**Introduction**

In his book "No Hunger in Paradise", Michael Calvin writes that academies of professional football clubs, account for about 1.5 million children and adolescents regularly playing football in England.

An interesting, and rather shocking fact, is that only less than 0.5% of these young football trainees will ever have the chance to play professional level football.

I've always asked myself the same question - Why is that so?

You would think that with some many young people going through the academy systems, that a higher percentage would end up as professional footballers.

The statistics cited by Michael Calvin suggest that the problem may lie with the setup itself. The whole system of training. Starting from the recruitment of children as young as six years old (pre-academy), through football training and education and ending, in the best cases, with the signing of a professional contract.

According to an article by the FSA (Football Supporters’ Association): "the Premier League will pay a proportion of core funding for each academy, according to its level. This will range from £775,000 per annum (one-third of the cost of a Category One Academy) down to £100,000 for a Category Four Academy (two-thirds of the running costs). These subsidies will increase gradually over the four-year period of the EPPP (Elite Player Performance Plan) agreement".

This means that English academies receive exorbitant amounts of money to help train as many players as possible to play professional level football. So why, with such a high level of funding, good infrastructure and a coaching staff, do such meagre numbers go on to become professional footballers?

It is often suggested that it’s the fault of the individual player. That they fail to capitalise on the opportunities presented to them. And this is true, there are examples of young players that lack the mindset required to succussed at the highest level. However, it is often the case that such arguments are primarily propounded by coaches.

Let’s imagine a situation where the Ministry of Education visits a school where the majority of students have made no progress in their studies. What will the ministry do in such a case? It will hand down a negative grade for the poor progress shown by most of the students. Will a teacher who helps only the best students get to university be rewarded? Never, because the question will always arise - what happened to the rest of the students?

I have no idea why most people accept this state of affairs in sports education, especially football. It indicates a serious failure of the whole system. This is why I decided to write a book that will not shy away from the basic problem. On the contrary, it will present solutions on how to develop, educate and more effectively manage the process of training children and adolescents. This is because I believe that the problem lies in how we work with talented children to develop their huge potential.

We coaches are often limited by the framework of the system and the club's football curriculum. The basic value enabling people to fulfil themselves is freedom. So, if we restrict that freedom in the strictly educational sense, then inevitably our potential for development will also be limited.

Imposed from above on the coaches of professional academies is a training structure that is not always compatible with the development and learning potential of those under their care. All young players must also submit to this training structure imposed on them; otherwise, they will be passed over and rejected by their academy.

This means that young players are often more focused on meeting the arbitrary requirements of the academy, than what is best for them to develop into professional players.

The best example of this is the training and game model. This involves nothing more than lumping everyone together, while ignoring the obvious fact: every young person is different, has a different character, different qualities and learns differently! This approach mean that their individual development is thus inhibited. This consequently leads, in many cases, to the end of their adventure with football. Unfortunately, this is perhaps sad, but true and real.

This is just one of many examples that I will develop further in this book. I will take the time to describe this problem and show that it doesn’t have to be this way. I will provide solutions to the problem and show how we can develop the potential of talented young players as much as possible, the purpose being to ensure that many more of them get to play football professionally.

The reason behind my wanting to do so is because I am a professional coach with over twenty years of experience and have worked in several countries around the world. I have spent over eight years as a coach in category 1 and 2 professional academies in England. For another, almost, ten years I worked for the English Football Federation, where as a coach, educator and expert working with children in the 5-11 age bracket, I came to know all that body’s structural and training changes from the inside out.

This book is undoubtedly an ambitious project. The knowledge I want to share will provide readers with a better understanding of adolescents and the learning process and thus will, I hope, address the shortcomings I see in training methods and suggest solutions other than those that are currently applied.

**The purpose of this book and how can it help**

In December 2022, The Premier League report, described by 'Coaching Insights', shows how the EPPP plan (Elite Player Performance Plan) for elite young footballers has been successful over the last decade. It covers everything, from the success of England’s national youth teams, through education and welfare and finally the progress achieved by talented young players with the potential to play football at a professional level.

Richard Masters (CEO of the Premier League) says: "Our goal is that every young person who enters the academy system leaves as a better, more-rounded individual." I understand that successes should be applauded, because undoubtedly academies have made a lot of progress in terms of education and, welfare, but what does the report say with regard to training? It boasts that 762 young players, who have passed through the s,ystem have been offered professional contracts. What's more, their number is higher than in the 2012-2013 season, when the EPPP plan was first implemented. Wow! Over the period of a decade, 762 out of the more than 1.5 million adolescents playing football at academy have turned professional. Is this to be considered a success or a huge failure? After all, this number doesn’t even reach a thousand.

But that's not the point.

This represents a mere 0.00001%. What about the other 99% of the kids, who day in and day out spent so many hours in the academy system, often devoting all their time and childhood energy in order to become professional footballers?

Of course, I realize, and understand perfectly well, that not everyone gets to play professionally, but no one is going to tell me that such a small percentage should be acceptable.

So where does the problem lie, because there undoubtedly is a problem?

Why did 99% of those kids fail? Should they be blamed for this state of affairs? Or maybe their parents? Is the system that offers youth football to children truly adapted and consistent with their needs, development and cognitive-emotional abilities or is it merely there to satisfy the egos and needs of adults?

This book is, therefore, addressed to everyone who works at this level: academy managers, coaches, parents, etc. Especially those in the clubs who are responsible for the implementation of the training system and its effects. If the main goal of the academy of a professional club is to develop, prepare and introduce as many kids as possible to professional football, then it is safe to say that the figure of 762 is a failure (we are talking here about a decade and over 1.5 million kids).

We, the coaching community, must take responsibility for this situation and introduce new solutions. This book will help by giving examples of what lies behind this state of affairs (based on my own experience of working in academies). Furthermore, I will suggest ideas on how to better develop the individual learning abilities of young players so as to maximize use of their potential. We start with the recruitment of children as young as six years old (pre-academy), the disadvantages of such a procedure and the complete misconception of the learning process in children.

**Chapter 1: Recruitment**

* 1. **I’ve found a talent! He has only just learnt to walk and can't read yet**

Dear parents, do you realize who is observing your child and recruiting them to the academy of a professional club? Why are you agreeing to this when after all, your child has only just turned six? I understand (sorry, actually I don’t understand) that you already see your toddler in a beautiful stadium, filled to the brim with fans. You can already imagine his wonderful, rich lifestyle, lots of money, good cars, fame, etc... Well, the reality is thatthe se expectations will burst like a soap bubble, when your toddler is discharged from the academy. What then? Does your child, who has constantly been told by everyone that he will grow up to be a footballer, know any other existence and will he be able cope in normal everyday life? This is not the way to go and things really can be done differently.

I have never been able to understand the role of so-called 'scouts' at children's football level. I’ve always wondered what they were looking for in children aged six to twelve. Has no one explained to them that what they are doing makes no sense? After all, you can’t objectively assess that you’ve found a talent at the age of six and be convinced that he will play professional level football. This is just complete nonsense!

Another thing is the preparation and qualifications of the people involved. Often, it’s just a hobby, or a very poorly paid job. Generally, you get paid a percentage if, following your recommendation, a professional club enrols a six-year-old to its pre-academy. Yes, a six-year-old. This so-called 'scout' gets a club jacket and is proud that he will be able to 'hook young talents'. He usually doesn't understand who he's hooking or why. In most cases, such a fellow has only completed the level 1 Talent ID Scouting course and on top of that, did so online.

But whatever, after all it's only and exclusively all about looking for talent among children! Nobody in a professional club is interested in whether such people are properly prepared. I'm talking about understanding children's personal development, their cognitive, emotional and physical development. Moreover, it’s a question of how they learn, what the learning process looks like and the process of children's developing behaviour in various situations. Finally, what individual needs particular children have and how we are to recognize them.

So, dear parents, the recruitment of your children is carried out by random people, who don’t have any qualifications predisposing them to this type of activity. But it's not just about the qualifications of these people. The rat race and rivalry between particular professional academies is intense. After all, finding that one child that grows to become a top-level professional can bring millions into a club.

But even though this is the case, why is it done at such a cost of these youngsters, who are only at the stage of exploring the world and falling in love with this beautiful sport. That’s why I and many others consider the recruitment of children at such a young age to be the first reason why only a small percentage of the 1.5 million football students will go on to play professional football.

In the first place, the child ceases to be a child and loses his identity of being simply a person. From now on, the only identity he has is that of a young footballer – the potential next Messi. Parents, grandparents, uncles, colleagues, teachers, etc... start repeating at every turn that 'Joey' is a professional academy player. Then there’s social media, where it’s announced with great fanfare that the nine-year-old has just been recruited by club 'X' and has signed a contract! A contract? Sad but unfortunately true. Most clubs, parents and coaches tolerate such practices, without thinking about how this will affect the child, not only now but also in the future (which will be discussed in another section of the book).

The next step is to label such a child one of the 'elite'. How does that even sound? Well, let's say that an eight-year-old is an elite young player. To clarify, I feel obliged to quote what the word 'elite' means according to the Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner Dictionary: "people or organizations that are considered to be the best of their kind". Applying this definition to an eight-year-old is crazy, is he really the best at what he does? We can never say, or try to convince, someone that children are or will become elite football players. The process is too complicated and difficult. There are so many factors to consider that any kind of prediction is nothing more than a guess. Each young child learns differently, develops differently and this is sufficient argument for their not being labelled 'elite'.

Instead, we should competently change the narrative as a society and our perception of the very young who simply like to play football but are not in any way 'elite'. Such a narrative only creates artificial divisions, introduces unhealthy rivalry, fails to teach respect for others and is generally bad for the development of children and adolescents and their being raised to be competent adults. It should be remembered that one may perhaps be a footballer, but one is always a citizen of a given country and a human being!

Another problem is very early specialization, which begins with the recruitment of such young children. Scouts, parents, coaches and clubs set professional standards, creating a highly specialized and structured environment, completely unadapted to the needs and development of children at this age.

Under the guise of excellent (i.e. serious and professional) training conditions, kids are deprived of the possibility of falling in love with sport, forming a passion for it, understanding and the pure pleasure and fun of simply playing with their friends. Early specialization doesn’t make much sense, as it limits the possibility of trying out other sports and meeting friends.

Other sports also have a significant impact on development and can help in better preparation and the selection of one sport over another at a much later age. There are many sources and documented studies confirming that early specialisation leads to many negative effects among adolescents. One of them is burnout and total aversion to any sport, even those that are purely recreational.

So why do mainly parents (generally due to a lack of basic knowledge), and most coaches, push children in only one direction?

Tom Green, in his May 2019 article "Early Sport Specialisation" for *Science for Sport*, writes that: **"This is driven by the belief that selecting one sport and excluding others will increase the likelihood of athletic success. There remains concern that engaging in a year-round, concentrated program in a single sport can negatively impact both physical and psychological health. This is driven by society’s increased regard for successful athletes, who can experience social recognition, scholarships, sponsorships, and financial reward for competing at a high level. Whilst the definition of early sports specialisation remains uncertain, the general consensus suggests that intense and selective participation in one sport could lead to several issues associated with overuse and burnout"**

Early specialization in children leads to many problems. The consequence of such action is a lack of willingness and motivation to play sports, along with psychological and physical stress caused by the expectations of parents, coaches and the environment. Intrinsic motivation is very necessary for a young person in overcoming obstacles and becoming a professional footballer. It helps in learning and ensures long-term development. Early specialization gradually depletes a child's intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, it leads to burnout of "talent".

A lot of gifted children, who have a predisposition to play at a high level, suffer arrested development of their skills and consequently give up football. We lose a lot of "talent" due to the inflated ego of coaches, unrealistic expectations on the part of parents and pressure from the environment to play as much and as well as possible, preferably at a very young age.

How much talent is lost this way?

In an article entitled "How to make your kid hate sports" Kelly Wallace writes: "The actual science and evidence that we look at though shows that except in sports like female gymnastics where kids hit their peak when they're 14- (and) 15-years-olds, specializing in one sport before the age of 12 is going to be a far less likely path to actually elite level performance". He doesn’t cite a specific number but agrees with the conviction that early specialization is not conducive to the development of potential at a high level. It should be added that the article refers to adolescent sport in general, and not only to football.

Further on in the article, he provides data on concussion and other injuries caused by early and uncontrolled specialization. The data supported by research is frightening: "Every year, more than 3.5 million children under the age of 14 need treatment for sports injuries, with nearly half of all sports injuries for middle and high school students caused by overuse". It is safe to say that injuries at such a young age hinder a child’s potential for growing. In this way, we reduce the talent to play professional level football, instead of developing and increasing it. We can only imagine how many potential young trainees, sufficiently talented to play football professionally, are lost by the system every year. Insufficient knowledge in this area, the irresponsibility of parents, and the recruitment of even five-year-olds means that we (sometimes unconsciously) lose thousands of youngsters at the very start!

According to a study by Fransen et al. (2012), boys who play or practice more than one sport are physically better prepared, and have better coordination than their peers, who focus on only one sport and that at a very early age. Thus, it can be said that plenty of practice in many sports at a young age increases versatility and develops all aspects: physical, psychological, social and technical.

This means a child’s sports potential increases evenly, as opposed to one-dimensionally, when focusing on only one sport. Children who have talent (a high degree of learning to play football), and try many sports at a young age, increase their chances of becoming a professional footballer. Their basic motor coordination, skill in adapting to various training conditions, ability to overcome obstacles and operate outside their psychological comfort zone all helps develop a high level of learning potential in sport.

Thus, in order for the potential of talented children to increase, we need remember that early recruitment, and closely related early specialization, doesn’t favour the process, rather it slows down or even inhibits it.

If parents allow a medal with the word 'elite' to be hung around the neck of a seven-year-old, they must also accept the fact that their child’s potential is being reduced right at the beginning of his adventure with sports. One usually has to wait several years to see the serious effects of such action, when most of these young football trainees are rejected by their academies at a later age. Who do their parents then blame? What happens to a child who has strutted around, labelled an 'elite' young footballer? Usually, he has long since lost his identity as a child and as a person. His childhood has passed him by, because everything was subordinated to the fact that in the future he would be a professional footballer. Unfortunately, that balloon burst with a bang, and another 'talent' from among the 1.5 million has probably been simply wasted!

In an excellent (2014) interview for *Footblogball,* Dr. Martin Toms also addresses the issue of early specialization, talking about its negative influence. I quote here his remarks: **"The whole issue of specialisation is inherently fraught with problems – when you are in a system that requires specialisation in order for you to ‘fit’, then no wonder people say look at xxxxx – they specialised early. What they forget are the number of kids who were forced out of the system because they did other things or chose to opt for another sport. The problem with that? Obviously, we miss people who could become top class because we ensure there is exclusion criteria applied to them. We need to remember that talent is not achieved until peak ability is attained – and that doesn’t happen until we stop growing, psychological maturity is reached and we have stable support systems. Roughly at the ages of 16-18, so if you were a small child, a late developer or only took up the game later – since you were not in the system at a young age, you will never get in".**

The argument propounded in this answer is simple and clear. Firstly, football is a sport involving late specialization. Neither you, nor your child, needs to adapt to what this inefficient system expects. Children should simply play and take an active part in many sports. Secondly, youngsters have time for their potential to develop comprehensively and according to their principles and their own level of learning. Thirdly, there are many professional footballers, who had nothing to do either with scouts at the age of six or early specialization. Erling Halland played golf, volleyball and athletics. Robert Lewandowski played basketball, volleyball and also practiced athletics. Those two examples alone show that the road to professional football doesn’t involve (only and exclusively) early specialization.

The example of those two excellent strikers also testifies to the fact that one can become one of the best in the world. Today, both are excellent athletes, excelling in moving about in tight spaces, under very high pressure from rivals and in terms of timing (basketball, volleyball). Other sports helped them build the foundations and develop the versatility needed today in professional level football. Another example is the ability to adapt to conditions, the type of training, the environment, etc. Adaptation is a very important trait that develops the potential of children and adolescents. It prepares them for playing professionally.

How is the problem of early specialization and recruitment of five-year-olds to be solved?

The alternative seems quite simple – namely, practicing various sports should be the universal norm and not the exception, especially when it comes to children starting to play football at a very early age. The second alternative is a greater amount of time spent with peers in an ordinary backyard, where numerous street games and lots of fun compensate for time spent only on football training.

Parents and coaches need to be educated about the risks posed by focusing attention on only one sport and how it affects the development of sports potential in late adolescence. The role of educating them on these issues should be taken over by the academies of professional clubs themselves (some are already doing so), in order to make parents aware that it is good for children at a very young age to enjoy sports and the ensuing benefits.

All these solutions will ensure the optimal development of children's potential and can help in preparing the body for professional football in the future. The question to ask oneself is simply, are parents, coaches and professional academies prepared to put aside their expectations, egos and highly structured programs focused on performance and winning in childhood? Because today, as Richard Bailey says: **“There is a significant conflict between how children learn and how elite programs work. Until very recently, talent development programs were designed without any reference to or consideration for healthy development, and treated children like mini adults. Let’s be honest, though, most elite sports programs are not designed to meet children’s needs; they are designed entirely for adult ambitions”**

Unfortunately, this is the norm and not the exception to the rule. Academy directors, coaches and, finally, most parents accept this state of affairs. They still blindly believe that their beloved son will become a professional footballer. They either chose to ignore, or are unaware, of the fact, that the odds are stacked heavily against them. Therefore, he must adapt to the prevailing rules and principles imposed by the current training system. In a way, this is imposed on them by the culture of our modern society, in which they were brought up and grew up.

Dr. Martin Toms put it perfectly, and I quote: **“In almost all sports we have lost the ‘talented’ as anyone who doesn’t fit the norm is rejected or has that flair coached out of them (or is criticised for it). This is especially a problem in the UK because of our obsession with controlling sport and coaching”.**

So, it's worth considering what is the price paid by children so young that they are still finding it difficult to read and write, and take their favourite toy with them to bed? The answer is that your child is left among those 1.5 million who failed and were either not admitted to or expelled from an academy. But there is a higher price in devoting one’s entire childhood to football. Those thousands of hours spent on the pitch instead of with friends and colleagues can never be regained.

Despite this, the environment and the system will still have little to reproach itself for, because 0.000001% of those 1.5 million made it and fulfilled their dreams! But no one is talking about the multitude of equally talented children, whose potential never developed on the same scale as the talent they had. Not because they didn't have it, but because early specialization and recruitment at such a young age significantly neutralized it.

This was influenced by the mad rush of coaches, academies and parents to early specialization, and the expectations of the scout, who recommends a child to a professional academy. A scout who, as already mentioned, has no qualifications or knowledge concerning child psychology, child development and how the young learn. Answer the question yourself: is this the right person to recognize potential in such young children? Is this even possible?

**Summary**

Early specialization and recruitment of children even at the age of five not only gives no guarantee of success in the form of signing a professional contract, but significantly limits the sports potential of talented children. To put it bluntly, this is not so much incomprehensible as simply sick! Promoting comprehensive development among children and adolescents, and their trying out various sports will have a positive impact on their overall development and shape basic physical abilities that will later be useful in professional football.

**1.2. How does an inefficient 'talents' recruitment model reduce children's potential to play high-level football?**

No doubt you have encountered the situation where a scout from a professional club says that your child is talented, that he has that certain something. The next step is a recommendation to the academy of a professional club. To begin with, to the pre-academy (between the age of six to eight). If he’s at least nine years old, then he spends a minimum of six weeks at the academy (I will return later to those six weeks).

As parents, you are, of course, proud that it was your child who drew their attention. However, you have to ask yourself whether this is good for developing the potential of this little fellow, who is just getting to know sports. The problem with recruiting such young children is that we know very little about their potential. The reality is that scouts, coaches and academy heads have very little, or no, knowledge about how to recognize or identify a child with considerable potential to play high-level football.

Even at a slightly later stage of adolescence, it’s very difficult to correctly identify this talent. Perhaps, that is why out of 1.5 million children only 0.00001% will make it. It is a numbers game. But first things first. If we don't know what talent looks like in childhood, why are academies constantly recruiting at such a young age?

One of the reasons is the competition between clubs to recruit to their academy a nine-year-old, who has, for example, good ball control skills. In addition to the obvious talents, academies also have their own player profile for recruitment. Such a profile includes: technical-tactical, psychological, physical and social information on what kind of players the academy needs. Such a profile is needed and has its raison d'être in adult, professional football, where we are dealing, in most cases, with fully formed adults.

It can also be useful in the selection of adolescents aged sixteen to eighteen. Such a profile has no raison d'être when it comes to recruiting children and young adolescents. Because children and adolescents are just developing, especially physically, emotionally and psychologically-cognitively. They are just learning to understand new things. They have little experience, due to the meagre number of years they have been playing football.

For all these reasons such profiling makes no sense. It does more harm than good to these young football players. These young players are determined to develop their learning potential. They should, therefore, remain in an environment conducive to their particular learning process and individual needs.

Following upon this 'fake' kind of recruitment, professional academies marked with the so-called 'elite' sign quickly realize that this new little footballer doesn’t really fit into their environment. He may excel at the one skill that caught the eye of the scout (say ball control), but may lack other skills that are needed to match the academy profile.

So what happens? He is simply removed from that environment!

It worth reiterating at this point that there’s no scientific evidence in regard to what indicates a professional footballer at this young age. The academy profile is largely educated guesswork.

This begs the question - how many children with high potential have we wasted in this way? How many young players, who had the potential to play professionally, have be discarded and, ultimately, discouraged at a young age because they failed to fit an arbitrary profile?

Personally, I am against recruitment at such a young age. Many clubs in Europe have long since abandoned this process, simply because it doesn't make any sense. It only promotes early specialization and false identification of talent among children which simply reduces their potential instead of increasing it. Recently, the German giant Bayern Munich totally abandoned the recruitment of children at the youngest age of U6-U11! There are many reasons why this decision was right, but I will cite a few of them:

1. A child should be just that – a child and have the opportunity to enjoy childhood.
2. Children should grow up away from the pressure and wild aggression of adults.
3. Children should have opportunities to learn and try other sports.

You can read more on the subject from the following source: Training Ground Guru Article (May 1st 2020).

Such a trend has already taken hold in football for adolescents and children in Sweden, the United States, the Netherlands and some clubs in Spain. Recruiting children at such a young age has many disadvantages. For instance, countless mistakes occur because no one knows, nor will know in the future what 'talent' looks like at this age, and even during adolescence it is difficult to identify.

A large number of mistakes involve the expulsion of those same children from the academies of professional clubs at a later age, usually before the age of tweleve or in the age range of twelve to sixteen. This is happening on a massive scale and is further proof of why only such a small percentage of young players make it to professional football.

Meaning what precisely?

At the age of say eight, a youngster had potential and was accepted into an academy. However, at the age of tweleve, he no longer had this talent, did not prove himself and was discharged from the same academy by the same people that recruited him!

Where is the logic in such an action?

Had that high football potential suddenly evaporated? What happened to that potential during the five years spent in the academy of a professional club and why did it not develop? (more on this in later chapters)

Real Sociedad is a professional club in Spain playing in La Liga (the highest level of football in the country). After analyzing scientific research on children, their development, how they learn and how their brain develops, the people responsible for the academy totally abandoned the recruitment of children until the age of thirteen. In Alex Chapman's (2019) article "Inside Real Sociedad, a football club shaped by its academy" for *Cano Football*, people associated with the academy talk about the reasons why they abandoned recruiting the youngest children:

1. “We start late as we want them to have the chance to be kids first,” says Zubieta.
2. “We have endless contact with their schools and in their physical education classes they will work on six different sports every year up until the age of tweleve.
3. A kid that is coming here at twelve years old has played volleyball, basketball, cycled and tried many other sports. We believe that all this helps us to have an open-minded, more flexible individual”.
4. ‘Stay in your environment. Stay with your family. Stay with your friends. And if you feel like you are ready to leave all of those behind, then you can come to Real Sociedad.’
5. By bringing players in later, we stand less chance of getting it wrong.

The director of the Real Sociedad academy also sensibly argues, concerning the profile of players accepted by the academy: "Of course, there are kids who look good when very young and have the profile to win us youth tournaments, but do they have the profile of a player who will play in our first team?"

The conclusion one arrives at is that a young player aged thirteen and over can better suit the profile of players the club needs at the professional level. Of course, nothing can be guaranteed; nevertheless, the risk of error decreases in such a case. If only because we know much more about the player, about his biological and physical predispositions.

What does all this mean when it comes to the development of potential in young football players? How can the individual potential of children and adolescents be increased?

Well, first one must invest time and understand the individual needs of the youngest players and what exactly they need at their age. From the examples described above, it follows that potential will develop better and more evenly outside the academic environment of professional clubs. This will also benefit the clubs themselves, as they will be able to recruit adolescents who are older, with more experience and also more fully developed physically. The awareness of young players recruited will increase.

If you are thirteen to sixteen years old, you are more aware of what sport you want to choose and in which you see a chance for a professional sports career. Children also develop their emotional and cognitive potential. They play football locally, without losing anything of their childhood (driving to a match, an average of eight to ten hours travelling, in order to play an average of forty minutes doesn’t make any sense and has absolutely nothing to do with the development of a young person's potential to learn and play football).

Locally played games allow them time to meet their peers and enjoy family life, also allowing them to develop other interests and hobbies. School and academic results are also important. Thus, potential is developed as a child and as a person, and only at the end is there football. Children don’t risk losing their identity, and are not perceived, as in the case of early specialization, as merely young footballers and nothing more.

We all know the saying: "less is more". Unfortunately, it doesn’t refer in any way to recruitment to professional football academies and programs, where it’s quite the opposite.

Football’s recruitment program for children and adolescents is the largest of all the sports, especially in countries where football is the number one sport, such as England. As I mentioned earlier, around 1.5 million children play football in clubs, but only 0.0001% become professional footballers. This model is simply ineffective, if not to say dreadful!

Considering the number of recruited young players, the time spent on their recruitment and the costs associated with this model, it is simply one big failure, which unfortunately the world of football doesn’t want to admit or simply ignores the facts.

Children recruited at such an early age simply have little chance of becoming a professional footballer. As for other solutions, perhaps the model we see at Real Sociedad and Bayern Munich should be considered. Such a model will involve less recruitment, but thanks to that, will increase the chances of success (more professional footballers). As described earlier, the youngest children will be able to develop their potential and compete with their peers locally, among their friends and in an environment without any pressure from adults, who mostly want to satisfy their own inflated egos.

Another solution may be a football environment more friendly for the youngest children, one that is adapted to their needs for learning and their psychological and physical development. One that is adequate for the stage of learning that the children have currently reached. Such solutions have recently been introduced by the German Football Federation (more on this can be found at [Training Ground Guru | Germany revolutionises foundation age formats with emphasis on fun](https://trainingground.guru/articles/germany-revolutionises-foundation-age-formats)). To quote Ronny Zimmerman, vice-president of the German Football Federation: "We need to think like children, not like adults. Only children who develop fun and joy in the game will stay in football." Furthermore, Germany is introducing 2v2 and 3v3 games that simply correspond to the development of children at an early age. By making this format of games suitable for their needs, it also develops their potential to play football at the level they have currently achieved (more about the positive impact of such games can be found in later chapters of this book).

**1.3. Maybe scouts know what they're looking for, but they don't understand who they're looking at!**

Most people involved in recruiting children to the academies of professional clubs do it out of good will. Above all, they don't need to have any qualifications directly related to understanding who they are observing. All that’s needed is Talent ID Level 1, aside of course from Safeguarding and DBS. The other side of the coin is that there’s no pay or else it’s very low, usually £10 an hour or a tiny commission on an academy signing a contract with a toddler. This clearly shows with what degree of ignorance professional clubs treat this level of recruitment. Considering their inflated budgets, this is just sad but true.

So why bother investing time and this meagre budget in the process of recruiting the youngest players?

Since clubs treat this procedure in such a cavalier manner, we can hardly expect that children playing at the local level will be recruited by real specialists, namely people who have excellent knowledge about the learning process in children, their development, adolescence, psychology and behaviour, and only at the end is a football match the subject of their observation. Such people, for the most part, may know who to look for (in the case of the youngest children, a complete abstraction) but they have absolutely no knowledge on the subject and therefore don’t understand the youngsters they are watching. Since they don’t understand who they are observing, they cannot assess a child's potential from every possible perspective, including the learning process, which is so very important.

At this point, it is worth quoting Mark O'Sulliwan, who confirms this: "**When we talk about**[**talent identification**](https://playerdevelopmentproject.com/survival-of-the-fittest/)**, we know what we’re looking for, but we don’t understand what we’re looking at”.**

**Developing this line of thought further, if you employ scouts who don’t understand the learning process and child development, you actually come to a dead end. To reduce its chances of making mistakes in recruitment, a club's academy rejects more young players among the above mentioned 1.5 million, who unfortunately “didn’t make the grade”!**

**Even more interesting, Level 1 Talent ID can be achieved online, so today virtually anyone can become a scout at the lowest level (but wait, is it really the lowest, seeing how we are talking about children with a high predisposition to play football?). Furthermore, if a scout doesn’t understand the learning process, he will not be able to recognize or notice those youngsters who present a good level of learning and problem solving on the pitch. The knowledge of such scouts is limited to just the basic, purely football related skills, such as: (simply put) he dribbles the ball well, which means that he should be in the academy).**

**Is it less important when such a young football trainee dribbles the ball? Does he understand when to dribble the ball and where to do so on the pitch? Can he adapt his dribbling to the situation he finds himself in and the position of the defender he is trying to get round? This requires considerable knowledge not only about the game of football itself, but also about the children one is observing. Another element that is extremely important, but completely ignored is knowledge about a young player’s background, the culture he presents, how he behaves in difficult situations, etc.**

**Let me here quote Ruben Jonkind: "We need to understand both the macro factors and the micro factors. Society and the economy are changing, and we need to be aware of all of this" I am not convinced (and after all, I worked at academies for over seven years) that scouts understand the micro and macro factors that affect the potential a child currently possesses.**

**I myself had the pleasure of being a participant of a Talent ID level 2 course, organized for coaches of the academy where I was employed. I have to admit that apart from pure theory, it included nothing about the learning process in children. Who is a good pupil and what does he look like on the pitch when he is playing? What does detailed observation of children and adolescents mean and how does one practice it. Yes, once again it was about what to look for, but very little about understanding the young player we are observing.**

**That is how, following the recommendation of such scouts, a child is recruited to a club’s academy. Often, not knowing anything about the environment, he is totally ill adapted to the professional standards prevailing there, which in no way correspond to the development of children and their learning process. The child is torn from his own world and local club (because a stupid rule applies – that once he goes to an academy a child can no longer play football in his local club – why’s that and what's wrong with it?). The same child unfortunately leaves the academy at a later age, not of his own free will, but because he’s told that unfortunately he is no longer talented and doesn’t fit the club’s profile.**

**As I wrote earlier, there is plenty of scientific research clearly stating that early selection and identification of talent at the age of five to thirteen doesn’t make sense. We know too little on the subject. The only thing it leads to is inhibiting the development of children’s’ potential instead of assisting it. The (grassroots) local environment is completely different from what children find in a club’s professional academy. From an environment where they had fun playing football, meeting their peers, being able to develop their creativity, curiosity and autonomy, they suddenly find themselves in a strictly standardized, highly professionalized environment, where adults decide how to play and where to play football. Such an environment is totally ill adapted to the needs of individual children aged five to twelve and sometimes equally those aged twelve to sixteen.**

# **First, there is the meagre knowledge of children and their development on the part of the scout, who recommends a young academy player. Then there are the coaches and parents, and an environment where the pressure to win instead of learning is simply insurmountable for most children. They don’t have their emotional and cognitive side sufficiently developed to cope with this burden. The result is they close up and their potential is killed, the consequence being their total apathy to playing football at any level, not to mention professionally. That’s why the first solution is to completely halt the selection of children at such a young age. The second thing is to create for them an environment and conditions that follow the path of the German Football Federation, where the game of football will be adapted to the needs and development of children aged five to twelve, employing for this purpose a highly qualified coaching staff specializing in this age group, who first and foremost understand children and their needs, second to which comes knowledge about football. Thirdly, if someone must stubbornly continue on this pointless path and model, then at least they should invest in ensuring that those involved in scouting for the youngest players are well-educated people. All this so that the talent can grow according to principles applied to children and in physiological-biological-psychological balance.** **When it comes to recruiting children and adolescents, our experience and opinions influence how and who we recruit.**

# **As a rule, a subjective assessment can have a negative impact on the development of a young person's potential and career. Usually, scouts, but also coaches, rely on their own previous experience and an academy’s or first team’s game model. Such a subjective manner of evaluating, identifying and selecting potential talent often leads to them making erroneous assessments and, consequently ignoring other, no less talented children who simply don’t fit our subjective view or way of thinking.**

# **In this manner, we lose children with high potential, who continue to remain in the group of 1.5 million, instead of increasing that number of 0.0001% of young trainees who graduate from an academy and become professional footballers. All of this contributes to the enormous waste of children's football learning potential. The research paper: “**Waste Reduction Strategies: Factors Affecting Talent Wastage and the Efficacy of Talent Selection in Sport” (January 2020) presents the main factors behind the waste of talent in sports during the early selection process, and the identification process in general.

# Those are:

1. Subjective preferences and intuition.
2. Large number of performers excluded from competitive sport opportunities (only 0.0001% of the 1.5 million children playing football).
3. **De-selected athlete chances to back to elite level of sport are reduced**
4. Poor predictive capabilities of talent identiﬁcation programs which may be related to a number of diﬀerent factors including: (a) a lack of understanding of what talent is and the way it is manifested, (b) cognitive biases aﬀecting human judgment, and (c) situational factors aﬀecting the quality of decisions being made.
5. our understanding of how talent develops and evolves over time is limited.
6. biases likely aﬀect judgments regarding talent, we describe (a) personal preferences and intuition, (b) framing and the endowment eﬀect, (c) the illusion of conﬁdence, and (d) the primacy eﬀect.
7. The nature of talent identiﬁcation programs limits the ability of talent selectors to check out their accuracy in making predictions.

The presented factors suggest that we know too little about the potential of young, talented players. They also suggest solutions that can be used and applied in such a way that more players playing at the academy level go on to play professional football. Later instead of early selection. A number of actions that can be undertaken aimed at filling the gaps in our knowledge about children and adolescents. This knowledge can reduce the number of mistakes made during selection. More time to be spent observing gifted children in various conditions and environments and thus a chance to get to know the person we are recruiting much better.

**1.4. Why is the recruitment of children according to a specific profile a trap that hinders the development of their potential?**

A few years ago, I was at a training conference for scouts and coaches organised by the English Football Federation. At this conference, Damien Comolli (currently Director for Football at the French club Toulouse FC) gave a lecture and presentation. In the past, he had worked as a scout, but also in other roles for clubs such as Arsenal London, Tottenham and Liverpool. His entire lecture was devoted to the recruitment process and was very interesting, because Comolli talked about the recruitment process for clubs and the professional level generally. Thanks to the notes I made during that lecture, I can share with you some quite interesting observations about the profile of professional players and how it relates to the recruitment of children and young players to an academy. For example, who to recruit?

1. A personality that fits.
2. Understands the culture of the club he is coming to.
3. Character over 'talent'.
4. 40% attitude 30% tactical awareness 20% physical abilities 10% technical skills /talent.
5. Intrinsic motivation – loves playing football.
6. A personality that hates losing.
7. Emotionally stable.
8. A good student – makes the right decisions.

Now, how does that relate to recruitment to the academy of a professional club?

Clubs usually have the profile of the players their club and manager need. Often the same profile is also used to recruit the youngest.

Where is the trap?

Well, children and adolescents are constantly developing, and everyone is at a different stage of this development. The same applies to the learning process; everyone will be at a different level of understanding football, technical-tactical skills, etc. That’s why human development does not proceed in a straight line; it’s long-term and each individual reacts to this development differently, so looking for young talents according to the profile of mature players will be difficult and the probability of mistakes will be high. Perhaps it is better to choose three or four characteristics that will reflect and match the traits found in children as opposed to adults (we understand who we are recruiting and not just who we are looking for).

For example, the following characteristics matching children and adolescents, as listed in Damien's presentation, may be:

1. Intrinsic motivation – loves to play football (observed details are important, e.g. what the child or adolescent does before and after training, how long it is before it commences, etc.).
2. Character over 'talent' – of course, the attitude of children and adolescents is constantly forming, nevertheless we can, at an early-stage, notice character traits that in the future will be important for playing professionally (for example: natural ambition and a desire for self-improvement; how they deal with failures and difficult situations; can they easily adapt).
3. A good student makes the right decisions (many scouts confuse intelligence on the pitch with tactics, recruiting players based on this trait. Well, intelligence on the pitch is nothing more than cognitive abilities and the skill to solve situations on teh pitch to advantage, while tactics are only the organization of the game). Often, due to ignorance (as I mentioned earlier in this chapter), scouts recommend someone who dribbles the ball well, completely ignoring the fact that another young player knows when, how and where to dribble – and that is a fundamental difference).

Despite everything, profiling children and adolescents can be useful, but it is also associated with a high risk of making many mistakes. This results later in such a child, after a long period, perhaps being excluded from the academy.

A good example of the fact that professional academies rarely consider the overall development of the child is the goalkeeper profile.

The Kharis-Rode method is used to assume and calculate what height a child will be in the future. Clubs suggest that to play in the goalkeeper position, a player must be at least 187 cm tall. This only takes into account a physical attribute (which is important, it’s true), but what about other abilities suggesting a child's high potential to play football? History clearly shows several goalkeepers who never exceeded the magic measurement of 187 centimetres, and yet became excellent goalkeepers, some even world-famous! Goalkeepers such as Fabien Barthez, Jorge Campos, Iker Cassilas, Victor Valdez, David Ospina, Sergio Alvarez, Aitor Fernandez and many more. Unfortunately, life is brutal!

How then can we solve the player profile problem to make it more effective and reflect the needs and development of young footballers?

Isn’t it perhaps worth considering the creation of a profile for children and teenagers instead of solely a profile for an adult professional footballer for every position on the pitch?

Generally speaking, reducing earlier selection in favour of longer identification should have a positive impact by ensuring that gifted children and their extraordinary potential remain in the system. Thanks to this, we will save time and money in the long run and reduce the large number of mistakes that are made today, leading to the potential of talented young players being wasted instead of developed.

**1.5. Late selection and longer identification of gifted children is the best chance of developing their potential!**

In earlier sections**,** I already described why early selection of pre-school and school age children doesn’t make sense. Observation and assessment of a child's ability to play football at the age of **six** to twelve (also extremely complicated and difficult at a later age) is completely pointless. Typically, early selection involves no basic criteria. Because what would be the correct criteria when we are talking about such young children?

Usually, poor early selection is based on what children do with the ball at their feet. Such a form of selection compares those who are already in a professional club to those who could possibly be accepted there. No child is selected for ‘soft’ abilities (because those are only just being formed). Nevertheless, this can be an important selection factor. We select early for a sport that is a late specialization. I find no logic in that, except that the whole system has been created by adults to meet their needs, not children's.

In his excellent article, "Our biggest mistake: Talent selection instead of talent identification" (December 2019), John O'Sullivan cites a devastating fact: about 70% of children give up or quit sports before the age of thirteen!

This should be reason enough for changes to be made to the system and how we select and identify talent among the very youngest.

In the same article, John presents Piotr Unierzynski's research, which was conducted on over 1000 young tennis players aged twelve to thirteen (such as Kim Claisters and Roger Federer). The study was conducted in more than fifty countries between 1994 and 2002. Finally, this presented the characteristics of the young players he studied and who achieved positions in the top 100 ranking of professional tennis players. Here are some of those characteristics:

1. Three to four months younger than their peers.
2. They played fewer matches than their peers in the same period.
3. On average, they trained two to four hours less than their peers.
4. They had supportive parents, who however were not necessarily obsessively involved in their child's passion.
5. Generally weaker physically, but faster and more coordinated than their peers.

If we now apply these characteristics to early selection in football, we will notice many similarities with those children who have been rejected by the system. Academies prefer tall, physically strong boys (early puberty) at the expense of those physically weaker (late puberty). Early selection results in the child playing football practically all the time. In addition, most parents pay for additional individual training sessions. A large number of parents are also totally obsessed with making their child a professional footballer. High and often unrealistic expectations, an environment that’s not very conducive to the development of a child's potential, and the pressure to be better than others all the time, are the reasons why football of the future loses a lot of talented children and potentially professional footballers. Then we have professional academies and a sports culture in our society that unfortunately glorifies winning and efficiency instead of the football learning process. And finally, coaches, who indeed in most cases have excellent knowledge about football, but know little about the development and learning process of children and adolescents (more on this in chapter two).

Rivalry between clubs has led to a situation where in the pursuit of winning and being the best here and now, scouts select ever younger children, and some coaches (because not all) completely misconstrue their vocation and become "talent selectors" instead of thinking about the identification and long-term development of each child they have under their care. This short-sightedness and labelling children "elite young footballers" at a very early age leads to parents, coaches and generally everyone around them perceiving the child as already an elite footballer.

The rivalry between professional clubs and their academies in almost every region of England leads to a rat race being played out between adults, at the expense of youngsters. Early selection takes place at an ever younger age, even as young as five. In the youngest age categories, people responsible for recruitment want to grab up the "best" nine-year-olds for instance, because they want to be the best in their category and win, not merely be competitive. But what about the development of potential and the long-term learning process for which such academies and their coaches have taken responsibility?

Where’s the problem?

If you are not going to be the best, you won’t win. If you don't win, you lose and may even lose players (a generality, since there are academies that really do emphasize development and learning, though unfortunately I’ve yet to have the pleasure of working in one)!

What does this have to do with developing the potential of gifted children?

Well, such a nine-year-old is selected early for the here and now and so maybe he is the best at this moment and will ensure the academy succeeds at this level. The question is whether this and other nine-year-olds have the characteristics that will allow them to develop their potential in the future and become professional footballers. The statistics don’t lie and are pretty deadly (0.00001% of 1.5 million). This means only one thing – early selection is inefficient and a mistake. It leads to success here and now, but failure in the future.

How many children have been left out in this way? How many of them were unable to develop the potential that they undoubtedly had? But there are solutions and perhaps it is worth considering them.

1. Let's do away with early selection and focus on long-term identification of gifted children.
2. Let's leave selection until after the growth spurt process.
3. Let's educate coaches, and those who deal with selection, about the emotional-cognitive development of children and adolescents, as well as physical and biological development and how it affects the learning process and potential.
4. Let's respect and educate people about the learning process and how it works, and what characterizes it in children and adolescents (how they can assimilate information).
5. Let's consider potential as a whole and not just as some part that can be easily measured for now! If someone runs fast, jumps well and is tall, it means that he is talented – but only physically, but what about real potential? When a child doesn’t jump particularly far, that doesn’t mean he hasn’t the potential to play football or any sport whatsoever.
6. Let’s create an environment that allows children to develop at their own pace, with coaches who specialize in a given age category, have excellent training as teachers and know all about the learning process.

Here’s a list of some players who were never subjected to early selection or were never in a professional academy and yet became excellent professional footballers. Some of these names have played or are playing at international level: Didier Drogba (started playing at age twelve, never played in an academy), Ian Wright (started playing at sixteen), Miroslaw Klose (started playing more seriously at twenty-two, was never in an academy), Messi (signed to the Barcelona academy at thirteen), Ronaldo (signed to Sporting Lizobon at the age of twelve), Jay-Jay Okocha (never played in an academy), Luca Toni (never in an academy), Carlos Bacca (a Colombian, never played in an academy).

So how does a child develop potential without being under pressure, without any training structure, qualified coaches and obsessive and unrealistic parents?

Well, let’s just look at some countries that are less wealthy but with a strong football tradition, for instance countries in South America. Brazil is the only country in the world to have won the World Cup five times. Argentina is the current world champion. Of course, given the population of Brazil and the fact that football is a national asset, we could take the easy way out and assume that these are the main reasons for that country's success. However, I would like to draw attention to a few issues.

First of all, Brazil achieved this success without any system that selects five-year-olds and locks them into the structures of professional clubs, whose environment is neither conducive nor meets their needs or develops their potential. Brazilian children learn to play football on the street, on the beach, in the so-called favelas.

What does that mean?

They have complete freedom in perfecting their dribbling, technical tricks, playing in small and large spaces. The whole learning process is fully controlled by the children, not by adults (coaches and parents). They also themselves develop their social and cognitive-emotional potential, often in conditions far removed from the structural strictures of academies in Europe. Thus, they get what early selection and, early specialization takes away from children in the professional environment of the academy.

Children from South America fall in love with football, and that passion for this wonderful sport is later clearly evident in professional footballers from that continent. The most important is one more thing. Creativity, imagination and curiosity are traits that characterize all children. Thanks to football played on the street, at the beach and futsal, Brazilian children can develop these qualities independently. Professional academies are quite the opposite. Although more and more often "street games" for children are being restored in academies, the children's creativity is still mostly marginalized and in many cases killed off by less aware coaches, who have little understanding of the basics of teaching and the development of children, especially the emotional and cognitive side. Indirectly, and unconsciously, they considerably reduce the ability of children in early school to try things out, create, take risks, and thus such coaches significantly minimize the technical, psychological and social basics that will later be the foundation for playing football professionally.

In the article: "The role of football in Brazilian culture”, Emily Bennet writes that about 16,000 Brazilians play football professionally all around the world and according to the article: "Let children play football like they do in Brazil" only when a young Brazilian is fourteenyears old does he begin a step-by-step tactical education. Until then, he plays football with his peers on the street and develops individual skills. Which doesn’t mean that when a child is fourteeny ears old, no one is further developing his individual technical and tactical needs.

One would look in vain for the academies of Brazilian clubs in the ranking of the top twenty professional academies in the world according to the information quoted in the article: "The 20 best soccer academies in the world 2022" (August 2016). The overwhelming number we can find there are European academies, including three from England. Despite this, as many as 16,000 Brazilians play football professionally around the world and the clubs of the best football leagues in the world vie to sign them up.

Perhaps the secret lies in the initial phase of learning and their deriving primarily the pleasure of playing football in childhood. Maybe it’s thanks to street games, futsal, and playing on the beach, that Brazilian adolescents grow into large-format stars. Their potential is therefore used to the maximum in natural conditions for children and in an environment conducive to their development. Thanks to this, they learn to adapt, show spontaneity, enthusiasm and unlimited passion for playing football.

The other side of the coin is the poverty, in which most Brazilian football trainees are found. Thus, they demonstrate an enormous hunger, determination, courage and stubbornness in overcoming life’s obstacles. Their motivation is also to get out of poverty, not only for themselves but also for the whole family. Thanks to this, they develop their personal and psychological potential and, already in their teens, become more mature. They are therefore able to adapt quickly to different cultures, countries and conditions.

One reason for the fact that as many as 16,000 Brazilians play professionally is their basic football education, which they received, not from qualified coaches in a strictly structured environment, but learned in natural conditions conducive to the development of a child’s potential. Excellent technique is not the result of "stupid" running from one set up prop to another without an opponent, but is the end result of playing against an opponent, countless dribbling experiences, and small street games on various surfaces (sand, asphalt, etc...).

Children play and learn in the context of a real game of football. Some may disagree with such arguments because playing games in the street is extinct in Europe. My question is what stands in the way of providing such a model of the game to youngsters? One obstacle is the inflated ego of coaches and parents who are unable to accept that children can learn without them.

Finally, the right balance between the training structure and free play will have a positive impact on developing the potential of young children and perhaps lead to a greater number becoming professional footballers. In an article for the British "I" "Premier League reveals 97% of players who come through top academies never played a minute of top-flight football" (January 7, 2022), Sam Cunningham cites some sad statistics. About 70% of young academy players don't even get a professional contract! At this point, it’s worth asking the question: Why this state of affairs? How does that compare with what is happening in Brazil?

In my humble opinion, early specialization, early selection and the whole recruitment process contribute to such a sad state of affairs. Children lose out on their childhood in favour of playing football in the academy of a professional club, where their creativity, curiosity, and social, emotional and cognitive potential are minimized or subordinated to the training program in a given academy. From the perspective of finances, structure, and the conditions that children live under in professional academies, the conclusion is that we are all responsible for this undoubtedly serious failure of the entire system for adolescent football. Perhaps we’ve no need to cite only the example of Brazil, but also other sports and how the recruitment and selection of gifted children is carried out. More on this in the next subsection.

**1.6. Recruitment in other sports – how does it affect development of the potential of gifted children compared to football?**

What the system for adolescent football can learn from other sports, but also from other areas of social life, such as music or dance. How is the recruitment of gifted children in other sports conducted and how does it work? Ice hockey, for example, is a quite popular sport, especially in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden.

In the past, Sweden had a huge problem with recruiting talented youngsters, and especially with keeping them in the system which, in a word, was a total failure! According to the data cited in the article "Grassroots to Gold: Sweden uses innovative thinking to tackle development challenges" (The Athletic, 30 November, 2017), Sweden had 64,000 registered players out of a population of 9.8 million, 10% of whom were active players in the NHL's top hockey league! We are talking about 10% in a country five to six times smaller than the UK in terms of population, and yet a large number of talented children become professional players! In the same article, its author Sunaya Sapurji cites solutions that the Swedish Hockey Federation implemented to increase the number of high-level professional hockey players. Below are some of those solutions:

1. Individual development of the potential of young players up to the age of thirteen.
2. Focus on as many gifted children as possible registered in the national program "Tre Kronor Hockey School" – increasing as much and as long as possible the chances of selecting and identifying the truly talented for this sport.
3. Agreement with the NHL, the best league in the world, that the most promising young Swedes will play in the professional hockey league in their country (a minimum 260 games in a season), further maintaining and developing potential that may not yet be ready to play in the best league in the world.
4. Creating programs for immigrant communities who have settled in Sweden and inviting their children to these programs – a broadly developed program to recruit and disseminate hockey, thus increasing the chance of a greater number of late-selected talented young hockey players

Norway is a small Scandinavian country with a population of 5.3 million. Despite this, the country has won the most medals at Winter Olympics - 368! Not the United States, not China, not Great Britain, not France, but this tiny country. How is it possible and how do Norwegians approach the development of children's potential and developing world-class professional athletes on an Olympic scale?

Whereas in most highly developed countries parents, coaches and society in general are obsessed with early specialization and early selection, in Norway society focuses on a whole mass of various sports in childhood and actively participates with whole families in the program: "Joy of Sport for All"! The very name of this program already encourages people to take up sports. The word 'Joy' is associated with having fun, learning, smiling and having a great time. It is especially closely associated with children, as the program creates a friendly environment for them and their needs. There is no place for any form of pressure, unrealistic expectations of parents and coaches who don’t know why they control children all the time and yell at them!

Furthermore, Norway has created a sports document called "Children’s rights in Sport", which clearly defines the rules of participation in sports and what the environment should be for children who want to play various sports. It’s only when youngsters become teenagers, i.e. around thirteen to fourteen years of age that they can begin to choose the sport that suits them best and in which they want to specialize.

It is worth noting that even teenagers talented in one particular sport are not forbidden to practice and enjoy other sports! The approach of coaches working with talented youngsters with the potential to play professionally is also very different from that of their colleagues in other countries. They support 'talent' by providing advice and mentoring. The balance between self-learning and the coach's involvement in the learning process is to the young athletes’ benefit. The role of the coach is to help and add to the learning process, instead of constantly instructing and controlling the learning process of children and adolescents.

The Norwegians' successes are not restricted to just winter sports. They are also enjoying ever better results in summer sports. In the article: "Norway's radically different approach to sports helped it climb to the top of the Olympic podium" (January 2021), its author cites several of the successes achieved by Norwegian athletes in summer sports:

1. Casper Ruud is the world’s number eight in tennis.
2. Viktor Hovland is one of the top ten golfers.
3. Soccer player Erling Haaland is considered one of the best young strikers.
4. Magnus Carlsen has been ranked number one in chess for eleven years.
5. Norway’s Karsten Warholm smashed his own world record in the 400-metre hurdles, and Jakob Ingebrigtsen continued his dominance of middle-distance races by winning the 1,500 metres.
6. A Norwegian duo even won gold in men’s beach volleyball.

The obvious conclusion is that children enjoy the opportunity to practice and learn different sports. The motto of the Program "Joy of sports for all" fulfils its role to perfection! The number of medals won and the increasing number of world-class Norwegian athletes speaks for itself. Children can simply be children and develop their excellent potential for creativity, curiosity, imagination, along with their cognitive-emotional potential in healthy conditions where adults offer support if gifted children show such a need.

The population of the Caribbean island Jamaica is less than three million. Despite this, for some reason it’s home to the most excellent (mainly short and medium distance) runners. One may wonder why that is so in a country that doesn’t have a sports infrastructure anywhere near the level of the professional football academies in England, Jamaica being a country where parents don’t take their children to every training session and monitor their progress daily. They can't afford it. In fact, many parents can't even afford the school bus. This has its drawbacks from a financial point of view and compared to the opportunities that children in other, more developed countries have. But this also has its advantages when it comes to the development of potential in sports, especially running. Since some parents often can't afford the bus, their children often run to and from school. In many cases, this run takes place uphill and downhill. If youngsters and teenagers do that every day in tropical conditions, their physical development is exceptional. It also shapes character. Determination, courage, stubbornness and struggling with difficulties beyond one’s comfort zone, such features are not alien to professional athletes. Jamaican children are generally athletic and don’t need a whole army of so-called fitness coaches, or a sports science department that measures everything from head to toe.

In most of the countries where I have worked, schools play only a marginal role in the selection and search for gifted children. In Jamaica, schools send their best runners (generally at the age of twelve) to take part in interschool, regional competitions. The next step is for the most promising to be taken under the wing of the Jamaican Athletics Organization. The downside, of course, is finance and the fact that the country’s young runners don’t enjoy the kind of conditions their colleagues from other, richer countries can boast. Nevertheless, if you train on a track that’s full of potholes and fails to provide decent conditions, and your changing room is in a barracks, all this increases your motivation to leave poverty behind and makes you incredibly desirous of success. You are constantly improving your skills and developing your potential.

Many professional footballers also came from poverty: Sadio Mane, Christiano Ronaldo, Louis Suarez, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Angel Di Maria and many others. Do youngsters whose parents every day take them to training sessions in a fancy car (just look closely at the academy’s parking lot), have everything served them on a platter and don’t have to worry about anything, actually want to become professional footballers?

The motivation of young trainees such as these will be significantly reduced, and will certainly not be intrinsic motivation. What's more, young trainees at an academy have everything provided on a tray and likewise in the club. Everything is done for them and they don’t have to worry about anything (more on this in the following chapters). How often do academies recruit from the poorest regions of England, or from immigrant backgrounds?

Children with potential from such backgrounds have one essential feature: they are very modest, determined to succeed and very desirous to become professional footballers. Their intrinsic motivation is at an incredibly high level. This motivation combined with their high physical and psychological potential opens the way for the most talented to a professional career in athletics. The multitude of successes achieved by Jamaican runners (but not only runners) over the last decade is directly related to how they develop their potential at a very young age, running every day on the streets of the capital Kingston and beyond.

So what can we learn and what conclusions can we draw from other sports? .

First of all, early selection doesn’t serve the development of children and their huge potential to learn and develop their abilities. Secondly, being outside the comfort zone, playing or training in difficult conditions builds character and enables talented young football trainees to get to know what it is to adapt to conditions and achieve personal development. Someone once said that "success is born in pain". It’s hard to disagree with that, considering the conditions in which many Jamaican children began their adventure with running and where future Brazilian football stars grew up and played. One must of course take into account the cultural, mental and climactic differences. Nevertheless, training in less comfortable conditions, in an environment where youngsters will have to face adversity and overcome their weaknesses and adapt, can in the long run reveal who has ‘soft’ skills suggesting that they will become professional footballers. Thirdly, the creation of programs similar to those in Scandinavian countries will allow children to truly enjoy sport and thus have a much better chance of playing sports professionally.

**The lesson taught by Chapter One!**

The key message of this chapter is that early specialization and early selection greatly reduce the potential of gifted children, resulting in a large-scale loss of 'talent' at subsequent stages. Above all, the child should be immersed in sports and have the opportunity to try out other sports that will have a positive impact on overall development.

Another conclusion is that early recruitment takes place on the principle: we know who we are looking for, but we don’t know who we are watching!

Lack of knowledge in above all the field of children's development and how they can learn leads to many mistakes in recruitment to academies and, as a result, expulsion from academy structures later. A much better solution is to identify and select children later, where the risk of error still exists but is much reduced.

Too often, recruitment is subordinated to the player profile that an academy’s first team may need. Such a profile in terms of soft, social and psychological as well as physical abilities should not be applied to children and adolescents before or during puberty. When children are profiled in this way, we cannot in any way assess the power of a young player who is still to undergo developmental changes that affect the learning process.

The conditions in which adolescents grow up and train can in the long run either develop or reduce high learning potential. The motivation for success is incomparably greater in children who come from poorer regions or countries. Their hunger for success is at an extremely high level.

**Chapter 2: The training Program**

The English remember the year 1966 with nostalgia. Being the best in the world in the most beautiful and popular sport was an incredible triumph, not only a sporting, but also a social and cultural achievement. In 1990, the English national team reached the semi-finals of the World Cup in Italy. Later, in 1996, they repeat this achievement in the European Championships played at home.

What connects all these events?

All these successes were achieved without professional academies, a mass of coaches of all kinds, a professional training program, or a strict, regimented structure to which every young player must be subordinated.

In this chapter, we will look at whether current training programs in academies are conducive to developing the potential of the young players who attend them. The most recent successes of the English National Team suggest that this training has improved (the semi-final of the 2018 World Cup and final of the European Championship 2020). Perhaps academies are raising better players, educating them better and preparing them better for the requirements of professional football, but still only a small percentage become professional footballers.

Working in academies I got to know the system, the structure, how they operate and what sort of training system they have installed. My own experience tells me that current programs are not fully adapted to the needs of individual children and their development, and thus inhibit the considerable potential of young players. This chapter will be devoted to how we can maximise the potential of young players and what alternative solutions are available to improve the training programs currently used by professional football academies.

**2.1. Game Model or Learning Model?**

Most professional academies develop their training program based on the so-called game and training model (elements of training). These models are the basis for training young players in the academy, and coaches are obliged to strictly and even rigorously adhere to the rules of training and how it’s conducted in each age group.

Of course, there will be minor differences between age groups, but in general the basics are the same for everyone. Such an approach to the question of training means that all players, regardless of age, individual and personal development, are de facto lumped together. This means that every young player, who goes to an academy, must quickly adapt and train according to the strictly defined model of the game that is in force at a given academy.

The result is that a nine-year-old who goes to an academy loses his originality, much of his creativity and all the best qualities that he possesses and that help in the development of potential. He has to train and play the way in which he is bound by the academy’s game model. The pressure from coaches is enormous because they in turn are under a lot of pressure from the people managing the academy. So, there is very little room for developing their innate abilities and the traits that characterize children. Thanks to this, the potential with which a child arrives at an academy is reduced. Every young player has to fit into the strict, regimented structure and program that the academy and adults impose (by the way, each academy’s program is created by adults to meet the needs of adults and their egos, not the individual needs of young players).

The game and training model, when implemented and applied in the same way for everyone is the opposite of what the people responsible for training in these academies like to say and often attribute to themselves. You've no doubt heard such slogans as: "Person before the player" or "We focus on developing the individual and his needs". So how does an identical game model for everyone relate to these wonderful self-serving slogans?

One is reminded of the school curriculum, where everyone learns the same thing, regardless of individual differences, ways of assimilating information, or the stages of learning which individual students have arrived at (young players in the academy). This leads, above all, to the killing of creativity (which especially in children aged five to twelve should be nurtured and developed) and thus to a drastic reduction in the potential of gifted children.

Please note that even the great professional players sound the alarm and loudly denounce this practice. Dennis Bergamp in an interview with BBC Sport (29 September, 2020) said about the training problem of young players who learn to play in the academies of professional clubs: **"They are taught more nowadays and it seems that the creativity has gone a little bit. Sometimes when I watch youth football, you have what I call PlayStation coaches - they have got the controls and the players are just doing what they say, not thinking for themselves. The way you get good players is if they're inventive, but all the way to the age of 18 they're not getting the chance".**

In an interview with *Give me Sport* (November 2022), another great footballer, Lionel Messi also talks about the problem of all youngsters with potential being lumped together: **"I think football has changed a lot. It's more difficult to see a player who is different, who is out of the ordinary... Because from a young age you are forced to play in a certain way. And that's the problem."**

The words of these great players must not go unheard. If a child goes to an academy with all his original individualism, it should be developed and nurtured. A uniform game model for everyone works in quite the opposite way. Furthermore, forcing the same game model on all youngsters, we have to accept the fact that they will learn the game model instead of playing football.

What am I getting at?

Well, at the English Federation’s (Advanced Youth Award) Course, we had the pleasure of listening to a lecture by John McDermott. John, former Head of Coach Training at Tottenham Hotspur, also spoke about the potential of young players being reduced through a training program that is the same for everyone. In his lecture, John reminded us that in their football careers lasting ten to fifteen years, players will have about seven different managers, meaning they will have to adapt to different tactics, different models and styles of play and types of training sessions.

The aim of the academy and the people working there is therefore to develop the potential of young players and prepare them for versions and styles of play that in physical, mental, technical and tactical, social and personal regards differ. Currently, in many academies it is quite the opposite, there being just one game and training methods model represented. Young football trainees learn a game model instead of what the game of football looks like. In training sessions, they make decisions based on the game model, instead of what can really happen in an actual game. In other words, they are limited technically, tactically, personally, physically and socially. Everything they learn and do on the pitch comes down to the game model.

This leads to a reduction in their potential to a large extent, and thus in the long run the loss and waste of youngsters with a talent for playing professionally. This is particularly evident at foreign tournaments attended by young players. I had the pleasure of taking part in such tournaments. I remember all too well when we went to a tournament in Germany. There, every youth team played differently. For example, I remember a match with a German team that decided to position the whole team in defence behind the ball line. In England, matches at academy level are the same in terms of the game model. Most, if not all, teams build the action from the back of the pitch and use high pressing on the opponent's half (there is nothing wrong with that). However, this means a lack of that diversity thanks to which young players can better understand the game, different styles and adapt to them within a short space of time. That’s why in that match against the German team, the young players had enormous problems playing with an opponent who presents a different style. They had never before had contact with this style or the opportunity to test their skills against young players from other countries playing in such a way. Here, the same game model for everyone again made itself felt. The young English players had never had the opportunity to play differently. This meant that once again their potential was not fully used, especially the socio-psychological aspect and adaptation to other match conditions. Here there is certainly room for implementing and diversifying the game program for professional academies, so that their players can face a variety of styles.

A uniform game model is practiced in all age categories with only cosmetic changes (usually the selection of different means) in particular phases of development. **The technical-tactical conditions are the same for everyone, so in what system is the game model, what style it presents, and what it means for the various positions on the pitch and the players who will play in those positions**. The danger is that coaches focus on the game model and group tactics, instead of individual development at all levels.

What does this lead to?

Well, if a given youngster doesn’t fit the game model (or the profile - see chapter one) he is usually shown the door, to put it bluntly! Not because he hasn’t potential, is incapable, but because he doesn’t fit the game model and the training program that the academy presents. Nobody takes into account the potential of such a boy, his individual needs; all that counts is the profile, the game model and how he plays here and now (how he presents himself in terms of football). After he is discharged from the academy, no one particularly cares about his fate, because in a moment there will be others who want to take his place. This is yet another example of how football is losing masses of talented adolescents who rarely return to football, let alone professional football.

So what can be improved, evolve or simply be changed so that the individual potential of children and adolescents is developed in accordance with their natural development as opposed to what is written in the game model?

It’s worth considering whether it wouldn’t be better to develop potential on the basis of the learning model. Such a model is based on the learning process, and the psychological, physical and cognitive-emotional development of children and young players, and so the stage at which individual players are currently learning. In such a model, the football learning process would take into account only the (defending and attacking) rules of football and would be tailored to the possibilities, potential and stage of learning the game that each player has achieved. Instead of focusing only on the game model and lumping everyone together, the learning model will take into account the player’s stage of development, and how many years of experience playing football he has. It will take into account what the player is able to learn at a given moment, as opposed to a uniform game model, which imposes in advance and assumes what the young player needs to learn. And that is a fundamental difference for the good of the individual and for developing the maximum use of the potential that talented youngsters possess. The learning model is also more conducive to the needs of individual children. The game model, in turn, satisfies mainly the ambitions of adults, and to a much lesser extent cares about the development of the individual young player’s potential.

The learning model would be based on three main stages:

1. The learning stage (something that players did not know before, or are just getting to know).
2. The training stage (something that players already know and have been training for some length of time).
3. The performance stage (knowledge gained and its application in training or match conditions).

Each stage would be based on the basic rules of football (individual and group attacking and defending and collectively as a team). In this way, having a large group of youngsters with high-level potential, we will not be lumping them together (one game model) but giving them a chance to develop at their own pace and adequately to the learning stage at which they have arrived.

They will also train and learn the game according to its basic rules. The learning model provides a better chance of maximum development of young players’ potential, because we are fully aware of what stage of learning football they are currently at. If we have eleven-year-old players and they are all lumped together in a uniform game model, then maybe they will have a good understanding of the game model, but not necessarily the game of football itself. The learning model for the same eleven-year-olds offers them the chance to learn and understand the basic rules of the game (defending and attacking) at the level and stage of learning which they have achieved at any given moment. The game model doesn’t guarantee that, because all players, without exception, must learn the game model, regardless of what stage of learning they are currently at. This makes football for youngsters once again lose talented players whose potential is not recognized or is ignored because they don’t fit or don’t meet the requirements of the game model that has been imposed on them. This is especially noticeable in children aged five to twelve. The game model rarely takes into account what they are learning at any given time. Together with the coaches, it dictates what they should learn. That is the fundamental difference. It doesn’t take into account at what stage of the learning process a young player finds himself.

The game model is nothing more than a predetermined program, the same for all (regardless of individual differences). Young players learn to play football in only one way. This leaves adaptability (so necessary in today's professional sport) at a very low level. Because a uniform game model doesn’t offer different possibilities adapted to what a real game of football looks like. Thanks to this, young players play and understand the game model in which they were raised, but don’t necessarily understand the game of football.

The game model is also the same game system for all age groups (the only difference being the format of games depending on age (more on this in Chapter 3: Coaches). Adult football involves various systems, settings and playing styles. So, what is the reason for everyone playing just one way in the academy of a professional club?

We usually hear the answer: because that's how the first team plays. Okay, but what happens when there’s a change of the first team’s coach and the new one usually has his own philosophy regarding the game?

The same system of playing for everyone means we treat youngsters as mini adults and again, the ambition of adults is more important than developing the potential of talented young players. I think it's clear that if everyone plays the same way, not every young player will realize his potential to become a professional footballer in the future. Here, again, I will refer and return to the profiling and recruiting of children and teenagers. Really, how can you judge that this or that ten-year-old fits a particular game and training model? He's only ten years old.

The academy’s program, the game model and finally the coaches lump young trainees together and directly force them to play only one way, the one that’s applied at a given academy. Nobody can tell me that the potential of these youngsters to learn and play football will develop to the maximum. The very structure and clearly defined framework of a predetermined game model preclude comprehensive development of young players and inhibit their creativity, curiosity, natural adaptability and unpredictability, which is so useful and necessary in today's football.

As Michel Bruyninckx says in an interview with Footblogball: "There is no uniform learning model or perfect technique to teach a player how he or she has to do it. He or she has to learn to explore their own potential by his or her unique body and brain organization".

The game model, therefore, doesn’t take into account their learning potential in terms of ability, performance and the individual needs of each player. Nor does it necessarily understand the learning process and its impact on a player's potential, since all players are forced to do the same. Everyone learns in a different way. The learning process is highly individualized to the needs of each individual. The very fact that academy programs impose in advance a specific game model suggests that they don’t necessarily know or understand how adolescents (children and teenagers) learn and how this affects development of their great potential to play sports at a high, master level, which you will read about in the next subsection.

**2.2. The negative effects of a uniform game model on the learning process and developing the potential of young players!**

Working at academy level with talented young players, I came to the conclusion that training programs, game models and all associated issues ignore the learning process of adolescents.

Dr. Martin Toms specialises in talent development and sports coaching and teaches at Birmingham University. In one interview, he has this to say about the learning process: "One thing we often forget about is the learning process, and in order to ensure that people learn properly we need to teach them appropriately. Children are all different, so we need to try and understand what their needs are in order to help their specific learning phase. We can’t treat all adolescents as the same and then teach them all in the same way – there are so many lessons from education that show this. If however we want to ignore an inclusive approach, then teaching the same thing in the same way to all children is fine – as long as you realise that any dropout is not likely to be the fault of the child…”

I think that analyzing and developing the thoughts of Dr. Martin Toms, we can say that football education has a lot in common with school education, but not necessarily in a positive sense. Early schooling and education in its entirety are based on an identical curriculum for all children. All children must learn the same thing regardless of their development and potential. Furthermore, all children are divided according to age, not according to their level, abilities and interests.

Looking at it from the perspective of a coach and teacher, academies have built a similar system of football education and are unlikely to draw any conclusions with regard to training and development from school education, which is completely isolated from the reality surrounding us, in the sense that it is totally ill adapted to the needs of the modern job market and the abilities that children will need in order to cope in their future adult life.

Generally, school is a good place in which to memorize information and gain analytical learning, but is not necessarily a desirable place when it comes to creativity, decision-making and teaching critical and independent thinking. Professional academies have in many aspects copied the school curriculum and called it a game model or training model. As far as children and adolescents are concerned, such a program doesn’t reflect the learning process and how young players assimilate information. It therefore seriously affects development of the potential inherent in the talented young trainees of the academies.

An identical game model for everyone has a negative effect on the development of potential in two main areas, namely:

1. The learning process.
2. Individual development.

Let's start by explaining the word "learning".

Mary Immorfino-Yang defines learning this way: "learning is dynamic, social and context-dependent because emotions are, and emotions form a critical piece of how, what, when and why people think, remember and learn".

To better understand the negative impact of an identical game model on potential, one also needs to know the definition of the "learning process". Ulrich Boser in his article: "The learning process and why it matters" (May 2020) writes that: "Learning as a process means that through method, effort, focus, and practice, we can get a lot better at gaining expertise".

In order to teach effectively, we need to really know the learning process. What's more, we must, all the time, look for information and continue to educate ourselves about how people learn, especially the young players with whom we come in contact every day. From my practical experience and observation of the professional academy environment, I can say that most coaches are well prepared, when it comes to strictly football knowledge. On the other hand, much is amiss in how coaches provide knowledge and apply it to young players. Poor education in this area and a lack of such knowledge in coaching courses means that we don’t fully understand the learning process and so will not be able to teach effectively.

A coach is, first and foremost, a teacher. Lack of this essential knowledge often leads to wrong or poor decisions, beginning with recruitment and ending with the expulsion of countless players from an academy’s program. The game model that’s identical for everyone is an example of misunderstanding the learning process in children and adolescents.

So how does it negatively affect the potential of talented young footballers? What solutions could help better manage the learning process and thus develop the potential of an academy's trainees?

Above all, the whole learning process is long-term and never-ending, because we learn all our lives. However, if we focus only on learning specific abilities in relation to a specific sport (in this case, football), then a long-term process exists only in theory. Because an academy’s program reduces and eliminates the way young players can learn at the very beginning of their career path. Imposing a specific structure of training organization and game model is a failure to take into account the individual and his cognitive-emotional and physical characteristics. Such a work model is suited only to a selected group of young players, but what about the rest of the players and their potential. For example, we reject the late maturing and focus only on the academy’s early maturing trainees, who already show specific physical parameters at early school age. Rarely or never is consideration given to who is a good student, and instead of focusing on good learners, coaches devote their attention to those who are physically stronger. Likewise, with regard to the physically stronger, no attention is paid to their learning process and just how they assimilate information. Everything is based on physical predispositions (which are important, but not the most essential).

A game and training model imposes on coaches and players alike predetermined learning behaviours, which are often predictable, instead of looking more broadly at how a given player learns, how he solves problems encountered on the pitch and finally at what stage of learning he is at any given moment.

So, if the game model dictates how to apply pressing in one specific way, then sure, young players will understand the concept of pressing in that game model. However, other versions of pressing and adapting to what an opponent is doing will be completely alien to them. An academy also loses a unique opportunity to see how players really learn and how their thought process works in the kind of conditions offered by a game as opposed to the game model.

In other words, players learn the game model, not the game itself. Thanks to this, we can’t talk about a long-term learning process, since each player must adapt his individual other abilities to one structured game form. This is a short-sighted process in which all the players, and not only those who just happen to fit the game model, are derived of the chance to fully develop their potential. Therefore, the solution could be to focus on and teach the game according to the game’s simple rules (attacking and defending), especially at the early-school and school level. Thanks to this, we would be able to see and observe much more detail. Young players would not be locked into a strict, regimented framework, but would learn to play football according to its simple rules. The rules of the game, or a program based only on them, would allow youngsters to develop their potential and abilities in more creative conditions.

A more creative environment would allow them to engage more in the learning process. As Mary Immorfinao-Yang mentioned, learning needs emotions in an environment that reflects the game. All young players differ from each other, have different experiences and grow up in different environments. All this has an impact on how they really learn. True, game models reflect the game, but only in one way, thanks to which they restrict the development of those young players who, due to their creative and unusual traits, want to play and solve problems in different ways, meaning those not favoured by a given model. Such players, although they have excellent potential, are expelled from the academy. Coaches take into account only the game and training model and on this basis evaluate their protégées’ achievements.

I appreciate that there have to be some basics that allow us to judge the progress of players. Nevertheless, we judge their progress in the game model, but don’t judge and evaluate the learning process as a whole.

Returning to the definition of learning and the learning process that I cited at the beginning, a game model may not necessarily engage the brain of adolescents, so that they actively participate in the learning process. Often a game model includes exercises that not only fail to inspire and engage adolescents to learn, but also fail to trigger any emotions. For example, if a ten-year-old has to run from one prop to another with no purpose, decision or emotional involvement, he won't learn effectively. It's just boring! Adolescents need to have a meaningful goal so that their learning process starts up at all and is then sustained long term.

I use the expression long term in the sense that a given academy will not only raise decent people, instil a love for football (former trainees may become coaches, referees, etc.) but also raise more professional players. Therefore, if we really must keep game models, let them be conducive to the learning process and adapted to the development of children and adolescents. They should take into account the potential of all talented players and not just a select few. Let them be more varied and teach players how to adapt to the game and its rules. There is no one way that can be the same for everyone, because everyone is different. That’s why a learning model, as opposed to a game model, based only and exclusively on the rules of the game can be a solution thanks to which we may possibly increase the number of academy students who become professional footballers.

The learning process needs emotions and motivation. In other words, young players have to be very interested in what they are learning and their brains have to be involved in the whole process. Of course, players who love football shouldn’t in theory have any problem with motivation. However, practice shows otherwise. Because especially young footballers need the learning process, in their case training sessions, to be fascinating and exciting.

So, if we force players to learn an identical game model, we aren’t necessarily meeting each player’s individual need to learn. Most game models focus on building the basics of technique based on exercises without an opponent. For young football trainees this is boring, there are no emotions involved, so motivation and commitment to the learning process is at a low level. In other words, players don’t learn effectively because they are not emotionally involved in the information that is being provided them during training. Nor will they remember that information, because the worst thing for the brain is boredom. Football is a game based on emotions, so training and the process of learning the game cannot take place without them.

In his theory of the learning process, Kolbe (1984) identified two types of learning:

1. Perception (the way we assimilate information).
2. Processing (how we use the information we receive).

In short, the learning process requires assimilating information through different experiences, thanks to which young players accumulate and remember the provided information in order to then use and adapt it to different situations in the game. For the learning process to be more effective, information should come from various sources that offer a variety of practical experiences.

Furthermore, this results in young players being able to use their creativity and adapt it to situations encountered on the pitch. So, taking into account Kolbe's model of the learning theory, we can argue that an identical game model applied to all players is less effective.

Its pitiful efficacy will mainly be seen in poor adaptation and creativity when learning the game, because if a game model offers the same information for everyone (perception – players assimilate only that information adequate for the game model), then youngsters will know how to use the knowledge and information they have received (processing), but only if they know the game model. If, on the other hand, an academy level opponent prefers a different style, different settings, etc., the same players will not be prepared for that, since their game model never required it. Revealed will be a lack of adaptation, creativity and a variety of ways to solve the problems that the opponent brings to the game.

How does that look in practice?

Well, if a game model is based on a 1-4-3-3 tactical system, then young players will know more or less what to do and how, for example: when, how and what type of pressing to apply. The problems start when an opponent plays differently, and the players have to accommodate and adapt to the new situation. In such a case, the players find themselves in a new environment, and the learning brain receives new information and knowledge that it didn’t possess before and so doesn’t know how to react and adapt to the new reality. Because the learning process needs time to assimilate and effectively use the new knowledge. In other words, time to solve a problem encountered on the pitch created by the opponent and not the game model.

In terms of learning, therefore, the game model prepares the thought process of the players from only one angle. Information will be derived from only one source. The conclusion is that academy players will learn a game model instead of an actual game and adaptation to the opponent and the conditions of the game. A separate issue is that during their ten-year professional career, players will have on average about seven to ten new coaches, each of whom prefers a different style, a different formation and a different game and training model. Academies don't prepare players for this, and perhaps that's another reason why most of them are expelled from academy programs too early, through no fault of their own.

Generally speaking, the whole learning process is about motivation, emotions and finally the knowledge and information needed in order to develop. For players to develop, we have to know them and how they learn (how they react to the learning process). There’s no happy medium or any great secret here. We learn when we have intrinsic motivation, which in turn engages the whole brain in the learning process. All this must include emotions.

And what about the individual approach to each child? Do current game models and the generally identical academy program for everyone really help in individual development?

The very fact that every child has to abandon its creativity, curiosity and natural ability to learn in favour of a game model imposed by academy coaches does little to help develop individual potential. Generally speaking, let's start with the fact that it is difficult to optimize the development of each player individually. That’s because if in the age category of, for example, U13 you have an average of sixteen players, then that number alone is already a challenge to positively bringing about the development of the individual. Added to that is the number of coaches at training and matches, which varies depending on the category of the academy. Nevertheless, it is not unusual for sessions to be conducted by only one coach. Despite all the available technology that most academies have to monitor the progress of players, one or even two coaches per group are not able to optimally ensure the individual development of each player. So already at the start, not every player will receive the same amount of support.

In my opinion, the role of the coach is to develop the player on and off the pitch, but above all to train. A lot of paperwork (EPPP regulations) means that coaches have little time for what their calling requires and they have prepared for, i.e. working with players on the pitch and helping in individual development. Let me cite another example from school education. There, too, the teacher deals with everything (paperwork imposed by the government) except what their calling involves, i.e. teaching. It is not only the students who suffer, but also the quality of education they receive. The same applies in academies (EPPP is needed, but in a more simple and friendly form for coaches), making it hard to focus only on developing players, i.e. what they love, are obligated and paid to do.

The individual development of each academy player is also closely related to the game model that applies in a given academy. To this end, each player has an individual development plan based largely on the model and training. This however, is less related to the personality of the young player, his psychological and social characteristics and what stage of learning he has currently achieved. This plan is extremely important because the decision about whether a player stays in the academy for the next season or is expelled is mainly based on how he fulfils the objectives of this plan during training and matches. The individual development plan is evaluated every six weeks, during meetings with the player and his parents. At these meetings, coaches evaluate the player's progress together with him, informing the parents and the trainee concerned about the progress so far made and the goals for the future and the rest of the season.

On the one hand, coaches have a basic program and information on which to base their conclusions about the development and progress of the player. However, evaluation based solely on a game model, training and performance instead of the learning process and potential, may not be effective and fail to reflect the abilities of young players.

It is also worth adding that the assessment of a young player is often the subjective view of the coach himself and those with whom he consults. Each of us is biased in some way and this bias can or rather most certainly affects the decisions we make regarding the adolescents in our care. If we are not too careful and if we are stubborn, our decisions may negatively affect the players, at which point they may end up expelled from the academy. This way of proceeding means that we lose more talented young players who could be in future playing professional level football.

An interesting solution is to assign individual challenges to each player. However, such challenges relate mainly to just one aspect of developing a player's potential, namely his technical and tactical skills. Children in the basic phase of learning the game have challenges related to playing with and without the ball. Throughout the season they are evaluated on this basis during training and matches by an academy’s training team. After each match, coaches are required to provide feedback to the players on how they fulfilled their individual challenges and tasks during the game. This has its advantages and downside when it comes to the development of the individual and his potential.

The advantage is that coaches monitor the progress of young players on an ongoing basis, observe their behaviour in terms of technical and tactical skills and how players apply them in relation to the individual development plan. The downside is that most of these plans fail to take into account the social and psychological abilities of the players. Rarely does such a plan take into account the stage of the learning process which a given player has achieved and personal abilities and qualities in a given age group. With regard to children, creativity and curiosity should always be developed and taken into account.

Another downside may be the fact that some academies don’t establish a plan for individual development with the player himself, though this is an integral and fundamental part of such a process of assessing the progress of young players. It is also worth considering whether there’s really any sense in assessing the progress of children and adolescents and reviewing their performance at this age. It's hard for me to understand what can be learnt from a review of the performance of a ten-year-old child, who plays football because he really enjoys it, loves it and above all wants to be with his friends. Are we again focusing on the performance instead of the potential of gifted youngsters and what learning abilities they possess?

My practical experience, and conclusions from performance reviews with children and their parents, are that young players are very stressed and can rarely be themselves in the presence of so many adults. This negative stress is the result of our treating adolescents as if they were in school, with the difference that here there are no learning results, only performance reviews. Especially the youngest trainees aged nine to eleven don’t understand this procedure conducted for them by adults. After all, generally we are here to enjoy the possibility of playing football. All the enthusiasm shown by adolescents completely evaporates. This complicated and complex process is difficult for children to grasp.

Instead of feedback that is easy to understand and appropriate for their age and learning needs, young players are bombarded with a whole lot of information that they simply can’t comprehend. Again, in this case, we can compare it to the school system. There too, students have meetings throughout the year regarding their term-time results. Unfortunately, this is very ineffective and doesn’t develop a student's potential (in the player's academy). That’s because schools focus on standardized tests and programs that are completely unsuited to the learning needs of adolescents and the learning process itself. Schools and professional academies have a common feature, namely they test knowledge as opposed to learning and progress in the learning process.

The result is that by the time adolescents finish school, they have lost what is left of their creativity and decision-making skills, they believe that mistakes and failures are not good, and in general they are not taught any life skills. This means that adolescents lack the ability to think critically and independently. Since the school system in this form is not effective and frankly fails in its educational role, why do professional academies duplicate it in many aspects?

Perhaps because it is not easy to develop the potential of each player based on his cognitive, emotional, physical abilities, etc. It is much easier to control the learning process and lump everyone together in a game model. In this way, young players cannot satisfy their needs to the maximum, are limited and have to adapt to what the game model presents. In this case, only the coaches (and in a school the governing board and teachers) decide what the youngsters will learn. This not necessarily takes into account the learning potential and the learning process itself of children and adolescents who are in the academy of a professional club. Such an environment favours only some young players. Most of them don’t obtain any long-term benefits, because their potential is not fully exploited. So, returning to that figure of 0.0001%, what about the rest of the talented youngsters? Such a way of conducting selection, based on a single game model, where everything is decided by adults, cannot be conducive to the development of potential and thus a greater number of professional footballers graduating from academies. Strict profiling, early selection, early specialization, a one-size-fits-all game model and finally, coaches who control what children and adolescents are to learn minimize football playing potential. In this case, there can be no talk of individual development and its support. Nor do young players have any time to fully show and develop their individual potential. The pressure from the academy, coaches and parents doesn't allow for it. If we don’t take into account the need for socially oriented learning in children and adolescents, we can hardly talk about a governing individual development plan for a particular player. Academies and their programs strive too rapidly for children's and adolescents’ sport to become fully professional.

For what purpose?

Only for the sake of their egos, so that later they can boast and loudly proclaim that this or that player is a graduate of their academy?

That is indeed one thing to boast about (more on this in the next chapter – training and trainers). I think that elite professionalization of sport should start around the age of seventeen to twenty-two and for a simple reason, no earlier: development of players' potential is affected by physical and psychological changes, so this is not the right time to judge who will become a professional footballer.

So, what other solutions can there be, ones more child-friendly and thus helpful in developing their abilities and individual learning potential?

In the youngest age category, we should allow children to discover the game of football by supporting their creativity, curiosity and focusing only on the development of their individual technical and tactical skills. This could be in the form of an individual development plan based on the rules of the game, the learning process, the learning stage players have achieved and their needs at this age. Furthermore, the learning process is supported not so much by a highly professional structure but rather the very skeleton of the structure, in which individual learning needs are the basis for development of players' potential. Because football is not mechanical, and certainly is not based on mechanically learning how it is played. On the contrary, it is a game in which emotions, creativity, adaptation, decision-making and the soft abilities of the players play an enormous role.

By the way, it is interesting to note that professional academies mostly teach young players in a mechanical rather than a more balanced way. We are talking here about the balance between analytical abilities to remember information and cognitive abilities to process the same information in game conditions. Unbalanced professionalization of children's and adolescents’ football leads to negative consequences. One of them is to neutralize and minimize the learning potential of players in favour of too much disciplinary control over what and how players learn. When we try to look at this process through the eyes of the child, or put ourselves in his shoes, we realize that we are underestimating the learning process and that children are supposed to learn without us and our overkill control! This is not conducive to having fun, which the game of football and learning its rules should be for young players.

An individual development plan for each player doesn’t consider soft skills, and their importance for the further career of young players, to the same extent as hard skills. Hard skills are needed, but developing the potential of gifted children cannot take place without observation, identification and development of soft skills. I understand that hard skills are easier to see and evaluate than soft skills. However, if we accept and understand that the whole learning process is a long-term undertaking, it will be easier for us to note and assess the soft skills of players. However, this cannot be done under time pressure and is much more difficult during just six weeks of observation. The learning process doesn’t come to an end in six weeks – it continues long-term. All the more so, our assessment of potential based on six weeks, an individual plan and performance adapted to the game model, and less to the needs of the player will not be reliable, but largely subjective. Rarely during my work in the academy did I see coaches take into account how a young player develops soft skills. Decision-making is a soft skill.

On this basis, we can determine whether a player draws the appropriate conclusions from decisions made? Do his decisions improve? Does he later make a better decision in an identical situation? Generally, how does he understand the game?

But too often coaches, in the evaluation of performance, have focused on the technique of passing, dribbling with the ball, etc., these being hard skills. Less important was how a pass was used, in what space it was made and whether the young player draws conclusions from this action (the learning process). In other words, the individual development plan for a given player could be more effective if it focused on the learning process and combining soft and hard skills instead of separating them.

Example:

The individual development plan:

A task with the ball: What kind of passes can you use in match situations and what kind of technique will you use to make that pass? (the learning process and adaptation to match conditions)

Playing high level football requires hard and soft skills. Players use them at the same time while playing and when solving situations encountered on the pitch. Skills create a connected system, from which a player chooses the best possible solution (hard skill – the kind of technique, soft skill – the kind of pass). That is why it is best for the individual plan of the player’s development to focus to the same degree on soft and hard skills. Thanks to this, we will be better able to assess the development and learning stage at which a given young football trainee has currently arrived.

**The lesson taught by Chapter Two**

The same game model applied to all young players leads to everyone being treated the same, with them learning the game model instead of playing football according to its basic rules. Such an identical model reduces the creative capabilities of young players and significantly reduces their individual potential.

Adaptation is a basic human ability. It is also one of the most important qualities in professional footballers. An identical game model not only fails to promote adaptation to different match conditions, but significantly limits such an ability by forcing children and adolescents to learn the game in only one way, in accordance with an academy’s program.

Another solution is to replace game models with a normal learning model, where players will learn the game and its basic rules. The learning model will be more player friendly due to an understanding of the learning process. It will take into account what stage of learning the game the player has currently arrived at. Because it’s a long-term process, patience and observation will ensure an adequate individual plan for developing the potential of a young player. Such a plan will be tailored to the player’s learning needs. It will also take into account hard and soft skills in equal measure. Development of potential in these areas will be closer to the optimum.

**Chapter 3: Training and Coaches**

Street games develop children's potential in a freer, more enthusiastic and independent way. When I was a child, I spent a lot of free time with my peers just playing football on the street. I have already mentioned South America (Brazil, Argentina), where adolescents are passionate about playing in the street from dawn to dusk. To a large extent, this has a positive impact on the development of potential and the fact that Brazil is the source of the largest number of professional footballers in the world. Of course, times have changed. Computers, smartphones and digital technology in general have meant that far fewer youngsters are involved in any physical activity, not to mention practicing it on the street or in the park. Street games have been replaced by computer games.

According to a UK Government study (2021-MVPA vs FMS Study 2018) children should receive a minimum of sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Unfortunately, according to this same research, only 48.6% of children meet these criteria! And the same study found that during ordinary playtime at school and during team games, children receive more MVPA (moderate to vigorous physical activities) than during physical education classes or games played individually. Another interesting fact revealed by the study is that the difference in fundamental motor skills (FMS) between children from the UK and China is: 35-38% for the UK and 83-87% for China (in ten-year-olds).

From this research we can conclude that children in Wales and England (where the study was conducted) play sports only during organized and highly structured sports training in clubs established for this purpose. Another conclusion is that team games and ordinary play during breaks between lessons at school provide youngsters more fun and perhaps that's why their physical activity increases. During this time, children have more freedom, they make their own decisions, set their own rules, learn to adapt themselves, and develop the soft as well as hard skills that were mentioned in the previous chapter.

Since it cannot be denied that street games have practically ceased to exist, professional academies find they have to recruit a whole army of coaches qualified in motor methodology, basic motor skills and sports science. They do so in order to minimize the effects of declining motor activity in children and adolescents and eliminate bad motor habits. However, this doesn’t necessarily have a positive impact on developing the potential of talented young players. The effect of such highly professionalized training and structure is children losing valuable time that could be better spent playing football and thus not only increasing their physical activity, but also improving their skills.

It would seem that the academies are, to some extent, trying to recreate street games, where the youngest children will be able to develop their mental and emotional potential. Training will therefore appropriately stimulate both cerebral hemispheres, the (thinking) one that’s responsible for our basic needs and decisions and the other (emotional) one related to feelings and memory. This chapter will be about training, its various types and whether it actually develops learning potential to the extent it should. It will also be about ourselves, i.e. coaches. The issue here is whether the academy system allows coaches to properly develop the skills of children and adolescents to such an extent that they can fully realize their extraordinary potential to play football.

**3.1 Is training really a reflection of how young players and their brains learn?**

Children with a talent for football have unlimited potential for personal and football related development. Therefore, to develop this extraordinary potential, it is necessary to know the basic learning needs of players. Knowledge about the learning process, how children and adolescents and their brains learn is needed to effectively teach how to play football. Quoting the words of the great American basketball coach John Wooden "A coach is first and foremost a teacher", it can’t be denied that a coach who doesn’t understand the learning process and the resulting needs of his players will not be able to get the maximum out of their potential.

Having worked in this wonderful profession for over twenty years, almost ten of which were spent as a coach of youth groups at academy level, I believe that training fails to reflect how young players assimilate knowledge. This has a negative impact on the development of talented children and the great opportunities they have that predispose them to play football. This gap is currently being filled to some extent. Coaches attending educational courses to gain the highest qualifications in youth football are now being provided more socio-psychological knowledge. As a result, they are more aware that training should consider the entire learning process, thanks to which their work can reflect players’ learning needs. Practice shows however that the results vary. Training that doesn’t take into account the learning process and how the young brain assimilates knowledge will be less effective and will reduce a player’s potential instead of increasing it.

In his excellent article: "The Art of Street Soccer", Darren Lovern writes that the brain consists of two hemispheres: the left and right. The left (thinking) side is responsible for our basic needs and decision making. The right (emotional) side concerns our feelings and emotions. The emotional side is also responsible for the learning process through emotions and direct experiences with the environment. The thinking side, on the other hand, is involved in a conscious learning process, where we focus on one specific thing. It can therefore be assumed that optimal training, which develops the potential of players, is one that stimulates both hemispheres of the brain and not just one!

Optimal training also constitutes an increase in the optimal potential to learn. For decades, football training has been conducted in parts and in a more isolated form. Although trends are now changing (because we know more and more about the learning process itself and the brain and how it learns), in professional academies the training of children and adolescents is largely conducted in an isolated form. In the case of some players, there exists a place for this form of training. Where some need to improve a given technical aspect, training in an isolated form with a lot of repetitions will actually improve the technique of those players who need such an approach. In academies however, everyone is lumped together, regardless of whether certain individuals need to improve their technique or not.

All this applies to game patterns (which apply in each game model). For the sake of the game model and game patterns, we impose on all players, without exception, an isolated form of training session in which we involve only the one (thinking) side of the brain. Such training means that a player can indeed improve his technique, but he will not make any decisions. Such training will be totally devoid of emotions. The emotional side of the brain will be completely switched off. And yet a football match is about emotions and making decisions!

The potential of young players will not be developed in a balanced way, because their learning process will not actively stimulate the entire brain, only one part of it. Children who must follow game patterns in an isolated form don’t smile and don’t find any pleasure in training for the sport they love. And since they don't enjoy the training, there's no emotional involvement. By not getting emotionally and cognitively involved, young players simply don't learn. Training is boring and their brain is not at all interested in it. They do exercises only because they have to, not because they want to. All the fun is gone, so the training later has no impact on a match, for the simple reason that in an actual game, it’s the opponent who determines what you do on the pitch, and not game patterns.

In his book: "The Winning Mindset – What Sport Can teach Us About Great Leadership" (p129), Professor Damian Hughes presents some basic information about the brain. For instance, the brain is made up of 100 trillion cells, each of which is connected to 10,000 other cells. The whole network consists of 1 quadrillion (1.000.000.000.000) connections that control everything we do. This information and knowledge, although only basic, allows one to imagine just how complicated the learning process is.

How is this basic knowledge concerning the brain linked to playing football?

Football is all about emotions, as I mentioned earlier. Football is also twebty-two people chasing after one ball. The game requires making numerous decisions, and adaptation to various situations encountered on the pitch. During a game, our brain not only generates countless amounts of information and processes it in countless old (knowledge that we possess) and new neurological connections (knowledge that we are just assimilating). The whole process means that we are unable to remember all this information. A player will likewise not be able to process it all, because our brain doesn’t learn in this way.

This is confirmed by research carried out by psychologist Georg Miller: "The Magical Number seven, Plus or minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information" (1956). He writes that someone with a short memory is only capable of memorizing from five to nine very small and short bits of information. Therefore, a person cannot focus on two things at the same time or information flowing simultaneously from two different sources. As a result, to learn something and for the learning process and assimilation of information to be effective, the brain focuses on only one thing.

Now let's look at that from the perspective of football training. If a coach transmits information non-stop (see training in an isolated form), frequently interrupts classes and issues instructions, training cannot be effective from the point of view of the learning process and the learning brain. Training is the conscious transfer of knowledge and will involve young players assimilating information in a similar fashion. Only the left (thinking) side of the brain will be involved. But because the information will be a lot and frequently transmitted, it will tend to overload young players’ brains. Young players will have to think too much and over-analyze the information flowing to them. Excessive analysis, too much information and a lack of emotion in the learning process means that the training will not have a positive effect on developing the potential of children and adolescents. Training will not be effective and adequate with regard to how the brain learns. The development of players' potential will be inhibited. The number of mistakes they make will be closely related to the amount of information the brain receives. And players will not learn from these mistakes, because they will be a direct consequence of the brain overheating.

So what should the training look like so that young players learn effectively?

Academies recruit and employ coaches who are highly qualified in terms of knowledge about football. They pay less attention to whether that person understands the learning process and is competent when it comes to the development of children and adolescents. In short (perhaps simplifying this somewhat) if he has an UEFA A license, that already suggests he’s an excellent coach for working with children and youth.

Unfortunately, in many cases this works in the opposite direction, because coaches with a UEFA A license often don’t have the appropriate skills and knowledge about the children with whom he will work. He, therefore, to a large extent uses training based on game patterns. A lot of information, a lot of isolation, zero emotions and a lack of opponents means that the young player is not emotionally involved in the learning process and therefore doesn’t develop his potential in an optimal way. Therefore, taking into account the realism of playing football and all the information that I have quoted here, training in academies should stimulate both hemispheres of the brain. The training plan and design should contain only the most relevant information for the learning process (the thinking side of the brain). It should focus largely on the emotional zone, i.e. the feelings, emotions, instinct and intuition of young players. Then a small but important amount of information combined with emotions, i.e. playing during training, engages both hemispheres of the brain and will ensure the brain learns. Players will also be emotionally involved in the learning process itself and will unconsciously be learning. This will have a positive impact on the development of their potential and individual learning abilities.

Academy coaches often have their own theories about training, which is frequently based not on how a person and his brain learn, but on a game model. Therefore, they often defend these ideas and believe that a young player cannot play football if he doesn’t have the right technique and the skills to manage that technique during a game.

True, but here too there’s a problem.

Technique and skill are two different things. Pure technique, for example, is passing the ball using the inner part of the foot. Skill, on the other hand, is the use of this technique in match conditions consistent with the situation encountered on the pitch in which the player finds himself.

So, if a young player practices game patterns for hours, he isn’t engaging in the learning process. The moment he finds himself in a situation on the pitch during a game, where he must make decisions, be creative and use the right skills, he will get confused. The emotional side of his brain was involved to only a small extent or not at all during training. The player's brain will not be able to recognize the stimuli and the information coming from the situation in which he finds himself. Inevitably, he will have difficulty in choosing the right technique to solve the problem the opponent is creating.

Training and coaches reverse the learning process and teach in the opposite way to how the brain assimilates information and what it looks like to play football. A way of training and teaching, where coaches encourage players to think about what they do and how they do it will be ineffective from the point of view of learning skills, not just technique. Instead, creating an optimal environment where players will also feel, touch, and get excited about developing their skills, will engage their brains.

An emotionally engaged player is a learning player, even if this process occurs unconsciously. Playing football stimulates both hemispheres, so training cannot take place without involving both of them; otherwise, it will be ineffective also from the point of view of the learning process and developing the potential of talented young players.

As sports psychologist and performance coach Simon Hartley says: **“We should strive to create a learning environment where our brain’s need for challenge meets its search for meaning”**. Another great field hockey coach, Danny Kerry, draws attention to the context of the learning process and training and the benefits of this for developing the potential of young players: **“I don’t believe in a cause and effect, mechanistic type of coaching, where if you do this, this will happen. The context is always changing, the opposition is changing, and even the nature of the sport is changing. There is an incredibly complex set of variables within a team sport context”**

Optimal training will stimulate the thinking and emotional side of the brain. Creating a training environment in which young players are emotionally involved in the process of assimilating information fio and not mere mechanical repetition will foster the development of their potential. Players will be interested in training and will have intrinsic motivation to learn. The learning process will be more relevant to the needs of children and adolescents, as it will be conducted in the context of a game. It will also be enjoyable, because what brings the most joy to all young players is simply playing football itself.

The selection of intelligent game tasks and limitations conducive to individual development, learning needs and ones that are brain friendly will have a positive impact on systematically increasing the potential of talented players. Such a training regimen and environment will also foster such traits as creativity, and intuitive and unpredictable behaviour in young players. We coaches, observing the learning process in such an environment, will be able to see how the players assimilate information. Likewise, how they solve a similar problem encountered on the pitch. We’ll see whether they are good students and how they adapt to the conditions and various situations encountered on the pitch. We will get to observe character traits that we are unable to see during mechanical control and our telling players all the time what to do and how to behave. The thinking side of the brain analyzes; on the other hand, the emotional side is responsible for instinctive action. That’s why both sides in combination, stimulated during training will raise the potential of players to a higher level and meet their individual needs.

Returning to Danny Kerry’s quoted remarks, mechanical training, which offers a lot of information and forces players to think too much and analyze everything is not conducive to their individual needs. Well, everyone develops in a different way, some faster, others slower in every area. It is no different with our neurological system and assimilation of information.

Every young player needs autonomy and to be able to solve problems in different ways using various techniques. It is sufficient to cite the example of small children and how they learn to walk. Not every toddler learns the same and in an identical fashion. Their neurological systems assimilate information in different ways, which is why their learning the same activity varies. It's the same with young players. Each of them is different, performs differently a given technical element conducive to their biological development and a player’s stage of learning at a given moment. Therefore, training and the game model force young players to behave in the same way, regardless of their individual differences, as well as those occurring in the neurological system. That’s why the same game model, and the ensuing training, is not an optimal solution for the football learning process in children and adolescents. I can't understand how every player can be expected to fulfil and develop his potential in identical game models and training. He fails to develop and that's another reason why we don't have more professional players graduating from academies.

The programs of professional academies need to consider other solutions in view of the fact that an identical training and game model is not the best solution for developing young talented players. Take, for example, two ten-year-old players. Each of them has different needs. Their neurological development is not at the same stage. Their brains and number of neural connections, and thus their experience and knowledge of the game of football will also be different.

So, does it make sense to teach everyone in an identical way (mechanical training, game patterns)?

In terms of the game itself and learning, I have my doubts. There is no such thing as what coaches call a "perfect technique". The technique of passing the ball will be different for each player and each will pass in a different way, closely according to the stage of neurological development the player and his brain have arrived at, what he has remembered and retained in his short memory and what he can retrieve from deep memory.

This will also be due to the different number of neural connections in his brain that create new knowledge and habits. Isolated training, therefore, has its place but should be used selectively, for those who need it most. Training in the context of the game is more conducive and accords with development of potential. It's not about throwing the ball and playing! It is about choosing intelligent tasks that are conducive to the individual development of players. This is possible by using small games and having the right proportion of coaches to players in sessions.

Another benefit of such training is that it stimulates both cerebral hemispheres of the brain. The learning process is active, not passive. Players are participants in this process, not just passive recipients of information. In addition are the benefits obtained from making mistakes and their consequences. Such a consequence may be, for example, a goal conceded. Players learn by drawing conclusions, sometimes with the help of coaches, sometimes without. During training in which a child does something mechanically and makes a mistake, there are no consequences, since there is no opponent. In general, therefore, he isn’t able to draw conclusions and doesn’t learn anything. The learning process is greatly minimized, even marginal.

To sum up, a football learning program based on an identical game model is not the optimal solution for developing the potential of talented young footballers. When the applied training is based on the same game model and often used in an isolated form, it is not necessarily friendly to the learning brains of children and adolescents. Coaches are also restricted by such a structure and cannot fully achieve their potential. This adversely affects the players they work with.

Generally speaking, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that most professional academy programs are not built to meet the learning needs of children and adolescents. Rather they are, to a large degree, tailored to satisfy the ego and ambition of the adults working in this environment. Based on my own experience, and years working in this profession, I concluded that there are clear differences between how young players learn and how professional academies and their programs operate. These differences cause the sport to lose a lot of talented children, just because they don’t fit into a program and game model entirely prepared by adults. This is another and significant reason why academies don’t produce more professional level players.

Scientific research also shows that active participation in the learning process is the optimal solution. Active in the sense of being an active participant in decision-making, problem solving, and emotional involvement in what one is doing and learning. Optimal in the autonomous sense, i.e. being responsible for one’s learning process, and not being merely the recipient of this process. In the scientific article, "The Value of Indirect Teaching Strategies in Enhancing Student-Coaches' Learning Engagement" (Journal of Sports Science and Medicine (2015) 14, 657-668), the authors came to the following conclusions:

1. Active participation in the learning process, where students are active participants, has a positive effect on self-confidence, increases intrinsic motivation and arouses enthusiasm.
2. It increases responsibility for learning, decision-making and problem solving.
3. Has a positive effect by increasing learning autonomy.
4. It draws attention to the need to construct practical learning situations consistent with the environment in which this learning takes place.

If we now refer this to the current football programs for children and youth in the academies of professional clubs, it is worth considering increasing those training methods that most closely reflect the game. Creating practical and real situations on the pitch will allow players to learn in the most optimal conditions representing a real football match. A training method based on small games and situations met with on the pitch, which most often repeat themselves in the game, will allow players to become emotionally engaged and make decisions and solve problems at the same time. Young players will be interested because they will be participating in the game. They will therefore be more willing to learn and take responsibility for the learning process and developing their potential. The isolated method, without an opponent, doesn’t solve any of the conclusions resulting from these studies. True, it is necessary, but should be selectively applied for those young players who may need this type of training. Of course, every scientific study has its limitations. Nevertheless, the conclusions show that we can try to take such a path, but it should be clearly noted that this is not the only way. Studies can be a good and reliable indication of what can be done differently to increase learning potential.

Coaches, and their training methods, are often a reflection of the environment in which they work. Bearing in mind the strict, regimented structure and within it the game model in force, coaches must closely follow all guidelines. They don’t therefore necessarily meet the learning needs of young players so much as the needs of the game model and current training methods.

In the scientific article: Successful Talent Development in Soccer: The Characteristics of the Environment (Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology, published in the American Psychological Association 2013, Vol. 2, No. 3, 190–206), the authors cite the characteristics and advantages of the ATDE environment (the Athletic Talent Development Environment), in which athletes playing football professionally can be more successfully trained:

1. Emphasis on age-appropriate individual potential development rather than focusing on the success of a given age group.
2. Promotion of optimal development of the individual player, along with promotion and implementation of a flexible program tailored to the individual learning needs of talented young players.
3. Training based on diversification (a variety of methods).
4. Training groups with relationships that support players.
5. Clear communication and connections with the professional club’s first team (sharing knowledge, offering support for professional and individual development).

The research was carried out in the Danish club AGF Arhaus, which in the years 2007-2009 trained some fifteen to twenty-five players playing at the highest professional level, seven of which came from the club’s academy.

So, what makes this club different from others when it comes to developing the potential of young players:

1. Developing players in terms of their football skills, but also high educational standards and attention paid to the comprehensive development of players as individuals,
2. Recruitment to the academy no earlier than at the age of thirteen, and full specialization only at the age of fifteen.
3. Training sessions focused on the learning process and an individual approach to each player (an individual development plan discussed before, during and after each training session).
4. Each week, players train with players at the same, weaker or higher skill level
5. Recruitment of players perhaps less talented in terms of football but with appropriate characteristics and soft skills for hard work.
6. Focus on the development of individual characteristics such as: self-awareness, self-organization, social and psychological skills, learning and performance management, and the setting of goals.
7. Team play, tactics and learning the skills of playing in a team only at the age of seventeen – players responsible and included in the process of preparing for matches, tactics and discussion of tactical elements and tactical situations the day before a match.

The authors of this scientific article also made reference to what can be improved in such an environment. Namely, better communication and support and complementation between the academy and the first team will help young players to better adaptation and recovery from the potential cultural shock of their transition from the academy to senior professional football. Currently, this cooperation is quite far from ideal. Young players aren’t given opportunities to practically experience training in the first professional team of a given club more often than just occasionally or else not at all. Often such first experiences are gained when they are on loan to other clubs with a completely different culture, style of play, training model, etc. So, it often happens that they cannot get selected to a team and play professionally. This is related to poor psychological preparation of young players. This is all about acquiring and learning the skills to cope with the stress and pressure of moving from an academy to a senior professional team. If an academy doesn't offer enough opportunities, we can't blame the young players for not being able to deal with such a transition. After all, no one prepared them for it in the right way, consistent with their potential.

It should be clearly noted that research does not constitute some set of rules to be adhered to or even followed. They are only intended to present information and conclusions from which we can learn something and that can be implemented in the current programs of professional academies.

At present, coaches focus too often on the success of a given age group. In practice, this is often at the expense of developing individual potential. Local, domestic and foreign tournaments are a good example here. Usually, teams are selected in such a way that one consists of better players and the other of weaker players (according to the bias of the coaches). During my ten years of work in this field, I had the opportunity to participate in many tournaments. However, the distribution of players was not chosen for the sake of their development, but to win the tournament. There is nothing wrong with winning and young players always play to win, and the role of coaches is to help them in this, but not at the expense of individual development and the learning process. Another example is the selection of players for a foreign tournament. Usually the weaker players (according to the bias of the coaches) stay home. This shows that focusing on the success of the age group is very much the ambition of coaches and sometimes their superiors. Obviously winning a tournament at the age of eleven is super and the youngsters have a lot of fun. However, this has no bearing on whether or not the players who won the tournament later become professional footballers.

**3.2. Training models, types of training and their impact on the individual learning potential of young players**

Every type of training applied by coaches will have a positive or negative impact on the individual development and learning potential of players. The measures that the coach chooses to apply in the current game and training model can increase or reduce the individual development of players' potential.

Technical and tactical training models differ from each other depending on the game model used in a given academy. They also differ in terms of the coach’s practical experience. They do, however, have one thing in common: all are used in accordance with the current game model, which doesn’t always mean for the good of the individual (development of individual potential).

The research project report: “An analysis of practice activities in youth football including coach and player perceptions” (Liverpool John Moores University) presents training forms and those of them that can have a more positive impact on learning new skills and the development of talented young players. The authors of that report came to the following conclusions:

1. The form of the game has a more positive effect on the acquisition of skills and their use during matches than a strict, regimented form. Young players are actively involved in making decisions and solving problems encountered on the pitch.
2. Although the games form is likely to have a better impact on the acquisition and use of skills, on average as much as 40% of training sessions took place in a strict, regimented form.
3. When choosing the type of training and its measures, coaches must better understand what impact the chosen form of training will have on the acquisition of skills, their use in match conditions and the development of a player’s technical and tactical potential.

From my own experience, and years of work at academy level, training in the form of games is more conducive to development of the youngest football trainees. Although the type of training used in academies is more balanced, a strict, regimented form is still used in every age group. A regimented, isolated and selectively applied form is needed for those young players who so require it. The academy community lumps everyone together on the same merry-go-round, regardless of whether a ten-year-old needs it or not. This makes it difficult for many young players to understand situations on the pitch and the game in general, especially from an individual point of view. If a player doesn’t understand individually, he will have more trouble understanding team play at a later stage of the football learning process. The time devoted to individual development and training that fosters this development is minimal. Most coaches focus on the team as early as the training of his youngest players. True, an individual development plan is assigned each player, but that is largely inconsistent with the level and stage of learning which the young player has currently achieved. What’s more, it is often inconsistent with the learning needs of young players and more in line with an academy’s game model and program. Furthermore, the player is often merely the recipient of this individual plan and not an active participant in it.

Coaches create individual plans, rarely asking for the opinion of the players themselves. They are also marginalized during training, as well as the match itself. Coaches focus more on team tactics, the game model and the success of the team as a whole and devote less attention to development of an individual's potential. However, this is hardly surprising, since even in the first, i.e. the highest category, there is often only one coach for on average fourteen players during training sessions, especially in the most important learning stage, for those aged six to twelve. In such a ratio of coach to players it is very difficult to observe and develop individual potential.

Also, the number of training sessions devoted to individual development is considerably less than the number devoted to group tactics. An ECA (European Club Association) report on youth academies in Europe presents the number of group and individual training sessions. Take, for example, the twelve-year-old age group. This has group training sessions three times a week and individual training only once, lasting an average of thirty minutes. When I was working with young U11 players, they had only one training session for individual development and most often in a regimented, isolated form. The training took place in groups of three to four players. Each group had one coach. Each training session was adapted to the individual development plan of each player. Taking into account the average duration of the session and its form and frequency, its effectiveness and impact on the development of individual potential could not be much.

In addition, the individual player development plan focused mainly on repeating and improving technical qualities. Rarely or not at all did this take into account the player as a whole, i.e. developing his needs in social, psychological and physical terms. For example, the development plan for individual player A when he is with the ball is: "Range of pass". His training will therefore be based on the repeatability of passing the ball various distances from point A to point B. Such training may improve the technique of passing, but the player will have a big problem concerning what type of pass to use in an actual match.

From my own practical experience, I believe that young players have a serious problem with the application of the technique in game conditions. Because on average they spend thirty minutes passing the ball without an opponent in conditions that completely fail to reflect an actual game. And yet during a game, although coaches expect the same player to make better decisions – one completely excludes the other. In addition, coaches often intervene and overly instruct young players, which has a negative effect on their development and individual learning process.

The authors of the article: "Differences between tactical/technical models of coaching and experience on the instructions given by youth soccer coaches during competition" (25 March 2014) show how coaches behave in two different training models. This concerns how instructions and providing information to players are handled and their impact on the development of individual potential. The environment in which the coach operates has an impact on how he behaves and his interaction with young players.

Also important is the experience that each coach possesses and how he communicates with adolescents, thus directly affecting their development.

The first model is the TAM (Tactical Approach Model). In this model, the player is an active participant in the learning, decision-making and problem-solving process. The learning process is based on situations encountered on the pitch in the context of an actual game of football. Players are more responsible for their learning process, and the coach prepares a training project based on intelligent tasks that the players will try to solve themselves.

The second model is the TEM (Technical Approach Model) based largely on direct transmission of information by the coach, who often instructs the players, thus depriving them of the chance to independently make decisions. Thus, TEM type individual training is based on an individual player development plan lasting an average of thirty minutes, taking place in a strict, regimented form, where coaches decide where the player must pass the ball, run, etc. In this model, a player’s motivation is at a low point, as no emotions are generated. Where there is no emotion, the learning process is also at a low level. The brains of players are rarely involved in what they do. The reflexes are such that the players will not think independently during a match, nor make decisions on their own. They will always look to the coach on the bench. In this case, the training model has a negative impact on the development of talented young footballers’ learning potential. Their cognitive-emotional and social potential will not be developed at all. This model also has a negative impact on the learning behaviour of the players themselves. Coaches often call out instructions and interrupt sessions when players make mistakes. During a match, young players are paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes and often look towards the bench to see what the coach’s reaction will be.

The Tactical Approach Model (TAM) is more conducive to the learning process of players. Training in this model will be based on small games, and situations encountered in playing football on the pitch. Players will be motivated and be active participants in the learning process. Coaches will intervene and issue instructions only when this adds something to the individual development of young players. Less intervention will be the result of the coach’s experience and the preparation of such a training project that will directly give players feedback. This will mean fewer demonstrations, instructions and interventions in the learning process of young footballers.

The conclusion is that the model in which the coach operates has a direct impact on his behaviour and interaction with the players. The amount of interventions and information contained in the instructions to players has an impact on their motivation to learn. Therefore, fewer interventions and a decision-based model can increase the individual potential of players and their involvement in the learning process. This will have a positive impact on improving the learning process and its effectiveness. An intrinsically motivated young player whose brain is emotionally involved in what he is learning is more likely to take the next steps in developing his potential to play at a high level.

To summarise this line of thought, if a coach has to constantly issue instructions to young players during a match, he does the same during training, not noticing that in doing so he is depriving his protégée of the chance to make independent decisions and reducing their joy of the game. A player who is dependent on the coach and unable to adapt to different situations will inevitably have a very hard time becoming a professional footballer. Therefore, training based on the TEM training model is not necessarily conducive to the development of talent in young players. It locks them in a strict, regimented framework in which young players suffocate and their learning process is very limited. This is based on the principle that it is more effective for the learners to see and understand the effects of the movements, passes and kicking, than to focus on a particular pattern of movement (Hodges, Hayes, Eaves, Horn, & Wiliams, 2004).

**3.3. How to correct negligence regarding individual development of potential in academy players resulting from the training process**

The system of professional academies must have a plan for the individual development of players in each age group. This is a step in the right direction, as it forces the academy to focus more on individual development. Such a plan is monitored by the academy throughout the season. It is also discussed with the players during meetings regarding the players’ progress. A player has a clearly defined plan and tasks regarding technical and tactical skills. Less attention is paid to social-psychological skills. Such a plan is usually laid down at the beginning of the season by the coaches of the various age categories and includes various challenges and tasks that the player will have to execute and develop.

Working with players over a complete season, I knew their individual development plan. Observing them during matches and training sessions, I often concluded that the plan of a given player didn’t reflect his learning needs, or the stage of learning, which he had achieved. Also, the selection of tasks related to technical-tactical skills, in many cases, did not reflect the player’s strengths and focused only on his weak points.

It may be worth considering a solution in which a player’s individual development plan is prepared only after the first one to two months of the season. We will then have more reliable knowledge about the individual learning potential of a player and thus this plan will more adequately reflect the development of that player’s individual needs. Furthermore, since we are teaching the game of football, such a plan should contain basic information about how a given player learns and assimilates information. Here we have to involve the players themselves in the process. Thanks to this knowledge, the individual development plan will be better tailored to the player’s learning needs. Such a plan is partly tailored to the age and characteristics of players. Nevertheless, knowing for instance the characteristics of children aged five to twelve (creativity, curiosity, improvisation), it is worth taking this into account when setting an individual learning plan for particular players.

Here, however, I understand coaches who are doing amazing work in this direction, as dictated by the requirements of the system. Because this requires a lot of paperwork (let’s remember that coaches are practically minded and should work as much as possible on the pitch) and that’s why we may come across individual plans prepared quickly, off the cuff. This is at the expense of the players, because the plan does not necessarily reflect the true needs of the individual. This is mainly done by full-time coaches. And because there are often two or three coaches for each phase and they have to prepare plans for an average of forty to fifty players, it is not hard to imagine that not every plan will be optimal for the development of individual potential.

The next step is to put such a plan into practice, i.e. in the training process, and the game and training model in force at a given academy. This is where the problems and neglect begin, as it’s very difficult to prepare training that meets the needs of all players and implements their individual plans. It is difficult enough when there is only one coach who conducts sessions. And quite often (even in academies with the highest status), it’s very difficult to prepare sessions to develop the potential of each player. It is much easier when there are a minimum two coaches conducting a session.

Then, if there are six to eigth players per coach, a training session can be prepared that will optimally develop the potential of players and implement their individual learning plans. Despite the fact that each player has an individual learning plan, the training process is mainly based on the development of the team and its success. I know that many coaches and people responsible for academies claim that what counts is individual development, not results or the success of the team in a given age category. However, I myself experienced something completely different. Most of the coaches with whom I had the pleasure to work considered the result and success of the team more important than developing the potential of individual players.

Training was always based on some part of the game model and focused on the development of tactical skills in a group or team. Their priority was to implement group and team tactics as soon as possible at the expense of individual technical and tactical skills. This is particularly evident in the primary and development phase of tweleve to sixteen-year-olds. Most players are not prepared for such a quick transition to group tactics that academy coaches are pushing for (without knowing or understanding the learning process of their players). Individual development of technical and tactical skills is neglected in key aspects for the sake of further development of players and their adaptation to situations encountered on the pitch.

These aspects are:

1. Individual positioning (not to be confused with the position on the pitch or the geographical sector of the pitch).
2. Individual understanding and management of the playing space (an understanding of the various types of space: open, closed, one’s own, and general space).
3. Space scanning (frequency, order, micro-scanning, scan time, scan direction, scan length).
4. Timing (defensive timing (pressing), timing of attack (passing, dribbling)
5. Individual movement
6. Technique (body position, first contact when receiving the ball, concealing one’s intentions (deceptions), reading the opponent's body language, adapting technique to the situation and the opponent).

The above-mentioned aspects developing the individual abilities of players are the basis for good habits in the future. However, these are neglected because coaches too quickly move on to teaching group tactics, where a large group of young players are not ready for such and don’t understand, nor have as yet the appropriate technical and tactical skills.

Coaches training children and youths lack patience in their striving for what they call "the right game." They often forget they are supposed to prepare these young players for the "right game" when they are ready, i.e. signing a professional contract. In this way, many youngsters fail to keep up with the training process imposed by their coaches, which means that the system loses more of its talented adolescents. Their individual potential is marginalized by this rush to play the "right game", the game model and group tactics. Because players are not ready for group tactics and are at a different stage of learning, they don’t develop their potential.

It’s difficult for an eleven-year-old to understand moving in defence as a threesome, since none of them understands individual positioning.

What do coaches do?

Well, instead of focusing on developing basic habits and skills, they show their anger and frustration, especially during matches. This frustration is expressed in the constant calling out of instructions to players and almost controlling these adolescents like robots in a computer game. It’s interesting that the same coaches never gave a thought to the fact that their young players don’t understand and haven’t sufficient basic skills to comprehend what it is to move in a team game, where there are seven or nine players on the field.

From the point of view of the learning process, this is an extremely complex process that requires simplicity of operation (more on that issue in a moment). It is not without reason that the age of five to twelve is called the basic phase – the teaching and equipping players of this age with the basic individual skills that will be indispensable at further stages of learning and playing professional football. The egos of coaches are so strong that in many cases they want to satisfy their own adult ambitions instead of the individual needs of the children with whom they work.

I’ve had the pleasure of working with children aged eleven and have attended several tournaments like Futsal. The coaches (my bosses) responsible for the basic phase of five to twelve year-olds divided the team of eleven-year-olds into two smaller teams: better and poorer players. Such a division clearly illustrated the aims of my bosses – winning the tournament instead of focusing on what the tournament would bring and how young players develop their individual potential.

During the tournament itself, the order of the day was controlling every move and play of the players. All the time, instructions were being called out from the sideline. It looked so pathetic that at one point you’d think that the youngsters running around the pitch had no brains of their own and couldn’t make any decisions. Of course they can, but the upbringing and influence of the coaches' behaviour effectively deprive these children of independent thinking and taking responsibility for their learning process.

I tried to react and discuss this problem, but unfortunately, who is going to listen to a guy who is employed part-time, and what can he even know?

To be clear, youngsters always go out there to win the match and I'll never say that that’s not important. However, we coaches must realize that our role is to develop players individually, so that in the future they play football professionally, or at least stay with the sport. During that same Futsal tournament, shortcomings in individual technical and tactical skills were clearly visible. Futsal is an excellent game where any lack of basic skills quickly comes to light. During this and other tournaments in which I participated as a coach, I also observed a lack of understanding and solving the most common situations during the game. The young players had trouble understanding and resolving the following match situations:

1. Going against an opponent flow-timing of changing direction and drive off (change of speed).
2. ‘Position before possession’ – take their space then take your ball) – how and when?
3. Cutting across your opponent’s lane to the ball – take his space then take the ball – when (timing), and how (body advantage).
4. Using the body as a barrier – how to adapt and when?
5. Stepping across your opponent’s line to the ball – when, how, why?
6. The ‘moving screen’ – receiving a pass safe side using the body as a moving barrier to prevent the opponent from challenging.
7. Blindside runs (type of runs to practice: horizontal, vertical, diagonal) when – timing.
8. Individual movements to draw defenders out of their defensive positions.
9. Pass & run combinations – enticing – disguise – timing – changes of speed & direction are crafty skills that when combined are very difficult to defend.
10. Receiving and turning in midfield – show ‘safe side’ – shield side on keeping the ball away from the defender.
11. central defenders to cope with is skilful dribblers running at them, the ability to delay, quickly transition between running strides, jockey, side step, sideways running, turning hips, sprinting forward, tackling, blocking are vital tactics to be practiced regularly.
12. Learning to ‘win space’ by timing your step – in front of an attacker
13. Defending the 1-2 – gaining advantage in flow – jockey side on (ready for the sprint) – turn with your man (not towards the ball) – match his running using arms to disrupt his flow.
14. A way to improve a player’s ‘scanning’ skills is to educate their attention to INTERCEPTIONS.
15. “Holding the ball for the right amount of time”.
16. A common mistake for young players is to run at one pace without a clear change of speed to signal for the ball – teach them to prepare by moving away from the ball.

Non-verbal communication is vital for flowing connections between teammates – it must be clear but concealed from opponents until the right moment – involving positioning – eye contact – body language – timing.

All these situations require a good technical and tactical basis. They can and should be taught in small games: 2v2/3v3/2v1/3v2. Despite the fact that more and more children play small task-based games, the training environment is still sceptical about this type of training session, because game formats for children and teenagers are: 5v5, 7v7, 9v9 and finally 11v11. That’s why the game and training model programs of academies are adapted to the above-mentioned formats, which don’t necessarily reflect the cognitive needs of young football trainees.

In other words, coaches prepare young players according to the formats in which the game will take place, instead of what cognitive and learning needs specific age groups may have. This is a mistake that leaves many children unprepared for the move to larger format games. They haven’t yet acquired the basic aspects and skills that I previously mentioned. They also don’t understand how to solve basic situations encountered on the pitch, those that most often occur during a game.

If they have a problem playing 5v5, what is the point of playing 7v7?

Again, we go back to what I talked about earlier. Most coaches don't consider small games to be the "right game." I believe that young players will best develop their potential when they are given a more comfortable and more balanced program of games adapted to their learning needs and the stage of individual technical and tactical skills.

There is a large body of scientific research that says that small games are better for the development of individual potential, especially in the case of children aged five to twelve. It is even recommended that at the age of twelve to fourteen they should not play in the 11v11 format. Coaches working with children are expected to know all about the learning process and development of children and adolescents. They also need to understand the maximum number of possible ball passing lines of application occurring during various game formats.

In the book: "Play to Learn, Learn to Play", Mick Critchell and his co-authors show the maximum number of possible lines of passes between players depending on the format of the game:

3v3 – 30.

4v4 – 56.

5v5 – 90.

6v6 – 132.

7v7 – 182.

8v8 – 240.

9v9 – 306.

10v10 – 310.

11v11 – 462.

This shows why the fewer the number of players on the field, the better for the development of individual potential and cognitive assimilation of information.

Let me cite the example of a goalkeeper in a 9v9 game format. Observing his behaviour at the moment when he has to start the game from his own goal, we can describe it in one word: confusion!

Taking into account the number of players on the pitch and the maximum number of possible passing lines between players, the player's brain simply freezes. The number of possible situations, problems to solve and the number of possible decisions lead to the young player assimilating too much information. His brain doesn’t have the memory capacity not only to remember, but also make the right decision. Hence a very large number of errors (such as giving the ball up to an opponent), with the same mistakes that cause frustration and anger in coaches being repeated.

Even in the game model, where coaches push for various tactical solutions, young players will continue to make similar mistakes. However, this is not because they haven’t the potential to learn. This is due to the overly complicated tactical problems provided by current game formats for children and teenagers. Game models, game formats and the training process based on them cause coaches to enforce group tactics (resulting from game formats) that children and teenagers are not ready for. They don’t have enough experience and haven’t developed the cognitive maturity to assimilate such a dose of very complex tactics. They aren’t ready for it yet – their cognitive-emotional brain is not at that stage of learning. This type of training and training process means that a lot of young players fail. However, coaches and the whole environment are still firmly sticking to established formats in order to see the 'right game' – football for adult 11v11 games as soon as possible!

Thanks to scientific research, trends in the world are beginning to change. The football community is beginning to understand that children should learn to play football in formats that are conducive to their learning brain. Small games are nothing revolutionary or new. Their application and implementation in children's football will be the norm in Germany from the 2024/25 season onwards. Below are the game formats for children that will be in force in Germany:

U6-U7: 2 v 2 and 3 v 3, on a pitch: 16m/20m, maximum size 28m/22m.

U8-U9: 3 v 3, on a pitch: 28m/22m and 5 v 5 (4 small goals, no goalkeepers) on a pitch: 40m/25m.

U10-U11: 5 v 5 and 7 v 7 (6 plus GK, on a pitch: 55m/35m).

The German Football Association (DBF) claims that the new format will be more conducive to the development of children's potential and will be more friendly to them. Children like to play, score a lot of goals and at the same time have fun – the new format gives them unlimited opportunities to do so and above all, meets children’s needs.

In addition, this format promotes 1 v 1 games, a lot of dribbling and generally individual technical and tactical skills, which in other formats are neglected, the simple reason for this being attention focused on group and team tactics far too early, when children are not yet ready for it. Another benefit is the promotion of playing and learning to play football instead of focusing all the attention on performance and the pressure of winning. In such a format, all children have a chance to play, completely opposite to the game models and game formats of today, created only to satisfy the unhealthy ambitions of adults and promote those children who are physically stronger (early developers).

Much earlier than the German Football Association, Belgium introduced an evolution in the teaching of children's and youth football. In 2014, the Belgian Football association introduced U6-U7 2 v 2 game formats for the youngest players. The argument for this was propounded by Kris Van Der Haegen (Director of Coach Education for Belgium FA): “Kids want to play football in their own way, not the way adults want to play. If you put a child on an adult’s bicycle, they’ll say, ‘Are you crazy?’ But this is what happens in football, we ask them to play 11 v 11 or 8 v 8 at a very young age. They are unable to do it”.

All this is so that children enjoy the game, dribble the ball as much as possible and have a chance to score plenty of goals. It is safe to say that the evolution of game formats in both countries resembles street football, where children have plenty of freedom, make decisions independently and learn. They develop their learning potential because this game format makes children intrinsically motivated and emotionally involved in what they are doing.

The coaches working with children are excellent educators, competent in terms of understanding children's development and learning process and, of course, perfectly understand the game of football in terms of the individual. The recent successes enjoyed by Belgian Football and its considerable number of excellent footballers playing professionally argues for this being the right way to help develop the potential of gifted children, so that later they acquire excellent habits, picked up during 2 v 2 or 3 v 3 games! This approach to the learning process of children means that also late maturing players, often with poor physical characteristics, can develop in the best possible way. This evolution is being adopted by other countries such as Sweden and Poland – where a lot of 1 v 1, 2 v 2 and 3 v 3 games and tournaments are being introduced to the national children's football program.

**3.4. Does the current match program adopted by professional academies offer young players development in line with their potential?**

As with game models and training models, match programs are identical, or very similar to, each other. What I refer to here is that I have rarely, or never, seen an academy’s match where young players had the opportunity to solve various tactical problems. All, or almost all, youth teams played games in the currently used 5 v 5, 7 v 7, 9 v 9 and 11 v 11 formats and most used 1-4-4-2 or 1-4-3-3 tactical systems.

Generally, in adult football, players must quickly adapt to the various game styles and systems not only of their opponents but also those of their own teams. Academy programs usually offer young players one type of style related to the game model used in a given academy. The problem is that the enforced game model, and the system and style adapted to that model, means that young trainees learn to play and make decisions according to a given game model, instead of what is currently happening on the pitch.

In other words, when the information obtained during a match differs from what a young player learned in the current game model and system, he will be unable to resolve the situation on the pitch to his team’s favour. He has never been in such a situation. From my perspective and the practical experience of working in academies, game programs don’t fully develop the potential of players, because they don’t have to solve various tactical problems that arise from other styles of play, tactics, etc. Below are various game formats and styles. Some of them never appear in youth matches played at professional academies.

Low Block High pressing

Street game Tactical game (organization)

Direct game Game based on ball possession

Small pitches and smaller formats Large pitches and larger formats

Similar skill level Different skill level

Not the best pitches Excellent turf

Good fun Serious match

Work on developing the potential of young players thus looks completely different from the youth games (match program) for these players. I must emphasize again that in my opinion, repeated application of the same game model prevents any increase in football learning potential and doesn’t teach players to adapt to different styles of play.

A game model enforces the way young players are expected to play and thus limits their technical and tactical skills and cognitive abilities to make decisions resulting from an actual game as opposed to the game model being applied. Another issue is the complete neglect of the individual technical and tactical abilities of young players, especially in the basic U5-U12 phase. Coaches are obsessed with group tactics and the strictly enforced structure of the given game model. This is carried out at the expense of children with football talents, who move on to the (U12-U16) developmental phase not optimally prepared in terms of individual movement habits and individual technical and tactical skills.

Again, coaches are too quick to switch to 11 v 11 (adult football), when young players in the initial U12-U14 development phase are completely unprepared for such a move. I’ve had the pleasure of closely observing U13 and U14 matches in the 11v11 format. They looked more or less like cross-country running, with the minor difference that there was a ball involved, one that the teenage novices touched rarely or not at all (I refer to one player in particular and his contact with the ball).

The most striking shortcoming was the players’ lack of understanding of individual positioning and the management of the space around them. That’s why group tactics meant nothing here, since five to six players out of the eleven didn’t understand such basic issues as the line of passing the ball and the ability to move individually on the pitch. What could the young players get in return by learning one and the same game model and taking part in youth competitions, where everyone plays the same way?

Well, at least they learned to some extent to win and deal with failure. After all, they were taking part in a competition and in physical terms, the game provided plenty of positive reflection. But the players learned much less in terms of individual development and potential in other aspects. Furthermore, during private conversations coaches often said about a player that he didn’t have a “winning mentality”. This sounds ridiculous and only confirms how much education is needed in the area of development and the learning process of adolescents. How can a teenager of tweleve have a winning mentality? After all, he is only just developing in psychological-cognitive-emotional terms.

The current match program poses the following problems for developing the potential of young players:

1. How much do players risk depending on the type and format of the game they are playing?
2. How much of the learning process do they lose when they play the same way every weekend?
3. How much do they lose in terms of adaptation if they play only one style?
4. How often can they exercise their individual skills – are they put to the test?
5. Do they develop their psychological, cognitive, physical, and technical-tactical skills?
6. Does the current game system provide players the opportunity to develop individual technical and tactical skills?
7. Is it conducive to adaptation or is it an enemy of learning adaptive skills?
8. Does it force players to play a certain position (a particular area on the pitch) instead of learning and understanding individual positioning on the pitch?

When you go to a match every weekend, often spending an average of ten hours on the bus, just to play on average about forty minutes, it’s quite ridiculous to talk about individual development!

Instead of playing games of football on their home turf and developing, young players often sacrifice their entire childhood to play a whole forty minutes. Parents pretend that they don’t see any problem, because what counts is the prestige that their child "is playing" in the academy of a professional club.

Coaches and youth football managers could solve the problem and instead of 50% of the game being played in a match, why not 100%?

After all, the more you play, the better your individual development. The idea is simple. If you have tweleve players, why not play: Two 6 v 6 matches or even two SSG 3 v 3 matches? In this arrangement, everyone plays and develops instead of sitting on the bench and watching others play. Here again, the ego of adults comes to the fore, with the mantra that 3 v 3 is not the 'right game'. It sometimes happened that academies came to an arrangement whereby they played two matches of 7 v 7 or 6 v 6 at the same time, which was beneficial for everyone, especially those youngsters who had to spend ten hours on the bus travelling in both directions.

If we reduce the formats of games for children to ones that are more friendly, they will play plenty and often and no young player will be left sitting on the bench. If we keep to the current formats, at least we can agree among ourselves to play 6 v 6 and 3 v 3 and rotate the players every twenty minutes. It often happens that games are played by youth teams that are ill-matched, with scores of 10:1 being a common result.

In such an arrangement, any assessment of the individual development and potential of players is completely pointless. The level of challenge for young players relative to the level of success achieved in a match (with a 10:1 result) is none, due to too great a disparity between the two teams.

The solution might be smaller game formats of 3 v 3, as this would perhaps make for a more equal game. A smaller pitch and more contact with the ball will promote those children who develop physically more slowly but have considerable cognitive abilities. This will also significantly reduce the advantage of those children, who more rapidly develop physically.

Another solution is to simply take two players off the field and play against an opponent while being outnumbered. The match would be more equal and the young players would face more challenges on the pitch, especially in terms of adapting to the new situation. Of course, in such a case, the players who left the field could play in a 2 v 2 game, so that they can keep playing the whole time. Of course, these are not ideal solutions, but should surely be taken into account – for the sake of young players.

The current program of matches in youth competitions limits the chances of spending as many minutes as possible on the pitch. This is the main barrier to developing the potential of young players and has a negative impact on the number of graduates of a given academy becoming professional footballers. Coaches often say what player profile is needed to play football at the highest level. Adaptation, self-confidence and high individual ball control skills in all sectors of the pitch. It is worth considering whether the current system really develops the individual potential of players to an optimal extent. Evolution and education of the current system instead of revolution can bring measurable results in the form of a much larger number of academy graduates playing football professionally.

**The lesson taught by Chapter Three**

The 7 v 7 game format contains 182 lines of interaction between players. The 3 v 3 game format has only thirty. Fewer complex tactical solutions, fewer options to make decisions, more contact with the ball, potential dribbling and shots at the goal provide a complete picture of which game format is more appropriate for the youngest football trainees.

Current game formats mean that the brain of a young player gets confused under the pressure of a large amount of information. His deep memory and cognitive and perceptual abilities are not yet sufficiently developed to be able to optimally learn and develop individual potential.

The current training process based on a highly structured game and training model means that coaches teach young players to play in a given game model, and not necessarily the game itself and assimilation of the information resulting from the situations on the pitch in which the player finds himself, which means that players lose the chance of learning to adapt to the conditions brought about by their opponents.

The current game formats for youth football mean that the coaching environment strives as soon as possible for the so-called 'right game' (11 v 11) to be played. The training process is therefore largely based on group and team tactics as early as the basic phase. This leads to gross negligence in the development and teaching of individual technical and tactical skills, such as individual positioning or management of space on the pitch. A player who lacks basic skills and habits with regard to individual movement on the pitch will not be able to fully comprehend the learning process for playing in a group (group tactics).

**Chapter 4: The Learning Process**

My experience in working with children and youth in professional academies (as well as in other contexts) leads me to conclude that the current training system doesn’t reflect the way young players learn. This causes a number of misunderstandings and the failure of youngsters to comprehend their training.

Why do they make such and such decisions that are not in accordance with our convictions? Why do they behave on the pitch in ways that differ from the intentions of the game model being taught?

In earlier chapters, I discussed recruitment, early specialization, the training process, coaches and game formats and their impact on developing the potential of talented children. This chapter will attempt to examine how the coaching environment and the current system can better understand the learning process and use the knowledge acquired to better develop the individual potential of players.

**4.1. How to use the learning process to increase the individual development and potential of young players**Everyone learns in a different way. The way we assimilate information, our basic knowledge and our experience mean that everyone learns differently. More than twenty years working in the coaching profession leads me to the following conclusions about the learning process:

1. It is highly individualized.
2. It concerns the knowledge and experience that young players currently possess. Each new experience and information must be closely connected with knowledge acquired earlier, so that young players can achieve success while learning.
3. It is a long-term process, it requires patience.
4. It requires the emotional commitment and intrinsic motivation of trainee players.
5. It involves communication and transmission of information on the simple teacher-recipient principle. The way information is conveyed will have an impact on the learning process.
6. Any educational program must take into account a player’s current experience and be closely linked to the same.
7. It needs to include failures, the making of mistakes and the drawing of conclusions

I will now attempt to develop each of these conclusions in relation to the training programs of professional academies. Learning is an individual process highly adapted to the needs of each individual trainee. This means that the youth football education system should adapt the training and teaching process to the learning process of its young players. Thanks to this, players can develop their individual potential in a more optimal way.

But is that so? Not necessarily!

The training process in the youth academies of professional clubs is, in many aspects, more adapted to the needs of adults and the game model (as I have already mentioned) and less to the individual learning needs of players. Individual development plans for each player are themselves a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, in order to maximize the potential of players, these plans should be based on the stage of learning the game that a player has reached. Instead, they are largely based on the game model and academy’s program.

Perhaps the fact that the learning process is different for each player is best demonstrated by the districts of South London. Currently, 14% of players playing at Premier League level come from this part of London (source: football.london November 2021). Such excellent players as: Aaron Wan-Bissaka, Joe Gomez, Trevoh Chalobach, Ryan Sessegnon, Deckan Rice, Ruben Loftus-Cheek, Jadon Sancho, Wilfried Zaha, Emile Smith-Rowe, Tammy Abraham, Eberechi Eze, Michail Antonio, Cullum Hudson-Odoi and many others grew up on the streets of south London.

That was where they not only grew up, but played street football in colloquially speaking (but not literally) "cages". Street football allowed them freedom of play and the chance to learn football according to their own rules. It was where the learning process was adapted to the needs of the individual. Good fun and the pleasure of playing football were at the highest level. And as we already know, without that element, it’s difficult to get involved in the learning process.

The players themselves emphasize this: point. "I grew up in south London, but I've lived up north," said one striker. "They don't have them cages like we do in south London. Wherever you go, there's five-a-side, there’s little areas where you kick. You're there for hours, just for the fun of it. If we hadn’t had that sanctuary, I don’t know where we would’ve spent our time." (Michail Antonio)

This is echoed by other well-known players who currently play professional football at Premier League level. "How I enjoyed playing football in the cage - that's what I want to do in the Prem." (Eberechi Ezre).

All these players had the opportunity, at a very young age, to play street football, where they developed their individual potential on various levels. Psychologically, they learned what it is to be outside their comfort zone, perseverance, and character traits that they would never have learned in an academy environment. Furthermore, on the social level, they learned communication, the role of the individual in a team, and interpersonal relations.

Their individual technical and tactical skills were also learnt in street games. When you play in a 5 v 5 cage, on concrete and other surfaces, you have little space and are constantly under pressure from time and opponents, so you learn to make decisions quickly and effectively. You next learn to adapt techniques (skills) to the situation in which you find yourself. Academies of professional clubs don’t teach this. They believe that any training must be based on a structure in which children and teenagers have their freedom kept to a minimum. In such an environment, it is difficult to develop your individual style and potential, let alone adapt your teaching to how young players learn.

Would the English Premier League have as many as 14% of its professional footballers coming from the South of London if those players hadn’t had the opportunity to play street football?

In his excellent book "Drive”, Daniel H. Pink talks about the three most important things when it comes to a person’s individual development and what motivates him:

1. Mastery – personal development.
2. Autonomy – self control of the learning process.
3. Purpose.

South London provided opportunities for personal development (social and psychological/personal). Control of the learning process, while playing in the street was in the hands of the young players. They also had their own aims, such as personal development, learning according to their own rules, and playing football at a professional level, undoubtedly contributing to which were their games in "cages".

Now we can consider how much autonomy young players have in the academies of professional clubs. How does this affect their individual development and learning process?

In my opinion, and experience as a coach, I can say that the academy environment ought to ensure a more balanced division between one’s own control of learning and its management by coaches. No coach can control the learning of others; he can only consciously and skilfully manage the process. Personal knowledge of academy players and daily observation of their behaviour should tell a coach which players are able to take responsibility for their learning process, and which should be helped, as opposed to lumping everyone together.

All the players from South London also learned some important things from an individual point of view and regarding the development of potential. Street games taught them leadership, responsibility and social ownership. Young players who attend training sessions at an academy are especially deprived of the chance to learn responsibility and leadership.

The adult community does everything for young football trainees, such as washing the club’s uniforms, cleaning shoes, organizing warm-ups, etc... In such a system, the idea of requiring players to make independent decisions and take responsibility for their learning process is at least unrealistic. Apparently, some clubs commit to conducting life skills workshops, but the academy environment itself does exactly the opposite. Training and what the players learn from it is totally controlled by the coaches.

I think that introducing a form of street games to the academy program would help players learn the same qualities that South London players have acquired on the streets. In such a variant, coaches should give players a free hand regarding how they want to play, and focus only on observation and taking notes. I think there is a lot to be learned about players playing in such an environment, which would benefit both the players and the academy’s program. In such a scenario, coaches would have to abandon their egos and overcome the fear that it is not they who will be managing the learning process of the players.

What else can we learn from the experience of the South London players?

Considering their current professional level of play, one can see and admire their extraordinary creativity, their solving problems in unusual ways that are completely unpredictable for players defending the opposing team, and their ability to entertain fans attending their matches. These players are far from one-dimensional, thanks to the fact that in their early years they played on the street and learned individually to a degree adequate to their needs. Most of the players who have spent their whole lives in the academy are very similar and as a result don’t think independently and haven’t the ability to think critically. In addition to football, academies first and most importantly must prepare a young man for life, ensuring he learns basic life skills.

The learning process is continuous and cannot be squeezed into a specific framework. When a new player comes to the academy environment, he is usually given six weeks to adapt and show his skills. We are talking here about young players. I have never understood what an eleven-year-old was supposed to prove during the whole six weeks. That he knows how to learn?

A child at the age of eleven is constantly developing in every way. When he comes to a new environment, it is normal for him to be shy, upset, etc. and so may not show his full abilities. It is worth knowing at what stage a player is located at any given time. Because the learning process is directly related to the knowledge and experience that a young player currently possesses. Every new piece of information and new experience must be closely linked to the knowledge acquired earlier, so that young players can successfully learn in the new environment. So, from the point of view of developing individual potential and learning, for an eleven-year-old, everything will be new. Starting with the notorious game model and the training process, etc. The young player will be at the stage of the initial learning process, because he doesn’t know anything about the academy environment, the standards prevailing there, the game model, etc. Furthermore, the training process will be new to the player, because he will have never trained in such a (very structured) way before.

So, we give this poor child six weeks and expect him to fully adapt to the new situation. In doing so, we are simply failing to understand the learning process that must be adapted to the individual. Many young players who experienced those miserable six weeks did not stay long in the academy. Here again the question arises, how many players has the system lost in this way?

In doing so, we don't respect the uniqueness of youngsters and forget that each of them comes to us with his own baggage, experience and cognitive development. I refer again to the game model here, because all the decisions made by coaches are largely based on it. This means that it has its limitations and, in this way, unconsciously also limits young players who come to or are already in an academy.

In other words, we are looking for adolescents who fit the game model and are not taking into account the learning process, or the uniqueness of the youngsters. Here again, we are losing a whole bunch of talented young players who are not accepted into the academy, simply because they don’t fit the game model. If Muhamad Ali, with his unique style of boxing, had agreed to limitations and had been placed within a certain framework, not only would he never have become a professional boxer, but he would certainly never have won the title of World Champion.

The individual development of a child's potential needs mistakes and failures! They should be an integral part of the learning process and of course they are, but is it to the extent that the potential of young players can be developed to the maximum?

I have my doubts.

First of all, most training sessions are focused only on success. According to most coaches, if the desired results are achieved in training, it means that the players have learned and have thus achieved success. To what extent did this success and the whole training lesson result from mistakes and failures and to what extent was it due to how the training was planned?

A large number of coaches plan training around a given topic, instead of planning their training to suit the learning process of their players. Therefore, it is rare for coaches to plan training where players will have difficult challenges and walk a thin line between failure and success. As Krumboltz Babineux says: “If I want to be a great musician, I must first play a lot of bad music. If I want to become a great tennis player, I must first lose lots of tennis games”.

Larger and smaller failures make it possible to see which player is a good student. On this basis, a player who made a mistake in solving a situation but the next time in an identical situation solved the problem in a different way may be showing a strong cognitive potential for learning. The same player can also be mentally creative. Failures and mistakes are an indispensable part of creativity and individual learning. Therefore, an academy program and the training itself should to a much greater extent challenge the players to the extent of their abilities or even beyond, so that failures and mistakes generate the development of good football trainees. They also help see how players react to failure and mistakes and how they adapt cognitively and emotionally to such training conditions.

In general, training for academy players is too easy and too focused on achieving success. A high standard of individual learning cannot be achieved without failures. The problem with professional academies is that training and its process is too much devoted to memorizing patterns of play in isolated conditions (not real to the game itself), instead of allowing young players to learn through real playing experience, where they can and should make mistakes. Some coaches, however, are reluctant to observe mistakes, especially during the game, and therefore have a problem with accepting them. During a match, this negatively affects the players, because they feel more afraid of making mistakes and so they don’t have a chance to learn from their mistakes. This negatively affects individual development of the potential to learn and play football.

This state of affairs also creates external barriers to learning through failures and mistakes made. The potential of young players is developed during training within the context of an actual game, in which they must use their skills to the maximum in order to overcome difficult challenges wisely tailored to their learning process. Such training turns mistakes into positive feedback that works to the favour of young players and their individual development. It seems to me that too often, when planning training for talented players, we forget that teaching is a skill! Too often we look at the subject of training and subordinate everything to the wording of the paper on which it was planned. All attention is focused on the subject at hand instead of the learning process and the individual needs of the players.

In this way, we completely control the subject of the training, the game model, reducing the possibilities to manage the learning process of players. Because our training is too easy, it doesn’t present difficult challenges, doesn’t adapt to the learning process, and becomes mechanical in which the coach becomes entirely responsible for the players’ learning. That is why it’s worth considering training, where failure is a specially planned element. When players get to make mistakes and suffer failure, they will feel the learning process emotionally and cognitively. When the whole training process is controlled and consists of a ready menu, young players will make very few mistakes and thus learn very little.

For this reason, every success in training should be consistent and tailored to the level of challenges that the training presents. Otherwise, training will be too easy and fail to optimally stimulate the learning process of young players, because they will not be forced to face challenges. If they make a mistake, they will not suffer any great consequences. However, during a match mistake made always lead to consequences. Training in which coaches try to force players to scan the space around them without an opponent being present is completely pointless. Whether a player will scan or not and how many times he does so will not have any consequences, unless we consider that scanning a bollard or other prop in training reflects an actual game situation! If coaches want to develop and strengthen certain behaviour patterns in young players, training must take place in conditions as close to the game as possible.

The learning process needs consistency, simplicity, emotion and intrinsic motivation. Academy coaches being largely well qualified in their field of sport, they believe they should control the learning process of young players. Nothing could be further from the truth. No one can control the learning, except the player himself. We can be and are responsible for managing the learning process. The best coaches working with adolescents are able to ideally choose training measures that suit individual needs and the learning stage that young players have achieved. Such coaches are characterized by excellent observation. Before they intervene, they observe the players' performance in training, learning as much as possible about them. Only after some time, upon drawing conclusions, do they articulate optimal interventions in order to develop a player’s individual potential to a higher level.

A significant number of academy coaches do quite the opposite. They already have a whole list of versatile tasks for their trainees before they even start playing. What does this indicate? Simply that this whole list is not governed by a young player’s stage of development and learning, rather it is dictated by and adapted to the game model and the training process in force at a given club. It doesn’t take into account the players, their point of view and the learning process. This often leads to a lack of understanding of what is required of them.

**4.2. How does the pervasive culture of winning and the accompanying pressure affect the learning process of young players?**

Every child goes out to play a match with the intention of winning and having fun at the same time. Victories and defeats are inseparable elements of individual development and help in the development of personality traits that will later be useful in adult life. It is therefore completely ridiculous to tell young players that the result and winning the match doesn’t matter. But likewise, playing only for a dry score and trying to win the match at all costs, at the expense of the players’ individual development is completely out of place.

Coaches and parents, who act in this way, should consider what role they have to play in working with adolescents who have above-average football playing abilities. The coach should always help players if they need it. At the level of children's and youth football, the match is an opportunity to further develop the individual learning potential of each player. Knowing how adolescents react to defeat, winning, etc. is an excellent way to build and raise the development and individual potential of a player to the next level. Unfortunately, society and the culture of youth’s sports have gone in the wrong direction. The pressure and attitude of winning at all costs has completely killed what is most important in youth’s sports.

I refer here to the value of the learning process. A tweleve-year-old child continues the learning process for playing football every time he goes out onto the pitch. He obtains further valuable experience, which can be used in the future. Unfortunately, this process is unconsciously interrupted by parents who have excessive and unrealistic expectations for their children attending the academy programs of professional clubs. Furthermore, a large number of parents are colloquially speaking "helicopter parenting". They are so involved in what their children are doing that they don’t allow them to make decisions on their own. Young players with such parents have everything presented on a plate. They don’t have to think independently or critically, which negatively affects their individual development. Having worked in several clubs, I can safely say that only a few children were mentally independent enough to be able to solve their problems. Most of them, if there was no parent present, went running to the coach with every little problem. Sure, we are there to help, but a conscious coach will step by step teach the players independence and responsibility for their learning process. This is difficult in that most young players are rarely prepared for it. Club academies also do most things for young players and yet they expect them to make their own decisions on the pitch. One completely excludes the other.

Children shouldn’t feel any pressure from adults and the associated negative emotions. It should be remembered that young players learn the game and develop on many levels, especially on the physical and psychological-emotional level. For this reason, most of them will not be able to cope with such pressure. It’s no excuse to say that the pressure is enormous at the professional level.

Let’s remember that we are talking about children, not adults. Blindly working towards winning at all costs leads to children feeling less valuable if they don’t win and don’t satisfy, mainly their parents but also too often their coaches. Another negative side effect is that players will focus only on the final result of the game, instead of learning and individual development of their potential. Everyone working with young players should focus more strongly on supporting enthusiasm and the learning process and thus constantly improving their skills. You can't talk about an eleven-year-old child not having a winning mentality. After all, he is only eleven years old, so how would he learn such a mentality? And here we come back to the learning process, which is an inseparable part of individual development.

A match at the youth level should be a chance for children to continue their learning process and develop their potential. Children should take advantage of the chance to constantly try their best, should feel the learning process working and thus improve their skills. Continuation of the learning process also includes defeats and victories. Our goal is to observe what the young player has learned. Is he drawing the right conclusions from defeats and victories? Is he becoming a better player and student of football? Is his understanding of the game improving? The result itself and confrontation with others is important from the point of view of players, and we coaches should focus on the continuity of the players’ learning process and thus more effectively manage their individual potential.

So, understanding what stage of the football learning process a player has achieved makes for the optimal selection of training measures and simple individual tasks to develop potential. The learning stage also refers to winning, pressure, etc. The quality and quantity of experiences related to defeat, pressure and winning affects the emotional development of players and how they react to developments on the pitch. How they react and what behaviour patterns they demonstrate will closely reflect the environment in which they learn to play football.

An environment with a lot of pressure and the adults that generate it will significantly reduce their understanding of the learning process. An environment where learning as a process has a superior value can increase the individual development of players and have a positive impact on their potential. This is because the players themselves will be focused on the process of achieving success instead of focusing only on the success itself. They will show learning behaviour patterns that enable development of individual potential. Players brought up in an environment with a high degree of culture and one that values the learning process itself will make decisions with much greater freedom. They will take risks and thus make mistakes that are accepted as positive, because they reflect the learning of players in game conditions. Finally, thanks to continuation of the learning process, players will form positive emotional habits that in the long run will develop the mental discipline so needed at the professional level.

Matches at the youth level are often devoid of adequate competition for the skills of the players. Winning by a large goal difference is seen as a success. Especially by parents, but sometimes also by coaches. The reward (success) should be tailored to the level of the challenge faced by the young players. The scale of difficulty and level of success should be difficult enough to force players to make as much effort as possible at all levels of development. When a 9-0 game is won, we can't talk about success in terms of the scale of difficulty of achieving it. The perception of parents is different. The dry result confirms the belief that their child is making progress. This is one of many examples of an unhealthy winning culture. The information flowing to the young player is that he has achieved an amazing success. All those around are congratulating themselves on a great match, the goals scored, forgetting that in fact the young players didn’t have to make too much effort to achieve that success. This is not good for their individual development and in no way develops the potential of young players, who at this level need stimulation consistent with their level of individual skills.

Looking at it from a coach's point of view, I can say that it is very difficult to force on players learning behaviour patterns relative to their needs in such a match environment. An unhealthy culture of winning, the lack of tailoring challenges to be consistent with the level of success achieved leads to a lack of intrinsic motivation, complacency and, as a result, a negative impact on the development of players' potential. Such a match environment happens quite often and in my opinion is a waste of time for both players and coaches.

Players could use this time to much better effect during training sessions. Winning this way not only doesn't develop players, but it doesn't really tell them how to deal with real challenges during a match. It also has a bad effect on the ability to learn. To become a better player, the match environment should give you opportunities to make mistakes and learn from failure. However, it is difficult to make mistakes when you win a match with a large difference in the score and you face a complete lack of competition. The player is learning in a fairly predictable match environment, but should develop his potential as often as possible in an unpredictable environment. This short-lived and false sense of success is celebrated by everyone around and has an impact on how the players themselves perceive success. It is not the best training and experience for developing the individual potential of young players at an academy.

The ethos of winning and how it is celebrated by today's society doesn’t help any child develop. An early maturing player, physically superior to most of his peers in the same age group, will use only his physical strength during a match. A player who has excellent speed skills will be able to get past everyone as if they were posts, because the match environment is too easy and doesn’t force such a young player to use and learn other attributes such as individual technical and tactical skills. Late maturing players, who are characterized by great intelligence on the pitch and outstanding technical skills, will too easily free themselves from the attacking of opponents. They will not have to exert themselves too much on the cognitive level, because the opponent doesn’t force them to make such an effort. Thus, a match environment in which you win by a large number of goals scored is not good for developing the potential of gifted children and teenagers, especially for their prospects of becoming in the long term professional footballers.

A strong win makes everyone focus only on the current result and in this way, in a short-sighted fashion assess the children’s success. How much of this success was actual learning and did the players actually become better? Also, in more evenly matched competitions, too often we focus on the result instead of the learning process, and so how the players achieved success. A more competitive match ensures that we can notice good trainees and not just focus on which player was the most efficient on a given day.

Coaches are too quick to evaluate and observe a player's performance instead of whether he is becoming a better footballer. Good players are good trainees and that shows during a match. If we only judge performance, we will be ignoring players’ real individual potential to play football. A player may not have been performing at the level we expected, but we have failed to notice that he has the potential suggesting a future career as a professional footballer. This is another example of how the system is losing masses of gifted boys whose potential to learn has gone unnoticed. Not because someone didn't want to take note, but because most coaches were focused on the performance of young players here and now.

**4.3. How best to manage the learning process of late and early maturing players.**

The system for youths in academies is too biased and often prefers early maturing players. At the FA Advance Youth Award course, we were shown statistics on how many late maturing young players passed through the current system and signed a professional contract. Well, the figure was only 2%! By comparison, 60-80% of early maturing players remained in the system and obtained the same chance to sign a professional contract.

The question is what happened to that 98% of young players – weren't they any good? Or were they victims of a system that is highly biased and favours physically strong players?

Early maturing players are characterized by their above-average physical condition (mainly in terms of growth). Thanks to this physical advantage, a twelve-year-old, looking like a fourteen-year-old, will run faster, use his physical advantage and therefore achieve considerably greater success at the individual level than his peers, who aren’t so physically developed (it should be emphasized that they simply aren’t yet). Thanks to this physical advantage, such a tweleve-year-old will be favoured by coaches at the expense of late maturing players. But this creates a false image and, in most cases, a false individual success, achieved only by physical advantage.

This success will not be completely at the level of challenge during a match in youth competitions. Such a young player will have only a temporary advantage over his peers. It should also be added that when it comes to psychological and cognitive aspects early maturing players are usually late maturing players in cognitive terms, decision-making and on the pitch intelligence, while late maturing players are early maturing players in this sense.

Taking all this into account, a significant preference for early maturing players increases the risk of missing out on the true potential for learning and good students at this stage of emotional-physical maturity. This causes the system to overlook and lose a whole host of talented young players with the potential to learn at a high level. Doing so also leads to ineffective management of the learning process for both late and early maturing players.

Selection conducted in this way, which favours and is clearly biased, is not a good indicator in the management of the learning process for high-potential players. Because first of all, early maturing players with above-average strength, speed and height, have it too easy during training and youth matches played in the same age category.

From my own experience, I conclude that coaches (too often due to their bias) create too demanding an environment for late maturing children and one that’s too easy for early maturing ones. Since the time maturity is reached is too diverse, it creates a problem in the proper identification of the potential to learn and play football at a high level. Therefore, coaches often focus on what is easy to see and measure – i.e. only physical potential. When someone runs faster and jumps further, does it means that he is talented? Nothing could be further from the truth! T**here is an inevitable bias towards picking the bigger, stronger and faster boy. However, research is emerging to show that the least mature players in junior representative squads are the most likely to transition into senior national squads (McCarthy, 2016). In every age group I’ve worked with at the academy level, it had both types of players in terms of maturity. During most matches in the same age category, these players used only their physical advantage. The environment didn’t force them to make more effort and take advantage of and develop other traits, such as their individual technical and tactical abilities or cognitive-psychological predispositions. Such an environment was a complete waste of time for these players and their learning potential.**

**The solution would be for them to play and train in a squad that’s a year or even two years older, but this has happened too rarely and not sufficiently often for a young player to learn to adapt to playing based on anything other than just the physical aspect. The moment he can't rely solely on physical strength and the environment forces him to use other abilities, he starts to develop. He finds himself outside his comfort zone, starts to make more mistakes and his intrinsic motivation increases.**

**This is where coaches can really see whether an early maturing player is a good student, whether he can cope with difficult conditions and how he adapts to them. Can he skilfully use his individual technical and tactical skills, because physical strength is simply not enough. How does he behave in terms of personal development?**

**That is why it is so important to have an environment in which the challenges for early maturing players will go hand in hand with their physical development and the stage of maturity reached. Relying only on physical strength is too little for the coach’s over-dog to develop his potential. If an early maturing player has too few opportunities and challenges to develop his technical and tactical skills and psychological strength, then the moment he moves on to adult football, they will simply disappear. This will be combined with a lack of sufficient preparation of an early maturing player in psychological, social, technical and tactical, and not just physical terms. In order to better support and manage the learning process of early maturing players, it is worth considering the following solutions that can be effective and useful for the development of their potential:**

1. **Instead of the traditional division into age groups, one could divide players according to their skills and according to their height and body weight.**
2. **Modification of youth matches in such a way that physical strength doesn’t have such a big advantage and other aspects needed to play are developed at a high level.**
3. Playing on small pitches and in a smaller format will foster the development of individual technical and tactical skills.

Some of the best players in the world, if not the very best, were players who in the physical sense matured late. Of course, we are talking about Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi. There are plenty of other great professional footballers whose physical abilities were not an asset in the early phase of maturity. Players such as Harry Kane, Jamie Vardy, Kevin De Bruyne, Phil Foden, Oxlade-Chamberlain, Frank Lampard, Steven Gerard, Edin Hazard, Toby Alderweireld were also not noted for their height or somatic physique during adolescence.

In his excellent book (which I recommend to any coach working with talented athletes) "The Best – How Elite Athletes are made" Harry Kane says: “It’s hard to tell at that age what the player is going to turn into. I was small for my age. I was late maturing. So, look it is hard to call a player at such a young age”. I've never understood why a young player is discharged from the academy just because he isn't physically adequate – isn't yet adequate.

I remember an under eleven category match in London, where the smallest player on the pitch made the best decisions, had impeccable technique and an excellent understanding of the game. His potential to learn was already at a good level. This was evidenced by the way the boy solved various situations on the pitch. Interestingly, even the coaches of the opposing team were of the same opinion. This young eleven-year-old was on a so-called six-week trial. Also, during training, he showed amazing intelligence in solving problems encountered on the pitch. Unfortunately, his fate had already long been sealed, regardless of the fact that he was one of the best in terms of intelligence on the pitch. His disadvantage was being too small and frail and for this reason he was not accepted into the academy – another example of how bias leads to coaches failing to recognize a good student. The examples of players mentioned earlier are irrefutable proof that late maturing players aren’t necessarily worse and certainly it doesn’t mean that they can’t become professional footballers.

Over 45% of academy players are born between September and November (source: the article: Kevin De Bruyne developed late but would England have patience? Adam Bate, July 2016), which proves that the current system prefers the oldest in a given age category and the most developed in terms of physicality. What is the reason for this, since late maturing players not only play professionally, but are also among the best in the world?

Perhaps not development but focusing on performance and winning in one’s age category is more important than individual development and managing the learning potential of young players. In this same article one can read that in order to keep talented fifteen-year-olds, the Belgian federation created two teams: early and late maturing players. Belgian coaches made an excellent decision, thanks to which, today we can watch one of the best ball passing players – Kevin De-Bruyne, European midfielder Edin Hazard, the excellent goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, and the striker Romelu Lukaku and Dries Martens. These players were already maturing early at the cognitive-psychological level, and they had excellent learning potential. What they needed was to be understood and what physical level they had currently reached, the value of the learning process, patience and time. This is a good example of how to manage the learning process of late maturing players, so as to increase the chances of developing their qualities. Interestingly, Belgian clubs turned away many late maturing players, which were taken under the wing of the Belgian federation, who saw their exceptional potential in terms of anticipation, perception and intelligence.

Young players, who mature late, have the advantage over early maturing players that their environment and the challenges it poses to them are usually much more difficult, especially in physical terms. That’s because a late maturing player, in addition to a good mind, technique and problem-solving skills, learns to adapt and overcome the difficulties met in competing with much more physically developed peers. Such a player uses other advantages to be able to compete, but also to adapt physically. This willpower, adaptation and being outside the comfort zone in the long run brings only benefits in terms of personal development and football skill.

Training in a learning environment that requires adaptation to the conditions experienced is good for developing the potential a player possesses. Once the physical abilities equalize out, the former late maturing player will have a mental, social and individual advantage in terms of technical and tactical abilities. He will be better prepared to compete professionally. So, a biased approach focusing on performance here and now will favour physically strong players and overlook late maturing players. Such action leads to us not noticing or our bias not allowing us to soberly assess a young player and his skills. Likewise, it doesn’t allow us to understand what impact on the game and the result can be achieved by a young player with an excellent predisposition to make decisions and solve situations in an unconventional way.

My experience leads me to believe that the obsession of coaches, regarding group tactics and performance in each match and winning, favours early maturing players, which doesn’t mean (as I wrote earlier) that it creates an adequate environment for the development of their potential. Too often, their bias with regard to age and physical potential determines positive and negative selection of players. Too often we forget to focus on the learning process, its management and what stage of learning development a player has reached. This in turn leads to the current system losing a lot of talented young players.

Bio-banding is a good idea and a step forward to keep more late maturing players in the current system. The problem is that not everyone has been convinced about this idea and a majority of professional academies continue to prefer early maturing players. Bio-banding also fosters the physical and emotional changes that occur in adolescents. By using bio-banding, the academy program is more adapted to the needs of both early and late maturing players. And most importantly, they are constantly monitored and learn in an environment where challenges are tailored to their needs and potential and the individual development they have currently achieved.

Bio-banding has another important advantage. An early maturing child often uses his physical attributes in a match. When I was coaching Under 12s, I had a twelve-year-old in the group with a predisposition to play in attack. In a match against his peers, he used only his good physical advantage and scored a lot of goals. Of course, the coaches and parents were amazed by the teenager's performance, as if totally forgetting that most of those goals were scored thanks to his physical strength. This is a false environment for development, because if you score 5 or more goals per game, you don't experience any challenges. If you don’t have challenges, you don’t develop your potential and in the long run you will hit a wall. You will not be able to cope when you actually have to compete with players with the same physical parameters. The bio-banding environment gives players an opportunity to develop that is incomparable to that they experience when playing amongst their peers. The player develops technical, tactical and psychological aspects at an age that is predisposed to such development.

**The lesson taught by Chapter Four**

The learning environment must create the conditions and match the challenges to the needs of individual late and early maturing players in order to further develop their potential. If a player scores a few goals in each game, just because he surpasses everyone in physical strength, this is a so-called false environment, one that will not optimally help develop individual, technical-tactical and psychological skills.

The match environment should be used for further development and learning of the game. Focusing only on whether a young player is sufficiently efficient on the day and on winning is in the long run a mistake. We don’t see the player's strengths in the sense of the learning process; we only focus on the performance. Secondly, if matches are not competitive and one team wins by a large goal difference, this is to the detriment of the learning process and development of the potential of talented players.

The learning process is highly individualized, for which reason the training process should be adapted to the learning needs of a young player and the stage of this process he has currently reached. It should also combine the experience and knowledge that a player possesses before he joins the academy of a professional club, so that he can optimally develop his potential according to his needs and the stage of learning the game he has currently achieved.

Training should be planned in terms of the learning process of young players instead of focusing on the implementation of just a given topic. Training should also force players to balance on the edge between failure and success, because then their intrinsic motivation to achieve success increases, as it is difficult to achieve. Thus, young players also develop their potential at the psychological and social level.

**Chapter 5: Can we recognize high-potential players?**

Before we even consider what high-potential players look like, we should first consider the difference between learning, understanding what we are learning and the potential to learn.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word potential as follows: "someone's or something's ability to develop, achieve, or succeed" Potential Plus UK defines high learning potential thus: "high learning potential' most often refers to an ability to understand information well, make quick analyses and use memory capacity to learn quickly." (more on this at: <https://potentialplusuk.org/index.php/families/high-learning-potential/>). Furthermore, there is a big difference between what we learn and understanding what we have learned.

A good student is one who understands what he has learned and can demonstrate it in practice. He will be able not only to correlate the information he received during the learning process, but also to choose the most important bits of information that will be most useful to him at a given moment and will be the best for solving a given problem. He will intelligently combine the knowledge he has received with that which he already had earlier and thanks to this will draw appropriate conclusions when he makes a mistake.

Thus, a good student with high potential will not only assimilate and remember knowledge, but will know how to use it effectively and successfully. So we can assume that a player with high potential is one who not only has considerable football skills, but understands and knows how to use in a match the knowledge gained during training. He will be able to achieve this through a good memory, rapid analysis of the situation on the pitch and the problem ensuing from it. He will combine his experience to date with newly acquired knowledge and use the information that is most useful in the situations on the pitch which he encounters.

To better understand this, I will translate this into football language. A ten-year-old player has a learning goal: when to pass and when to dribble the ball in a 2 v 1 situation. The moment he finds himself in such a situation during a match, he will solve it quickly and effectively for the benefit of himself and the team. He will do so thanks to a good memory (the brain’s ability to remember), rapid correlation of facts (the 2 v 1 situation), quick analysis, and an understanding of the situation, while using only the information that is needed to make a decision (when to pass, when to dribble and what technique to use). Thanks to experience, he will quickly combine the knowledge acquired with the situation on the pitch in order to solve the 2 v 1 problem.

This last chapter will attempt to understand what high potential for learning to play football means. Can we reduce our dependence on "luck" in finding and recruiting high-potential players and how is that to be achieved? If we can find what we are looking for, why is it that so many young players in academies cannot realize their potential? This chapter will look for answers to these questions.

**5.1. Why don't young players fully exploit their potential to play football?**

Whole masses of young players training every day in professional academies fail to realize their potential. Instead of starting with themselves, coaches largely blame their young players for this. They often throw out such remarks such as: lack of personality, too weak physically, mentally weak, etc... as if forgetting that we are dealing with children who in many aspects are still developing.

Children recruited to an academy come to it with their own history and baggage of experiences that are rarely taken into account. This is a fundamental mistake, because apart from their purely football skills, we know nothing about this little fellow. Insufficient knowledge causes coaches to use training methods and teach in a way that is far different from the individual learning needs of the player himself. Training measures selected during sessions are not consistent with the learning stage which children have currently reached. Coaches’ interventions are not planned in accordance with the differences resulting from the individual needs of such players, the consequence being players being dismissed from the academy.

The main reason is a total lack of accurate information about these children and how they might learn, what their strengths and weaknesses are, whether or not they are good students and whether at this stage the academy environment fosters their further development. A child arriving at an academy must quickly adapt his past experiences to the new environment in which he is bombarded with a lot of new information. If a player is recruited only on the basis of being able to kick a ball in a straight line, when he finds himself in a new environment with much greater standards and a serious structure, he can quickly feel lost and fail to show all his potential.

A young player will be better assessed, and the risk of his being dismissed from the academy will be reduced, when coaches know how he learns, how he reacts to challenges and the new environment, whether or not he can adapt, how he reacts to failures, whether he can adapt to various situations and whether he is a good student in the practical sense of the word (he makes better decisions than others, knows how to solve problems). Such detailed information will also lead to a player being skilfully introduced into the academy and ensure optimal development of his potential.

A young player with plenty of potential for learning to play football will be able to effectively use every source of information. These sources will be the coach, the environment, the experience gained and newly gained knowledge. In other words, he will understand and correctly use the information provided by the coach, consistent with the educational goal set before him, whether for training purposes or in a match. For this to happen, such players require an environment that gives them the opportunity to solve problems and adapt to situations encountered on the pitch.

Academy-based coaches are so obsessed with the subject of a given training session, the game model, enforcement of the training plan, training performance, and group and team tactics that they completely ignore and largely misunderstand the learning process in adolescents. So instead of creating conditions for the players to individually solve situations occurring in the game, they too quickly squeeze them into a rigid framework of arrangements, formations and working in formation, etc…

This leads to young players not only failing to adapt to situations on the pitch, but also understanding them and being able to solve them, because they have never or rarely had the opportunity to experience these situations – ones that young players rarely have the opportunity to experience at their stage of development and training:

1. Solving 2 v 1 problems: to pass or dribble the ball.
2. How to defend 1-2's or overlapping situations.
3. Third man run.
4. How to defend in an overlap situation.
5. How to defend when an opponent runs forward with the ball.
6. How to create a line for passing.
7. Interactions between one providing information and its recipient in 2 v 2 situations.
8. 1 v 1 situations learned not in isolation but surrounded by other players.

In such situations, young players adapt to what the opponent is doing, how he behaves and what ensues from a given situation. Players develop their potential in the context of the game and react to events on the pitch. The more lessons of this type, the better for the development of players’ potential, because it is they who decide on the solutions to problems, while it’s the coach who prepares such a game, where players will pick up information directly from the game itself. The coach will intervene less, with better results. His interventions will add to the learning process of young players and will have a positive impact on the development of their potential.

To conclude this line of thought, young players will not fully use their potential at the next stage of learning if at the basic stage, group and team tactics have completely minimized the learning of individual technical and tactical skills. Instead of creating opportunities for players to learn and individually solve situations on the pitch, coaches too often and too quickly push for players to learn tactics, focusing on performance resulting from game models.

The second important factor inhibiting the potential of academy players is a failure to delve thoroughly into individual details and the effectiveness of using the technique of individual players. As I mentioned earlier, those coaching youths are too quick to apply group or team tactics, thus reducing individual potential. Understanding how individual high quality technical and tactical skills look in modern football at the highest level will help in more effectively developing individual potential. Coaches will be able to choose such training measures that will best suit the individual needs of players.

I well remember a presentation at my coaching course, where we were introduced to the characteristics of modern football players in positions seven and eleven. The presentation showed what individual technical and tactical skills should be sought and developed in young players. The presentation also focused on psychological and social characteristics and, to a lesser extent, physical ones. I present the selected traits below:

1. Keeping possession of the ball under constant pressure from an opponent and in a small space.
2. Creative elimination of an opponent in a 1 v 1 game.
3. The ability to adapt and consider problems, e.g. recognizing key moments during a game, such as receiving and running with the ball and without it behind the opponent's lines of defence.
4. Creative and intelligent passes that are used to break the opponent's lines of defence.
5. Individual positioning.
6. Timing.
7. Versatility.
8. Relations with a wing defender at the social level (understanding).
9. Understanding one’s role in a team.
10. Courage and stubbornness in the face of failure.
11. Speed of movement enabling one to repeat similar actions.
12. Strength in facing physical challenges (physical duels).
13. Agility in using the body quickly and effectively.
14. A high level of readiness and willingness to run beyond the opponent's lines of defence.

With greater knowledge and understanding of what a high level of skill looks like, we will know better what young players need in order to play professional football. Thus, understanding the learning process, the stage a young player has reached and knowledge of how individual qualities (technical and tactical skills) look will enable coaches to increase the individual potential of their players.

Coaches love to apply restrictions in training, which are not always conducive to individual development. Frequently applied restrictions inhibit individual potential and don’t always reflect the actual game. Using such restrictions as "you can only play two contacts" not only fails to reflect the game but has a negative impact on young players, whose strengths are dribbling, playing 1 v 1 or running with the ball. The application of such a restriction forces players to eliminate their strengths! That is why it is so important to use intelligent restrictions that will develop individual learning potential. Again, we return to the individual needs of players and who needs what and at what stage of learning the game to further develop their potential and individual abilities.

Another restriction that academy coaches love to apply is to set a certain number of passes that must be made between players before a forward pass takes place, etc. This again is a restriction that has no real connection with the game itself. That’s because this restricts young players from making good and effective decisions (for example, when to play forward and when not), i.e. solving problems directly resulting from a given situation and the game in progress.

Furthermore, the restrictions mentioned don't represent an actual game. If a player can only play two contacts, his opponent will organize his defence in relation to that particular restriction and not as it would look in a real football match. This will adversely affect the development of most players. Another restriction used in youth and children's football is: all players of the attacking team must touch the ball in order to score a goal. This type of rule limits the individual potential of players in the following ways:

1. It doesn’t represent the game.
2. It limits the ability to make quick and effective decisions (for example: breaking the defensive line by passing to a free space).
3. It excludes the possibility of trying for a goal when it is possible.
4. It limits perceptual and cognitive abilities

Generally speaking, any restrictions that don’t represent the actual game will have a negative impact on the development of players’ potential. Likewise, too many restrictions threaten the development of players' potential. This will lead players to make decisions based on restrictions, and not what the game itself presents. The information they will use will also be limited.

All this will impose limitations on an individual player with good perceptual and cognitive skills. His decisions will be less effective. His individual decision-making potential will be limited. The more such training sessions are conducted and the longer this process lasts, the more we inhibit the individual development and strengths of young players. Using a simple rule: less is more and applying restrictions consistent with the level of a young player, we will be able to ensure he continues to progress.

**The lesson taught by Chapter Five**

If coaches focus heavily on performance and less on learning potential, in the long run the system will lose young players who are 'good students' of the game. A good student is a player who will be able to use and combine the knowledge acquired and use it in an effective way during the game.

When a child arrives at an academy with all the baggage of his past experiences, not only relating to football, coaches should first of all determine and understand what stage of learning the young player has reached. This will increase the chances of optimal individual development and his potential to play football.

Focusing on game models and teaching group tactics too quickly leads to individual technical-tactical, psychological and social skills being neglected, which negatively affects the development of a student's learning potential.

The use of restrictions and training measures during training sessions should be intelligently selected and adapted to the individual needs of young players so that they progressively develop their individual potential

**Conclusion**

This book is the result of my own experience working in the academies of professional clubs. During that time, I got to know all too well the structure, environment and system that reject 99.9% of talented youngsters with the potential to play professionally. I was constantly wondering why this was happening and how to resolve the existing problems regarding the structure, system, training and learning process of young players.

Do we as an environment really do everything to ensure as many young players as possible play football professionally?

Working at the level of professional academies allowed me to draw certain conclusions regarding training and present them in this publication. Practical experience gained in working with talented children and adolescents has allowed me to present many positive examples as well as describe my doubts concerning the current youth training system. I believe that the statistics and conclusions of scientific research presented in this book and my own thoughts will lead the reader to reflect and wonder: is the current system effective and does it reflect the individual needs of young players?

Or is it largely structured to satisfy the ambitions and egos of adults (coaches, parents, etc...)?

After all, only 0.00001% of the 1.5 million youngsters playing football became professional footballers! This is not something to be proud of, but rather a statistic that prompted me to write this book and dig deeper into why this is happening. I think that each reader will draw his own conclusions. Perhaps the book will have a positive impact on the people managing academies and encourage further evolution of a system in which young footballers will actually be at the centre of the training and learning process.

One beautiful spring Friday evening, a new player appeared at my sessions, who was to be with us for six weeks (a trial to see if the eleven h -year-old was good enough!). Well, this youngster had impeccable technique, at a better level than the current eleven-year-old academy players. In addition, his intelligence on the pitch and cognitive abilities were at a high level. He was able to pass extraordinarily well, and his perceptual abilities often enabled him to make moves surprising his opponents.

I remember a match in London played against a Category 1 club. After the game, the coaches unanimously admitted that this kid was the best on the pitch in terms of perception and cognitive abilities. Unfortunately, after the six weeks were up, he was not registered as an academy player.

The reason?

Well, he was too small (again, we are talking about an eleven-year-old). In this case, the decision was based on biased views and the system, to put it bluntly, simply "spat the boy out" without offering anything in return. My book was written with the aim of making sure that there are as few such cases as possible and as many opportunities as possible to develop adolescents with great potential to learn the game of football.

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