

Talent Identification and Development in Youth Football in India

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problem Statement and Background Information

The issue of talent identification and development (TID) in football is prevalent globally despite the popularity and growth of football. The recently released report dated 17th May 2021 by FIFA titled "Increasing Global Competitiveness-An Analysis of the Development Ecosystem" highlights the importance and correlation of TID and footballing success. The report reveals that only half of the top 100 member associations have a TID system in place and that more than 80% of top 20 member associations adopt a systematic approach to TID.

While many European countries have developed several frameworks to ensure that their youth football system allows talented players to emerge from a process of nurturing, the Indian youth system is yet to formalise such practices. At an international level, very few Indian footballers made it to the global football leagues.

The current system and process employed for TID is not well defined in India. The emphasis is on competing and winning rather than a sustainable TID system. The Indian youth football ecosystem currently lacks the holistic approach and focused expertise to maximise the window of accelerated adaptation to training and developing fundamental football skills. The quote by FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, Arsène Wenger, emphasises the issue. "Our immediate target is that every member association should reach its full potential to have the strongest possible national team. A long term plan for talent development is essential for success."

The lack of targeted approaches to the development of youth football in India has, on many occasions, led to one-sided preparation, early burnout, lost potential, with many talented players lost early in the system. Apart from factors like inadequate planning, quality of education, infrastructure, financial resources to train the youth, lack of competition, exposure to more games, poor quality of tournaments, the lack of awareness about TID and the parameters influencing it remains the vital issue in Indian youth football ecosystem.

Purpose of the Research Study

Three of our 5-member research team are active footballers, one member is closely involved in media management of a renowned football club, and the other member owns a football academy. Taking a cue from the football experiences of the research group, TID emerged as the most crucial in Indian youth football. An extensive review of literature validated the consensus.

The report focuses on several aspects of TID that are key to ensuring the sustained growth of football in India. The report analyses the TID process and its physiological, technical, tactical, psychological & social parameters for developing youth football players in India. The study identifies the issues that are impeding the progress of TID. While providing insights into the

prevalent practices in youth football in India, the report aids youth football clubs and academies better understand the process of talent identification and growth.

The report provides practical steps towards improving the TID process for All India Football Federation (AIFF) and other Indian youth football ecosystem stakeholders like state associations, clubs, and academies. The suggestions provided will help improve the current practices in India's youth football clubs and academies and build a sustainable flow of talent pool in Indian youth football.

Main Arguments

There are several reasons why India has struggled to unearth talent for the national team. Some of them are listed below:

1. The talent pool coming out of the Indian academies lacks the footballing education and encouragement needed to succeed at the topmost level.
2. Vast fragmentation of the Indian subcontinent into several cultural and environmental conditions makes it challenging for India to develop a winning game plan for TID.
3. A sustained and collaborative effort to grow and nurture talent through a systematic approach has been missing.
4. Lack of data collection, analysis and slow digitalisation of the leagues has made it challenging to identify the right talent.

Lack of youth football talent development in India and football education plight can be gauged from the quote below:

"As a young player, I believe I was fortunate to get the opportunities to showcase my talent and climb the ladder to footballing excellence and represent my country. However, I am cognizant of the current unhealthy state of professional and youth football in India. It is our duty to undertake this responsibility to bring a fundamental change and ensure the young talent is nurtured in the best possible manner." - Baichung Bhutia, Former Indian Football Team Captain.

Method of collecting data

The study is both qualitative and quantitative and involves descriptive research. The study group utilised the following methodologies for data collection:

Primary Research: Google survey form

A well-researched questionnaire consisting of 32 questions, calling out all the essential parameters for the development of youth football players, was distributed to football coaches in India. The database of 6500 coaches registered on the AIFF coaching portal

formed the core population of the study. The study sample comprised of initial 352 coach responses. Opinions and viewpoints from current experts, active in the Indian youth football ecosystem, sought via electronic mails and telephonic conversations augmented the primary research.

Secondary research was carried out to make the study more robust and reliable by reviewing official websites of AIFF, FIFA, other governing bodies and global football clubs/academies. Scholarly articles review papers, empirical articles, academic books, governing body documents - AIFF Strategic plans 1.0 and 2.0. Best practices of few global youth football academies, journalistic articles, and insights formed a part of secondary research.

Overview of Findings

1. There seems to be a lack of coherence between the TID practices followed within the most successful football academies in Europe and India.
2. The emphasis on the outcome (winning), as opposed to the process (skill development), is generally seen as a shortcoming in the Indian youth football system.
3. The coaching and scouting issue is integral to the core issue of TID.
4. The Indian coach education system design is not accurate to reflect the kind of skill development it requires.
5. Most of the D-License and C-License coaches are responsible for identifying and developing U-17 players. Yet, they seem to lack an in-depth understanding of the correct parameters and characteristics inherent to these age-development groups.
6. Several critical decisions that the coaches make, either during in-game situations or during training, seem to be borne out of deeply embedded individual biases.
7. Digital transformation is lacking in most Indian football youth clubs and academies.
8. Most of the coaches in India seem to believe psychological, social and tactical characteristics to be the most important.
9. Coaches share the responsibility of several other roles that are not part of their primary job due to a lack of infrastructure and services at different clubs/academies.

Recommendations

1. Creation and effective implementation of national talent development plan to improve talent pool in youth football.
2. Develop a comprehensive scouting system with technical experts at the helm.

3. Age-stage development models must be a priority to develop Indian youth football. Coaches must be aware of the progressive nature of training adaptation.
4. Specific long-term player development strategy must be in place in youth football academies and clubs.
5. At the ages of U-14 and 14-17 years, technical and physiological characteristics are the most important in TID. However, social and tactical parameters emerged as the most preferred parameters in the survey for coaches in India, and this aspect needs a rethink.
6. Indian coaching system must focus on the technical and physiological characteristics during the TID process at the youth level. More importantly, coaches need more education to identify these characteristics among players.
7. The development of a player is not linear. The late maturation of players is a recognised phenomenon, and coaches must pay attention to it.
8. Digital transformation can go a long way in helping bring a change and identifying the right set of people who would help bring this change.
9. Services that are part of any modern club, such as doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, analysts, performance tracking tools, among others, need to be present at all clubs and academies to assist coaches and players in fast-track development.
10. Coaches must focus on the holistic development of players keeping in mind the extrinsic factors of environment, conditions, family and culture.
11. The coach licensing system in India needs to become mandatory for training youth players, and the category of license to be the basis for appropriate age-specific training.
12. International exposure at global clubs and academies for coaches to improve their technical training practices.
13. Considering India's regional and cultural diversity, a holistic development model needs to be adopted that removes different region-specific biases.
14. To improve football in most states and make every state follow the same basic principles of talent identification and development, AIFF should have more vested control and interest in the talent identification and development practices prevalent in each state.
15. Encouraging private initiatives like Indian Football Foundation and BBFS can impact and transform Indian youth football.