take place; (b) the interrelations between these surroundings; (c) the macrolevel, the larger context in which these surroundings are embedded; and (d) the organizational culture of the sports club or team, which is an integrative factor of the ATDE's effectiveness in helping young talented athletes to develop into senior elite athletes (Henriksen, 2010). As an extension, the HEA includes two working models. The ATDE working model is a framework to describe a particular environment and clarify the roles and functions of the different components and relations within the environment. The environment success factors (ESF) working model serves to summarize the factors that explain the environment's level of effectiveness, including preconditions (e.g., human, material, and financial), daily routines and processes (e.g., training, camps, and competitions), and athletes' individual development

and achievements (e.g., psychosocial competencies and athletic skills), with the organizational culture serving to integrate these elements. These two models have proven to be helpful as a lens through which environments can be studied.

The ATDEs have varying degrees of success in nurturing talented athletes. Within the HEA, it is suggested that successful ATDEs are environments that manage to maintain a consistently high record of accomplishment in terms of producing elite senior athletes from among their juniors or youth teams (e.g., Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014). From researching ATDEs in Scandinavia, a number of features that successful environments share have been identified (Henriksen, 2010). Table 1 presents these features and their opposite poles. Based on later case studies within the HEA framework (see Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), two additional features have been added: (a) opportunity for their own initiatives (the environment has available facilities and supports the athletes in organizing training for themselves outside of formal practice) and (b) openness and sharing knowledge (coaches share knowledge and experiences with their coach colleagues, experts, and coaches from other environments, and athletes share perspectives). A case study of a successful football academy in Denmark (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013) not only found similar traits of the environment, but also emphasized that a lack of interaction between youth and senior players was a barrier to successful TD in the club.

With the overall aim of applying the holistic ecological approach to the study of a successful football talent academy, the objectives of this study are (a) to investigate the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy in Genk as an ATDE and identify factors of their success, and (b) to compare the academy to the previously identified features of successful environments.

Method

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Aarhus University and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

This study takes a contemporary (not retrospective) and in situ view of the Jos Vaessen football academy as an ATDE. We selected a case study design to explore the uniqueness and complexity of a specific bounded case because case studies are well suited to provide context-dependent and rich knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). More specifically, we consider Genk to be an *intrinsic case* because the aim is to obtain a rich understanding of the specific football academy—a highly professionalized environment—using multiple sources of data (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). We position this study within a realist ontology (ATDEs exist as material structures that operate independently of our experience) and a postpositivist epistemology (although we acknowledge that we can only grasp an imperfect understanding, we strive to provide an accurate portrait of the academy; Smith, 2019). Following the HEA, we used the ATDE and the ESF working models as the lenses to facilitate analysis of the case, and used the list of features shared by successful environments (Table 1) as particular points of entry.

To describe and investigate the case, qualitative data were collected through observation, interviews, and desk research. All data were analyzed, interpreted, and related to the theoretical framework (Henriksen, 2010).

Table 1 Features of Successful Athletic Talent Development Environments (ATDEs; Henriksen, 2010)

Features of successful ATDEs	Descriptors	Opposite poles
Training groups with supportive relationships	Opportunities for inclusion in a training community; supportive relationships and friendships within the group regardless of performance level; and good communication	Individualized training programs at an early stage; training alone; low cohesion in the group; intergroup rivalry; and performance as a criterion for inclusion
Proximal role models	Community of practice includes prospective and current elite athletes; opportunities to train with the elite athletes; and elite athletes are willing to pass on their knowledge	Airtight boundaries between athletes at different levels; and elite-level athletes keep their secrets and regard prospects as future rivals
Support of sporting goals by the wider environment	Opportunities to focus on the sport; and school, family, friends, and others acknowledge and accept the athletes' dedication to the sport	Nonsport environment shows a lack of understanding of elite sport and the demands involved
Support for the development of psychosocial skills	Opportunities to develop skills and competences that are of benefit outside the sporting domain (such as autonomy, responsibility, and commitment); and considering athletes as "whole human beings"	Focus solely on sport and winning at any cost; excessive control from coaches; and focus not on personal improvement but on relative performance level, which devalues learning and development
Training that allows for diversification	Opportunities to sample different sports during early phases; integration of different sports in the daily routines; and appreciation of versatile sport profiles and basic sport skills	Promoting early specialization; focus solely on developing sport-specific skills; and considering athletes' interest in trying different sports a potential threat
Focus on long-term development	Focus on long-term development of the athletes rather than early success; and age-appropriate amount and content of training	Focus on short-term success; kids are seen as miniature elite athletes; and no time to heal when injured
Strong and coherent organizational culture	Organizational culture characterized by coherence between artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions; and culture provides stability to the group and supports a learning environment	Fragmented culture in which espoused values do not correspond to actions; uncertainty and confusion among coaches, athletes, and others; and lack of common vision
Integration of efforts	Coordination and communication between sport, school, family, and other components; and athletes experience concordance and synergy in their daily life	Lack of communication; conflicting interests; and athletes experience many and contradicting pulls in their daily life

Case Selection and Presentation

We selected the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy of KRC Genk as the case for this study because of its successful record of accomplishment in producing senior elite-level football players described previously. Genk is a football club in the city of Genk on the border to The Netherlands and Germany. Belgium is a country of cultural diversity, especially since the nation has two majority cultures, a northwestern Flemish part and a southeastern French part. The city of Genk is located in the Flemish part of Belgium. The academy in Genk has roughly 70% of players of Flemish origin and roughly 30% of the players with a French background.

The academy has U7–U21 youth teams playing at the highest level of Belgian football. Historically, one third of the senior team of Genk has been developed through the academy, and during our investigation, 11 players on the senior team originated from their own academy (Genk team roster, season 17/18). In addition, seven out of the 36 players (roughly 20%) who appeared on the Belgian national football team during the season 17/18 were players originating from Genk. In the Belgian national youth teams (U16–U21, season 17/18), roughly 17–19% of the players originated from the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy in Genk. Furthermore, when, in spite of international success in the season of 16/17, Genk lost in the UEFA Europa League quarterfinals against Celta Vigo (from Spain), the club had 33% of their total game minutes played by players originating from the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy.

Data Collection

We collected data through qualitative interviews, observations, and desk research. Interview and observation guides were created based

on the HEA and particularly on the ATDE and ESF models, as well as the list of features shared by successful environments (Table 1). We undertook seven interviews with players, coaches, and leaders in the club. Semistructured interview guides were used to elicit the experiences of being part of that environment (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Language barriers were taken into consideration using clear language and short questions because interviews were conducted in English and German, both of which were second languages to participants and interviewer alike. To avoid brief replies, avoidance, and/or nonreflective answers, the questions were worded as open questions, followed by in-depth questions to ensure thick descriptions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The questions in the interview guide were shaped by the list of shared features (see Table 1), when asking, for instance: "Is there any direct contact between first team and your academy?" Here, the intention was to investigate for the use of role models. Or in relation to investigating the cultural environment of the club and the consistency, we asked the following: "What attitude and values should players demonstrate to get your appraisal?"

A secondary source of information was observation. One of the fundamental ideas behind observation is to obtain an understanding of other cultures (Geertz, 1973). To achieve this, observations of the everyday life at the academy were necessary. This meant that the observer was physically positioned within training sessions, on the side of team talks, next to players and coaches. As a result, the observer continually had to negotiate the difficulty of participating and doing research at the same time (Labaree, 2002). To create as normal an atmosphere as possible, observation notes were written after each session. Getting a feel for the environment as well as the structure, patterns, practices, and context was important.

Data Analysis, Rigor, and the Research Team

Data collection and analysis took place in a cyclical process that involved generating data and writing summaries. Adhering to our postpositivist approach, we analyzed the data (interview transcripts and observation notes using a coding reliability thematic analysis; Braun & Clarke, 2019) drawing on the six steps outlined by Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016). We conceptualized themes as data domains and used a predesigned coding frame. The first step consisted of transcribing and then reading and rereading the data to obtain familiarization. The second step was coding the data mainly from a theory-driven perspective with higher order themes derived from the ATDE and ESF working models and the previously established list of shared features of successful environments. Subsequently, we generated lower order themes to describe the content of the overall themes. Next steps involved going back and forth between the different types of data and the themes, drafting a description of the environment and discussion of the accuracy of the report within the research team. The final step included writing the final report of the findings.

The research team consisted of a mix of young and experienced researchers representing multiple perspectives, with expertise in the field of TD and of the HEA, as well as intimate knowledge of academy football.

Findings

The aim of this article was to generate in-depth knowledge of the traits that may characterize a successful football academy. Thus, we investigated suggested traits of TD (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) in an effective youth academy, to serve as inspiration and assist TD academy staff in developing their coaching practice. We decided to consolidate the features “Integration of efforts” and “Support of sporting goals by the wider environment” into one feature called “Integration of efforts” because both features were considered to capture identical aspects of the TD environment. In previous studies of ATDEs in individual sports, the feature “Training groups with supportive relationships” was salient to understanding their success (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). However, because training in team sports is for the most part organized as group training, this is not a distinct success feature. Nevertheless, it is described in detail earlier, since it was important to understand the environment.

The Jos Vaessen Talent Academy and the Basis for Its Success

We have already demonstrated that the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy is a successful environment in terms of outcomes of youth players delivered to the first team. The academy has consistently produced high-performance athletes and helped them to make a successful transition to the elite level. However, it is important to notice that the outcome perspective here is from an elite sport perspective. Besides a football career, personal development is also important in TD, however this is beyond the scope of this article. In the following, we investigate the environments through the lens of the previously established shared features of successful ATDEs presented in the introduction.

Training Groups With Supportive Relationships

The staff at the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy was explicit regarding the need for supportive relationships. These values also seemed deeply rooted in the staff, since they were outspoken about the need for support through a team-oriented approach:

Our values and principles are important, also on the training sessions and not only in matches. We need each other to become better individually. We need each other to become better as a team. Not until we are a team will we have success. (Technical director)

Such values were expressed particularly in relation to the learning environment, where feedback from coaches and players was perceived as important:

It is very important—to learn. We learn better, when we are learning together as a group. We support each other. We help each other. When a player is struggling, then it is up to another player to be positive. Give him feedback; well done, try again, do not give up. This is important to us. (Coach U15)

Relying on peer feedback was a vital part of the training groups, where the coaches actively wanted the players to partake in their teammates’ development and not only their own. A safe learning environment was explicitly mentioned as vital to the TD ideas: “For me as a coach and coordinator here, this is very important. Give them support so that they can develop and learn. That is essential: A safe learning environment” (Coach U17).

Proximal Role Models

We observed no opportunity for the academy players to practice with the elite players from the first team, even though the training areas overlap. Moreover, none of the elite players exchanged knowledge or were in direct contact with the academy players. In this respect, the first-team players did not serve as proximal role models for the academy players.

However, we often observed how the older academy players were role models for the younger academy players. For instance, different age groups were mixed at least once a week in training. In this way, U17 players acted as role models for U16 and U15. Furthermore, at least two coaches at the academy were former professional football players and had played on the Belgium national team. As such, they acted as role models within the academy.

Support of Sporting Goals by the Wider Environment

Generally, the wider environment around Genk seemed supportive of Genk’s sporting goals. We talked to spectators who were proud of the TD in the club, to volunteer chauffeurs (driving the talented players if needed) who felt a strong connection with the club, and to residents in the city of Genk who perceived KRC Genk as a shared pride of the area. The academy staff were also explicit with regard to the positive aspects of the broader environment. This understanding was deeply rooted in all staff we met.

We want to develop whole human beings. You need to talk and think about other things, not only foot, foot, foot [football]. School and girls [or other boys] are also important for a boy, when he is 15, 16 or 17 years old . . . Family is one, school is

two, and Genk football is three. Not only Genk, Genk, Genk. (Technical director)

However, there also seemed to be some challenges for the club in terms of cooperation with parents:

Sometimes there are pressures from families to make it in football, yes. Especially when money is involved. We have many African players, or players of African origin. Many from a poor background . . . and the parents have invested everything in their son. Such pressure is not so easy. (Coach U17)

The club was very aware of the effect of such pressure and actively sought to limit its influence on the players, for example, suggesting to some of the players that they live at the club's internat (a dormitory for players that the club owns and runs through volunteers), or offering some accommodation with a host family:

That is why some players are staying at the internat. We do this to take them out of their environment, and place them in our environment and try to give them a good lifestyle, good food, lesser pressure, all these things. (Coach U17)

Support for the Development of Psychosocial Skills

The academy staff valued holistic development and helping the players develop a set of characteristics that would assist them not only in football but also in their daily lives at school and in other arenas. For example, coaches and directors spoke explicitly about an ambition to teach the academy players how to make decisions of their own and take initiative on the football field. This was further observed during training sessions, where drills were designed to encourage the players to make their own decisions. For example, during offensive drills, the players had to choose between challenges such as 1v1, or make a one–two pass with the striker, or do an early cross or a cutback in the box. The coaches accepted all decisions as long as the player made a deliberate choice.

Another important finding was that the players had to learn to take responsibility for their own development: “. . . we are just here to help them to progress, but we are not responsible for their career. It's not your father, not your mother, it's not your agent . . . you are responsible for your career, you decide what to do” (Technical director).

Furthermore, weekly training sessions with an individual focus were part of the training environment. Players had to choose what they wanted to practice for a 4-week period (e.g., heading, finishing, etc.). In this regard, they were divided into groups with players from two other age groups (e.g., U15, U16, and U17), and within these groups, the initial focus was on the players individually. This group practiced together once a week, and after 4 weeks, a new focus was chosen and new groups formed.

Thus, social skills, such as working together and providing feedback to each other, were central characteristics for players' development at the academy. One coach (U15) informed us:

The Genk values are important not only here, but also in society. When you go to school, or later when you get a job, it is important to learn working together (. . .) we learn better, when we are learning together as a group. We support each other . . . Give feedback. “Well done,” “try better,” “cheer up.” It is important.

Respect for each other, authorities, the game, and for the surroundings in general were also a central part of the individual

development of the players. Another coach (U12) talked about the importance of respect in this manner:

Respect for each other. No bullying each other. Whether you are Muslim, Catholic, brown, white, homosexual, it does not matter. Everybody at Genk: Dunkel blau [*dark blue*, the colour of their jersey, ed.] blood! That is the main thing, which connects us in Genk.

Hence, the psychosocial development at Genk reflects a focus on developing players with a holistic set of skills (not limited to the sport-specific skills) and an awareness of their responsibilities. This included tolerance and space for other religious persuasions, cultures, and ethnicities. Furthermore, respect encompassed taking good care of materials, facilities, and the surroundings in general. This belief is stated in brochures, on the website, and at information meetings, and is orally explained to all players and parents within the academy.

Training That Allows for Diversification

We found no signs of training that allowed for diversification in terms of involving other sports, although Genk academy does allow the players to train in particular areas of football of their own choice (e.g., technical or tactical skills). This was a part of weekly training for all players, allowing the players themselves to choose particular training areas, where they would get feedback from the coaches. This initiative was named linjen training with a dedicated 30–60 min a week in the academy routines. However, Genk was categorical in the demand that youth players within the club focus entirely on one sport: football. Yet, we did see examples of diversification within football, such as playing out of position and with various tactics to develop diverse skills within football.

Long-Term Development

In the education of the players, the long-term development is a way of focusing on content and an age-appropriate amount of training rather than to look for early success of the athletes. In Genk, the vision of the club is to educate its academy players to become professional players on their first team. At least two spaces on the first-team squad on match day are continuously reserved for players from the academy, ensuring there is a visible pathway for the academy players to strive for. The technical director for the academy stated:

When a player develops, he gets the chance to be with the first team, because in the first team, there are always two places selected for academy players. It is our decision as a club that two spaces have to be for academy players. If Pep Guardiola was our new first team coach, saying: “. . . no, no, no, I need this, this and this.” We would say: “okay Pep you do what you want (. . .) but you have to find two spots for academy players.”

Genk's goals for games within the academy underline their focus on a long-term approach. When speaking with coaches at Genk about their last game, they never reply with the result, but instead talk about how the players performed. The sportive coordinator at the academy states:

The result is not the main purpose. We are a club. Education. Safe learning environment is for us important. Of course, we play to win the games, but the result is not the important part. We are looking to develop players.

Coaches at the academy focus on the long-term development of the individual player because they believe it will help their players in a holistic sense and thus be more beneficial to the first team in Genk. These holistic benefits were, among others, described as the club's reputation in their local area for having less focus on a narrow football identity for their youth players, which was beneficial to enhance motivation in the long run. Furthermore, the players were encouraged to take risks and dare to make mistakes even if it meant losing a game. Mistakes have minor short-term consequences but, more importantly, they are a key part of a player's long-term development at the academy: "In Genk we do not focus on short-term results. (. . .) You can make mistakes and we can lose matches. It happens. We want our players to come back and try it again, and again, while we support them" (U16 coach).

To ensure the long-term development of players, the academy has a promise in youth football: "When a season finishes, every player has played 70% of the total potential playing time of the whole season. We do not make distinctions Everybody plays every week" (Technical director). Equal playing time and learning from experimentation were seen as sources of individual development. It was also common in Genk to let players play in positions on the pitch that were unusual for them, even against the top team in their league:

Theo's favourite position is number six. However, I think it is better, when playing Anderlecht, that he play the number three position. Why? He is big, he is fast, he can receive the ball very well (. . .) I think it is better for his development that he can play number three position as well. (Coach U15)

Strong and Coherent Organizational Culture

The walls at the academy display pictures of former academy players who have fulfilled their dreams and become professional football players. Such pictures emphasize and display that the vision of the club is to develop professional football players. The technical director at the academy informed us about this vision: "Our vision for the academy is to develop players that are valuable to the first team. That is our goal. Our goal is to have an average of 11 or 12 players from the academy in the first team."

Throughout our fieldwork, we also experienced many verbal demonstrations of this vision, such as stories about how the top players at Genk developed. The coaches at the academy were proud to tell us about players such as De Bruyne, Courtois, and Benteke (as well as others), who had emerged from the academy. Parents of the players at the academy informed us that they chose Genk because the club is known for developing players and giving them a chance in the first team.

The relationship between the first team and the academy was close, and some of the employees at the academy functioned as part of the club board and committees. The first-team players trained in the same locations and were part of the same environment as the academy players. The technical director of the academy articulated how he cooperates with the technical director of the first team:

. . . I'm very involved with the technical part of the club. Not only the academy but also the first team . . . with the technical director of the 1st team of the club. (. . .) The connection I have with them, the board, also with the director of the academy, you feel that it's not the academy and the first team separately, no, we are together.

Another way the vision is reinforced is through the players' clothing. The academy has clear rules that players play in black

boots only (no colors). The jersey also has to be tucked into their shorts, the socks must not be pulled over the knees, and no one is allowed to wear earrings, have tattoos, or wear caps at the academy. Furthermore, aspects such as discipline, being on time, clothes, and behavior inside and outside of the academy are very important. All rules are enforced daily: "They are just small things [the rules, ed.], but we believe it's very important that the kids are true to our ways" (Coach U16).

This is associated with one of the strongest and most important values promoted through the academy: hard work, which is also visible on a wall sign in the academy gym that says: "Hard work beats talent, if talent does not work hard." Furthermore, the players learn the importance of hard work during training sessions and matches. Players who do not adhere to this are benched and ultimately released from the academy. Hard work leads back to the culture of the mineworkers of Genk and surroundings. "For us it's very important that the culture of our club is the DNA of mine working people: Hard work, being modest and not shy. Work hard that is the base!" (Technical director).

Finally, the organization at the academy is characterized by a high degree of volunteer work. Around 90 people volunteer (of which at least 30 are coaches) in different roles at the academy, such as receptionists, drivers, host families, video analysts, and team leaders. These volunteers are very important and are continuously referred to as a key asset for the club. Thus, on every game day, volunteers meet up to make coffee and sandwiches and help in the café. Many of the volunteers referred to Genk as the "family club," and we were repeatedly told, as noticed earlier, that everyone in Genk has "Blue blood," which refers to their special and deep connection to the football club and the Genk blue jersey (not to social rank).

Integration of Efforts

The academy has an integrated cooperation with the local school, Sint-Jan Berchmans College. During interviews and fieldwork, the coaches and leaders of the academy often mentioned that school had a higher priority than football. The underlying assumption is that only a small percentage of the academy players will actually become professional players, and therefore school must be ranked higher than football. The director of the academy also said this:

Because they [the players] have to work until they are 60, 65 years old and don't have job insurance. Okay, football for a few may become your job and it might be your job until you are 35 years. However, what about after? What will you do for 30 years after football? (. . .) Our work is to wake up the boys. Now it is a dream, but it is not reality. For some people it will become reality, but not now.

A central part of the cooperation between school and academy is that the school makes time for extra football practice during school time and there is a good dialogue between the school and the academy staff about the players. This cooperation is vital to Genk, as was explained by the U11–U14 coordinator:

When you are in school and the grades are not good, or you are bullying some other kids at school, then the club also has a problem. When we get negative feedback from the school (. . .) then the club sanctions it and you are not going to play. You will train, but you will have no games come the weekend School is the most important thing. Then comes football

The academy has three school counselors assigned to the club who visit the academy weekly to help the players with homework or school-related activities and issues. Furthermore, the academy has a school coordinator who is responsible for the communication and cooperation between school and academy. Collectively, this organizational structure supports the close cooperation between the school and the academy staff.

The academy staff also communicates directly with the players and their parents. This ensures that all adults around the academy players are working as much as possible toward the same goal. Finally, the 35 drivers who take the players from school to home and to the academy, and who even assist the players in a multitude of daily tasks, constitute a clear sign that the academy makes an effort to help the players experience an integrated environment.

Cultural Sensitivity: An Additional Feature

In our observations and interviews, we found that the academy pays attention to the players' individual cultural heritage and interacts with it. This was revealed in several ways, such as when coaches at the academy gave instructions in both French and Flemish. Thus, Genk acknowledges multiple cultures, while concurrently adding their own culture (as part of a mining district), and the blend results in an integrated multicultural club that is culturally competent. A particular expression of this is the coaches' acceptance of the individual differences their player expresses both on the pitch and off. The U11–U14 coordinator emphasized that diversity was a good thing and that the club drew on different cultures:

We are from the north and they are from the south, we say. The mentality of the French is more emotional (. . .) we Flemish we are more closed, humble. However, it is also a good combination. We can learn from each other what the strong traits of the Flemish and the French are.

The combination of French and Flemish culture is believed to be a strength, and both cultures contribute something to the environment and the individual's development. Genk is open to all skilled players as long as they take part in the community of the club. The advantage of this multicultural approach is that the club develops a broad variety of players, and each player has his distinctive character and contributes to the environment.

Openness and Sharing of Knowledge: An Additional Feature

The coaches and managers at the football academy in Genk believe in sharing knowledge with other clubs and coaches. They believe that their expertise and openness is necessary for the development of the academy, and that it will benefit the academy's long-term aim and help to fulfill the club's vision. This belief is, to some degree, present in all the Belgium youth clubs, which is reflected in the fact that they meet monthly to discuss the continuous improvement of Belgian football overall. These meetings are very important, as is indicated by the regular attendance of the Belgian national coach Roberto Martinez. The academy director supported this belief:

If Brugge [Bruges] and Anderlecht are getting stronger, it's also good for us. It means the players in Belgium are getting stronger (. . .) so it's no problem, of course we are happy that the national team is doing well, it means that the academies are doing well!

The club is open for new perspectives and knowledge, not only externally but also internally. During our visit, a coaches' seminar was held. Youth coaches (from other clubs around Genk) organized a training session for kids after which they would receive feedback from Genk's professional coaching staff. In addition, Genk had a common practice allowing other local, national, or international clubs' youth coaches to observe their professional youth trainings and comment on them afterward.

To initiate dialogue and knowledge sharing within the academy, a separate changing room for all the academy coaches and leaders was regularly used, and the main topic of discussion in here was football. A U16 coach informed us of an eagerness to acquire new knowledge, improve, and learn from the experience of others: ". . . We have every week coaches here, from the entire world. They learn from us. In addition, we learn from them, we learn from coaches from Ajax, from Lubin, and how they think football."

Discussion

In this study, we have investigated a TD environment in football, and although football is different in many ways from environments previously studied by Henriksen (2010), we found comparable traits and deviations. We achieved this by investigating the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy in Genk as an ATDE and identifying factors of their success by comparing the academy with the previously identified features of successful environments. However, we also found new traits, which have not previously been associated with TDs in football, namely cultural competency and openness and sharing culture.

In summary, we found the talent academy of Genk to be (a) centered on a high-quality training ground; (b) focused on football, but not at the expense of the players' school performance and their acquisition of a holistic set of skills that will be useful for them in life as well as in football; (c) almost a second family for the players, but not at the expense of their actual family; (d) well integrated by means of frequent and constructive dialogue between all elements of the microenvironment, including school, parents, and neighboring clubs; (e) focused on long-term development and allowing for mistakes as a natural part of any learning process; (f) integrated, to a degree, with the first team, in the sense that spots are reserved for academy players, but not in the sense that academy players commonly train with the first team; (g) situated in a multicultural society, which forces coaches and managers to demonstrate a keen sense of cultural sensitivity; and (h) integrating an openness and sharing culture locally, nationally, and internationally.

The Genk academy shared many of the traits previously found in successful TD environments relating to individual sports in Scandinavia (Henriksen, 2010). All players were guaranteed playing time during matches. This is not always the case in football academies (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2014). When the results are important to securing the academy's place in the leagues, and when early developed players can be sold for large amounts that can help secure the financial stability of the academy, coaches may be enticed to focus on results and early development instead (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010). However, such early investment can potentially lead to burnout, injuries, and narrow athletic identities (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; DiFiori et al., 2015). An interest in openly sharing knowledge and ideas with coaches from other teams to promote Belgian football further supports this attitude of long-term investment in players.

Supporting the development of a broad range of psychosocial skills, rather than focusing solely on football skills, supports previous findings that show that this is key to a positive developmental pathway (Larsen et al., 2014). Positive youth development environments allow the members to develop life skills that are useful across a range of arenas (Holt et al., 2017). The study suggests that the developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004) has important implications in practice, through demonstrating the importance of considering athletes not only within the narrow sport context, but also in the broader contexts of their psychological, psychosocial, and academic or vocational development. Autonomy, making your own decisions, and taking responsibility for them were qualities emphasized in the academy. Characteristics such as autonomy, communication skills, and decision-making abilities have previously been associated with successful youth development in football (Gledhill, Harwood, & Forsdyke, 2017; Larsen et al., 2014).

However, some of the shared features of successful environments listed by Henriksen (2010) were less pronounced in the Jos Vaessen Talent Academy in Genk. For example, Henriksen highlighted proximal role models as a core feature and described how current, active, elite-level athletes were mentors, training partners, and even coaches for the younger talented athletes in sports such as sailing, kayaking, and track and field. This setup provided upcoming talents with a clear pathway, instruction, and motivations. In Genk, however, this feature was rather less pronounced. As is often the case in professional football clubs, the first team is a business, and many considerations are prioritized above the first-team players' potential contribution to the development of academy players (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Nesti & Sulley, 2014). Football is a globalized game with enormous financial interests (Poli, 2010). Hence, football differs significantly from most other sports (Larsen et al., 2013, 2014; Storm & Nielsen, 2012). This may affect the clubs' willingness to use first-team players as role models in their work at football academies. Other studies (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Larsen et al., 2014) have suggested that the lack of proximal role models is a football-specific issue. Recognizing the special football context, Martindale, Collins, and Abraham (2007), however, have proposed that the principle of using role models may also take the form of mixing different age groups for activities within the club, drawing on the knowledge obtained by former elite athletes or coaches, and video or autobiography as part of creating role models. This was present in Genk. At the same time, some academy players were invited to play with the first team (taking the two reserved spots), and there was an ongoing dialogue among the coaches of the first team and the academy coaches.

In terms of developmental pathways, Ford, Ward, Hodges, and Williams (2009) stated already a decade ago that early specialization leads to expert performance in football, and specialization has even intensified in football since then (Storm & Nielsen, 2012), in the form of identification and training of still younger players in some countries (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Larsen et al., 2014). On the contrary, Henriksen (2010) found that successful environments allowed for late specialization, for example, 16-year-old kayakers also trained and competed in cross-country skiing during the winter, and sailors up to their mid-20s would sail different boats despite aiming for Olympic success in only one of these. Recognizing that the traditions, culture, and competitive level of different sports vary, this diversification was argued to support the development of a broad range of skills and helped the athletes to maintain motivation. In Genk, the players only played football. Early specialization is the norm in today's football and is, in fact,

considered a prerequisite for reaching the elite level (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Larsen et al., 2014). This was also the case in Genk, where players from a very young age were schooled in a particular style of play and expected not to do other sports. Perhaps, this fact reflects that football training in itself creates a diverse set of skills. Football is a complex sport where players need a wide package of "open" and "closed" skills to reach excellence. Sports such as kayak sprint require a limited amount of changes during training and competition and thus typically involve "closed" skills, for instance the technical learning of a stroke with the paddle (Schmidt & Lee, 2011). The "open" skills, however, are skills in which the athlete must adapt their performance to a given situation that is influenced by the surroundings, opponents, and teammates (Schmidt & Lee, 2011). Hence, football training may require a diversified training to develop a broad base of skills. We suggest, however, that a more inclusive approach that integrates elements from other sports could, in the long term, be beneficial to the players. This is even more important if they do not make it to the elite level (which most do not). In such cases, possessing a broader range of skills will make it easier to manage a transition into another sport or to football on a recreational level (Côté et al., 2009).

Collectively, our results indicate that TD in football is a highly competitive and complex endeavor (Aguilar et al., 2012). Successful ATDEs in football in some respects share features with successful ATDEs in other sports. At the same time, football is different from many other sports in terms of its history and culture, organization, competitiveness, the level of professionalism, and the level of financial interests. Therefore, the features of successful football environments also differ from those of other sports. This is true not only of Genk, but also of other football environments in Denmark, Norway, and the United Kingdom (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Larsen et al., 2013; Martindale et al., 2007).

An additional feature of the academy, not previously highlighted by research in other ATDEs, was a focus on cultural competency. Cultural competence can be defined as ". . . A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies (. . .) that reflect how cultural and sociopolitical influences shape individual's world view and health related behaviors, and how such factors interact at multiple levels of psychological practice" (Schinke & Moor, 2011, citing Comas-Dias, 2011, p. 288). Cultural competence is thus the understanding of culture and the acceptance and involvement of other peoples' cultures. Genk was situated in a multicultural area, and the club hosted players who were primarily of Flemish and of French-Belgian origin (other origins were present, but to a lesser extent). French-Belgian was a minority culture within the area. Thus, French-Belgian players spoke different languages and had different cultural norms from most of the other players. Addressing a potential for cultural conflict and cliques, the club showed sensitivity to such issues and managed to create a balanced and inclusive environment. This was especially evident when coaches at the academy gave instructions in both French and Flemish (both of which are widely spoken in Belgium).

Cultural sensitivity is the ability to confront your own background, bias, and interests in a self-reflexive manner (Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). Each player has a cultural identity, and, according to Schinke and Moore (2011), a lack of consideration for the cultural identity can limit the player's potential. Allowing for diverse athlete identities (this includes aspects such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion) is a key not only to their individual performances but also to their mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019). Young athletes who regard their TD

environments as high quality report higher degrees of overall well-being (Ivarsson et al., 2015). We suggest that environments can actively nourish athletes' mental health, and that academies should include the mental health of their athletes in their evaluations and consider it a criterion of their success.

The openness and sharing culture, which in previous studies (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) have been suggested as an additional feature to the original traits (Henriksen, 2010), were also found in this study as important features in professional TD environments. To our knowledge, this is the first study to suggest such a trait in professional football, which is normally associated with secrecy and a performance-oriented and competitive attitude (Kingston et al., 2018). We urge for more research on features of successful TD environments and in particular openness in such environments.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide ideas for football practitioners about TD in football. We did so by investigating a unique and highly successful academy environment in Genk, Belgium, utilizing Henriksen's (2010) framework for a holistic and ecological TD that is associated with certain traits. The results of the study indicate that most of those traits (support for the development of psychosocial skills, focus on long-term development, strong and coherent organizational structure, and integration of efforts), as proposed by Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler (2011), manifest in the academy in Genk, and that this constitutes a possible explanation for the academy's success with developing professional football players. However, three traits (training for diversification, proximal role models, and opportunity for own initiatives) were not found in identical versions in Genk. Besides the abovementioned traits, the academy in Genk elicited an openness and maintained a culture of sharing regarding knowledge and cooperation, not least with respect to developing cultural competencies (Schinke & Moor, 2011) and cultural sensitivity (Schinke et al., 2012), suggesting that players of various origins were successfully integrated into the club. Further research on cultural competencies and sensitivity in TD in football might prove fruitful, as well as openness and sharing ideas in professional football environments.

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