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The player of tomorrow

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1. Tomorrow's player – shaped from today's youngsters

Sport in general – and this is particularly the case with football – has an important educative role to play in the learning and development process of youngsters. Football not only has to provide the opportunity for youngsters to develop the skills that are peculiar to the game; it also has to help them develop their personality and their psychological and social skills.

Specialist football schools, academies and other training centres have to gear their education and training programmes to the concept of all-round education and to playing an educative role, while still respecting the various stages of development and the learning objectives of those stages.

While children's football covers basic training and initiation of youngsters to the game, primarily through games and co-ordination exercises, a substantial amount of work still has to be achieved with the development and education of tomorrow's youth players while they are at their "building" stage, the age of pre-training/pre-development, i.e. 11 or 12 to 15 years of age.

This is the "golden age" for developing technical skills, as well as the technical/tactical rudiments of the game and even basic psychology skills. All of the basics of technique, individual tactical awareness and the fundamental principles of the game are trained at this age, as are mental attitudes, such as concentration, self-confidence, perseverance, willpower, etc. The work done at this pre-training/pre-development stage therefore has to be optimised, and the coaches/educators who work with the players have to be passionate about their educative role. Several players today have achieved their fame because of the education/training that they received at centres of excellence, but also as a result of the substantial work that is carried out at national association and club level at this pre-development/pre-training age.

We know the importance of the age at which performance is trained (16-19). At this stage, the greatest emphasis is placed on the athletic and physical preparation of players as well as on their mental approach and tactical preparation – all fundamental requirements for playing the game at the top level. Indeed, certain countries have now launched specific development programmes for this particular level of training. The most recent major international competitions have provided proof of the excellent work being done by several countries with young players in this age group.

In our opinion, a post-development/training stage is now required at the level when top-level performance is being trained (i.e. 18 or 19 to 21), to ensure that there is a follow-up with the work previously done and also that the training/development of youth players is brought to a proper conclusion. We are thinking here of those players aged 18-19 who regularly play in the first team (either in an amateur or professional set-up). It often happens that these young players have still not completed their development and training; there are gaps apparent, especially on a physical level (e.g. with muscular power), on a technical level (e.g. with heading), and on a mental level (e.g. perseverance). These gaps can block the young players from moving up to the very top level of the game. They find themselves having to work with professional players in training sessions that are essentially geared to the work of the team as a whole and to competitive activity. Unfortunately, they are not able to follow on a regular basis and at their own development pace a specific training and development programme that is geared to individual skills. To remedy this situation, we feel it is advisable to hold specific individual and group training sessions (this will also improve the quality of the relationship between the coach and the players).

The training and developing of future professional players is, of course, fully justified, because it ensures that they are better prepared to face playing at the top level. It is, however, essential to remember that the game of football has a wider role to play and that it has to include basic educative values as part of its agenda. Football has to provide a real School of Life, a school that is prepared to train and develop not only the elite players of tomorrow, but also all of those youngsters who are passionate about the game and who form the base of the football pyramid that the game needs to ensure its continued progress.

Tomorrow's player



Table 1: The stages of development

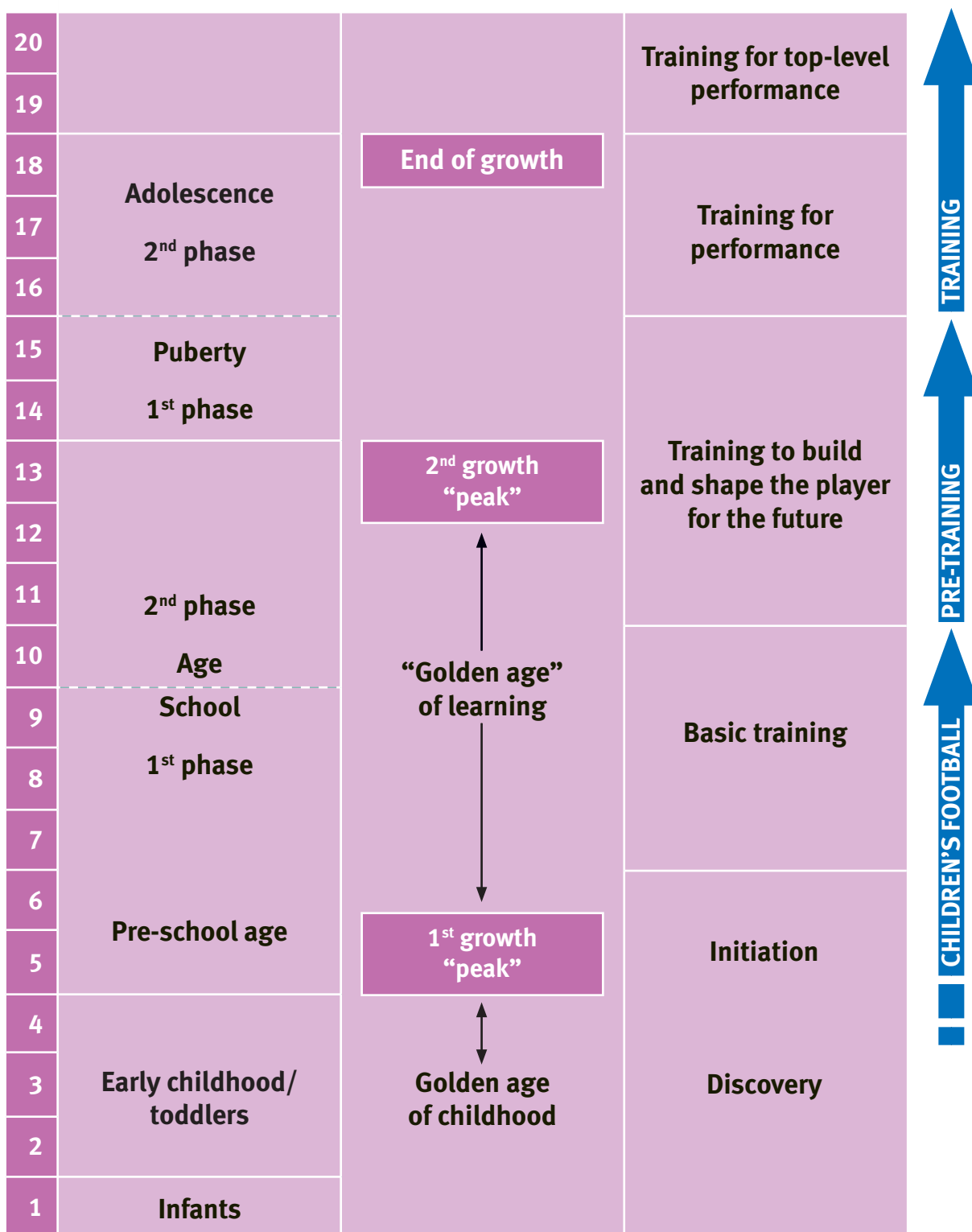


Table 2: The key components that determine performance in young players

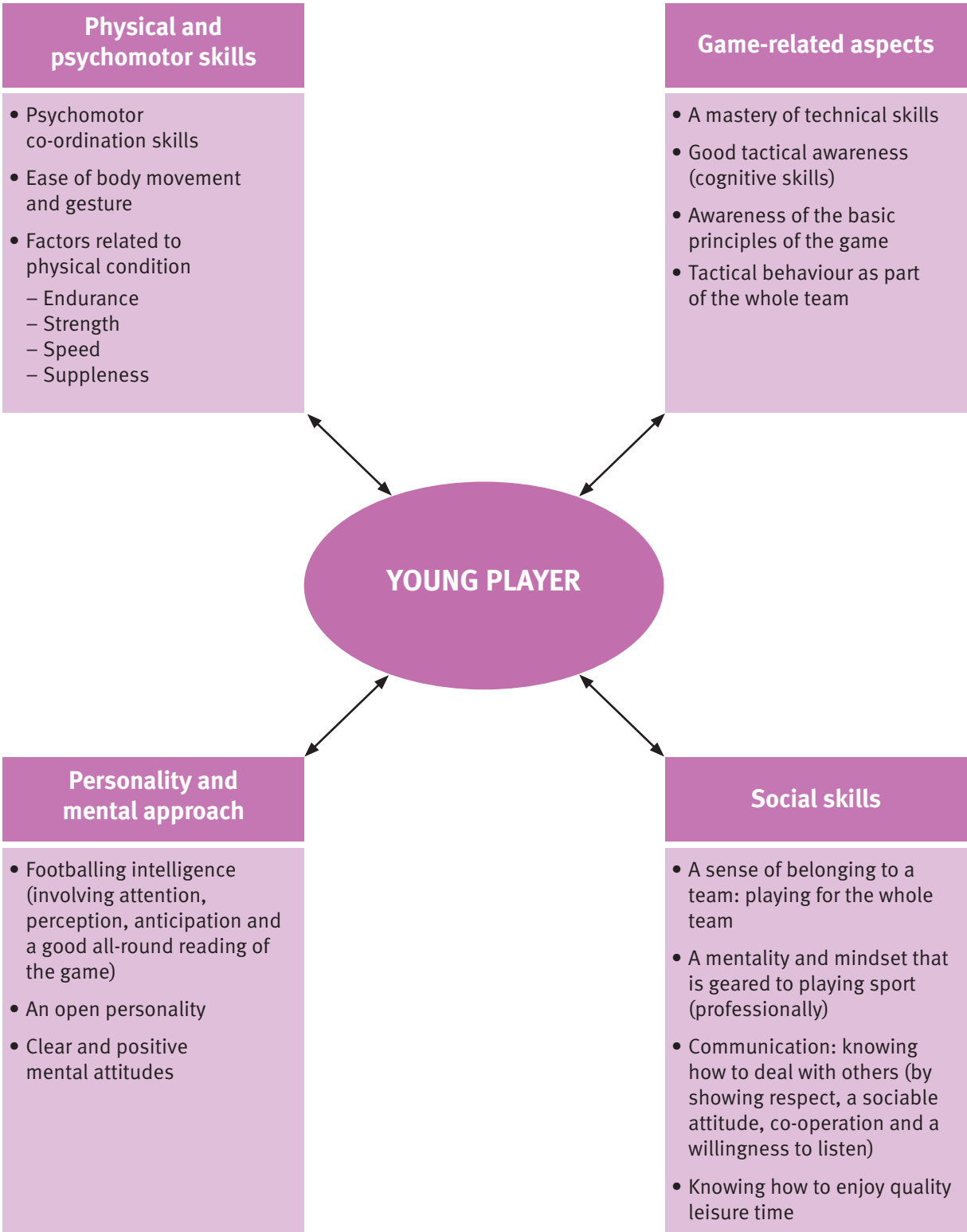


Table 3: The key components that determine performance in young players

BASIC TRAINING Children's football 8-12 years of age Exploring – Experimenting • The age of early childhood to childhood • The age of acquiring and learning gestures • The age of discovery and copying others • Psychomotor co-ordination skills • Technical instinct and the discovery of gestures • Individual ball control • Tactical awareness (individual) • Understanding of the notions of attack and defence • “Me and the team” • Mental attitudes acquired through experience Co-ordination – Basic motor functions • Play – Exercises with the ball – Play	TRAINING TO BUILD AND SHAPE THE PLAYER FOR THE FUTURE Pre-training/development stage 12-15 years of ages Consolidation – Assimilating • Puberty stage • Full control of bodily gestures and elementary aspects • Difficult period mentally • Training of basic technical skills • Technical/tactical skills • Individual ball control “under pressure” • A sense of individual and team tactical awareness (cognitive skills) • Defensive and attacking tactical behaviour • Responsibility in the game • Acquiring basic mental attitudes through experience and through specific forms of training Co-ordination – Basic endurance – Muscle strengthening – Speed • Collective and specific (individual) training • Practice matches – Combined technical and technical/tactical exercises – Play	TRAINING FOR PERFORMANCE The training and development stage 15-18/19 years of age Stabilising – Getting procedures to become automatic • Adolescent phase with growth coming to an end • Specific athletic and physical training/development • Age of making definite choices; development towards the status of a young adult; the period of “truth” • Technical work by position and by team unit “under pressure” • Complex technical/tactical skills “under pressure” • Individual technique with the ball; fine tuning, precision (specific training sessions) • Team tactical awareness • Attacking and defensive tactical behaviour as part of the game plan (organisation and playing system) • Specific tactical behaviour • Mental attitudes geared to performance instilled by specific training or other techniques Power-strength – Speed – Specific endurance • Collective (team) training • Gearing of the training to individual requirements • Practice matches – Technical/tactical exercises – Real matches
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1.1 Training and education and technical development

As has already been stated, the improvement of technical expertise is one of the prime training objectives in the process of developing today's youngsters into tomorrow's stars.

At the key age of learning, the pre-training/pre-development stage, work on technical skills should take up the majority of the training schedule. At each training session, technical moves should be worked on using specific exercises or during games. Use of the ball can also be included in physical activities focusing on aspects such as endurance, speed and suppleness.

Unfortunately, experience has shown us that the teaching of technique is all too often neglected, with emphasis placed instead on the instruction of team tactics and physical condition.

Even when work is done on training technical skills, this all too frequently becomes geared to specific positions, thereby reducing the range of overall skills that the player has in his armoury.

Today's game at the highest level calls for tactical versatility, but this versatility cannot be achieved without perfect technical mastery. Gaps can frequently be seen with youngsters aged between 15 and 16 at the training/development stage when they are faced with having to play intensive football under pressure. They are unable to make the right choice technically, they lack speed in their movements, and they have gross motor skills (as opposed to fine motor skills) because they do not have sufficient experience and technical solutions to offer. Consequently, young players have to be given a basis of motor experiences (co-ordination) starting from the first learning stage (11-15 years of age), on which they can build; and they have to be taught general individual technical skills (i.e. basic technical skills), thereby allowing them to increase their range of movements and, as a result, their confidence when working with the ball.

Because of the pleasure that youngsters derive from playing the game and the creativity that it engenders, they can acquire these motor experiences simply by playing football in the street or on a piece of waste ground, or even in lessons at school. Unfortunately, these outlets seem to be gradually disappearing. Consequently, emphasis has to be placed on these essential elements in football schools, albeit with a specially adjusted approach, because it is at precisely this age that the psychomotor foundations for good technique are laid.

At the training/development age (16-17), work has to be done on training the skills required in situations of intensive play in a match and on developing specific technical movements, using specially adapted forms of training and a specific methodology (i.e. specific training depending on position).

“Before playing a piece of music, the pianist
still has to practise his scales every day.”

Some basic rules to help make technical training more efficient

a) The time devoted to technical training and technical learning has to be increased

- For youngsters at the pre-training/development stage, at least 50 to 60% of training time scheduled in the planning must be devoted to technical instruction and technical development.
- 2 to 3 sessions (collective and individual) should be held per week, with the main emphasis on technical work, as well as specific sessions geared to the individual to improve both strong and weak points.
- The number of ball touches per session must be increased, using all the contact surfaces (inside and outside of the foot, instep, both feet, thighs, chest and head).
- During warm-ups and active rest periods, the coaching staff must include work using the ball.

b) Technical training must be diversified and adapted to the realities of the modern game

- The content and the training methods used need to be adjusted to the age and the level of the players.

→ Progress from the simple to the complex

Methodological progression (e.g. for shooting on goal)

- Shooting with a dead ball (ball on the ground)
- Shooting after a straight run
- Shooting after a zigzagging run
- Shooting after being thrown off balance
- Shooting after controlling the ball (simple control and control on the turn)
- Shooting after dribbling and after feinting
- Shooting after receiving a pass (a long pass forward, a crossfield pass or a pass pulled back across the area)
- Shooting after a one-two
- Shooting under pressure (being timed with a stopwatch)
- Shooting under pressure (from an opponent)
- Shooting after a sequence of moves (control, dribble, feint)
- Shooting after a 1 v 1 duel
- Shooting in a simulated match situation
- Shooting in a real match

- If possible, work on training technique-related movements should be preceded by work on co-ordination.
- Two-footed technique must be improved, especially with regard to receiving the ball and making the first pass (e.g. control with the right foot followed immediately by a pass with the left foot as a means of speeding play up).

- The learning process starts with the acquisition of the fundamental technical movements (these are the basic motor actions that are characteristic of the game and are the body's biomechanical response to the demands made of it by the game).

For example:

- Getting the ball under control (the player-ball relationship)
- Running and dribbling with the ball and feinting
- Controlling
- Shooting
- Heading
- Tackling

- Players must be given training as early as possible in movement technique; this will allow them to reach rational solutions when opting for the moves to be made in a real match situation.

For example: In a passing drill with two players, a third player joins in to provide the other two players with real movement solutions (e.g. a triangular passing move, a choice of style of play or a choice of move).

- The exercises should not merely be placed one after another; instead, they should be scheduled in such a way that they relate directly to the game in which the skill that is being practised is to be applied.
- In the games where the skills that are being practised are applied, it is imperative that the players can use the technical moves they have worked on in a real play or match situation (players progress from an analytical exercise to a genuine situation).

For example: After a series of drills working on passing, the players play a practice game in which they concentrate on retaining possession (5 v 5 + 2 floating players) with only three touches allowed per player on a reduced-size pitch; the dimensions of the pitch are then changed to vary the type of pass.

- Technical training work should not be done when players are extremely tired (especially in the case of young players), otherwise there will be a drop in the players' technical level as well as a decrease in their motivation and their confidence.
- At the training/development stage (16–18), once the basics have been acquired, technical training “under pressure” when the players are tired will help to simulate real match conditions (the stress of competitive action, the need for self-confidence).
- At the training/development stage as well, technical training is carried out more as a constituent part of work on tactics and will depend on the playing system of the team and how that system is organised (technical work with individual team units).

“As a technical move, the pass is the very essence of the game on the pitch and of communication between players.”

c) The coach's key role in teaching technical skills

- With young players, technical coaching work is just as important as tactical coaching work, possibly even more so:
 - The technical training session must be well prepared.
 - Technique can be learned; it necessitates the application of methodological and educational processes and principles.

→ demonstrate – explain

The player must understand how an exercise has to be done and why, but he must also be convinced of its effectiveness; the clarity of the demonstration and the quality of execution are therefore of particular importance here.

- Organising and forming groups
 - Use playing areas that will allow numerous touches of the ball.
 - Ensure that the groups are even (i.e. in terms of the level of the players).
 - Correct and reinforce.
 - To optimise motivation, constant attention must be paid to the quality and effectiveness of execution.
 - Intervene at the right moment (this is an art in itself!).
 - Give precise feedback relating to the objectives (be calm, reassuring, convincing).

Example of decisive elements of a technical move that might require correction: **striking the ball:**

- Receiving the necessary information (the player must have his head up)
- Choice of move (which contact surface to use)
- Use of the limbs (playing the ball with the feet, short strides)
- Body position
- Position of the standing leg
- The striking foot (steady)
- Running past the ball
- Flicking the ball with the leg
- Quality of the run, going towards the ball (avoiding long strides)
- Weighting the ball (differentiating)

- Motivating the players

If a training session is well conducted, with the coach ensuring that the players are active, committed and efficient, they will want to intensify the technical work of their own accord. Giving free rein to their technical creativity (e.g. by letting them work out moves on their own) will also enhance motivation.
- Monitoring how a player acts (i.e. his choice of tactic and his technical execution) using video is an extremely useful additional tool as an aid to learning, as is studying the way in which the top players operate (as examples of technique and role models).

d) The players' level of mental commitment must be high

- Emphasise the need for vigilance, concentration, perseverance, spontaneity, autonomy and creativity:
 - Provide specific exercises to develop mental strength (free play on a reduced size pitch).
 - Work out and include tactical/technical solutions for the players by using attack versus defence practice games.
 - Allow time for the training to be geared to the players' individual needs (each player has to work on his strengths and weaknesses himself).
 - Encourage players to take risks, to try out something new; do not hamper them by giving them instructions that are too inhibiting.
 - Allow the players to practise dead ball situations individually.
 - Reward a team that scores after an outstanding move or an exceptional piece of technical skill.
 - Get the players to reflect on their performance:
 - What caused that lack of accuracy when you were trying to switch play?
 - Why didn't you know what to do with the ball after controlling it?
- Encourage players to visualise images in their mind (to memorise the moves that they have to make, to keep in mind past triumphs or moves made by their role model players) and to talk to each other.

e) Technical training has to be carried out regularly and with an ongoing programme as part of the whole training process

- Gradually increase the number of sessions where the main emphasis is on technical work.
- Include technical cycles in the training mesocycles.

Example: a four-week cycle designed to improve crosses and receiving the ball (volleying) in front of goal. This work can be included and then gradually combined with work on other aspects of the game, such as tactics and physical and mental development.

See table 8, chapter 9, training plan

- An ongoing assessment of his players' progress will allow the coach to plan training sessions that are tailored to the players' individual needs.
- It is advisable to work specifically on technique in individual sessions as soon as a player has shown interest in and understands the need for such training.

- Reasons for a drop in motivation during a technical training session:
 - The purpose of the exercise (or practice game) is not understood
 - The exercise is too easy or too complicated
 - There is a lack of progress in the methodology
 - Too much time is spent on one exercise
 - The correction is not precise or too vague
 - There is an insufficient success rate or a lack of efficiency in the session
 - Not enough reinforcing or encouragement
 - There is too much waiting about between exercises
 - The players are too tired
 - The coach is aggressive or authoritarian
 - The coach does not encourage creativity or risk-taking
 - The coach is too picky

In a nutshell:

Even though the best way of learning the game is to play it, players should still make a conscious effort to build on their technical or technical/tactical skills through analytical exercises (where the move is broken down into its basic elements and then made automatic or instinctive for the players in technical drills) and by working on potential game situations. The right balance has to be found between exercises and full-scale practice matches to ensure that the player is exposed to all the situations that would be encountered in a real match.

→ **Technical quality will always enable a team to win.**

1.2 Some key tips concerning the physical preparation of young players

Although the learning period at pre-training/pre-development level is the right moment for technical and technical/tactical training work, it is also important to ensure that the appropriate physical and athletic qualities are formed in the young player at this stage. It is worth emphasising that physical training for young players is not merely a scaled-down version of adult training. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the coach must pay rigorous attention to the various stages of physical and mental development in children or adolescents, and this must be reflected in his choice of exercises and methods and in the manner in which he organises working groups. However, since this growth or development will vary from one individual to another (because of differences in lifestyle and growth patterns), the coach must always be aware that he cannot treat all the players in the same way; the locomotive apparatus (skeletal structure, cartilage, tendons and ligaments) is still fragile, especially around the age of puberty (12-15 years of age). Furthermore, the coach must be able to give the correct weighting to endurance training (aerobic pathway and anaerobic pathway), so that metabolism problems and particularly heart-related problems can be prevented.

As speed and strength have both become essential elements in today's game, the development of strength has gained in importance in recent years. Also, for preventive reasons, and to make it possible to perform quality strength training with young players as soon as their growth phase has ended, it is essential to include muscle strengthening work where the players use their own body weight, as early as the pre-training/development stage.

Finally, coaches working with young players during their learning phase must ensure that any work relating to the players' physical condition is combined with technical training as frequently as possible. Integrated training with the ball must be considered as a priority during the pre-training/development stage, while physical conditioning work should take place only during the training/development stage (16-18), and linked to the physical factors that are to be developed.

The development of endurance capacities

- Basic endurance (aerobic capacity) has a considerable influence on all endurance qualities. Furthermore, its beneficial effects on overall health are undeniable, and its role in the prevention of accidents and injuries is by no means negligible. It also aids recovery to a large extent and is instrumental in the execution of technical skills. Consequently, endurance training must initially be geared towards improving this basic endurance and aerobic capacity (70-80% of MHR).
- Youngsters who play football and other sports regularly will develop basic endurance easily. Continuous exercises with the ball, practising moves by interval training or by playing practice matches are all effective ways of developing this basic endurance.
- Work at moderate intensity (70-80% of MHR) helps to build up the body's oxygen reserves, as well as the whole organic system and the heart. From the age of 12-13 onwards, daily sessions of practice matches and integrated exercises (e.g. running with the ball, passing exercises and simulated match situations) should be incorporated in the training.
- Aerobic power (AP) can be developed gradually from the age of 14-15 onwards by interval or intermittent training. This will have an effect on cardiac output as well, and will help the body to become accustomed to working in a state of fatigue (at 80-90% of MHR). Small-sided practice matches on a reduced-size pitch (3 v 3 / 4 v 4 / 5 v 5), are also included for the training of specific endurance (aerobic/anaerobic).
- High-quality endurance work at the age of puberty will determine the players' performance capacity in later life, since individuals have a greater capacity for and a greater tolerance to exertion at this age. (Weineck, 1990).

The development of speed

- Speed is a decisive factor in modern football and is best trained at a very early age, between 9 and 13, over short distances, (10-20m) and with long breaks (as the central nervous system can still be “moulded” before full maturity).
- Co-ordination and movement exercises, such as skipping, footwork, changing direction and working with the ball, are the basis of speed development in young footballers; this is different from a sprinter’s training (which is geared more towards synchronisation between the arms, body and legs).
- When combined with speed training, technical training will help players in their attempts to achieve optimal speed (integrated speed training).
- Speed of reaction (liveliness or explosiveness) can be worked on using various play exercises (e.g. contests or games), especially in aerobic endurance sessions to assist motivation. Integrated training with the ball allows the players to simulate real game situations (e.g. a 5m burst of speed finishing with a shot or an accurate pass).
- Speed strength and speed endurance (anaerobic) with longer sprints (80-100m) can be trained from 16-17 years of age, in tandem with strength training and by working on simulated match situations.
- As soon as training on performance has begun (at 16-17 years of age), it is possible for players to work on achieving high speed repeatedly (anaerobic lactic capacity [ALC]) by means of intensive running, either with or without a ball.
- Finally, it is imperative that the prescribed interval between exertions (i.e. repetitions and sets) is fully respected to guarantee full recovery of performance capacity (i.e. a heart rate of 110-100) and to ensure that the speed work is performed efficiently.

The development of strength

- The pre-puberty stage (12-14 years of age) is ideal for developing overall strength (thereby ensuring well-balanced development). Exercises to develop the posture muscles (upper body) are essential for children. The muscle strengthening method is recommended for this first phase as an introduction to strength training.
- Work with light loads can be gradually introduced at around the age of 15-16 (depending on the players), but the player’s body weight must not be exceeded. The necessary precautions must be taken, i.e. ensuring correct execution of the exercises, adherence to the recommended weight limits and increased supervision of the training session. Even at this stage, it is imperative that the programme is tailored to meet individual requirements.
- Training with low and high jumps (reactive speed) and multi-jumps (plyometrics) can be introduced progressively from age 14-15. Given the fragility of the muscles, joints and ligaments (e.g. knees, ankles and adductors) of these young players, appropriate precautions must be taken. This type of work must therefore always be preceded by a proper warm-up (co-ordination), and the posture muscles (abdominals and dorsals) need to be toned. An adequate break between exercises is essential. Suppleness work must also be included at the end of the session, together with some gradual stretching and limbering down exercises to relieve tension on the spinal column (wind-down + mobility).
- With the youngest group, (10-12 years of age), working with a skipping rope and hoops is an excellent way of developing muscular elasticity, reaction speed and even speed strength. It also provides a good opportunity to concentrate on footwork, suppleness and ankle strength, not to mention co-ordination, as well as serving as a useful preparation for quick starts, sprinting and ball control.

- Uphill running work in the countryside (on slopes, hillsides or steps), is another simple form of training that can have positive effects on the development of muscle power (speed strength).
- Strength training with young players must be carried out in the presence of coaches who are qualified to supervise this type of work.

The development of co-ordination (psychomotor skills)

- Co-ordination is a fundamental requirement for the execution of technical skills and develops in children very early, from 6 to 8. Between the ages of 9 and 12, psychomotor development starts to stabilise.
- Nowadays, co-ordination training is necessary to make up for the lack of natural physical activity in children, the absence of real physical education and, sadly, the disappearance of street football.
- It is imperative that this type of training is of the highest quality for youngsters, especially during the growing stage, since it helps them to develop better body balance, the sense of rhythm that is essential for football, as well as superior ball control.
- The situation varies from one part of the world to another. For reasons that might be partly genetic, morphological, cultural or even climatic, a young Brazilian or African will always be more co-ordinated and have a better sense of rhythm than a young European. However, despite these differences, it is well known that co-ordination skills can be trained at any age and that these skills give a player a greater choice of movement options.
- The development of co-ordination skills must be regularly included in training sessions at the pre-training/pre-development stage. The introduction of technical work can help to train basic movement skills (e.g. coaches can work on balance, on footwork, on differentiation and on rhythm before starting training on striking the ball, long passing, crossing and shooting at goal). Psychomotor skill training must therefore be included in training sessions even more frequently if we are to improve the range of young players' technical skills.
- Playing matches or any form of practice games (i.e. on different-sized pitches, in reduced spaces, with specific instructions and rules, etc.) will, of course, help players to learn psychomotor skills.
- Some football academies have included specific sessions in their training programme to develop co-ordination and have recruited specialist coaches to meet this need (AFC Ajax is an example).

The development of suppleness

- Children's bodies are naturally supple, and every training session should contain games or other activities that aid mobility and ease of movement.
- To prevent joint or muscle injuries, it is essential that work on suppleness is developed as thoroughly as possible, especially as far as the adductors, the hip flexor muscles, the ankles and the knees are concerned. In addition, flexibility of the spinal column ensures good bodily balance, better mobility of the torso and also aids the proper functioning of the neuromuscular system.
- In adults, but more particularly in growing youngsters, suppleness work is essential after strength training, jumping or speed strength work. The warm-up phase is especially appropriate for working on suppleness.

- To ensure effective suppleness work with young players, there should be a balance between static stretching and the dynamic form of stretching involving movement. When performed at the end of a session, suppleness training helps the players to wind down generally and to get them back to a relaxed state.
- As an educational exercise, the coach can ask a player to lead this session. The coach must, however, still monitor that the exercises are being performed correctly.

Table 4: Chart indicating the various phases at which different athletic attributes should be developed in youngsters

(based on Martin, 1982)

Age	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Co-ordination												
Aerobic capacity												
Aerobic power												
Speed												
Strength												
Suppleness												

Table 5: The development of physical attributes in young players

Energy sources Aerobic – Anaerobic (lactic – alactic)	STRENGTH	SPEED	SUPPLENESS	CO-ORDINATION
Improvement of co-ordination skills, preparation and basic learning				
• Building up basic endurance • Aerobic endurance (aerobic capacity) → No anaerobic work	• General muscle toning with body weight → Muscle strengthening, especially of the upper body	• Work on reaction speed (with the ball) • Exercises over short distances • Frequency of movement → Games → Competitions with the ball	• Generalised training • Spinal column mobility • Dynamic exercises • Work on suppleness with the ball	• Acquiring basic co-ordination skills: – O.R.D.E.R. • Expanding the range of movements/gestures (variety of movements) • Running exercises, circuits to train co-ordination
Age 10 – 12				
Training of basic physical and co-ordination skills				
• Increase of aerobic endurance work (aerobic capacity) • Start of anaerobic alactic work	• Muscle strengthening by weight training using light loads • High and low jumps and multi-jumps • Learning of different movements	• Speed training – reaction speed – speed of execution • Running exercises • Integrated speed training → Competitions, running against the clock	• Period of morphological development • Maintaining of suppleness • Young players must avoid overtaxing themselves (by stretching muscles too much) • Specific work both with and without the ball	• Consolidation of what has been learned • Work on expanding the range of movements → There is a loss in co-ordination as a result of morphological development • Separate and integrated training
Age 13 – 15				
Specific training and development – tailoring the work to individual needs				
• Development of aerobic power (AP) and maximum aerobic power (MAP) • Development of the lactic anaerobic pathway	• Increasing strength • Work to achieve explosiveness (muscular power) • Gradual increase of loads • Multi-jumps (plyometrics)	• Alactic and lactic speed work • Endurance speed work with active breaks between exercises • Movement sequences and play combinations performed at speed → Game with 1 v 1 duels	• Maintaining suppleness • Longer passive stretching exercises • Dynamic exercises	• Co-ordination skills can still be improved at this stage • Development of sequence (adaptation, guidance) • Integrated training
Age 16 – 19				

2. Talent scouting

Talent scouting is a major priority for the top clubs, which can, in turn, offer outstanding conditions for the training and development of young players.

A number of “small” clubs also need to continue the policy of training and developing their young players realistically and with perseverance. After all, one of the young players who benefits from this high-quality training and development could ultimately turn out to be the star player that the top clubs are eager to sign.

Talented players are not found hanging around on street corners; the professional talent spotter often needs to put in a lot of methodical and attentive observation and requires considerable patience to unearth such players.

A player of outstanding talent:

- can perform feats on the pitch that other players are not capable of.
- Talent is 20% gift and 80% hard work!

“When we talk about sporting talent, we mean that a talented individual has an above-average chance of producing really outstanding sporting performances.

Röthig, 1983

The recipe for talent

The player

- Physical build (height, weight, body structure)
- Depending on the age of the player or his position, this criterion is an important one nowadays. Indeed, some feel that it is the main criterion for selecting a player.
- Ball control, natural technical ability
- A good range of movement / moves
- Speed of execution
- Tactical awareness (footballing intelligence)
 - Clear and swift reading of the game
 - Good positioning sense
 - The ability to make the right choice of move, etc.
- Physical attributes
 - endurance (aerobic/anaerobic)
 - a strong runner
 - dynamic strength

His personality (behaviour)

- Motivated, enjoys both playing and training
- Keen to learn and make progress
- A desire to perform to the best of his ability
- Able to get on easily with others
- Willing to take responsibilities
- Leadership and fighting qualities
- A strong character
- Concentration, determination
- A creative mind

Although talented players do possess above-average skills, it is still essential that these skills are allowed to develop to the full. Weaknesses can arise, although they are sometimes difficult to detect (i.e. a drop in performance for different reasons: underlying depression, a weakness in the player's character, a dislike of prolonged effort, rapid loss of motivation, a gap in the player's training/education, etc.). These factors can also seriously hamper the player's progress, or even prevent him from overcoming the obstacles that he is bound to encounter in top-level football.

This situation serves to highlight the fact that scouting talented players, particularly when they are very young, can produce some surprises in the medium or long term.

High-quality scouting is not merely restricted to watching a player in a match and going through a checklist of requirements. The scout has to be able to observe the player on several occasions in different situations to see how he behaves on the pitch, in training sessions, during matches, with his team-mates and towards the coach, as well as away from the football setting with his parents and his friends. The scout can then be certain that the player is equipped with the right psychomotor skills and mental and physical capacities to allow him to follow a progressive development programme before reaching the required standard.

Even though it is felt that the optimum duration for a training and development programme is 8 to 10 years, it is difficult to give a precise figure of what is required to achieve success at the very highest level. We have seen that young players do not all develop at the same rate, and that they cannot all be subjected to the same workload in training and to a demanding development and preparation regime aimed at turning them into top players. These are yet more factors that can hinder the development of talent.

A well-organised scouting policy should therefore go beyond merely watching a talented youngster and then arranging for his transfer to the club. That club should be able to guarantee follow-up with the player's development, help him to achieve his full potential and provide him with an appropriate training and development structure and a high-quality social and educational environment.

"You can have a good scouting system, superior facilities and better programmes, but the key to training and development is still the coach."

Example: The criteria applied by AFC Ajax when recruiting talented youngsters for the club's centre of excellence

- T** – Technique
- I** – Intelligence
- P** – Personality
- S** – Speed

"Talent wins matches, but teamwork and intelligence win championships."

Michael Jordan, 1994

How to get scouting right

- Employ top-quality, experienced scouts.
- Establish age-adjusted selection criteria for players.
- Watch the player in several matches (at home and away)
- Know what to look for from the player in matches and in training.
- Chat with the player and with his parents.
- Contact the club or the set-up where the player is playing
- Get the player to take different tests to assess his suitability:
 - Medical screening (to ascertain his general state of health, both physical and mental)
 - A technical and physical test (depending on the criteria laid down by the club)
 - A psychology test (to assess his motivation, personality and character).
 - Others

The evaluation checklist

A talented player's skills can be assessed using a video (either a match or specific footage) or with the help of an evaluation checklist. The player can also use this himself to measure his own progress (self-assessment).

See Table 6 (attached)

Some possible criteria

- Can the player:
 - run well, both with the ball and off the ball?
 - pass the ball well?
 - receive the ball well?
 - control the ball well?
 - dribble and feint?
 - play with both feet?
 - escape markers easily?
 - break away well?
 - get himself into the right positions?
- Does the player:
 - know how to behave with dignity (win or lose)?
 - have a good influence on the game and on his team-mates?
 - etc.
- Does the player have:
 - a suitable physique for the game?
 - sufficient strength to win 1 v 1 situations?
 - a good reading of the game?
 - good heading skills?
 - a positive attitude?

- Can the player:
 - win 1 v 1 situations?
 - score goals?
 - create chances for other players?
 - make the right choice at the right time?
 - control the ball well on receiving it and give a quality first-time pass
 - run well with the ball at his feet, stop and then resume his run at high speed?
 - strike the ball well from dead-ball situations (free kicks)?
- Other criteria
 - depending on the scout's own experience

Conclusions

It would be wrong to believe that a talented young player (aged 13-14) will automatically enjoy unhampered progress once he has been signed. The road to success is a long and difficult one, and to achieve this the player will have to train and work hard, and persevere.

The talented youngsters of today are often motivated to succeed, but lack the character to do so. To ensure that these youngsters are given the best possible chance to assert themselves and fulfil their potential in the game, it is essential that they join a club that operates with a proper training and development structure and that they are entrusted to high-quality coaching staff.

The young player must be recruited for the considerable potential that he represents and should therefore not be called in merely to “bolster” a team. Players are all too often recruited on dubious grounds that could hardly be considered as “scientific” (e.g. because a player has performed well on a given day, because the scout is overtaken by the emotion of the moment, or because of incomplete or inaccurate information, etc.).

→ **Beware! True talent is often hidden.**

Table 6

Criteria for assessing talented young players				
FULL NAME:				
Position:	☐ Goalkeeper ☐ Central defender	☐ Outside defender ☐ Central midfielder	☐ Outside midfielder ☐ Forward	
Evaluation:	1 : very good	2 : good	3 : average	4 : poor
Technique				
	1	2	3	4
Ability to play with both feet				
Passing				
Controlling and releasing the ball				
Feinting and dribbling				
Shooting at goal				
Heading				
Tackling				
Others				
Physical attributes				
Strength (explosiveness)				
Speed				
Endurance				
Suppleness (mobility)				
Others				
Tactical awareness / cognitive skills				
Reading of the game				
Attacking play				
Defensive play				
Others				
Co-ordination				
Orientation				
Rhythm				
Differentiation				
Reaction				
Balance				
Mental strengths				
Concentration				
Willpower				
Perseverance				
Confidence				
Willingness to take risks				
Creativity				
Social skills and attributes				
Communication				
Behaviour				
Charisma / Personality				
Conscientiousness				
Team spirit				
Physical state				
Constitution (height :)				
General state of health				
Date :				

3. Adapting training to individual needs to improve individual skills

Today's coaches unanimously acknowledge the importance of gearing training to meet individual needs, both with physical and tactical work. Indeed, for top-level performance, which is becoming increasingly specialised, it is now indispensable.

What do we mean? Individualisation is the adapting of footballing technique and training methods to suit the individual needs of each player.

In other words, it means a distinct training programme to take into account the personal abilities and needs of the players to improve on skills they have already acquired and to help them achieve specific training objectives, such as developing their strength.

The individualising of training in this way can prove particularly valuable when the coach is doing specific training with individual positions, working on technical moves or on tactical aspects (e.g. training for attackers crossing and shooting at goal).

In a training and development programme where the individual development of the player is a priority, the use of specific individualised training sessions has now become a necessity if we are to improve the development of young players, and this needs to be introduced from the pre-training/pre-development stage.

Individual training

- ***As part of the team training session***

- Work in groups, workshops and with individual positions using exercises that are specific for each type of player.
- This form of training requires one or more assistants to help run the session.

Example: One group works on technical/tactical exercises, while another group plays a practice game. The groups then switch activities.

- ***Separate individual sessions***

- An additional individualised training session geared to the needs of the player (improvement of strong points or correction of tactical behaviour, etc.)
- The session can be held as part of the weekly training programme on the same day as the session for the whole team, at different times on that day, or even on a different day.
- There can be a daily session before or after training, depending on the needs or the motivation of the players.

Example: An individual strength (upper body) training session before the session for the whole team.
Training of specific technical moves at the end of a session
(Jean-Pierre Papin, former leading goalscorer with the French national team, used to practise his celebrated volleys in front of goal)

- ***Specific individualised sessions***

- A training session in small groups with a maximum of 4 to 6 players each
- A special session depending on whatever type of training with specific objectives is required
- A session scheduled in the training cycle, either in addition to or replacing a whole team session

Example: A specific session for a talented group of individuals or for the forwards; training of dead-ball situations.

Examples of specific sessions

- Technical training (improvement of individual skills)
- Co-ordination training (running exercises)
- Position training (goalkeeper, forwards, etc.)
- Team unit training (defensive unit, midfield unit, etc.)
- Muscle strength training (individualised programme)
- Form and fitness recovery training (for injured players or those experiencing a poor run of form, etc.)
- Mental strength training (individual work to improve concentration, confidence and willpower)

Specific individualised training sessions also enable players to work on individual skills that cannot easily be trained with the whole team and to improve other performance-related aspects of their game.

Depending on the player or players, the coach should conduct the session emphasising precise aspects and choosing specific drills to which he can gradually introduce variations (the number of repetitions, the tempo of execution, an increase in the degree of difficulty, putting pressure on the players or bringing in particular actions, etc.)

The learning time is therefore optimised: there are more ball contacts, the coach is always present with the players, the human contact is improved, correction is geared more to the individual and is therefore more precise, the coach can give direct feedback with positive reinforcement, the player is more motivated (because his confidence is boosted).

As quality of execution is crucial at the pre-training/pre-development stage and during sessions where the main emphasis is on technical work or position work, the coach can use a player from the first team to demonstrate (as a role model for behaviour and technical expertise).

Example: A session for forwards featuring one of the top strikers from the first team

Individualised training sessions of this type fit in well into overall training and development programmes, especially those aimed at talented players and budding stars.

An example of a specific training session (lasting 60 mins)

Objectives:	To improve basic technical skills: emphasis on control on the turn and passing (short and long passes)	
No. of players:	6 (midfielders and outside defenders)	
Content:	• Basic co-ordination work (separate and integrated training) 20 mins – work on footwork and rhythm – receiving the ball and sequences of movements with two players • Technical exercises with three players 15 mins – Receiving the ball, control on the turn and passing • Game situation 15 mins – switching play and finishing • Individual ball juggling test 5 mins – number of touches (left and right feet) in 2 minutes • Stretching session 5 mins – led by one of the players	

This training can be scheduled as part of a weekly cycle with one or two sessions per week, depending on the type of training, the level of the players and also on the overall training/development programme.

It can also provide some interesting variety to the schedule for youngsters undergoing an intense academic programme.

Example: A session held between morning and afternoon school classes (11.30 - 12.45)

“The most gifted youngsters must be placed in learning situations that require them to reflect and to show willpower and courage.”

Erwin Hahn, 1987

4. The Academy or “Centre of Excellence”

In many countries where there is a strong footballing tradition, the concept of academies or centres of excellence for young players has been in existence for some time now. Indeed, it has been the basis for reforms aimed at improving the training and development of young players, but also one of the reasons for the considerable footballing success enjoyed by national teams and clubs from countries such as Argentina, France, Netherlands and Spain.

These centres can be run by a club, operated by the national association at national or regional level, or they can even be sponsored or supported by private funding.

Each of them operates according to a distinct training/development philosophy that is adapted to meet the cultural and educational demands of the country or region, the traditions of the club or the personal ideas of the directors. The manner in which they operate, is, of course, also dependent on the finances available.

In each case, the centre of excellence is an important pillar in the development of football, especially as a means of providing better football training and development for players striving to reach the top. It can also help players to manage their sporting and academic study activities, in particular by facilitating co-operation between the parties involved and providing solutions to produce a programme that offers the right balance between the various learning activities.

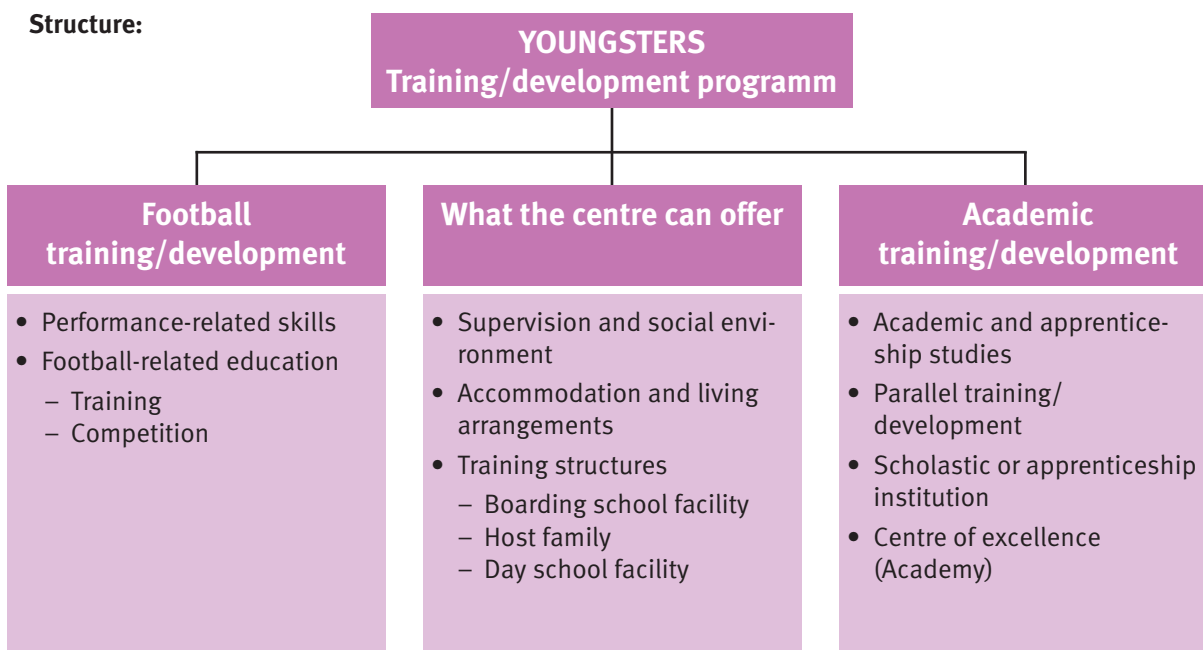
In this section we have put forward various ideas for setting-up, organising and running this type of educational and training institution.

The centre of excellence

Aims:

- To offer youngsters a place where they can develop both academically and as footballers.
- To provide better supervision and follow-up for young players.
- To optimise the learning process and the training/development programme.

Structure:



Supervisory structure:

- Centre Director
 - Welcome/reception staff
 - Administration
 - Staff responsible for accommodation and equipment
- Technical Director
 - Technical staff
 - Medical set-up
- Director of academic studies
 - Teaching staff
 - Educational co-ordinator
 - Person responsible for relations with the school

Reception centre:

- Main building ↔ Training centre
 - Administration
 - Accommodation area
 - Medical centre
 - Classrooms (study rooms)
 - Changing rooms
- Accommodation is not essential. The players can live at home either with their own families or with host families. Whereas France tends to favour the boarding system, the Netherlands prefers players to stay with host families.

Training facilities:

- Training pitch(es)
- Other pitches, with grass or artificial surfaces
- Training equipment and material that are essential to guarantee efficient work in training

School/educational arrangements

- Young players at the centre attend a state school or private establishment close to the centre.
- Academic classes are taught at the centre itself by teachers recruited by the centre or provided by the school.
- Those players who have signed up to receive scholastic training attend a state school or a private school. Those receiving a less academic training follow a special programme at the centre under the guidance of teachers or specialised instructors.

Football training development programme

- This depends on the age and the level of the players and is adapted to meet the learning objectives.

Points of emphasis in the programme

- Individual development of performance-related skills by training and competitive activity.
The youngsters play for the academy's team (i.e. as part of a club, regional centre, national centre, etc.), which plays in official competitions.
Example: A national league championship or international competition.
The players may also rejoin their own clubs at the weekend to play competitive matches (this applies especially with young players at the pre-development/pre-training stage).
- Developing of other skills/knowledge (social skills, general culture and sport-related knowledge)
 - Career management
 - Learning how to prepare for matches
 - Managing leisure time
 - Others

Young Trainees

- These players are chosen according to the type of centre and the objectives of that centre:
 - Training and development centre (football + studies)
 - Academy (football + scholastic supervision)
 - Football school (football + school for children)
 - Training centre (football only)
 - Others
- They are selected according to the following criteria:
 - General sporting ability (depending on the experience and level achieved)
 - Assessment and specific tests
 - Motivation and mental attitude
 - Scholastic level (to determine whether they are able to follow an academic programme or another form of training)
 - Minimum age: 12-13 years of age
 - Maximum age: 16-18 years of age
 - Number: This depends on the structure and facilities of the individual centre

Annual programme

- The annual programme will depend on competition fixture lists and on the academic calendar
- It also depends on what the individual centre is seeking to achieve in footballing terms

Table 7: An example of a weekly schedule

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
MORNING						
School	Training	School	Training	School	Training or travel to a match	
	Theory		Theory			
	Practice	Training	Practice			
AFTERNOON						
School	School	Rest time	School	Personal work	Match or Rest time	Match or Free afternoon
Recovery training	Training	Other activities		Training		

Success in football in the future at both national and club level will go to those that have the best football schools offering training and development structures and programmes that have been adapted to meet the demands of the modern game and society as a whole.

It is worth noting that, according to FIFA statistics, only 1-2% of the world's footballers are professional and can earn a decent living from the game, with some of them enjoying a very comfortable existence. The others all play the game for the enjoyment of it and to keep fit or for moral and social reasons. Some of these players have undergone several years of specific training and development at centres of excellence, but they have failed to make the breakthrough into the professional game or to remain at the highest level for one reason or another (health, motivation, family and professional life, or simply a lack of ability to play the game at the highest level).

Faced with this reality, it is therefore essential that any football training and development programme should also provide for simultaneous study, learning a trade or profession, or some other form of training that will one day enable the footballer to make a living elsewhere.

Every child and young sportsman or woman is entitled to receive training and education that will allow them to face life with confidence. And it is precisely in this spirit that FIFA sees the educational role of football.

"My coach at Napoli told me once that if I wasn't doing well at school, I wouldn't be able to play for the first team."

Fabio Cannavaro, captain of the Italian national team, 2003

Summary

Table 8: Process by which players progress in their training and development

