

EUROPEAN CLUB ASSOCIATION

TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM FOOTBALL



ECA  **YOUTH
FOOTBALL** 2023-24

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
 **FOOTBALL
BENCHMARK**

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EUROPEAN CLUB ASSOCIATION –
YOUTH FOOTBALL WORKING GROUP
STUDY IN CO-OPERATION WITH



1

FOREWORD

BY DENNIS TE KLOESE

ECA BOARD AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER
AND ECA YOUTH FOOTBALL WORKING GROUP LEAD

Charlie Chaplin once said: “All children in some form or another have genius, the trick is to bring it out.” Investing in youth football is investing in the future of the sport and in the long-term, sustainable success of clubs, so that football continues to shine and be the most popular sport in the world.

As the main drivers behind the training of young players, and the future educated and responsible citizens, clubs have realised that success is built on a long-term vision and a model that allows them to fill their first team with quality players in all circumstances. The precarious and unpredictable nature of the industry and of life (e.g. wage and transfer inflation, Covid) have shown that it is essential to be able to rely on your own assets, and the role of the ECA Youth Working Group is to provide the best possible environment and the best tools for clubs to be successful today, and in the future.

With this in mind, an ECA Youth Football Strategy has been developed for the period 2023-2027, based on the following pillars: better legal/regulatory protection for training clubs; development of the youth competition landscape in Europe; football and social impact; and the implementation of an academy excellence programme for clubs, all supported by solid relations with governing bodies and stakeholders.

This study on the transition from academy to the first team is part of a series looking at key challenges in the academy infrastructure and aims to provide clear recommendations and

practical solutions to what remains the biggest challenge faced by academies in terms of transition. Integration into the professional world is the culmination of years of work and the implementation of a long-term strategy on the part of both players and academies, and it is therefore essential to offer clubs a solid study enabling them to rethink their structure and processes, and thus be able to improve them.

In conjunction with this study, you can also access a separate Executive Summary. This is available online at www.ecaeurope.com.

On behalf of ECA, I would like to thank everyone involved in producing this study, including the ECA Youth Working Group, the ECA Member Clubs, the task force set up to carry out this project, the experts who took part in the interviews and Football Benchmark (an initiative of Ace Advisory), the Data & Analytics partner of the ECA and co-authors of this study.

Wishing you a pleasant read.



2

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The development of the study utilised a holistic approach; the objective was to hear from all relevant stakeholder types who have an impact on the transition process, while also collecting as much hard evidence and data as possible. To achieve this, a balanced mix of primary and secondary research methods were used, including in-depth interviews with clubs and industry stakeholders, surveys, statistical analysis, insights from Football Benchmark's data platforms, and literature reviews.

The starting hypothesis of this research was that the process of transitioning young players from academy to first team football is not sufficiently optimised in European football. In 2020, an ECA member club survey found that most teams deemed this topic to be very important and wanted to find out more about how they could improve. In this follow-up study, the target was to first assess the topic from a statistical perspective and analyse all available data to find out which countries or clubs perform the best in this regard and why. Then, it was equally important to gather

insights from the innovators and leaders in this field, develop case studies about the best practices and provide recommendations to clubs of all sizes on how to optimise their transition to first team process.

To achieve this, a blend of primary and secondary research methods was utilised. The journey to develop the study lasted from May to September 2023. Please note that data collection was closed in September 2023, therefore all data points and figures in the study refer to available information at this point.

This period encompassed the busy summer transfer window and the start of the 2023/24 season for the majority of clubs in Europe, while for leagues that align their football season to the calendar year, this period coincided with the middle part of the 2023 season.

The study is a result of the cooperation and joint effort of ECA and Football Benchmark. We are grateful for all club representatives and experts who took time out of their schedule to support the study with their valuable insights in some form.



RESEARCH METHODS

1 PRIMARY

INTERVIEWS

In-depth, one-hour interviews with a wide range of club representatives and professionals who deal with the topic of transition provided the backbone of the study. First-hand accounts of experiences and processes were crucial to understand the challenges of the transition, as well as to identify best practices.

In total, 27 interviews were conducted, of which 21 involved professionals working for European top-flight football clubs in various positions. The rest of the interviews covered the perspectives of governing bodies, former and currently active players, as well as other experts.

For a detailed breakdown, please refer to Appendix 1.

SURVEY

In July-August 2023, all ECA Member Clubs and several other European clubs that are not current members were invited to fill in a survey about the first team transition process. In total, 95 different clubs completed the 23-question survey that inquired about strategy, transition-related goals, as well as internal processes.

For a detailed introduction of the survey respondents and results, refer to Chapter 07.

2 SECONDARY

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS

The views of clubs and experts needed to be checked against the hard evidence of statistical analysis. Covering the period between the 2018/19 and 2022/23 seasons, the data analysis section identified players who made their debuts and/or successfully transitioned to first team football in the leagues that were part of the scope. This included all European top divisions and a selection of second division leagues.

The statistical analysis was based on match data and player career path information gathered from various sources but mostly drawn from Football Benchmark's databases. Importantly, transition success rate statistics were cross-checked with differences in the transition models used by the clubs, regulations, regional differences, and club characteristics in order to find trends and contradictions that could inform decision-makers.

For a detailed explanation of the analytical scope (geographic coverage, definitions, etc.) and the results, please refer to Chapter 06.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies from ECA, FIFA, UEFA, Football Benchmark, and other organisations about aspects of youth player development and first team transition also supported the preparation of the study. These were primarily used to create a guiding framework for the discussion of the topic and are referenced throughout our study.

STUDY OUTPUTS

- Identification of best practices and recommendations from clubs to clubs.
- An understanding of the first team transition process in UEFA countries
- Quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (survey) assessment of the process.

STUDY TASK FORCE

Prior to the commencement of the study, a Task Force was set up to provide strategic direction to the research and to ensure that ECA Member Clubs are represented during the process and have a say in the overall direction. The four members of the Task Force were:



Erik van Spanje
AFC Ajax
Strategic Advisor to the CEO



Pedro Mil-Homens
SL Benfica
General Director of Benfica Campus



Per Mertesacker
Arsenal FC
Academy Manager



Pascal de Maesschalck
AS Monaco FC
Director of Youth Football Development

The club representatives of the Task Force are all youth football and academy experts with vast experience in the subject matter. They are also active participants in the ECA Youth Working Group.

The Task Force's role included the review of materials such as the Club Survey question list and the methodology of the Statistical Analysis. Additionally, they provided recommendations related to the study structure and participated in the review of the final output.

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3

OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Following extensive discussions with dozens of club representatives and subject matter experts, it has become apparent that the transition from the academy to first team is one of – if not the – most difficult period of a player's career. To provide context for the findings later in the study, this chapter describes the transition process and its theoretical background, including:

- 1) The concept and definition of the first team transition process
- 2) The importance and placement of first team transition in the overall player journey
- 3) The complex nature of the challenge with multiple transitions happening at an individual level at the same time
- 4) A high-level overview of the environmental factors that influence the process significantly

3

FIRST TEAM TRANSITION THE MOST CRUCIAL MILESTONE IN A FOOTBALL CAREER?

Generally, the word 'transition' refers to a change from one state or condition to another.

In sport, athletes face several of these changes, resulting in a new set of demands that need to be managed (Stambulova, 2010). Examples include going through age groups in the academy, turning professional, ending the career, suffering a major injury, relocating to another country, facing omission from the playing squad or even the arrival of a new coach.

It is no different in football, with **all players experiencing multiple major transitions during their career.**

There are changes that all professional players experience, with the transition to first team and again to a post-playing career being the most apparent ones. Players also experience significant changes during the academy development, such as the increase of the number of players on the pitch, the pitch size, the length of matches, the type of training programme received (*technical, physical, and tactical aspects*) and the perspective of the development goals (*collective vs individual standards*).



Additionally, transfers – especially international ones – have become another almost unavoidable part of professional status in the modern game.

It is difficult to estimate the natural success rate of first team transitions compared to dropout rates during the previous phases of academy development. However, competition for first team squad spaces is very intense due to the large pool of players and the short-term results-driven nature of the industry. Evidence is rare, but the following data points provide an indication of the challenges ahead for young talent:

- Three-quarters of players who receive a scholarship contract in England (*a pre-agreement which can be signed as soon as the player is 13, but starts in the June of the academic year in which the player turns 16*) never make a living from football (Calvin, 2018);
- Based on a research study, the proportion of club-trained players in 31 European first division leagues (*who have spent at least three years at a club's academy between the ages of 15 and 21*) decreased from 23% to 17% between 2009 and 2020. This is likely due to an increasing number of foreign players (Carpels et al., 2021).

Still, from a player's perspective, the potential rewards of financial security, fame and status are highly enticing factors that can outweigh the overall low rate of success during the chase of a dream. From a club perspective, developing players with the capability to play in the first team is the main objective of academies, together with the generation of income from player sales. Based on a club survey developed for the purposes of this study (*please refer to Chapter 07 for more information*), four out of five clubs have a goal related to transition in their youth academy strategy. For example, the academy of Valencia CF has a goal to promote at least one player to the first team each year, while KKS Lech Poznań aims to fill at least 50% of their first team squad with club academy graduates. Thus, it is no surprise that the topic is currently deemed among the most important in youth development by ECA Member Clubs.

The first team transition is also unique because even though it is possible to prepare the players for it in advance, the timing is often undefined and can be impacted by many factors that are outside the players' control.

This study looks at all aspects of the 'transition to first team' process, starting from the academy preparation and the first interaction with the first team until the young player becomes an established member of the first team squad.

It is important to note that **for the purposes of the statistical analysis**, it was crucial to set an **objectively measurable and comparable definition** of the subject matter. With no recognised definition in the industry, a multitude of research methodologies were explored to identify the most suitable way to distinguish transitioning players from others. *For more details, please refer to Chapter 06.*

3

FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER PATH OF PLAYERS

The concept of 'Athletic Career Development (ACD)' is used to understand how players progress through their careers (Stambulova et al., 2021). The concept is basically a combination of career phases and the important shifts (or transitions) that divide them. This approach can help us contextualise the role of first team transition.

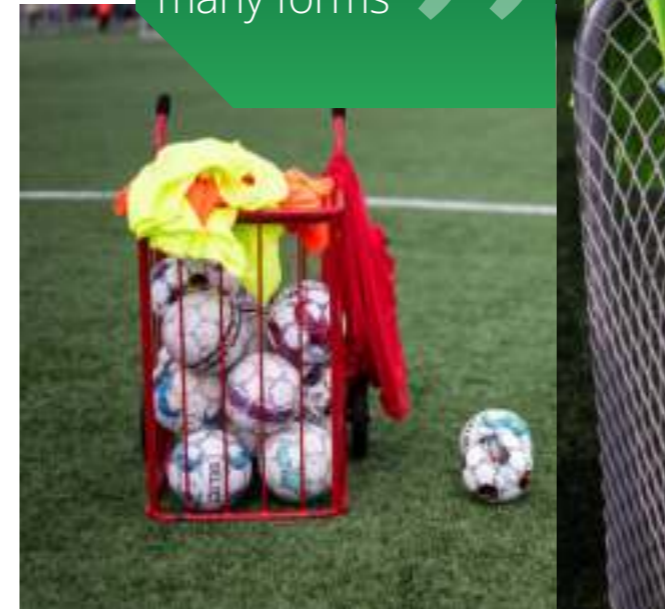
Starting from more general academic models, athlete development includes the following **four career steps** (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004):

- **Initiation:** Young athletes are introduced to organised sports during which they are identified as talented athletes.
- **Development:** Athletes become more dedicated to their sport while the amount of training and level of specialisation increases.
- **Mastery:** Athletes reach their highest level of athletic proficiency.
- **Discontinuation:** Athletes transition out of competitive sport, starting a new career.



Source: Football Benchmark analysis

“ In practice, career trajectories can take many forms ”



Phase 2: Academy development

Academy development is a lengthy process of educating and training the players in an organised manner, guiding them through different age groups and giving them their first professional contract at the end of it. In most cases, this phase coincides with the adolescent years of the players and can potentially cover a period from the age of 11 until the age of 23. This is where the most crucial skills required for a successful first team transition are gradually acquired.

2/A – Youth development

- During the first stage of academy development, players are usually part of the club, but only in an amateur capacity.
- Transition to 11 vs 11 play.
- Training focus on technical concepts and general football skills with an individual focus.
- In the English academy system, 16 hours of training per week is suggested during this period.
- Starting point is based on the domestic system, but usually at the age of 11-12 and finishing when the players are 15-16.

These career steps defined by the ACD concept apply to football, too. The age ranges on the visual indicate the 'average' player development path, but in practice, career trajectories can take many forms.

Phase 1: Foundation

- Players are introduced to organised football activities.
- Crucial phase to develop basic movement and co-ordination skills, and start ball mastery.
- While the start of organised football cannot be tied to a specific age, the first age group of most clubs starts around the age of six (there are examples starting at four) and finish around the age of 10.
- Here, the English academy system suggests eight hours of training per week.

2/B – Professional development

- Start of preparation for professional football.
- Players get acquainted with the necessary level of hard work and dedication.
- The focus is still on technical qualities, with the added factors of physical and tactical development.
- Individual development of players in addition to group work.
- This is the phase when most players receive their first professional contract. However, signing the contract does not necessarily mean that the academy phase is over.
- Starting point around the age of 15-16; concluding with first team transition. The statistical analysis of this study (Chapter 06) shows that successful transitions to first team most often happen before the age of 20 (in top division European football leagues).

The first professional contract of players

In most European countries, the legal minimum threshold of signing a first professional contract is between the ages of 15 and 17. For example, it is 15 in Belgium, 16 in the likes of Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal, and 17 in England.

There are some other contract types that can be used to tie down players, such as the scholarship contracts in England. These agreements are for a maximum period of two years and can be signed as soon as the player turns 13. However, the scholarship itself only starts in the June of the academic year in which the player turns 16.

Phase 3: Senior playing career

- The period of peak, elite performance.
- Even with peak ages extending further and further, players can only stay at the top of their game for a limited time.
- The average duration of a player's senior career is estimated between eight and 11 years (*Carapinheira et al., 2019*).
- The phase ends with the retirement from professional football. Reasons for retirement generally include a decline in performance, injuries, lack of playing time, burnout, or personal matters (e.g. spending more time with the family).

Phase 4: Post-playing career

- Transition to post-playing career after retirement from professional football. This is also relevant to those players who fail the first team transition. For them, transitioning out of professional football happens at a much earlier age.
- Career assistance programmes from governing bodies, leagues, and clubs can support the players with this transition.

OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Transition to first team

The nature of first team transition is different to the general phases of the player career path: its purpose is simply to move from one stage to another. The age of players going through the transition is diverse, with 'generational' talents sometimes starting this as soon as the age of 16, while 'late bloomers' might not transition to first team football before they're aged 23. The length of the transition can also range from a few months to even more than one year, depending on how quickly the players can establish themselves in the unfamiliar environment.

The first team transition in football can be broken down to five separate stages based on academic transition models (*Stambulova et al., 2021; Røynesdal et al., 2018*). These are:

ANTICIPATION STAGE

The anticipation and understanding that the first team transition could happen in the near future.

PREPARATION STAGE

Initial experience in the first team squad, such as in the form of a training session with the first team. Players get introduced to a new social setting and receive a 'sneak peek' of professional football.

ORIENTATION STAGE

This starts after the 'official' switch to the first team squad and usually includes the first match experiences, as well as the integration into the squad.

ADAPTATION STAGE

As players get more comfortable, they start to take up a bigger role and handle more responsibilities on the way to stabilising their role and potentially getting into the starting eleven.

STABILISATION STAGE

The last step before full transition is to become a regular member of the first team squad.



3

TRANSITION AREAS

MULTIPLE CHALLENGES AT THE SAME TIME

The main difficulty of a successful first team transition is rooted in its complexity.

Players – who are also human beings going through other life matters, including adolescence – are navigating between parallel changes. Handling just one of them separately would already pose a challenge in itself. This multifaceted change includes psychological, psychosocial, financial, legal, and academic-vocational development areas (e.g. formation of identity, change in educational institution, new social networks) (Wylleman et al., 2004).



Additionally, these impulses are not happening in a vacuum, but are instead interdependent:

if something negative happens in one area, it will most likely affect the others, too. For example, even if a player receives top-level training from a club academy and progresses well, family events unrelated to football can shake up the development path in the blink of an eye. Similarly, even a perfect player environment can only be effective to the extent of the player's talent and the quality of coaching. This is why none of the transition-related areas can be neglected by the club and the supporting environment of the players.

Based on discussions with clubs, we differentiated five main transition areas in practice:

- **Physical:** Increased physical demands primarily due to playing against biologically more mature players. In first team football, players are stronger, faster, and more athletic in general, which requires increased physical load, better conditioning, higher stamina, and more training time from them. A sudden switch between youth and first-team football can also lead to a higher number of injuries.
- **Technical:** Professional football is often differentiated from amateur play based on the observed technical level. In addition to an overall higher level of ball skills (e.g. ball handling, pass techniques, dribbling, shooting), the consequences of technical mistakes are also more serious at the professional level.

- **Tactical:** Contrary to youth football, the sole purpose of professional games is to win. Subsequently, and also in consideration of an advanced physical and technical level, coaches apply a much wider range of tactical concepts during matches. Processing the vast amount of information requires a more advanced use of cognitive functions from players. In addition, learning the tactical 'playbook' in theory is only one part of the transition: players also need to implement the instructions in practice.
- **Mental/Psychological:** Due to the increased pressure in the professional environment, players experience a high level of mental strain during the transition. Events such as deselection, fan abuse or media pressure directly affect the mental balance, which makes it difficult to cope with the pressure. In addition, events in the other four areas also have a psychological impact. It is important for players to learn how to cope with these mental challenges.
- **Social:** Promotion to the first team also brings new teammates, including older and more mature players, as well as a new coaching staff. Good communication with teammates,

club staff and media are needed in order to fit into the existing dressing room and club dynamics.

“From the perspective of football clubs, external factors are difficult to influence”

The table focuses on the **main challenges attributed to the five areas** based on academic studies and interviews conducted with club representatives and other experts.

In addition, academic literature also highlights the importance of other factors, such as the social background of a player or the quality of support received from the player's family, partner, friends, and wider entourage. In addition, there are other life challenges during the transition that cannot be categorised into any of the five areas but are worthwhile mentioning. These include academic changes (e.g. education in parallel to a professional job), general psychosocial factors during adolescence (e.g. puberty) and potential financial considerations (e.g. financial management of compensation). However, from the perspective of football clubs, these external factors are difficult to influence, meaning that focus and resources should rather be spent on the five clearly identified areas.

There are general coping strategies that players can use to deal with different challenges: a strong environmental support system, the development of problem-solving skills, effective support-seeking, emotional and financial stability, as well as a personality with resilience, motivation and determination can all help. However, even with the effective use of coping mechanisms, the highly varied and specific nature of each area means that coordination between multiple stakeholders and subject matter experts is required during the first team transition process. In the next chapter, we take a more detailed look at the list of stakeholders comprising the transition environment.

CHALLENGES IN THE FIVE MOST IMPORTANT TRANSITION AREAS ▼

TRANSITION AREA	MAIN CHALLENGES
 PHYSICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Different maturation curves and physiological attributes ● Greater intensity and load during both training and matches, resulting in more frequent tiredness ● Longer and more varied training, physical toll ● Higher injury risk ● Initial physical disadvantage in duels ● Shorter recovery and increasing travelling time between matches
 TECHNICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specialised (e.g. by position) and repetitive practice ● Expectations around a minimum level of technical capability ● Higher quality competition, short adaptation period to shift existing tendencies ● No room for error – mistakes are punished quicker and more often
 TACTICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A large increase in the number of different tactical setups to be mastered ● Decrease in time to make decisions during the play ● In case of no consistent playing style between the first team and the academy or multiple loans before transition, players could be unaware of the required tactical setup
 MENTAL/ PSYCHOLOGICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pressure from coaches, fans, and media, resulting in anxiety, depression, loneliness, or loss of confidence ● Dealing with lack of playing time ● Mental implications of performing on par with a lucrative contract ● Patience and perseverance needed during the initial stages of the transition
 SOCIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cultural differences between the academy and the first team dressing room, risk of social isolation ● Players have to earn respect from their senior teammates ● Role in team changes from a leading role to a peripheral one (at least initially) ● Getting accustomed to the management style and the expectations of the first team coaching staff

3

SUMMARY



Among multiple transitions during the career of football players, the transition to first team is one of, if not the most complex.



Therefore, both the starting point, and the duration of the transition, are varied and hinge on contextual and individual factors. The study looks at the entire transition process from various perspectives.



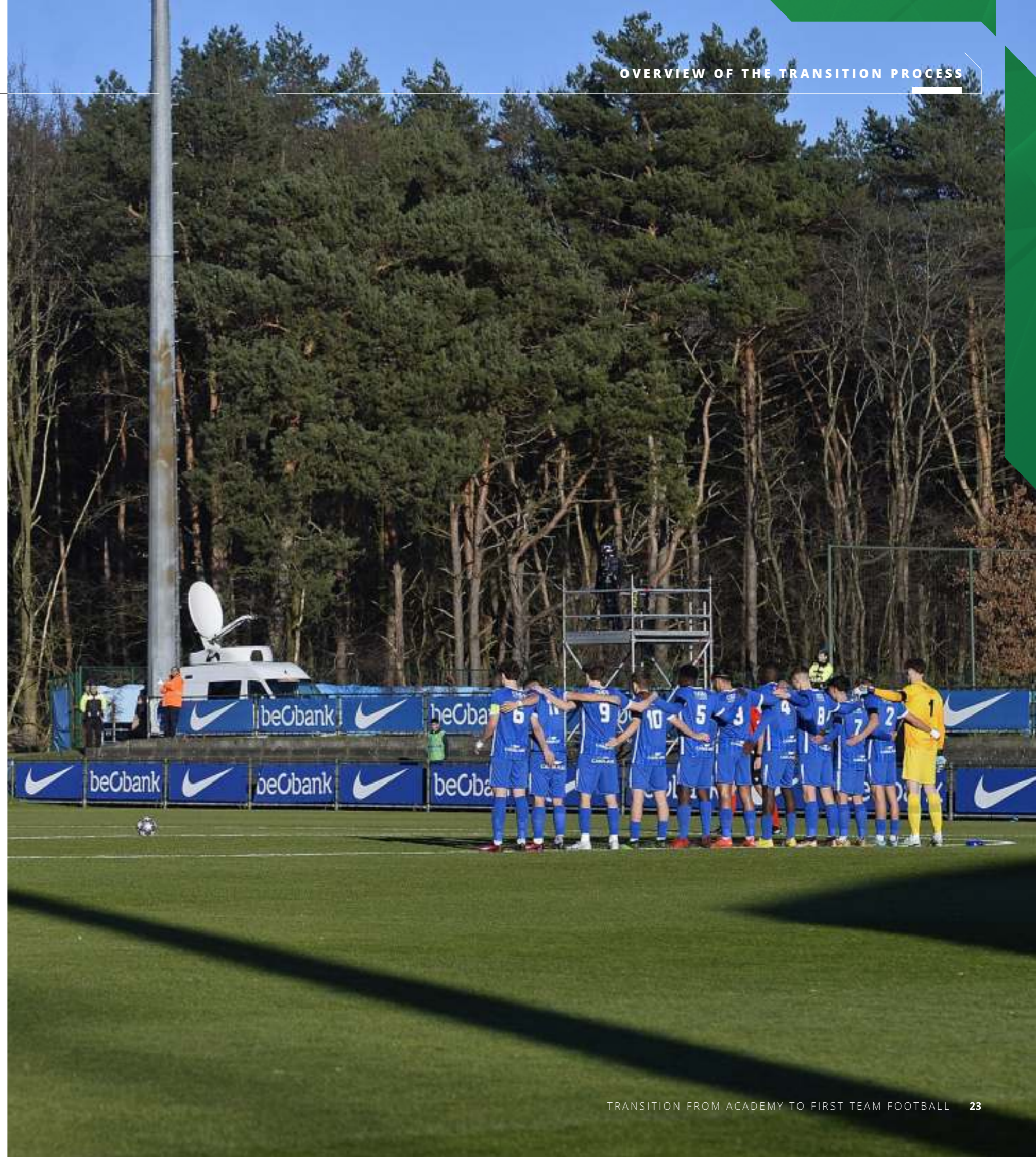
While high-level plans can be made around the process and timing of the transition, it often happens unexpectedly, due to its dependency on other, non-controllable factors, such as injuries or vacancies in the first team squad.



Player careers can be broken down into four main phases, with the first team transition separating the academy development from the senior playing career.



The transition in itself is a combination of different, interlinked areas. The changes happening can be categorised into five dimensions: physical, technical, tactical, mental/psychological, and social.



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4

THE SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT OF TRANSITION

This section is a qualitative overview of the complex transition environment: the stakeholders of first team transition and the different supporting areas associated with them are introduced. Additionally, interview excerpts and club best practice examples are provided from subject matter experts with extensive experience in how to adequately deal with the challenges that these areas pose.

4

TRANSITION AS A HOLISTIC CONCEPT: THE IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS



Previously in the study, first team transition was introduced as a complex career step of parallel challenges that players have to go through to become professional. However, the collection of initial club experiences about the topic emphasised that **one of the main challenges of clubs is the handling of the wider environment**, including both internal and external stakeholders.

Looking at academic studies on transition, early research also tended to focus on the individual, either by assessing the prerequisites of athletic excellence to predict who is likely to excel (talent discovery), or emphasising the quantity and quality of training needed to reach top-level performance (talent development) (Henriksen *et al.*, 2010). However, there has been a marked shift over the past decade, also recognising the **holistic concept of the transition** (Stambulova *et al.*, 2021). **According to the majority of recent studies, academic research confirms that success is largely dependent on how the entirety of this interconnected environment impacts the player in transition.**

If transition success was only dependent on internal talent discovery and development, it would be possible to replicate the best methods and produce a constant flow of talent across an extended period of time. However, this is not the case in practice: clubs with similar resources and recruitment markets often have quite

different transition track records, which implies that there are other factors in play that can influence even the best frameworks of youth development. These factors can be best explained by assessing the wider context of the transition.

The environment can be defined as “a young athlete’s social relations both inside and outside the world of sport – social relations which have a sports club or team as their core, but which also include the larger context in which the club or team is embedded” (Henriksen *et al.*, 2010). Other factors such as regulators or society in general also impact first team transitions and are considered to be a part of this environment.

While the recipe for a successful development environment is specific to each sport and country, some common themes can be identified: 1) the efforts of different stakeholders are integrated rather than fragmented; 2) the environment is focusing on long-term development rather than short-term success, and 3) they include a strong support system to facilitate the players’ goals.



4

TRANSITION AREAS

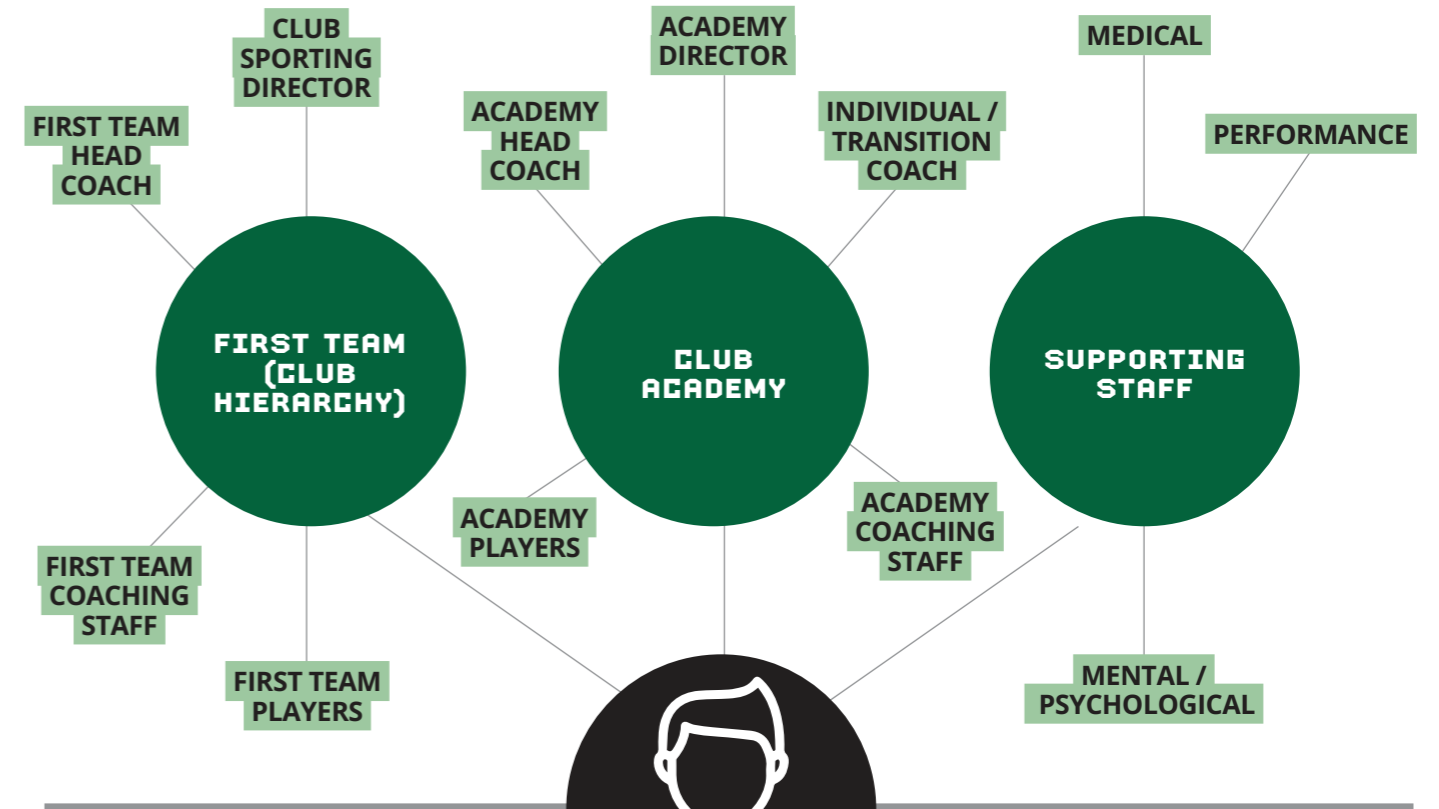
FIRST TEAM TRANSITION STAKEHOLDERS

During the development of the study, all information collection methods confirmed that a wide range of stakeholders are indeed involved in the transition process. On the chart opposite, we mapped the most important stakeholders, distinguishing between the ones that are part of the transitioning player's club (**internal/club stakeholders**) and those that are not (**external stakeholders**).

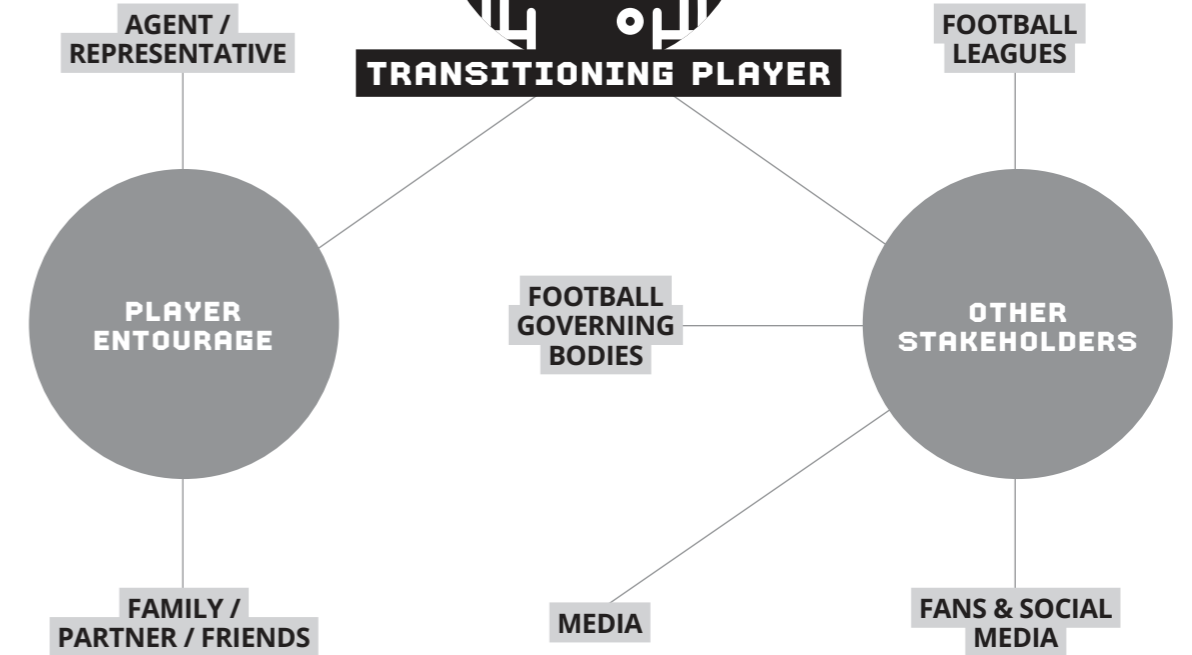


THE SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT OF TRANSITION

INTERNAL CLUB STAKEHOLDERS



EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS



Source: Football Benchmark analysis

4

SUPPORTING AREAS HOW DO STAKEHOLDERS IMPACT THE TRANSITION?

In order to build a comprehensive view of the supporting environment's key elements, first we must introduce the areas which can potentially support (or hinder) the transition of academy players to the first team. While gaps in a few individual areas might be overcome through a high level of support in others, the lack of proper assistance in too many areas will ultimately cause difficulties and lead to failures.

Similarly to stakeholders, supporting areas can be grouped based on the level of control that a club has over them.

Before the description of areas over which clubs generally have only limited control, we also provide a global perspective of the transition through an interview that was conducted with Arsène Wenger, FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development.

Supporting areas over which clubs' control is generally limited:



The wider society (media, fans, local community)



Regulatory support



Representation support (agents)



Emotional support

Over the following pages, all of these supporting areas are introduced, investigating their connection to first team transition and the challenges that can occur in case of their mismanagement. Additionally, the study provides takeaways and best practices from both clubs and

Supporting areas over which clubs have a high level of influence:



Club hierarchy



First team head coach



Academy support



Dedicated transition support



Loan management



Senior (first team) players



Performance support



Mental support



Social support



Medical support



subject matter experts who deal with specific supporting areas on a day-to-day basis. These are presented in an aggregated manner, combining the knowledge of clubs and experts, as well as the results of the club survey that was conducted as part of the study (please refer to Chapter 07 for more information).

All overviews of supporting areas over which clubs have a high level of influence include excerpts from interviews with club representatives and other experts, shedding more light on specific issues related to those areas.



CLUB HIERARCHY

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Within clubs, it is generally the **overall philosophy and vision** that guides youth development and subsequently determines the strategic importance of first team transitions. The selected philosophy is influenced by factors such as the budget of the club, the size of the local market and the attitude of club ownership.

The frequency and quality of playing time opportunity afforded to youth prospects is often dependent on the strategy or business model chosen by the club. For example, an organisation that consciously wants to develop and then sell players at a young age will provide **more space for errors, decreasing the pressure on players**. On the contrary, if a club is only focusing on short-term performance maximisation, academy players might get limited chances. Squads that are regularly competing under pressure offer limited opportunities. In cases where the club financially relies on the integration of academy players, opportunities could be more attainable, boosting the chances of the players. Therefore, the club's philosophy and business model undoubtedly have a major impact on how successful a player's transition could be.

The support of other areas often hinges on the overall club philosophy, and how it

is implemented in the organisational culture and in practice, influencing the level of internal services players can receive throughout the transition.

Based on the ECA survey and the opinion of the clubs, besides first team head coaches, **it is often the sporting director who has the most power when making transition-related decisions**; 78% of respondents indicated they have either major influence or final decision-making power in transition decisions. This finding confirms that the club hierarchy has a large say in transition decisions, and therefore the outcomes, as well.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Complete buy-in from and alignment with the club leadership (chairperson/board of directors/CEO)

The success factor that was mentioned most frequently during discussions with clubs is the alignment between the strategic and operative leadership of the club and its academy. In fact, the philosophy of multiple successful transition clubs originates from the ownership. If the strategic path is clearly outlined, transition decisions and operative actions also become straightforward.

Squad planning with the transition in mind

If the composition of first team squad spaces is consciously planned, then opportunities for talented players can be provided in a consistent manner. For example, a club can reserve the last few squad spaces for transitioning academy players without taking too much of a risk. Those players then can receive more responsibility as they progress with their development. The transition pipeline should also be accounted for when planning first team transfers. If a talented player is coming through the ranks, then the external recruitment team might prefer a 'stop-gap', short-term solution instead of an expensive signing.

Strategic usage of training camps

While the high-pressure first team matches are not the best occasions for experiencing the first team environment, there are several other moments when even young players add value to the first team preparation without any risk. Training camps provide a suitable opportunity for both first team and senior players to play on the same pitch, while periods such as the start of summer preparation or the winter break also provide a chance for the involvement of youth players in the everyday life of the first team. Even brief occasions like a warm-down exercise after a first team match has value for the players in transition.

Self-scouting of academy players

One way to evaluate academy players more thoroughly is to involve first team scouts in the process. This has multiple advantages, as decision-makers receive a more thorough picture from multiple angles. This way it's also easier to compare internal talents with potential external recruits.

Showcasing trust towards the players

Many times, transitioning players only get opportunities in matches or match situations when the pressure is lower, and their experience is not fully in line with what they can expect at the senior level. These are generally low-priority cup games or phases in a game when the outcome is already decided. While this helps at the beginning of the transition by making the process smoother, at some point, clubs must show trust and put the player in situations where there is responsibility and pressure involved.

Education of staff members about the club philosophy

If all club employees are fully aware of the club's philosophy about youth development and integrate it into their everyday work, then the strategic directions will be fully translated to the operative level without the need for further control mechanisms. For example, if academy coaches are aware that they all work towards the objectives of the first team, they will prioritise individual development opportunities over youth team results. This is why awareness and education about the overall philosophy is crucial.

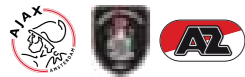


INTERVIEW

CLUB HIERARCHY

MARIJN BEUKER

DIRECTOR OF FOOTBALL AT AFC AJAX, FORMERLY AT QUEEN'S PARK FC AND AZ ALKMAAR



Before being appointed as the Director of Football at AFC Ajax in December 2023, Marijn Beuker was responsible for the strategic development of all aspects related to football at Queen's Park FC. Previously, he worked as the Sport Development Director of AZ Alkmaar, similarly being responsible for the football programme of the club. He believes in creating a culture around a cohesive club philosophy that is primarily built on youth development and the analysis of objective data.

Q What are the keys to creating a successful club philosophy that can accommodate youth development at its core?

As a pre-requisite, your philosophy must be understood and supported by the strategic management of the club (CEO/chairperson/board of directors). Similarly, the entire staff must work towards this vision, translating the strategic goals to the operative level and the football field. In my view, the main responsibility of the director of football is to oversee this coherent club philosophy and protect the vision of the club. I believe that everything you do as a club is the proof of your philosophy – are we actually doing what we are saying we are doing? In order to provide strategic direction, I always remind my staff at the beginning of technical meetings of the bigger picture we work towards.

Q Can you share an example of how this vision is protected in practice?

To give you an example, at one of the clubs I worked at, we had a 16-year-old goalkeeper featuring regularly in the first team starting XI.

Especially in this position, people are often sceptical and say that he does not have the necessary experience to be in this situation. However, this is the only decision that makes sense if we believe this player is the best option, because otherwise we do not follow the club philosophy. In situations like this, I tell the first team head coach that I fully support him even if the player makes mistakes or his play draws criticism.

Q What are the main pillars of your first team transition strategy?

First, you need to have quality players that can reach the level that you target as your overarching goal (e.g. UEFA Champions League participation). Therefore, recruitment is key; you need to identify and assess which pre-requisites you look for.

In my view, players have different physical and cognitive building blocks that can provide a forecast of their potential. For example, you can project the height of players and if a goalkeeper is not reaching a certain height by the time he fully matures, then it is highly unlikely he will be successful at the desired level, and it would be a waste of time and resources to develop him. I have a specific secret algorithm projecting aspects like explosivity, physical development, passion, or game intelligence.

Secondly, you need to develop the players. I believe there is room for growth in football to develop better players with the necessary investment and a good training methodology.

Finally, you need to provide opportunities. When planning a squad, you have the core 14-16 players that will play the majority of minutes. Ideally, you want to fill the rest of the squad with young players who are in their first, second or third senior season.

Even if they don't play that many minutes, they can already experience some aspects of first team football. We make sure that those players who do not get enough first team opportunities are instead playing in our reserve team.

Q How do you track the development of youth players and evaluate their readiness for first team football?

It starts with the biological markers of potential during the recruitment process. Then, we have a framework to measure the performance through the monitoring of every game and with the help of data.

At AZ Alkmaar, I had the chance to develop a model that tracks the objective parameters of the performance of players during games, measuring elements such as build-up, finishing, counter-press, or chance creation.

We track these parameters from Under-15 level and combine them with an evaluation of the mental side that is a major barrier during the transition. Players must be patient, possess the right attitude, and be motivated to reach a high level. We make sure that players face challenges even before the transition, because it can help with the development of the right mindset. Even after these aspects, you have uncontrollable elements such as reaction to pressure or a major injury, but at least it's possible to improve the odds of success. After eight years of practical data, there is evidence that the philosophy is working.



FIRST TEAM HEAD COACH

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

According to the results of the ECA club survey, first team head coaches are the most influential decision-makers during the transition process. Of respondent clubs, 86% indicated that people in those positions have either **final decision-making power or major influence** on transition decisions.

At the same time, head coaches also hold a central role in ensuring the sustained success and development of the club as a whole, serving as the link between a club's vision and its on-field realisation. Their duties extend well beyond the training ground, encompassing the strategic planning of match tactics, the implementation of game plans, and the overall management of the team. Besides the team perspective, they also bear the responsibility of nurturing the individual growth of players.

First team head coaches are consistently under pressure to achieve sporting success with the first team while often also being responsible for other areas of the club.

In many football clubs, there has been a historic tendency of first team head coaches prioritising immediate success over long-term development.

While understandable, this **shortsighted approach often leads to the underutilisation of the academy** and a reliance on transfers.

Their transition influence extends to critical decisions such as inviting academy players to train with the first team, granting them opportunities to showcase their skills, and even including them in the matchday squad or starting XI. They have a profound impact on the development and confidence of emerging talents, either providing them with opportunities or, conversely, setting them on a slower trajectory towards first team prominence. They are also instrumental in **fostering a supportive environment within the first team**. Their ability to manage the dynamics between seasoned professionals and academy players while ensuring that the team remains competitive, requires a delicate balance of leadership and mentorship.

Based on recent trends, the **turnover rates in the head coach position are higher than ever**, requiring players to adapt to new types of leadership frequently. The high turnover has a negative effect on all long-term aspects of team management, including the transition to first team process.

Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Recruitment of head coaches: commitment to youth development

It's not enough that the club philosophy puts an emphasis on the importance of transition; the first team head coach must also have the same level of commitment towards the promotion of young talents. Establishing a common understanding of the vision before the parties start working together clarifies the expectations for both sides involved.



Recruitment of head coaches: past experience

Coaches who have previously worked in an academy setting bring significant benefits to the transition. Their prior experience enables a deep understanding of the obstacles young talents face and ensures a willingness to provide playing opportunities, even in challenging times, both of which can contribute to a great extent to the transition process.

Strong working relationship between the academy and the first team head coach

Effective collaboration between the academy hierarchy and the first team head coach can take various forms. The frequency of interaction may differ based on the specific needs and goals of the club. Some clubs may find it beneficial to organise weekly sessions, ensuring a consistent and ongoing exchange of knowledge, strategies, and player development updates. In case of clubs with established systems and relationships, monthly meetings might suffice.

Frequent and transparent communication

Due to the varied responsibilities of head coaches, players in transition might only have limited interactions with them. Still, the club should make sure that the players feel engaged and receive feedback. A lack of communication can result in insecurity on the player side, increasing their perceived pressure. The feedback can be channelled through assistant or academy coaches or be provided in the form of regular, pre-scheduled meetings, so the players do not interpret the lack of communication as a negative sign. The most crucial point of communication is during the initial first team experience of an academy graduate: the coach should clearly explain his expectations and tactical philosophy.

First team coaching assistant in charge of coordination with the academy

One way to maintain frequent contacts between the first team and the academy is to have an assistant from the first team coaching staff being in charge of coordination from the first team point of view. This way, both parties have a clear structure in place to deal with common matters, such as the transition.

“Players in transition might only have limited interactions with first team coaches”

INTERVIEW

FIRST TEAM HEAD COACH

ANDRE VILLAS-BOAS

CURRENT FC PORTO PRESIDENT, AND HAS MANAGED CLUBS SUCH AS CHELSEA FC, TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR FC AND FC ZENIT.



André Villas-Boas' career highlights include a UEFA Europa League Trophy success in 2010-11 and an undefeated, title-winning season with FC Porto, as well as a Russian domestic league title, among other achievements. He has worked in five countries and experienced markedly different youth development models in practice.

Q How do you see the current situation of first team head coaches in relation to the transition of youth players?

During the last ten years, and especially nowadays, first team coaches have come under increasing pressure. There is an influx of more and more aspiring coaches, contributing to the trend that clubs are inclined to change their head coach whenever there is a challenging period. Subsequently, this has put more pressure on young players aiming to take the jump up into the first team as well, further limiting the already shallow pool of opportunities.

On the other hand, the fact that an increasing number of European clubs are under financial strain, makes it necessary to focus more on homegrown talent, which is certainly a positive for youth development and transition. Finally, there is also a trend of clubs leaning into their youth and reserve

coaches in case there is a head coach opening that can facilitate a smoother promotion of talent.

Q How would you describe the evolution of the first team head coach role during your career? How involved are coaches in the decision-making process related to youth players?

Twenty years back, a lot more freedom was given to the coaches to oversee the overall youth project. At a lot of clubs, whenever a new coach came in, all youth teams have started to play the same style of football that the first team played. However, after a brief uptick, this quickly became a rarity as clubs realised they're changing their coaches often, resulting also in frequent changes in the academy vision. Now, the majority of the clubs have taken ownership of their youth project, especially with the financial strains I mentioned before.

Q What are the most notable challenges that first team head coaches must go through when putting transitioning players into their teams?

In a lot of situations, coaches need to be brave and make a bet whenever they put a young player on the pitch. Over the course of my career, I participated in interviews

where the club president or the sporting director asked my take on youth team players, and if I believed in them. My reply has usually been that it depends on your project. Are you willing to bet on youth players even if they are not ready yet and need more experience? Do you want to take the risks if the talent is not there? Clubs need to understand that results will not always come right away following such a strategy. However, if everyone is aligned that they deserve chances, then results could come in the long-term. We have seen many examples of it, such as in case of AFC Ajax or FC Barcelona.

Q Can you shed light on some of the perceived challenges that youth players have with the head coach?

At times, a coach may require additional players to enhance the training sessions for the senior team. This necessity often leads to players oscillating between the youth and senior teams, sparking a mental disquiet fuelled by misaligned expectations. It's been observed on numerous occasions that players, feeling unsettled, might withhold their full effort, prompting the coach to eventually lose faith in their potential. To circumvent this issue, the solution lies in maintaining open and regular communication, coupled with the formulation of a clear transition plan. This plan should outline specific games and the expected minutes of play, while also offering guidance on managing both success and setbacks during these pivotal moments. On the flipside, I experienced several successful transitions in China where the players were culturally accustomed to have discipline and listen to the coach which made the learning process easier.





ACADEMY SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

The academy hierarchy and staff are **ultimately responsible for the youth development process of players before the transition to first team football.** The hierarchy is usually led by the academy director who not only oversees and ensures the quality of this development journey, but also acts as a primary touchpoint with the first team. Considering that first team objectives do not always match with the interests of young players, he also has a **responsibility to represent the youth development philosophy** within the club.

On a more immediate level, it is the academy coaches that prepare the players, making sure that they receive all the necessary tools and instructions that are required during the path towards the first team. Without academy support over the years, players will not reach the next level. There is often also an interim period in which the player in transition divides their time between the youth and the first team setting. Academy coaches still have an important role to play in that timeframe as players tend to gravitate towards the people who they already know.

It can make a big difference if players are sufficiently prepared for the transition during their academy development.

By **setting realistic expectations and providing the toolkit to deal with the challenges** that the transition presents, academies can make the transition process smoother. Furthermore, a large amount of information is generated during the academy development of transitioning players. If collected and used correctly, this can then be utilised by the first team to support the integration of incoming young players.

Interestingly, based on the results of the club survey prepared for the study, even though academies are considered as an integral part of the club by most of the respondents, the majority of **academy directors and coaches do not have a major influence on transition decisions.** While their main responsibility is to oversee the development of players, they are also well-positioned to evaluate their readiness, which can potentially add value during the transition decision-making process. This contradiction, if handled badly, could potentially be a source of friction and negatively impact the success rate of transitions.

Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Evaluation framework at the core of academy progress

Through the collection of quantitative and qualitative information, academies basically perform in-depth scouting for the first team, providing the basis for any transition decision. That is why it is instrumental to create a formal evaluation framework that ensures that all necessary data points are recorded and taken into account during the progress of the players. A thorough evaluation already filters out players who are not ready for the transition, saving valuable time and resources.

Prioritisation of goals: Player development vs winning

The two main goals of club academies are to develop players suitable for professional football and to perform well as a club at the youth level. What is the optimal balance between these two distinct goals? Based on club conversations, the most successful academies primarily focus on the individual player development aspect, as it is always going to be players and not youth team results that maximise the returns for the club as a whole. However, winning as a team is not negligible either, as players also need to learn the culture of winning as they will need this skill in the professional scene.

Constant two-way communication with the first team head coach

There must be a detailed communication process between the academy leadership (academy director and academy head coach) and the first team head coach, as the focus of the latter will almost always be on the results of the first team. Therefore, it is the academy hierarchy that must inform the first team head coach about the progress of players, while the academy also needs to be aware of the exact requirements of the first team to work towards the same goals. The information flow also goes the other way:

academy coaches can inform youth players about their status and progress in the first team, providing constant feedback from a trusted figure in a potentially insecure situation.

Clear expectation management of youth coaches

If a club focuses on the individual development of youth players, these objectives must also be accounted for during the goal setting and evaluation of all coaches, as well. For example, they should not be judged solely on the basis of a few poor on-pitch results in isolation. Instead, some objectives should be tied to transition success. This way, youth coaches are incentivised to look after the players during this period.

Internal marketing of talents by the academy staff

While decisions at most clubs are made by the club hierarchy (e.g. sporting director) and the first team head coach, the academy staff members also have the ability to influence this process proactively by formally (and informally) promoting the talents that they think are ready for the next step. By organising regular staff meetings and the strategic leadership considering these opinions, clubs also expand their overall knowledge about players.

Give playing opportunities against older opponents

Already during the academy development phase, it is sometimes advised to give talents a taste of playing against older, physically more mature, and more experienced opponents. For example, playing an exceptional 15-year-old in the Under-17 or even Under-19 category provides a similarly challenging experience in some areas as the first team transition itself. Getting players accustomed to change and adversity can be started well before the transition phase.



INTERVIEW

ACADEMY SUPPORT

PACO GALLARDO



CURRENT HEAD COACH OF SPAIN UNDER-18 TEAM,
FORMER HEAD COACH OF LEEDS UNITED FC UNDER-21 TEAM

After a 16-year career as a professional footballer, representing clubs in Spain, Portugal and Hungary, Paco Gallardo began his coaching career in 2015 at his boyhood club, Sevilla FC. After managing the club's youth and reserve teams, he moved to Leeds United FC in 2022, first as an individual development coach, and then taking over as the manager of the club's Under-21 team a year later. He is not only experienced, but also passionate about the development of academy players.

Q What methods do you use as an academy head coach to facilitate the first team transition of players?

As a starting point, I believe that the academy head coach must have a good relationship and frequent discussions with the first team head coach to be informed about how he can support the first team the most. For example, the academy coach can train a talented player in a position where there is a gap in the first team, so this way, the academy can offer a solution. In general, training players in multiple different positions and systems is an effective way of creating opportunities as the academy head coach can demonstrate the ability of the players proactively (e.g. through match and training videos) in case some unexpected opportunities arise.

For the players, I can give advice on what to expect and how to handle the first team environment, as well as ensuring them that they have been well prepared and do not have to expect huge changes in areas such as tactics or formations. Usually, I also speak with some first team players and ask them to support the social integration of the new players.

Q Based on your experience, what are the biggest challenges for transitioning players?

One issue I see is that a lot of clubs promote players to be with the first team only for training purposes and not with an intention to play them also in matches. This results in some players bouncing back and forth between the academy and the first team, which could be difficult to handle mentally. Another challenge is the disturbing effect of social media, as after posting about a first team experience, players receive a false impression that they have already made it due to the reactions. As a coach, I always tell the players that I do not want to see any posts about your first team experience until playing five times in the first team, because in reality, you are still part of the reserve team.

Q What qualities are crucial to overcome the challenges and make the jump?

Mostly psychological qualities such as being motivated and determined, which can be demonstrated by performing to your

maximum abilities in training. Players also need to be confident and believe in their abilities. It is not a quality, but the external support that players receive is also crucial. The advice that players get from their family and agents can sometimes be detrimental, but it can also help in areas such as healthy diet or emotional support.

Q With experience as a youth and reserve team coach in both Spain and England, what is your opinion about the two distinctly different systems in place in the two countries?

The first big difference is in the number of games played during a season. In Premier League 2, Under-21 teams play around 20 matches per year, while the reserve teams in Spain usually play in lower divisions which means around double the number of matches. I certainly prefer more matches; I believe 20 is not enough for young players. Secondly, the competitiveness of the matches is vastly different, as in Spain, players feel the pressure and play against senior opponents, in front of a crowd that is already at least similar to playing in the club's first team. In contrast, the focus in England is on player development, with less pressure and a more relaxed environment overall. My philosophy is that it's better if we put the players in a similar situation to what they will experience in the first team, thus I believe that the system in Spain is better. However, both systems have advantages and disadvantages.





DEDICATED TRANSITION SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

The appointment of a **dedicated transition coach, an individual development coach or a post-formation manager** is becoming more and more popular across Europe. Multiple interviewees indicated that they had introduced a position like this into their structure in the past five years.

Out of the 95 respondents of the club survey, 68% indicated they have a staff member providing individual support during the transition (dedicated transition coach(es), talent manager or part-time transition coordinator). In these roles, coaches create a personalised development programme for players, in order to better prepare them for first team transition and the challenges that come with professional football.

Transition coaching often focuses on technical and tactical development aspects; however, it can also include mental, social, and physical preparation support, based on the individual needs of players. At some clubs, this is the primary way of transition support, while at others, it's more of a supplementary tool that goes hand in hand with other areas.

What is common at all clubs is that this type of support **provides players with a dedicated person who they can reach out to** if they have questions, doubts, or struggles as they often feel isolated and lost during their transition to a new environment in the first team. Having someone who they can talk to is an extremely valuable resource.

Creating the **connection between the academy and the first team** can be difficult and is made much easier if there is a dedicated person in between the two.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of transition, it is difficult to give proper consideration to all supporting areas without a single person being responsible for the coordination between them. Individual player plans are also getting more and more complex in nature. Every player and every transition is different, **there is no universal concept or development programme that is suitable for everyone.** Having someone close to players who is dedicated to supporting them throughout the transition is a great way to deal with these differences.

Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Separation of individual coaching responsibilities by age category

A practice that was mentioned by clubs is that different individual development coaches are assigned to every age group (Under-12 to Under-14, Under-15 to Under-17, Under-19 to Under-21). They provide customised training sessions starting well in advance of the transition-to-first-team process, at a much younger age. By sharing the workload, more players can participate in these individual sessions. The coaches are able to implement practices they found successful in one team (e.g. Under-12) at another (e.g. Under-13) as the issues these players of similar ages face often overlap.

Creation of an individual development framework

Players and their development needs are different, which often results in distinctively different individual training programmes. Some players require regular discussions and joint video analysis reviews, while for others, it's enough if the jointly agreed goals are monitored more loosely. However, from the club perspective, it's still advised to have a structured framework in place which makes the tracking and evaluation of individual programmes easier and more transparent. In this framework, specifics such as the length of the programme, the issue that should be solved and the main indicators to be measured should all be defined.

The different elements of the individual coaching process

Which coaching methods can improve specific aspects of a transitioning player's game? It all starts with the goal setting that includes realistic, challenging, and measurable targets that need to be fully understood by the player before the start of the work. The next step is the demonstration of the issue, which can be done during training sessions or by analysing video footage that showcases the behaviour that needs to be corrected. Players then need to be incentivised to replicate the desired action which can be done through various positive or negative reinforcements and feedbacks. Finally, a detailed evaluation with the confirmation and presentation of the improvement closes the programme.

Ensure that everyone receives individual coaching feedback

While the employment of one or more specialised individual coaches might be the optimal way of transition coaching, many clubs do not have the budget or the organisational structure to accommodate this role. However, the main purpose of individual transition support (custom feedback for each player so they feel a high level of care) can still be achieved by assigning this task to members of the staff who also have other responsibilities, such as the head coach or assistant coaches.

“It all starts with goal setting that includes realistic, challenging, and measurable targets”

📢 INTERVIEW

DEDICATED TRANSITION SUPPORT

ARNAR VIDARSSON

RECENTLY APPOINTED MANAGING DIRECTOR OF SPORT, AND FORMER HEAD COACH OF THE YOUTH TEAM AND POST-DEVELOPMENT MANAGER OF KAA GENT



After a professional playing career predominantly at clubs in Belgium and the Netherlands, Arnar Viðarsson started his coaching career at KSC Lokeren, providing a link between the academy and the first team. Later, he worked with the Under-21 national team of Iceland before being promoted to head coach of the national team. He then moved to KAA Gent to become responsible for the reserve team (Jong KAA Gent) and the post-development period of players at the club academy. Since the summer of 2024, he was promoted to Managing Director of Sport at the club.

Q What are your responsibilities as the post-development manager of the club?

I am responsible for the creation of individual development plans for players to bring out the maximum potential from their career. On a day-to-day basis, this includes the coaching of technical, mental, and physical aspects to make sure all players who have the capabilities to reach the first team level get support that is personalised to their needs. As part of the job, I need to be aware of the players who are the most capable of reaching the first team, identify 'late bloomers' and get to know the players' personalities. In addition, I'm serving as the link between the academy and the first team.

Q In your opinion, what are the most important qualities that a transition or post-development coach should possess?

First of all, you need to be able to work with different types of people effectively. It means you must be open and possess the emotional intelligence to work with players

and other stakeholders of vastly different backgrounds. This is a necessity to understand the reason behind their struggles and weak points. Then, you must build connections with internal club stakeholders both in the academy and the first team to be the 'glue' between the two.

Q What do you think is the optimal way of fulfilling this role within a club?

I think, in an ideal world, it should be a full-time job. In addition to the job aspects mentioned previously, transition coaches should sometimes also talk with the external environment of players, such as parents or agents. I would say the transition coach should be sitting next to the head coach of the last academy team (e.g. Under-23 or Under-21 team) and must also build a strong formal and informal relationship with both the first team head coach and the academy director.

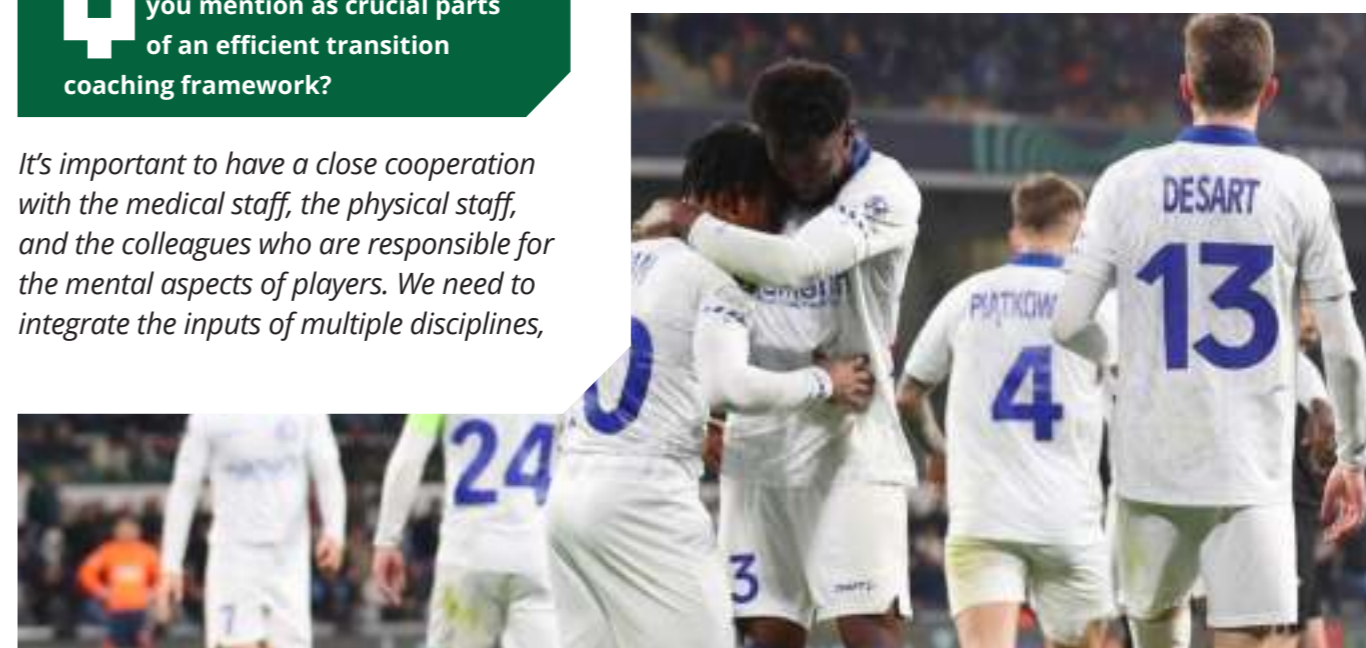
Q What other aspects would you mention as crucial parts of an efficient transition coaching framework?

It's important to have a close cooperation with the medical staff, the physical staff, and the colleagues who are responsible for the mental aspects of players. We need to integrate the inputs of multiple disciplines,

such as physical workload data. The data points must be evidence-based in format and stored in a database that is accessible and that is also independent from whoever is the first team head coach or the academy director.

Q What does an individual development plan look like for a transitioning player?

First, players need to be assessed properly, identifying the main strengths and weaknesses. Afterwards, a plan must be made together with the player, selecting specific areas to focus on. The key is to make sure that the player understands the purpose behind the tasks and get a full picture of the opportunities and threats that are ahead of him. The crucial aspect, however, only comes after this step as players must follow the plan in practice, which requires dedication and a high-performance mindset. For example, who is willing to stay after training or is dedicated enough to go to bed on time? The weights will not lift themselves either.





LOAN MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

In cases where there are no opportunities to transition directly via the parent club's first team, clubs must look for **alternative playing time opportunities**. These include satellite clubs and long-term club collaborations, with the most popular model being the loaning of players. Loans provide the **easiest way of senior playing time opportunity** in case there are no openings in the first team.

During these 'transition loans', the goals of the two involved clubs differ: the loan club would like to receive immediate gains due to the temporary nature of the transaction, while the parent club is more motivated by the potential long-term benefits that come from senior playing time opportunity. Therefore, the **loan club will rarely provide the necessary transition support** for the players. The parent club is also responsible for the **monitoring and evaluation of the loan experience from a long-term perspective**. In case a loan is not going well, a proper monitoring system can identify the issues and intervene if needed.

It is also crucial to be aware of the expected initial reaction of players. The first loan experience of academy players is usually about stepping out of the comfort zone and acclimatisation to the professional level.

While their reaction to the first loan is already valuable information, a second experience often provides a more realistic picture about their performance level and future potential.

Providing specific loan management support is therefore among the most impactful supporting areas for players who go through this indirect type of transition (accumulating their first senior minutes at a team other than their parent club).



“The more personal aspect of player care is just as important from a transition perspective”

Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Thorough technical assessment of loan club

It is imperative to perform a detailed evaluation of the loan club before the final selection. First of all, it is advisable to run a general check, looking into their philosophy, the success of past loans and the details of the current head coach's style and preferred formation. Only those who can provide a playing environment that is in line with the development expectations should be considered. Afterwards, the evaluation should be specific to the individual attributes of the player, such as his preferred position/role.

In some cases, the player's agent is also involved in the selection of the loan club in some capacity. Honest and transparent communication about such matters with the agent can help foster a good relationship.

Build long-term loan relationships with other clubs

After one or more clubs are identified as suitable loan partners based on the technical assessment,

it might be a good idea to expand the loan agreements and create a strategic partnership. With a closer collaboration, it's possible to agree on specific details about how the loan player should be dealt with and both teams get more access to information from the other.

Direct player assistance as part of loan management

At some clubs, loan management is considered as a function that is mostly about coordination and building relationships with other clubs. However, the more personal aspect of player care is just as important from a transition perspective. No matter if this role is a full-time position or part of the responsibilities of a loan manager who oversees the entire area, the responsible person(s) must spend time with the player before, during and after the loan. This might involve watching all matches of the players. In addition, some clubs send specialised support staff to visit players from time to time; for example, a club nutritionist can stay in touch with the player this way and provide valuable help.

Finally, keeping a strong and close relationship with the player can also preserve their personal attachment to the parent club. Because of this personal aspect, some clubs employ former players for this role as part of the academy structure.

Pre- and post-loan evaluation

It is advised to have face-to-face discussions with the players both before and after the loan experience. Beforehand, there should be a goal-setting exercise and the club should also inform the player about how they will support him and who can he turn to. After the loan, reflection is key from the player's side, while physical testing and debriefing discussions can also be held.



INTERVIEW

LOAN MANAGEMENT

DARIO BACCIN

LOAN MANAGER AND VICE SPORTING DIRECTOR OF FC INTERNAZIONALE MILANO



Dario Baccin is a former professional player and now manager with vast experience of the transfer market. Previously, he was a sporting director at Siena and Palermo FC before joining Inter seven years ago. In his current role, he has various responsibilities while reporting directly to the club's Sporting Director.

Q How would you characterise the context you face in relation to first team transition, with a particular focus on the loan management of young players?

At most clubs and certainly at Inter, the sporting objectives of the first team are at the forefront of decision-making. We must be aware of the expectations of winning trophies and balance the situation with the playing time requirements of young players. At the same time, it is crucial to give opportunities for these academy players to grow, highlighting the importance of alternative playing time opportunities. Operating a reserve team as part of the professional football pyramid requires a relatively large financial investment and high-level infrastructure, so at the moment, Inter prefer loans. This might change in the



close future, as loaning out players presents some inevitable risks. Our objective is to make the best decision for both the club and the player; therefore, each case is handled individually.

In addition, loan management decisions should also take into account perspectives such as 1) a player fulfilling the homegrown criteria before a move away from the club and 2) loan restrictions set by FIFA which, after the new regulations introduced in 2022, require a more thorough thinking process and provide less freedom.

During my everyday activities, I follow the training of our own youth teams, as well as the progress of loanees, also communicating with the academy coaching staff, agents, and clubs where loanees are currently playing.

Q How do you make these loan decisions?

We follow an integrated approach, involving multiple stakeholders. The first step is to decide who gets loaned out, which is the responsibility of the scouting department and myself. In most cases, the first team head coach is also consulted to have a full agreement within the club. At the same time, the player and his agent are also informed about the process and the development. In order to have a smooth experience, the club and the agent must be on the same page and have regular communication throughout the duration of the loan.

Once the final decision is made, we start to look for suitable loaning clubs. Inter has an extensive network of trusted clubs who we have a strong relationship with, but technical and tactical aspects are also considered to allow a challenging, but

suitable learning curve for the player. It is rare that clubs receive any loan fee for youth prospects; the priority during decision-making is the development of the players.

Q What kind of support do you provide to loanees during their loan experience?

Players are monitored on a weekly basis, both professionally and personally. Together with the scouting staff, I regularly speak with the players to make sure they are settled in and feel comfortable. One of the biggest challenges of the loanees, especially at a young age, is to adapt to a 'new reality' from a mental perspective. Another challenge is the limited level of control during loan spells: for example, there can be coaching changes at the loan club causing uncertainty and potential failure.

Q Can you share some successful or instructive loan cases?

One of the most successful journeys was Federico Dimarco's, who had loan spells at five clubs before becoming an established first team player. The player was resilient, while Inter always believed in him, providing support throughout the process. A different type of success is when we can sell academy players for a profit after a good loan performance, supporting the club and the first team financially. As for cases we could learn from, there was an instance when we allowed a player to select his preferred loan destination. Without a detailed selection process, he chose a club that was not a good fit, resulting in a lack of development.



SENIOR (FIRST TEAM) PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

The **cultural gap between the academy and the first team** is often mentioned by clubs as one of the biggest challenges of the transition. Players usually leave a caring academy setting that emphasises the needs of an individual and join a hyper-competitive, performance-focused environment that can be overwhelming. There is a fine line between healthy competition that makes everyone better and a sense of mistrust and fear of losing out.

From the perspective of senior players, transitioning academy graduates provide extra competition for places in the squad and first team XI. If the club does not pay attention to the nature of relationships between positional rivals, the team **atmosphere can become tense**. Based on academic studies, a supportive training community is often at the core of a well-functioning environment. Players spend a large amount of time with their teammates, thus the relationships within the group are key elements for **social and emotional balance**.

It takes a long time to change the **dressing room dynamics** of a team. If the environment is counter-productive, it influences the transition of multiple generations.

Conversely, a virtuous, self-preserving cycle can be created by paying attention to fundamental aspects related to the support that transitioning players receive from first team peers.

Mental toughness and an intrinsic drive to perform were mentioned among the most crucial transition criteria during club and expert interviews. The best way for transitioning players to realise what is needed to make it at the professional level is to interact with those who have already done it: the established first team players.

Additionally, the players' relationships also heavily influence the technical and tactical development during the transition. The volume and frequency of feedback is generally more intense during the first team transition process than at any other point during a player's career. It is crucial for young talents to pay attention to criticism, which is not an easy feat for many. **Receiving feedback from players who have already 'made it'** is the best way of delivering a message from the club's point of view. However, it is only possible if academy players are fully integrated into the first team's social group. In an ideal environment, the knowledge of experienced players can help to improve the capabilities of academy graduates.

Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Build a club culture of equality and inclusivity

The culture of relationships between the young and more experienced players starts at the top of the organisation. The club management needs to acknowledge the long-term importance of academy players and strive for the creation of an environment that promotes the values of equality (the handling of players is not based on status), inclusivity (accepting the personality of every player) and openness (conflicts between players are handled transparently). Several clubs and experts mentioned during the interviews that a clear vision is the basis of all practical activities.

Appointment of coaches who represent the desired values

A prime way to channel the philosophy of the management is to appoint a coaching staff that understands how to create the necessary changing room dynamics. During interviews, both a 'Big Five' and a non-'Big Five' club shared that they had experienced major team culture differences when the first team head coach was changed; the level of emphasis they place on the integration of youth players is key.

Mentoring of young players

While clubs and experts both agreed that senior players cannot be forced to mentor youngsters, the club can focus on the characteristics of the recruited changing room leaders. If there are players in the squad who are inclined to naturally support freshly promoted academy graduates, then mentorship relationships will be built without further actions from the club side. A prime example is AFC Ajax: the club consciously looks for experienced players who are natural leaders and are likely to lead a young group of players.

Create occasions for bonding

Informally, the best method to build strong player relationships is to organise events where young players can get accustomed to the presence of established stars. During the first formal contacts (e.g. first time training with senior players), transitioning players tend to be shy and reserved. In contrast, if the club creates situations before and during the transition when these moments are overcome in a more relaxed environment, one stress factor is taken out. Possible events that are suitable for this purpose include training camps, team buildings and organised programmes during away days, or even simple occasions such as team meals or more relaxed training exercises.

Another tool mentioned by a former player is to occasionally allow senior players to participate in academy training sessions as a coach, creating a formal relationship at an early stage.

Encourage the sharing of technical knowledge

The first team coaching staff should create opportunities in training where senior players can demonstrate their skills, experience and decision-making in a way that is replicable for young players. There should also be a platform (e.g. watch match videos together) where senior players can speak up and put their tacit knowledge into words, so that the thinking process behind certain on-field actions is explained.

“The club can focus on the characteristics of changing room leaders”

INTERVIEW

SENIOR (FIRST TEAM) PLAYERS

JOHAN DJOUROU

FORMER SWITZERLAND INTERNATIONAL WHO REPRESENTED ARSENAL FC, HAMBURGER SV, ANTALYASPOR AND FC NORDSJÆLLAND, AMONG OTHERS



Johan Djourou has a diverse range of experiences related to the first team transition process. Not only did he manage to successfully transition from the Arsenal Academy to the club's first team, but he did it after moving away from his home country at the age of 16. He also played in six countries during his senior career, experiencing various player development and transition environments.

Q How do you remember your own first-team transition?

I can still recall this memory very clearly. I was training with the goalkeepers far away from the first team and I saw Pat Rice coming to me. He said Sol Campbell just got injured and now I must come and train with the first-team players. So suddenly, I was doing training exercises against the likes of Patrick Vieira and Thierry Henry! That is how it started. But overall, I had a pretty smooth experience thanks to my focused mindset and mental stamina.

Q In your opinion, what makes the difference between successful and failed transitions?

I strongly believe it's actually this mental stamina or mental strength I've just mentioned. A young player will be challenged constantly, and he needs to show the willingness to learn and progress. Every day, as an aspiring player, you must learn something new and be able to go again and again. I would also mention patience and a positive attitude. Even if a player is not playing enough, they need to

avoid negative thoughts and remain focused, because they need to be ready when the opportunity comes. Otherwise, they will perform badly and may not get another chance.

Q During the initial stage of the transition, what can a young player do to fit into the changing room dynamics of the first team?

First of all, when you go to a new environment, it's you that must adapt yourself to the people instead of the other way around. In my case, overcoming the language barrier was a good example. Instead of looking for an easy solution (e.g. spending my time with French-speaking people who I'm comfortable with), I decided to move to a host family where I could use and develop my English every day. Even during situations when my teammates were making fun of my pronunciation, I told myself that overcoming this challenge only makes me stronger and ultimately a better player.

Q What is the role of experienced, senior players in the transition process and how can they facilitate and make it easier for the academy graduates?

In my opinion, the role of senior players is crucial during the transition. They should take the young players under their wing, and make them feel comfortable. Senior players need to connect with the youngsters and encourage them to be themselves instead of behaving like a player who has already made it and has a different status within the team. Furthermore, as a senior player, you need to show an example of



how to conduct yourself and share your experience that can support the young player's path.

Q How responsible are clubs for creating optimal dressing room dynamics between senior and youth players? What other roles do clubs have in the transition process?

The responsibility of clubs is to create an environment and an overall development methodology that gives enough space for the transitioning players to be themselves. That is why it's so important to put more of an emphasis on the players not only as athletes, but also human beings, offering methods to develop their personality in a way that makes them more aware of what they are responsible for and how they can become better. Lastly, clubs should make efforts to understand a player and not break any kid's dream before it starts. Not everyone can make it, but with a good club philosophy, knowledgeable people and a high-level infrastructure, more opportunities can be created.



PERFORMANCE SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

From a sporting perspective, the main goal during the transition is to **bring the performance of an academy player on par with the level of the first team.**

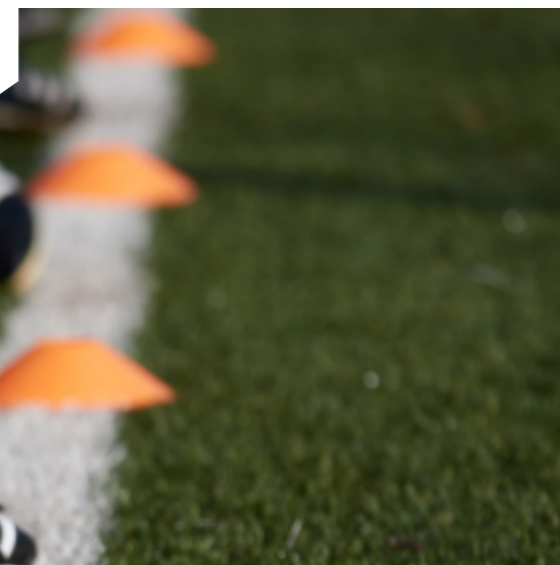
However, performance is not a uniform ability that can be influenced directly, but rather a combination of physical, tactical, technical, and cognitive factors. These different elements are sometimes not balanced. For example, a philosophy that promotes structure and discipline might result in physical and tactical development; however in these settings, the technical improvements might be less prominent.

The **physical and mental workload** associated with professional football is higher than the one at the academy level. If the workload is not managed properly, players will be more prone to injuries.

Club experts that contribute to performance development include assistant coaches, analysts, sports scientists, strength and conditioning staff, nutritionists, physiotherapists, physiologists, mental trainers, and psychologists, among others.

Furthermore, more specialised areas can also contribute if used correctly: lifestyle management, neuropsychology, and biological maturity research are just some examples mentioned by clubs.

Transitioning players only have a limited time to impress coaches and other decision-makers, thus **every minor differentiator** that can impact player performance matters.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Multi-positional training

Several successful club academies rely on an overarching philosophy to train players in multiple positions, in order to make their game more versatile and to increase their chances of getting first team opportunities.

Multi-position training develops an understanding of other positions (e.g. a right winger being aware of a right back's responsibilities) and skills that might be useful at the top level. As transition opportunities are generally rare, players also need to understand why coaches put them in multiple spots during the youth and professional development phases and be willing to play outside of their preferred positions.

Detailed quantitative measurement of physical parameters

With technological advancements such as GPS tracking and video footage of all training and match situations, collecting data from every physical aspect has never been easier. However, clubs need to identify those data points that bring the most value for them to not get lost in an enormous amount of data. The next step afterwards is to create and maintain a database of the information that is easy to use, visual and gives information to decision-makers and all participating stakeholders in a clear manner. For example, visual elements such as spider-diagrams, evaluation skills and benchmarking with past successful transitions are some methods to do it. Finally, with the correct interpretation of the data, physical readiness can be evaluated.

Load management

A topic that came up several times when discussing performance aspects with experts is the careful handling of physical and mental load management, especially during the early stages of the transition. Physically, the body needs to recover quicker from a more intense load, while

mentally, it's the pressure that creates a burden on players. By appointing a dedicated load manager (could be a part-time role as well), players that are overwhelmed can be monitored, identified, and supported.

Increase technical ability through different physical activities

Due to general changes in society, young kids playing football are not exposed to varied physical activities, as well as other sports, often enough. This leads to a slower development of natural technical and coordination skills. To balance the lack of these experiences happening during day-to-day life, clubs can integrate other sports and different physical activities that develop these skills.

Observing behaviour in extreme situations

Coaches can learn a lot from the behaviour of athletes when facing new, completely unfamiliar tasks. By observing the actions and patterns during spontaneous situations, both the attitude and the problem-solving skills of players come to the forefront. Through the understanding of these cognitive performance skills, limiting factors can also be identified and corrected.

“Coaches can learn a lot about athletes when facing new and unfamiliar tasks”

📢 INTERVIEW

PERFORMANCE SUPPORT

LUDO POLLERS

INDEPENDENT PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGIST, WORKING FOR CLUBS, FEDERATIONS, AND INDIVIDUAL ATHLETES

UNITED WORLD

The expertise of Ludo Pollers lies in using the biopsychosocial model approach with athletes, maximising their performance through aspects that are often ignored, overlooked, or minimised at clubs. As a performance expert, he has recently worked for the United World Group, a Multi-Club Ownership group managing a portfolio of clubs from England, Belgium, France, India, and UAE. He also has vast experience in providing individual training to young footballers who are on the verge of first team transition.

Q How does a performance psychologist help with the development of transitioning athletes?

The performance of each athlete can be broken down into around 90, what I call, Performance Construction Functions. I divide them into categories like awareness, attributes, actions, or needs. My job is to identify which functions or skills need to be improved and then assist players to reach the desired outcome.

First of all, I have specific tests to assess the level of the athlete in each team and



then, with the help of training materials, on-pitch field work, outside observations, and practical sessions, I work together with them to identify focus points, make strengths even stronger and eliminate weaknesses. Ultimately, the players receive a flexible toolkit to deal with challenging situations, such as during the transition.

Q Can you share a practical example of a biopsychosocial development area and guide us through how you improve players in this aspect?

Let me give you a unique example off the pitch: a problem I face from time to time is that academy players get bored and do not know how to use their free time. At the same time, they are focusing on football and sometimes, only football, which is not healthy for any individual and can cause stress. In order to generate 'happy hormones' that create balance and ultimately improve performance, we need to create opportunities for players. For example, I organise team activities that are completely unrelated to football (e.g. biking, hiking, playing music, reading) and also develop the soft skills of players (service projects). As a side-effect, players also get an intrinsic motivation boost when going back to the pitch, creating an appetite for football after doing entirely different activities.

Q How do you define a high-performance climate and what elements do clubs need to build one?

In my experience, the core of a high-performance climate is that 'what we do

has a clear intention, and that intention is to have success'. Interactions are not aimed at confronting the players or making them feel bad, but simply to make them better. As a starting point, everyone must understand the purpose. The other part that is important to understand is that club employees also tend to work in silos – the coaching staff's focus is only on football, the physical trainers are pivoting towards muscles, physiotherapists are busy treating injuries, but nobody puts together the whole picture. The role of a performance expert is to allow the supporting staff members to focus on their tasks, but at the same time, ensure that the puzzle pieces are also put together.

Q From a physical performance point of view, what are the most common reasons behind transition failures?

Not being ready physically often comes from one of three related root causes:
 1) Being injured and unavailable;
 2) Not performing under stress;
 3) Not willing to pick up the new physical challenges that come with the transition.

All three of the reasons can be caused by very different issues. After identifying what exactly is the case behind the physical struggles, I need to work together with the subject matter experts (e.g. working with the physiotherapists and medical professionals on preventing injuries, working with the club psychologist on removing mental fears from certain physical challenges such as being tackled a lot). However, in my experience, most of the time, it's not the physical parameters that cause the failures.



MENTAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

The importance of mental factors during the transition was strongly emphasised by clubs and other stakeholders alike throughout the development of this study. Out of the five main transition areas, **mental capabilities were ranked as the most crucial trait** in the ECA club survey to have a successful career at senior level.

One of the most profound changes during the transition is related to the status of players. After being among the best players of their youth team, they might find themselves at the bottom of the pecking order in the first-team squad. This is a major shift with only a short time to adapt. Furthermore, **expectations from the player side** are often unfounded or unrealistic; setbacks are not handled properly. One day, they could be on the verge of breaking into the first team, while on the other, they are relegated to the youth team's bench.

Additionally, players experience **mental barriers** during the first stages of the transition in areas such as workload (more training than before), level of competition (fighting against senior players for their job), physical demands (e.g. more aggressive tackling), outside pressure (fan and media criticism).

Subsequently, players need to get used to failure and build a mindset of not giving up. On top of that, players also **lack control over the transition process**, and this can sometimes cause insecurity and self-doubt.

At the same time, it is an area that is generally **difficult to measure and develop** consistently. When it comes to the abilities that define the psychological aspects of transition, expressions such as resilience, motivation, drive, toughness, identity, ambition, determination, and commitment were mentioned the most often during stakeholder discussions.

The most significant challenge, however, is the individual nature of psychological traits. All players differ in their mental makeup, thus **generalised solutions are rarely efficient**. Still, there are existing tools that clubs successfully use in practice.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Detailed assessment of cognitive functions and needs

Based on the conducted club interviews, the assessment of mental capabilities is not at an advanced stage in European football as a whole. There are only a few pioneering clubs that are exploring different detection and testing methods of cognitive abilities, such as mental analytics assessment. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses, clubs can look for specific, personalised tools of improvement. Evaluations then can be repeated at key milestones, such as at the first training session, match debut and full integration to the squad.

Creating a safe environment during struggles

When a player is struggling during the transition, honest communication is key to diagnose the issue. In order to have a transparent and open discussion, the club must create a safe environment for these talks, involving only those stakeholders who have a strong relationship with the players (e.g. youth coach, agent, sports psychologist).

Using the help of a dedicated sports psychologist

Sport psychologists specialise in understanding and enhancing the mental aspects of an athlete's performance and well-being. These experts use a combination of psychological techniques and

strategies to address various aspects of a player's mental game, including motivation, concentration, confidence, and emotional

regulation. They may also provide workshops, seminars, and educational programmes to help not only individual players, but also coaches and teams to develop the psychological skills needed for success.

When it comes to young academy players making the leap to the first team, sport psychologists provide crucial support in managing the psychological demands of this transition. They work on developing mental resilience, coping strategies, and self-confidence, all of which are essential for succeeding at the highest level of competition.

Custom solutions to remove mental barriers

Mental barriers such as workload and outside pressure can be isolated and analysed separately, decreasing the complexity of dealing with multiple challenges. For example, one potential way to monitor the workload is to have a role (even as a part-time responsibility) in the coaching staff who can track and manage the workload of each individual player. If there is an overload, together with the sports psychologist, players can be educated in how to regenerate, relax, eat, or sleep properly. Similarly, sessions about outside pressure can be scheduled with the club psychologist.

Build motivation on intrinsic factors

A challenge that many clubs and experts raised during discussions was the impact of the changing landscape of the business side of football. Players can earn a lot of money already at a young age, which can have a negative impact on their perception of football and the level of motivation to make it to the top. It's easier said than done, but instead of extrinsic factors, such as money and fame, academies should aim to build their programme at the promotion of intrinsic factors such as self-improvement, self-pride, or the love of the sport.

“Only a few clubs are exploring different methods of testing cognitive abilities”



INTERVIEW

MENTAL SUPPORT

CLUB PSYCHOLOGIST

FROM A "BIG FIVE" LEAGUE CLUB REGULARLY PARTICIPATING IN THE UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

The interviewee has been working as a sports psychologist in the youth department of football clubs for almost ten years. During the past three years, he has been working mostly on the education of youth coaches in terms of social competences, self-competences, and methodological competences through individual coaching and the organisation of workshops about various topics.

Q What is the role of sports psychologists in the mental development of football players?

In general, it is to help players find solutions to their mental challenges (e.g. school issues, preparation for training, building relationships, mental health, regeneration) by themselves instead of telling them what to do. Ultimately, players must deal with external pressure; however, we as sports psychologists can assist them. Some players are more sensitive to pressure, whereas others do not feel it as much, so there is no universal solution, and we need to find a way individually.

Q What are the main responsibilities of a sports psychologist during the first-team transition process?

First of all, it's important to decide which club psychologist works with the transitioning players. At my club, it is the responsibility of the first team club psychologist. One of the areas we are monitoring is the load management of players, both from a physical and mental

point of view. In case it is not optimal, specific training sessions can be organised that educate players about training techniques, decision-making and execution. Being in close contact with the load manager is also crucial to communicate issues and provide a gradual increase of load between the academy and the first team, which is a massive difference due to major physical requirements in the first team. Other areas to assist with are nutrition, sleep behaviour, and relaxation techniques.

Q Who do sports psychologists work with during the transition process? And how does the overall mental evaluation happen at your club?

The integration of our work with other club stakeholders is crucial during the process as transition decisions are made in an interdisciplinary manner. One of the key stakeholders is the head coach of the youth team, the Under-19s in our case, as he is the one spending the most time with the players before the transition, getting to know their psychological profile. Other stakeholders include the coaches of the first team, the transition coach that looks after the individuals and other psychologists of the club who work, or worked with the player before.

The final mental evaluation is done in an integrated approach, involving the mentioned stakeholders. We all come together and discuss if the player is ready for more challenging mental situations. In an ideal case, the player was already prepared during his academy development, and he only needs to be reminded in the first team environment about the techniques he learnt.

A key aspect of the evaluation is to not just leave the player alone once the transition starts, and do follow-up checks, especially during important milestones such as first-time training with the first team, or after the first match was played.

Q As you specialise in coach education, can you tell us how youth coaches can be better prepared to assist academy players during the transition process?

Football coaches have two distinct roles in parallel: they must be an 'expert' in their professional field, while also being a 'coach' for the players. While the first role is more technical, the second involves building a personal relationship with the players. Coaches must recognise when a player needs their help, and proactively offer their support, especially during a difficult period, such as when players are in between the academy and the first team.

Another interesting aspect that is rarely discussed is that youth coaches are also the internal 'agents' of the players, as they have to 'market' them for the academy hierarchy and first team staff in order to create opportunities as soon as possible.

Thus, in terms of education, they need not only football-specific knowledge, but also soft skills such as presentation skills, self-management skills, as well as storytelling and leadership skills.





SOCIAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

While sometimes less attention is paid to the social transition of players, it remains as important a transition area as technical, tactical, physical, or mental aspects.

The support of first team players was already touched upon in a previous area, however there are wider social interactions with other stakeholders, too. Clubs being aware of the social needs of transitioning players is a crucial step towards making them comfortable, which is a key element of success.

Starting from the early stages of transition, from the moment **young players** begin working with the first team, they **need to adapt to an entirely new social setting**. Fitting into the dynamics of any new group is a challenge in itself, and it is made tougher by the fact that this is often the player's first working experience with other professionals. This is further complicated by potential cultural differences due to a mix of languages, and cultural norms, as well as existing cliques within the dressing room that might make it difficult for a newcomer to fit in. Good communication skills and self-awareness are required to integrate into this new community.

Social needs, including the feeling of belonging are **crucial parts of a human being's general psychological development**, and this is even more important for adolescents. As professional footballers spend a considerable share of their time with their teammates, good relationships are important building blocks of their overall development.

From a club perspective, social support is inherently connected to the wider club culture, including the areas of values, leadership, and group dynamics within the first team.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Development of social skills

Organising training and education sessions for players, focusing on soft skills (e.g. communication, leadership, cultural diversity) and learning languages that assist with the social integration, will really help. This could also help staff members in properly assessing the players' personality and willingness to learn during the social integration.

Activities with the participation of both first team and academy personnel

Whether as part of football activities (e.g. training camp) or other events (e.g. team building, social cohesion camp), or with the organisation of joint activities with the first team (including players and staff members), these activities can build personal connections through the integration of the young players in a more relaxed environment.

Induction of academy players

It is crucial to give players room to introduce themselves and their personality to the first team when they first arrive. However, it is even more important to do it in a safe way, not forcing anyone to feel uncomfortable or awkward. A good solution is to organise an integration event at the start of the season, only including non-mandatory tasks.

Strategic focus on supportive squad composition

Having mentors in the dressing room who are aware of their role and support the integration of young players is crucial to the overall efficiency of social integration. There are two ways to ensure the presence of these characters: either building a pipeline of academy graduates with existing relationships to young players or by having strong leaders in the squad who take time to interact with transitioning players. However, it is difficult to put in a formalised context; the best results shall come naturally.

Joint training location

Firstly, when the academy and the first team train at the same location, young players have the chance to experience how professionals conduct themselves during these sessions. Secondly, it also gives an opportunity for staff members of the first and youth teams to deepen their formal and informal relationships which can ultimately also benefit transitioning players indirectly.

“It is crucial to give players room to introduce themselves and their personality to the [first] team”

INTERVIEW

SOCIAL SUPPORT

MANON ELUÈRE

GROUP DYNAMICS' ANALYST, CONSULTANT AND SPEAKER. FORMER HEAD OF RESEARCH IN DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND COHESION AT OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS FÉMININE



Now working as a consultant, Manon Eluère worked at Olympique Lyonnais Féminin between 2021 and 2024, where she was in charge of research in diversity, inclusion and cohesion at the club's women's football team. Her main expertise is the research of group dynamics within professional sports teams, focusing on leadership, team cohesion, teamwork, and cultural diversity. With a PhD in sports psychology and hands-on experience in improving the social dynamics of elite teams, she is well placed to discuss this topic from multiple angles.

Q What makes the transition to the first team challenging from a social perspective?

The majority of players who make the transition have, most of the time, been leaders (having influence on the team) in the academy team before the transition. However, when they arrive in the first team, basically none are perceived as such.

Q What should coaches first observe when a young player arrives in the first team squad?

Once players arrive in the first team, it's interesting to observe if they can fit well in the team culture, and if they can identify the right leaders. For example, if young players form a clique of their own and do not interact with senior colleagues, then they will not learn from senior players as they showcase important tasks and techniques at a high level in practice.

Q At what point do academy players struggle the most during the transition process from a social perspective, and how can they be prepared to deal with it?

A crucial point of struggle is when players have already experienced the first team environment but then must go back and forth between the academy and the first team (e.g. due to lack of squad spaces). At this stage, there is a risk of the players feeling that they do not belong to either of the teams.

One way to manage this situation is to prepare academy players beforehand, explaining that this scenario can happen and it's not a punishment, but rather an opportunity to develop skills such as leadership (becoming a leader in the academy team). This, for example, forces players to put into words their own tacit knowledge and thus provides an opportunity to reflect and learn. Another way is to maintain a strong connection between the two teams (first team and academy), including the players participating in the same off-the-pitch programmes or events and connecting the staff of the two teams to create and maintain a close relationship, and a consistent vision.

Q How can you manage personal relationships with the competitive aspects of being part of the same squad?

A healthy balance needs to be formed between these two aspects, ultimately built on the club's culture. Creating social cohesion is not strictly about friendships, but the creation of a competitive culture that ultimately improves the performance of the team (through task cohesion as well).

Q How can you monitor an individual player's social needs and the whole team's social state?

In both cases, the situation first needs to be diagnosed. In the case of individuals, clubs can conduct player interviews annually (or even more frequently), while for the diagnosis of the team, the best tools are questionnaires (i.e. measuring perceptions). After the diagnosis, a subject matter expert needs to evaluate the answers (it helps significantly if said expert is part of the day-to-day life of the team as it encourages openness and honesty), recognising improvement areas. One example is to map the leadership relationships within a group, measuring who are the leaders, the level of desire in terms of cooperation, tracking the integration of young players, and measuring the balance of the overall social structure of the team.

Finally, a list of recommendations needs to be prepared, which could be communicated through several channels: 1) discussions with the head coach, mental trainer, or club psychologist; 2) written reports and recommendations to the staff; 3) raising awareness with players either directly or indirectly through team building events.



HEALTH AND MEDICAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Skills in technical, tactical, and physical areas are all key parts of the transition. However, the primary criterion of any first team transition is **availability**. Therefore, player health and the necessary level of physical condition are irreplaceable factors. **If a player is injured, they cannot play. If they cannot play, they cannot develop** themselves during the academy years and might not reach the professional level because of it.

Based on club discussions, there have been advancements in the field of injury treatments during the past ten years, both in terms of knowledge and applications. However, in many cases, simply treating the injuries of players who are close to senior football is already too late. Instead, the focus **could be on injury prevention** before players start the transition to the first team stage of their career. The correct assessment of the biological and medical profile of players can also **mitigate injuries** and assist with understanding the projected on-pitch potential of the prospects.

Currently, there is a **lack of international standards** for the health aspects of youth players. As a result, clubs cannot simply turn to standard policies if they want to ensure that young talents get all necessary medical support.

What might be even more important is to pay attention to the **mental health of players**. While mental support comes from different places, mental health is a prerequisite to get through more specific mental barriers.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Focus on injury prevention and mitigation

There are effective prevention methods related to many frequent injury types (e.g. hamstring, muscular skeleton, ankle). However, based on the view of interviewed medical experts, there is not enough intrinsic motivation at clubs to implement these in regular training drills. Injury prevention often loses out to technical and tactical exercises when it comes to training time allocation, even though some say that as little as 15 minutes would be enough to reach positive results.

Education of players and coaches in injury prevention

Both groups should receive mandatory training in this area to understand basic concepts. In case of players, this education should happen at a young age, so they learn in due course why devoting time to prevention throughout their career is imperative to remaining healthy. In the case of coaches, there is currently not enough mandatory knowledge related to player health in general. For example, the mandatory coaching curriculum in the Netherlands only spends a total of two hours on player health aspects, with around 15 minutes allocated to the topic of injury prevention.

Understanding the biological maturation of players

In certain cases, there is a significant difference between the actual and the biological age of players, with some of them being ahead of schedule, while others need more time to reach the maximum capabilities in their body (late bloomers). There are technologies (e.g. ultrasound) that assess, monitor, and project the skeletal profile of players, making it possible to improve the accuracy of recruitment and the individual player development programmes.

Holistic rehabilitation programmes

Once an injury happens, the rehabilitation and return to play phases require teamwork.

The biological healing process starts with tissue healing that is overseen by physical therapists and the sports medicine physician. Then, players move towards field work, where they work together with not only physical therapists, but also the strength and conditioning staff and assistant coaches.

Finally, we should also consider the mental and cognitive healing as a crucial step of the process – if players have a fear of movement or re-injury, this will have a big impact on the return to play timeline, so the presence of club psychologists and mental trainers are also imperative. All this practical and scientific knowledge should be put together, while also making sure that player perspectives are prioritised (e.g. they are not rushed through the phases). However, coaching decisions might often work against this plan.

Sleep hygiene education

Players must be made aware of the importance of proper sleep patterns. It is crucial to regenerate, recover and develop cognitively (the brain is still developing until 25-26 years old). The education is usually the responsibility of sports psychologists who sit down individually with the players to talk about the importance of sleep and to teach techniques that can improve the quality of it.

“The prevention of injuries often loses out to technical and tactical exercises in training”

📢 INTERVIEW

HEALTH AND MEDICAL SUPPORT

VINCENT GOUTTEBARGE

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER AT FIFPRO



Starting as a professional player himself, Vincent Gouttebarge has been the Chief Medical Officer of FIFPRO for close to a decade, while also contributing to health and medical research as an academic in multiple professional sports. He is also the Chairman of the Mental Health Working Group at the International Olympic Committee and a member of medical committees in organisations like UEFA, CAF, or Ligue 1. His focus is on promoting and protecting the health of players both during and after their careers through the development of new policies and guidelines that are based on scientific, evidence-based knowledge.

Q What components do the terms health and medical support contain?

According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), health comprises 1) physical, 2) mental, and 3) social aspects. Physically, the two key aspects for transitioning players are workload and injuries. Workload is most directly associated with training and matches, while the topic of injuries includes prevention, mitigation and treatment. Mentally, we can highlight the pressure that comes with the performance requirements of first team football, especially if we consider that in the academy, the focus is most often on the development process instead of the results.



Social health issues arise due to a player losing the majority of his supporting network, for example when relocating to a foreign country.

In my opinion, the 'secret' is to monitor all three aspects and work towards an individualised, tailor-made approach as not all players have the same capacity and speed to adapt to the new physical and psychological challenges also impacting their health.

Q What can clubs do to prevent and mitigate injuries?

It all starts with the first team head coach who is the key stakeholder besides the interdisciplinary team (e.g. physical therapists, sports medicine physician, strength and conditioning staff) working with him. The medical team is responsible for the treatment of injuries that have already occurred. In my experience, coaches lack the knowledge to handle these medical

situations properly, whereas they have the authority compared to the supporting staff to be a strong influence on players. Therefore, clubs must make sure that coaches receive the necessary education to develop an intrinsic motivation to prevent injury that becomes a core aspect of their philosophy.

Q And what can they do to assist with mental and social health?

Here, I would say, an organisation that has good governance and good policies is key. Clubs need to employ the right people with a responsible vision (keep developing players in all aspects), who received a good education and possess empathy and rationality when it comes to decision-making. Once this is achieved, coaches will understand the importance of training good human beings who are balanced physically, mentally, and also socially, resulting in an increased performance on the pitch as well.

Q What items are on your list of concerns when it comes to the health of youth players these days?

Sleep and anxiety, as well as the mental effects of a serious injury. For transitioning players, the pressure associated with the jump to the first team is huge and if they cannot cope with that, they can experience side effects like sleep deprivation. The emergence of smart devices and social media are also decreasing sleep time by as much as one hour. Missing a long period of time with injuries can also lead to mental and social health issues due to social isolation and the inability to perform.



INTERVIEW

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

ARSÈNE WENGER

FIFA'S CHIEF OF GLOBAL FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT

Even though the focus of this study is the transition of players from the academy to the first team setting in European football, the global context cannot be ignored either. To explore the current state of youth development and transition from academy to first team football, we conducted an interview with Arsène Wenger, who currently serves as the Chief of Global Football Development at FIFA. Mr. Wenger also has abundant first-hand experience of the transition process from his career as a successful football manager.

Q What do you see as the biggest challenge in football talent development and how does FIFA try to support stakeholders in overcoming these obstacles?

As we analysed football globally over the years, the most significant problem we identified is the overall lack of proper education, referring to the quality of coaching, talent identification and competitions, as well as the organisation of development programmes. At FIFA, our objective is to deliver initiatives that give every talent a chance as part of our Talent Development Scheme.

We intend to raise the level of coaching everywhere, filling the gaps in technical expertise. In order to do this, we have created coaching academies where FIFA selects and educates coaches and then sends them to under-developed countries. In addition, we set up an online training

platform that can be accessed by coaches for free, as well as a data analysis centre to analyse playing trends and showcase the qualities that coaches have to improve during training sessions.

I also believe that many talents get lost in the process of youth development even before the transition to first team, not because of the lack of talent, but due to the gap in education, organised development, and a lack of competitions. The talent pool could potentially be significantly bigger for professional football.



Q How would you describe the talent development process, which steps are the most crucial in a player's career and what should football stakeholders do to improve the success rate?

The technical level of players is more or less set by the age of 16: this is the time when the development focus should be on training quality, especially when there is a lack of competitive matches. Afterwards, players need to start playing competitive matches regularly; this is also why the first age group of the FIFA World Cup is the Under-17.

The most sensitive period comes after, usually from the age of 17, until the age of 22. This is when the 'anxiety' level significantly increases for players, posing themselves the question: "Will I make it or not?" This is also the period when players develop the most, specialising in their position, competing against adults, and starting to take responsibility. By the age of 23, players must perform at a consistent level. What is shocking to see is that the vast majority do not get through the academy to first team transition hurdle. In England, 67% of players who had a professional contract at the age of 17 do not play football by the time they are 21, according to a study I read recently. This means that we have to ask ourselves: what can be done to prevent the loss of so many players who were selected, trained, and educated for years?



Q In your experience as a head coach, how could the transition process be improved at a club level? Looking back at your own career, is there anything that you would change if you could go back?

Starting with the recruitment phase, I always focused on a small number of players instead of scouting many at the same time. I met every young player and their families to assess their passion for the game. I would say this aspect, together with resilience, motivation, and the level of ambition are some of the most important elements of player success.

At Arsenal FC, we developed a personality profiling method to investigate whether a player has what it takes to be a professional at the highest level and if they can survive disappointments and setbacks.

Improvements in mental assessment is certainly one area that should be further addressed. When I meet successful players, I often ask them if there were any better players than them when they were kids at the academy. The answer is almost always 'yes', indicating that talent is not enough and that mental aspects are absolutely vital. Furthermore, I always had a strong relationship with the youth department of my clubs, and I regularly attended training sessions and matches to get to know the club's own young players.

The next crucial aspect is to give players the chance to prove themselves, get regular practice and game time, as well as a sense of development, making sure they are given new, increased challenges regularly. The level of motivation falls and problems start to arise if a player thinks he is standing still. That's why the strategic planning of squad spaces and playing time opportunities is vital; for instance, I often used the EFL Cup at Arsenal as a platform for giving competitive minutes to young players. Players need experience to learn how to play with the responsibility to win, because this is a crucial aspect of every professional's career.

There is one aspect that I regret, and it's related to player workload. While giving transitioning players opportunities is crucial, clubs also need to be aware of their physical limits. During the transition period, the body of young players is not completely ready for sustained competition due to the intensity of professional matches. A mistake I made is that I played young players too much in this tough environment instead of giving them more rest and a balanced schedule of matches. The fact that I coached in one of the most physically intense leagues, the English Premier League, did not help, but I lost players who could have had a

very promising career. Workload should therefore be monitored and managed closely to avoid issues arising from too many or too few matches.

Last, but not least, the head coach also needs to drive the youth philosophy of the club and step up for the young players during difficult moments. If you put a 17-year-old player on the pitch, there is a higher chance of a mistake compared to an experienced player.

Q Looking outside the internal club environment, what other aspects should be improved related to the transition to first team process?

The sociological environment (parents, siblings, agents, and friends) of players is a crucial aspect; if it's not supportive enough, the transition often results in failure. In my experience, a player who doesn't have the right environment never has a successful career. Mental support provided by club psychologists is another important support area outside of the pitch; at Arsenal, we had two

psychologists, with one dedicated to young players.

The emergence of social media also adds complexity to the transition: if a young player makes a mistake, his performance instantly gets scrutinised, leading to a loss of confidence and making the process even harder. The lifestyle and behaviour of players should not be discounted either, as adapting to a professional lifestyle can be challenging, especially when being stuck between the academy and the first team and lacking consistent playing time. High salaries often complicate matters further.

Q Do you have further suggestions in relation to the management of transition that you feel are important for clubs to consider?

Clubs need to educate and forge the character of young players during the academy development phase to help them survive the transition. When I arrived in England, the majority of my players had already gone through challenges and difficulties in lower-tier clubs, requiring mental stamina and character. At that time, clubs didn't provide much support for players during the transition, while today, they provide everything. With this approach, players often only face their first real struggles during the transition, together with several other challenges that come up during this time. This begs the question: do we have to take a step back and create periods where players need to sort out problems themselves at a young age?

A major inefficiency I see in the system is related to the dominance of major European clubs. By offering a better environment, with more facilities, better coaches, and a bigger salary, they often attract the best young players. However, the stockpiling of talent can result in a lack of playing opportunity: many end up standing still instead of playing regularly. Another similar issue I see is the early acquisition of foreign talent for significant funds. Clubs are now offering major transfer fees for players who have not stepped out of their 'comfort zone' yet, often skipping the normal transition process. I'm convinced that many players could have had a better career if they had a slower transition. It is also quite common that players get lost between the reserve and the first teams. Overall, I would say clubs are not better at facilitating the transition process nowadays compared to 15-20 years ago.





THE WIDER SOCIETY

AREAS OVER WHICH CLUBS' CONTROL CAN BE LIMITED

Frequently forgotten during the discussion of transition support is the impact of wider society. This diverse group includes football-related stakeholders such as the media and fans, as well as the wider local community. While their influence can be supportive, **in many cases these external factors are shown in a negative light**, including harsh feedback and potential harassment from fans, or the immense amount of pressure generated by the media. Subsequently, a significant part of the mental pressure during the transition comes from outside expectations.

However, as echoed by multiple leading academies, a long-term philosophy can only be built by accepting and **representing a leadership role in the local community due to the high interest in club activities**. The supporters and the local community of the club have a major influence on the culture of the club. Moreover, this community also provides the environment where transitioning players spend the majority of their time. By paying attention to these elements, clubs can generate measurable positive impact through, for example, more parents choosing the academy, or the local municipality supporting development plans.

The **emergence of digital technologies**, such as mobile devices and social media also have a large impact on how developing players spend their free time and interact with fans. This aspect must be managed throughout the transition to provide some sense of control.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Education about how to handle interactions with fans and media

Clubs can organise courses on how to handle media duties; however, a more expanded scope and frequently updated content would be advisable. Aspects worth touching upon include handling negative feedback from fans and when and how to use social media.

Embracing social responsibility by developing valuable members of the society

Academy success can be interpreted as a concept broader than just what happens on the pitch. Clubs can be proud when their former academy players end up playing in lower levels of the football pyramid, or if they find their footing outside the world of football.

“Academy success can be interpreted as a broader concept than what happens on the pitch”



REGULATORY SUPPORT

AREAS OVER WHICH CLUBS' CONTROL CAN BE LIMITED

There is a supporting area that does not have any direct relationship with the transitioning players but can still influence their path via **setting the standards** and requirements of how clubs and external stakeholders should handle them. Some clubs might only do the bare minimum when it comes to policies implemented in their operations. By setting more, and stricter, mandatory regulations, the level of services the players receive will often increase. Policymakers can open up more opportunities for young players by implementing mandatory regulations such as homegrown player quotas or minimum playing time requirements (*please refer to Chapter 05 for more details*).

At the same time, the **safeguarding support** of young players is also a notable element of transition regulations. There are **legal, medical and financial requirements** in place to protect the interests of this vulnerable group of minors and inexperienced young adults. For example, youth academy experts believe that the first contract negotiations start at too early an age in several countries, putting extra pressure on youth players. Regulators should be looking for ways to decrease this pressure.

Additionally, with the emergence of different club and transition models (e.g. multi-club ownership, satellite teams), the interests of players are potentially not always prioritised. For example, it might be beneficial for a club to keep complete control by loaning a player to a satellite team; however, the player might be more suited to gaining experience in a club that has a different style.

What must be emphasised is that this support area concerns not only football industry regulators (e.g. UEFA, FIFA), domestic federations, supporting organisations (e.g. FIFPRO, European Leagues) and leagues, but also more general policymakers at the European Union or national levels.



Collection of key takeaways and best practices

Best practice: The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in England

The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) is a long-term youth development plan, initiated by the English Premier League. EPPP was established in 2011 to develop a 'world-leading academy system' in the country. This came after the long-running criticisms of the system from various stakeholders and lacklustre national team results in international competitions. While the new system has also faced criticism (especially from English Football League clubs), the ensuing results indicate that this is one of, if not the most advanced youth development strategies in the world. Therefore, it is worth exploring in more detail as a case study of a domestic regulatory framework in practice.

The primary objective of the plan is to produce more and better-skilled homegrown players, through the following:

- 1 the improvement of coaching;
- 2 provision of more playing time;
- 3 implementation of significant gains in every aspect of the player development process;
- 4 influence over strategic investments to demonstrate the value of academies;
- 5 implementation of an effective measurement and quality assurance system.

The strategy was built on an extensive review of academic studies and club knowledge, resulting in a well-defined framework as the basis of the implementation plan. The player development journey is broken down in three distinct phases: the Foundation phase (Under-9 to Under-11), the Youth Development Phase (Under-12 to Under-16) and the Professional Development Phase (Under-17 to Under-21). Specific blueprints and action plans are attached to each.

At the same time, academies are categorised into four levels, depending on the quality of provisions and the expected outcome of the player development process. Category 1 represents the elite development environment in which the

highest quality of coaching and development is provided, while Category 4 refers to a late development model where formal entry into the academy setting does not start until the Under-17 group. All academies across the four categories are regularly monitored to provide quality assurance to all stakeholders in the system.

The mechanisms of the strategy include several elements that were also identified by this study as core aspects of the transition: individual development plans, coaching and workforce development programmes, widespread performance support, an expanded games programme, ensuring player care and looking at holistic outcomes. Furthermore, the development model identified four cornerstone areas of focus: technical, psychological, physical, and social. These are also in line with the major transition areas identified in Chapter 03.

As of the 2022-23 season, 90 academies were part of the scheme, with 25 of them graded as Category 1. During the first ten years of the strategy, 566 homegrown players made their debut in the English Premier League.

In combination with players of English Football League clubs, homegrown player sales generated over £4 billion in transfer revenues over the same period.

“The EPPP is arguably the most advanced youth development strategy in the world”



REPRESENTATIVE SUPPORT (AGENTS)

AREAS OVER WHICH CLUBS' CONTROL CAN BE LIMITED

Other than the family members, player representatives or agents have the biggest influence on the transition process externally, confirmed both by the club survey and the interviews conducted. Survey respondents indicated that the negative influence of agents is the most usual transition challenge they face. As in most countries, players can hire representatives during their academy years, preceding the start of first-team transition, making it an area that has an influence throughout the process.

In addition to providing professional services related to contract negotiation and other matters (e.g. sponsorship deals, social media management, personal player development support), agents are often trusted by families, too. Overall, their advice has a significant influence on the perception and decisions of players, **impacting the entire career path**. Improper support can possibly cause massive setbacks. During struggles, external advisors such as agents **might be inclined to give false positive feedback** to players to boost their confidence. However, this is mostly detrimental in a situation where a 'reality check' would be more valuable for progress.

Players and many families don't have any experience in **contract negotiations** before signing their first professional agreement, therefore the guidance of agents is often the only way to evaluate contract proposals. Due to this dependence, agents also have an influence on the financial perspectives of clients.



Collection of key takeaways

Established and transparent communication from the club side

While the club might know why a transitioning player is not playing enough, they also must communicate it proactively and honestly to the agents and other representatives of the player before they arrive at their own perceived conclusions. It is not enough to only say that the club still believes in a player, they also have to demonstrate it and back up the words to build an honest relationship. If there is a good relationship, representatives can even strengthen club messages towards the players.

Club and agent working together on player development

The expansion of representation services is becoming more popular, with sometimes entire teams working on different aspects of player development and welfare externally (e.g. physiotherapist, masseuse, chef, nutritionist). The services provided by this external staff can contradict the guidance of the club, causing issues for all parties. Therefore, if the club is aware of their presence and there is willingness to collaborate it is in the best interests of the player that parties share their information and coordinate their efforts.

Taking the long-term approach from the agent side

Instead of maximising short-term returns with a move away from the training club, agents should ask themselves which approach results in the best possible long-term career. Sometimes, being patient and giving more time to players in an academy environment can be the difference between a successful and failed transition and career. In the grand scheme of a 10-15 year-long career, sacrificing an immediate wage increase and a faster opportunity often yields positive returns both performance-wise and financially.



What clubs need to be aware of is that from the agent's perspective, the lack of long-term thinking is closely tied to concerns over whether they will be able to keep working with the player for a long time. As a result, this might force some representatives to prioritise guaranteed income. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to work towards a solution that transparently takes into account the challenges of both sides, flexibly addressing those.

“It is not enough to only say that the club still believes in a player”



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

AREAS OVER WHICH CLUBS' CONTROL CAN BE LIMITED

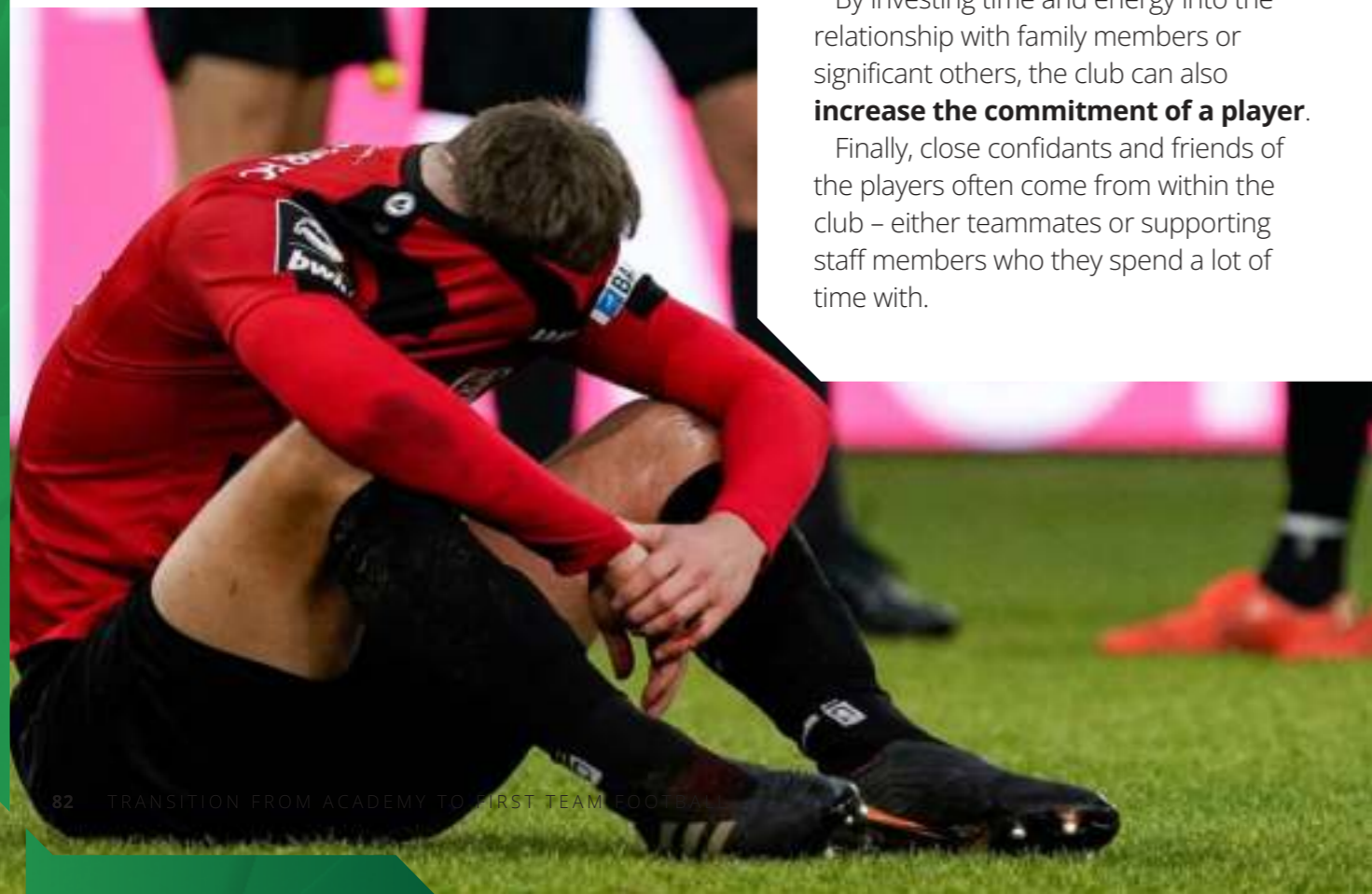
Players face life challenges that might not be directly related to football but can very much **influence their focus and mental health when they're on the pitch**. Increased stress, loneliness and depression often result in sleep deprivation, loss of focus and a suboptimal physical performance.

When it comes to coping with personal struggles, players mostly reach out to their family, partner, and friends, so these

stakeholders are the ones who are relied upon the most for emotional support, providing only limited options for clubs to be involved. However, this does not mean that they should completely neglect this aspect as in order to **understand the character and motivations** of a player, clubs must be aware of their personal situation and challenges. Importantly, there are ways to influence the level of emotional support that players receive throughout the transition.

By investing time and energy into the relationship with family members or significant others, the club can also **increase the commitment of a player**.

Finally, close confidants and friends of the players often come from within the club – either teammates or supporting staff members who they spend a lot of time with.



Collection of key takeaways

1 FAMILY-RELATED (PARENTS AND PARTNERS)

Involvement and education

It's key to involve the player's family in the life of the club in some capacity, such as through workshops about how they can support the players at home and education about the philosophy and the methodology of the work performed in the academy. It is crucial to emphasise that, according to most clubs, the family's involvement should be separated from footballing matters; for example, they should not have access to training sessions to avoid the unnecessary exposure of players.

General awareness of personal relationships

In the case of players who live far from their families, it is important to create personal moments during the time spent in the academy. For example, this could be video calls, housing

players with host families that give a sense of belonging, or by organising leisure activities.

2 CLUB RELATED

Honest and transparent communication

The basis of creating trust on a personal level is to communicate frequently and transparently with the players. Especially during the transition, a large amount of emotional distress can be derived from matters such as a lack of playing time or the lack of individual feedback.

Creation of a safe atmosphere

Players will rarely share personal matters proactively, so it is the clubs' responsibility to create a sense of privacy and safety. An academy director during an interview mentioned that the entire academy staff needs to 'function like a family'; looking after the young players is a part of every employer's responsibility.

Chapter summary

- One of the main challenges during the transition is the integration of the wider environment. The management of all supporting areas requires the coordinated work of numerous disciplines and connected stakeholders.
- Transition success is largely dependent on how the entirety of this interconnected environment impacts the player in transition – not only during the transition itself, but also throughout the academy development stage that precedes it.
- The main stakeholders can be distinguished based on whether they are part of the transitioning player's club or not.
- Players feel the influence of these stakeholders via different supporting areas. In total, 14 of these were identified, with clubs having a considerable level of control over ten of them.
- There are best practices that can improve all supporting areas separately. By combining these, the transition experience can be made a lot smoother and significantly more successful.

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PART

5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

After an overview of the framework of the transition process, it is important to investigate the practical context that shapes the European landscape. The regulatory environment and the competition structures are two crucial external aspects that define what clubs can and cannot do when they give opportunity to youth. Focusing on these areas, the following chapter provides both an international and a country-level overview of the external context that informs clubs' transition-related decisions.

5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT OF THE TRANSITION

Based on the recent changes in professional football, including the Bosman ruling and the rapid growth of industry revenues (*first division UEFA clubs had an annual average revenue growth rate of 7% between 2008/09 and 2018/19, reaching €23 billion in total; Football Benchmark, 2023*), **one major challenge is to find a sustainable balance between the present and future goals.** While players are the industry's key stakeholders, their football career tends to be short, creating an environment in which the industry depends on a constant flow of young talent. However, the high level of competition throughout the continent and especially among clubs at the very top of the pyramid increasingly results in strategies that focus on short-term goals, risking long-term sustainability.

While youth development primarily happens at the club level, it is also the responsibility of international and national governing bodies to ensure the right balance in the ecosystem. Thus, regulations related to youth development are predominantly in place to support the work of academies and help young talent get playing opportunities at the professional level. However, not all countries are equal in the overall objectives and effectiveness of such regulations.

REGULATORY TOOLS

First, the regulatory tools of the industry that have an influence on the transition process and incentivise clubs to give more resources and attention to it must be identified. As the transition itself often happens quite quickly in a short period of time, it is important to put this assessment into a broader context of youth development. The following mechanisms are all in use in certain parts of Europe; their introductions are ordered by how directly they affect the transition via areas such as the playing time of young players or the financial budget of the academy. It is important to clarify that the level of directness does not correlate with the efficiency or the success rate of the tools. Finally, in practice, these mechanisms are often used in combination by the regulators to achieve the desired effect: guiding the flow of young talent to senior football.

1 - Mandatory minimum playing time for youth players

The most direct tool available for competition organisers and regulators is the definition of mandatory playing time for specific youth player categories (e.g. Under-21). This way, clubs are obliged to provide valuable playing time for academy

prospects, making sure that all teams, regardless of size or strategy, have to plan for the inclusion of these players.

However, the mandatory nature of the mechanism can potentially also bring some disadvantages: clubs might be less motivated to improve their entire youth development system as there is no incentive for going significantly above the minimum threshold. An extreme situation, but there are past examples of clubs that substituted these young players in the first minute of a game, since the minimum criterion has been fulfilled at that point. In countries that had similar mechanisms but then scrapped them, it was sometimes noted that clubs simply stopped providing

first team opportunities to young players.

Because of the downsides, this regulatory tool is currently not popular among top-flight leagues in Europe. Based on publicly available information, only the Romanian Liga I use it (*Romanian Football Federation, 2023*), where clubs must field at least one Under-21 player during the entire 90 minutes of a game.

However, lower divisions could still be well-suited to using this mechanism. For example, Hungarian clubs in the second division (NB2) must feature at least one Under-20 player, and in the third division (NB3), at least one Under-19 player (*Hungarian Football Federation, 2023*). Outside of Europe, a prime example is the Canadian Premier League, where all clubs are required to give at least 2,000 minutes of aggregate playing time to Under-21 players.



2 - Player registration rules/limits and homegrown player quotas

Squad concessions in general refer to limitations related to the squad list that a club registers for a competition, as required by the organiser (e.g. private league entity, federation, international federation). Limitations can refer to:

- Overall squad lists (all players who are eligible to play in the competition);
- Match squads (players registered to play in a specific game);
- Starting line-ups;
- Players featuring in a match (not necessarily the starters).

The most popular version of such rules are homegrown player quotas. These quotas refer to a minimum number of players that fit the 'homegrown' definition (developed at the club's youth academy or within the country's football system at another club). These can refer to the overall squad, a matchday squad or even the starting XI. The specific requirements and definitions of homegrown players can vary by country and also by competition organiser within a country.

This rule often has a direct benefit for the overall youth ecosystem of a competition, as it forces participants to plan ahead and create a talent pipeline that is trained according to the requirements of the organiser. However, there are also disadvantages that need to be highlighted, especially in relation to the promotion of academy players to the first team. For example, even an older player can count as 'homegrown' as the status is not tied to certain age groups. Furthermore, the



status can also refer to players who were trained at other clubs in the country and not at the specific club's academy. Put together, these details mean that own academy products do not necessarily get opportunities as a result of the homegrown quota.

Perhaps the best-known example is UEFA's homegrown rule, which requires clubs to include eight homegrown players within a squad limit of 25 registered players. In addition, four of the eight must have been trained at the club.

The homegrown rule is also a popular

regulatory mechanism in domestic leagues (*for more information, please refer to the next sub-chapter*). As an example, the English Premier League uses a similar homegrown player rule to UEFA, with fewer restrictions on young players (unlimited Under-21 players can be registered) and a broader homegrown criterion that does not require any players to be trained at the specific club in question. The top tier of Finland has a stricter implementation of the tool, as at least half of the 18-man match squad must be homegrown, and four of them must feature in the game.

CASE STUDY

Homegrown player quotas in UEFA club competitions

The most used example of the homegrown rule, implemented by UEFA, was announced in 2005 and introduced from the 2006/07 season. The drivers behind the rule included a combination of youth development-related issues such as the lack of investment in player training, competitive balance challenges, the hoarding of players at the top of the pyramid and the perceived weakening of national teams. Ultimately, UEFA were concerned about the long-term development of the sport, with youth development and the opportunities of young players being at the centre of the issue.

The **homegrown rule** is a sporting regulation concerning the squad composition of clubs competing in UEFA competitions, defining a maximum limit of squad size, as well as a minimum number of players in this squad that are locally trained (irrespective of nationality). As explained in the description of

squad size concessions, this method is not exclusively promoting the transition of youth players, rather the prospects of players trained in the club's country regardless of their current age.

UEFA defines locally trained or 'homegrown' players as those who, regardless of their nationality, have been trained by their club or by another club in the same national association for at least three years between the age of 15 and 21. At least half of the locally trained players must be from the club itself, with the others being either from the club or from other clubs in the same association.

In terms of squad size, UEFA has set the maximum limit at 25 players (List A), with an unlimited number of Under-21 players (List B) also eligible. To qualify for List B, Under-21 players must have been eligible to play for the club concerned for an uninterrupted period of two years since their 15th birthday by the time they are registered with UEFA, or for a total of three consecutive years, with a maximum of one loan period to a club from the same association not exceeding one year.

Initially, during the 2006/07 season, clubs had to have a minimum of four homegrown players on List A, increased to six a year later and to eight since 2008/09, with the latter number still in effect. This means that a club can register a maximum of 17 non-homegrown or List B

players as part of their squad, generating more opportunities for homegrown players. However, clubs have no obligation to put any homegrown or youth players on the pitch or even as part of the official match sheet.

Since the introduction of the homegrown rule, there have been widespread industry and legal debates about its compatibility with the European Union's free movement laws, raising questions about the future of the mechanism. During the latest chapter of the debate in March 2023, Maciej Szpunar, Advocate General of the European Court of Justice, has stated that there is partial incompatibility, with the regulation likely to create indirect discrimination against players from other EU countries. However, the opinion also says that the current format of the rule is suitable to attain the objective of training and recruiting young players. Additionally, the advocate general also warned UEFA that players trained by other clubs should not be included in the definition. While his opinion is not binding on the ECJ's court, it is still a notable development that can potentially result in rule tweaks (*Court of Justice of the European Union, 2023*).

While there are debates around the legal feasibility and efficiency of the rule, the fact that several domestic leagues have mirrored its structure since its introduction indicates that the approach has support throughout Europe.

3 - Limitations on player nationalities

Another common mechanism in Europe concerns the nationality composition of a squad. With the development of domestic (local) players at the core of the vision, such tools can help maintain a balance between domestic and international players and prevent clubs from relying excessively on imported talent. However, this does not specifically focus on the involvement of youth players and sometimes incentivises clubs to feature older, more established local players at the expense of young talent.

Limitations can not only refer to a single country, but also to a wider geographical region, too. For example, in the Spanish La Liga, the rule refers to players outside of the European Union with a maximum of three allowed to be registered in the squad. There are similar limitations in other EU first divisions, such as Greece (maximum eight non-EU players), Slovakia (five), Cyprus (five), France (four) and Italy (two). Additionally, it can also include neighbouring countries with close cultural ties – players from Kosovo and Macedonia are not considered foreign in the Albanian first division regulation.

The scope of the regulation can also be flexible. Most countries refer to a limit related to the entire squad, but there are examples of the rule referring to the matchday squad (minimum 13 players with a Kazakh nationality in the matchday squad in Kazakhstan, no more than nine foreigners in Sweden, minimum 14 local players in Türkiye) and the players appearing in a game (maximum five foreign players per team involved in a game in Czechia, maximum four in Serbia).

While not exactly a direct limitation based on player nationality, another important regulation that can have an impact on the opportunities of domestic players should be mentioned here. The Governing Body Endorsement (GBE) rule was introduced in the United Kingdom in December 2020 after the Brexit deal. With an introduction of a points system, a new foreign recruit must meet additional criteria in order to be signed, which limited the foreign talent pool clubs are able to recruit from. The regulation was softened in 2023 to allow more young talent to come to the UK, but it still provides some advantage for domestic players.



4 - Financial incentives

Financial incentives in the regulatory context refer to direct financial support from competition organisers to clubs who give playing time to youth or academy players. This is a tool that can specifically promote a desired behaviour. However, building a framework that supports the goals without the risk of misuse can prove to be challenging.

One way to create a sustainable budget is to tie these funds to league revenues, committing to spending a pre-defined share on the promotion of youth development. The best example of this format is the **current system of the German Bundesliga**, where 4% of all broadcasting revenues are distributed based on each club's contribution to youth development. Two-thirds of this pool is distributed based on league minutes played at Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga clubs, while the rest is based on the training of the young (domestic, Under-23) players. Additionally, the German governing body, DFL, also distributes training rewards to lower-level and amateur clubs once players they trained make their professional debut in the Bundesliga or 2. Bundesliga.

A **similar system** is in place in Malta, where each club gets a small amount of money (e.g. €400) after each 30+-minute appearance by Under-21 players. Even more, €500, is received for Under-19 players. A crucial requirement is that this only applies to those who are also eligible to play in the Maltese national team. The total amount a club can receive from this source is capped to prevent exploitation of the rule.

A **different method** is to set a fixed threshold for an expected goal (e.g. total playing time or number of youth/academy debutants) and award money to clubs that

reach it. In the Hungarian first division (NB1), clubs can accumulate points based on the playing time of Hungarian players, with Under-21 players receiving a 10x multiplier. Clubs that meet the threshold receive a fixed amount of money as training compensation (around €850,000), while others receive nothing from this fund.

5 - Mandatory youth academies

The most purpose-driven and resource-heavy tool is the mandatory operation of a youth academy, or at least a few youth teams. This can ultimately influence the entire mindset of the club and set quality standards. However, its impact on specific players making the transition can be considered to be the least direct.

While this mechanism is probably the best way to encourage a systematic development of youth players, its implementation and monitoring is also the most complex of all regulatory methods. Additionally, the introduction of such a rule requires significant resources from all clubs and can become a burden for some. Also, the existence of a youth academy does not guarantee that the players trained there will make the leap to first team football; clubs with more funds can still opt to recruit first team players from the transfer market for immediate impact.

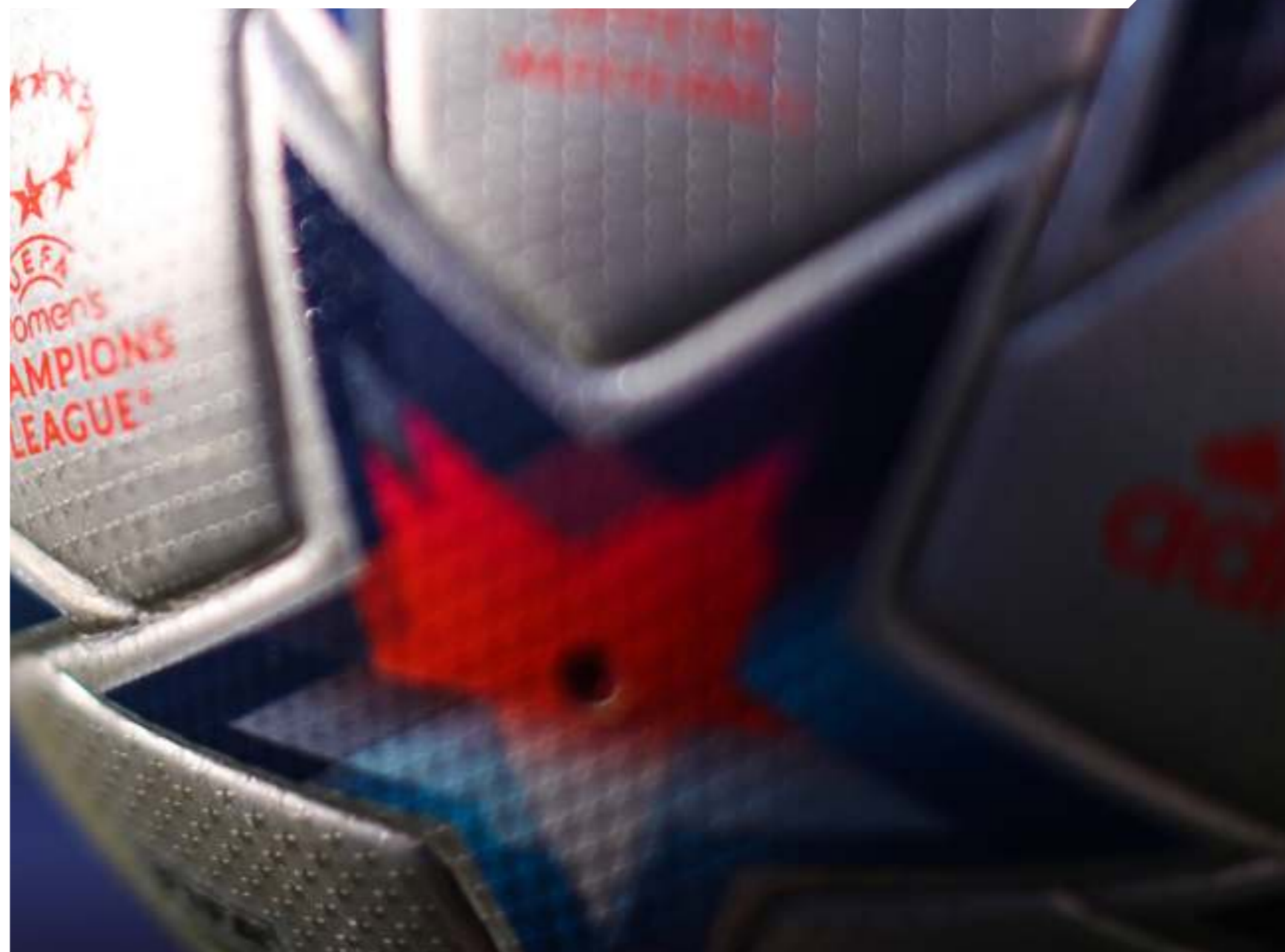
Based on available information, there are currently only two European countries where certain clubs are required to run youth academies. Since 2001, all first and second division clubs in Germany **must operate an academy** to receive a licence to play in the Bundesliga.

The **requirements** are even stricter in England, where all academies are classified based on a detailed list of youth development rules, specifying, among other things, the infrastructure, staff,

management, coaching and games programme requirements. Starting from the 2024/25 season, all Premier League clubs must meet the criteria of Category 3 requirements, which includes having youth teams from the Under-9 level upwards.

The opinion of clubs on the most popular regulatory tools was also asked as part of the club survey (*please refer to Chapter 07 for more information*). Based on their responses, homegrown player quotas are

the most favourable tools at the moment, followed by squad size limitations. The results imply that these tools are the most efficient, but it must be acknowledged that most clubs are already familiar with them and thus might have a biased view. What is clear is that mandatory playing time rules and financial incentives were consistently rated the least effective of all, which signals that many clubs would rather pivot to other alternatives.



5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS COUNTRY LEVEL VIEW

It is the domestic rules and regulations set by competition organisers that have the biggest influence on squad composition in club football. As a result, they directly impact clubs' transition decisions, as well. Based on available information, all first divisions of UEFA countries were analysed from the following aspects, focusing on the most popular regulatory tools currently in effect:

- Squad size limits
- Homegrown player rules
- Player nationality rules

As an overview, there are only nine UEFA first divisions that have some form of all three tools currently in place. Twenty-three countries apply two different tools, while 18 countries apply only one. Four countries (Netherlands, Scotland, Austria, and Wales)

don't use any of these three tools in their highest division leagues.

Data was collected from European Leagues (2023) and FIFA (2023) reports; both used direct inputs from first division leagues and member associations. In case of data inconsistencies, the report of the European Leagues was used due to its more recent publication date. It must be noted that as Liechtenstein currently does not have a professional league system (their clubs play in the Swiss league), the analysis covers 54 out of 55 UEFA member countries.

The table shows a regulatory overview of the top 20 countries by UEFA coefficient (as of June 2023). The breakdown of the rest of the countries is available in Appendix 3.

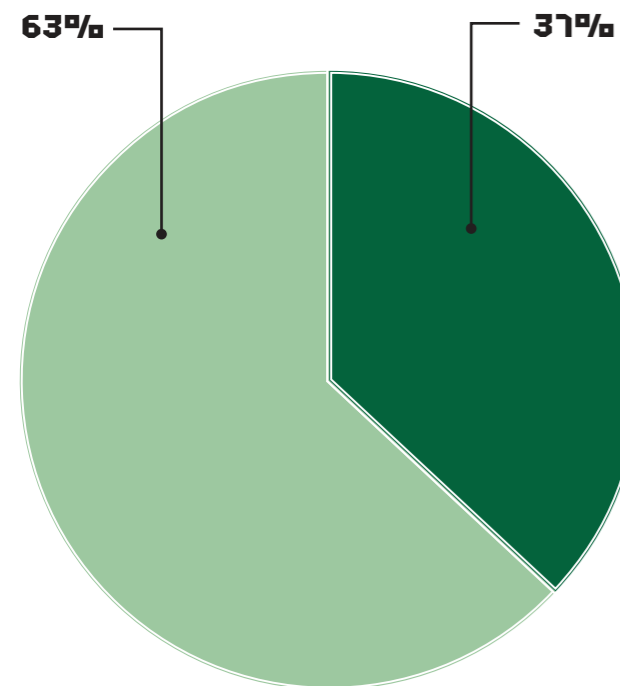
OVERVIEW OF THE REGULATORY CONTEXT IN THE TOP 20 UEFA FIRST DIVISION DOMESTIC LEAGUES BY COEFFICIENT ▼

UEFA RANK	COUNTRY	MAX SQUAD SIZE LIMIT	HOMEGROWN RULE	MIN. NO OF HG PLAYERS	PLAYER NATIONALITY RULE	PLAYER NATIONALITY RULE DETAILS
1	ENGLAND	25	YES	8	-	-
2	SPAIN	25	-	-	YES	MAX 3 NON-EU PLAYERS IN SQUAD
3	GERMANY	-	YES	8	YES	MIN 12 GERMAN PLAYERS IN SQUAD
4	ITALY	25	YES	8	YES	MAX 2 NON-EU PLAYERS IN SQUAD
5	FRANCE	-	-	-	YES	MAX 4 NON-EU PLAYERS IN SQUAD
6	NETHERLANDS	-	-	-	-	-
7	PORTUGAL	30	YES	8	-	-
8	BELGIUM	25	-	-	-	-
9	SCOTLAND	-	-	-	-	-
10	AUSTRIA	-	-	-	-	-
11	SERBIA	30	-	-	YES	MAX 4 FOREIGN PLAYERS ON PITCH
12	TÜRKIYE	35	YES	6	YES	MAX 8 FOREIGN PLAYERS ON PITCH
13	SWITZERLAND	25	YES	8	YES	MAX 5 FOREIGN PLAYERS ON PITCH
14	UKRAINE	25	YES	8	YES	MAX 7 FOREIGN PLAYERS ON PITCH
15	CZECHIA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 5 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN SQUAD
16	NORWAY	25	YES	16	-	-
17	DENMARK	25	YES	8	-	-
18	RUSSIA	25	-	-	-	-
19	CROATIA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 6 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN SQUAD
20	GREECE	-	-	-	YES	MAX 8 NON-EU PLAYERS IN SQUAD

Source: Football Benchmark analysis. Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons.

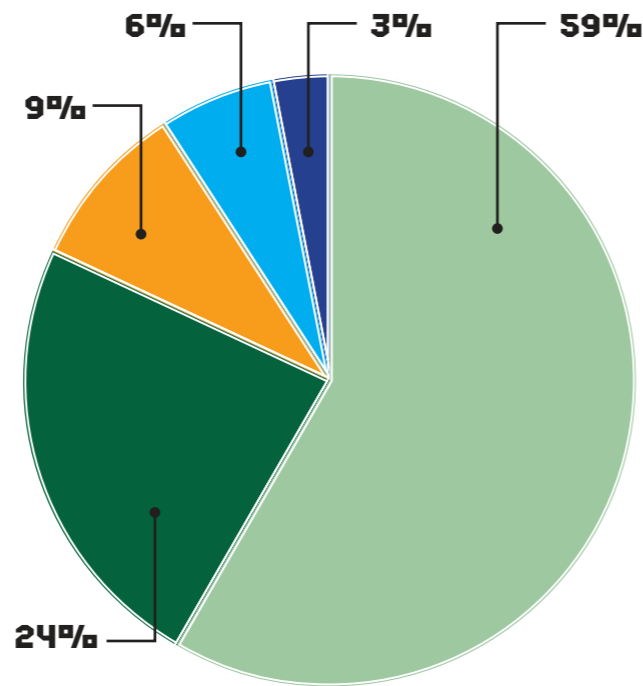


IS THERE A MAXIMUM SQUAD SIZE LIMIT IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

WHAT IS THE MAXIMUM SIZE OF THE SQUAD? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

KEY ● Yes ● No

SQUAD SIZE LIMITS

Firstly, the presence of squad size limits and the maximum limit thresholds were analysed.

In total, 34 UEFA first division leagues (63% of total) have a maximum squad size limit. There is not much difference between the top 20 countries by UEFA coefficient and the others in this regard.

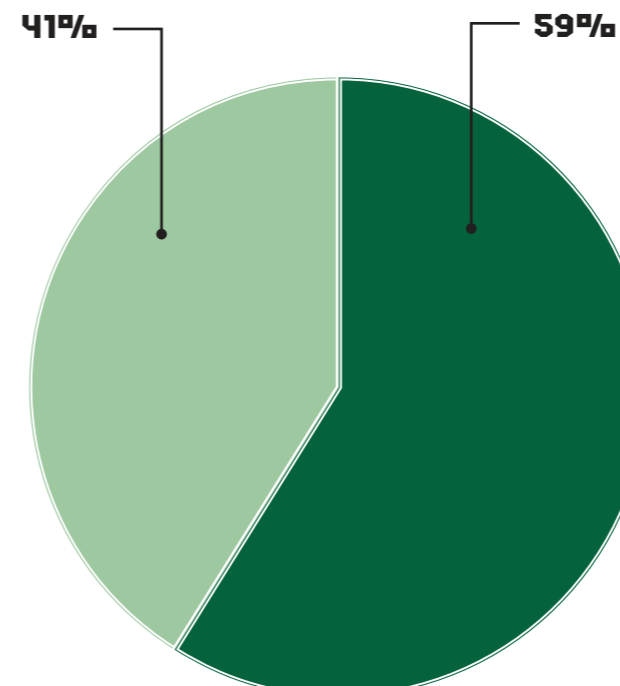
After excluding countries with no or unknown squad size limits, we find that most leagues have a squad size between 21 and 30 players with 25 being the most popular threshold. The largest squads are allowed in Israel with a limit of 45 players, while the smallest limit is in Iceland at 18.

It is also important to look at the specifics of exactly which players can be nominated on top of the set squad size limits.

Implementations of homegrown quotas usually provide the chance to register youth players as part of a so-called B-list (similarly to UEFA club competitions). In most cases, it is defined by age group: Under-22 players for example in Italy and Cyprus, or Under-21 players in England, Switzerland, and Northern Ireland.

Additionally, being part of the youth academy is also a potential parameter, for example in Spain (unlimited academy players can be added to the B-list), Kazakhstan (no limit for academy players), and the Republic of Ireland (80 additional B-list places for players eligible to play in academy leagues). Finally, homegrown status can also be a limiting factor of B-list eligibility.

IS THERE A HOMETOWN PLAYER RULE IN EFFECT IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

KEY ● Yes ● No

HOMETOWN PLAYER RULES

After the 2005 introduction of the UEFA homegrown rule, this type of regulation became more popular at the country level, too. Some countries simply implemented UEFA's framework, while others created their own specific versions. Still, to this day, only 41% of first division leagues (22 in total) have a homegrown rule in place.

Ten countries, around half of the analysed ones with a homegrown player rule, put the minimum threshold at the same level as UEFA, requiring eight homegrown players in the squad. This group includes England, Germany, Italy and Portugal.

The strictest rule is in Norway, with a minimum of 16 homegrown players, followed by Latvia and Montenegro, with 15.

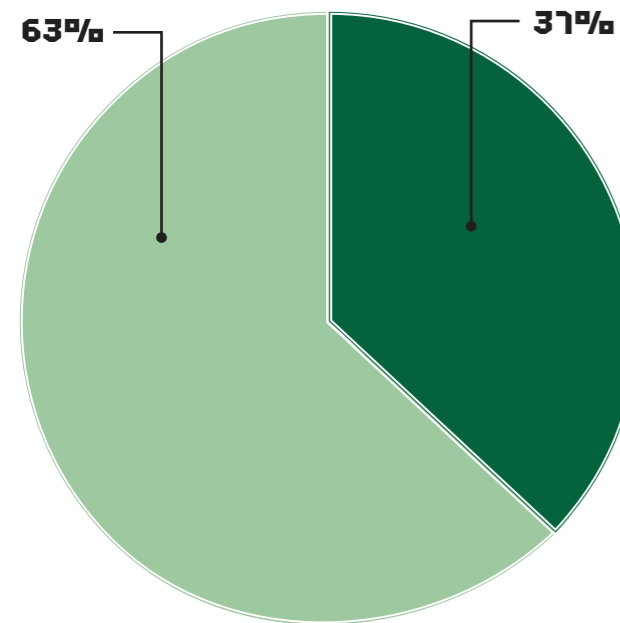
At the other end of the range, there is Malta (three players), Gibraltar, Armenia, Finland (four players), Georgia (five players) and Türkiye (six players).

In some countries, players who are only 'association-trained' (spent their development at another club in the same country) are treated differently, but it is not a common approach.

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

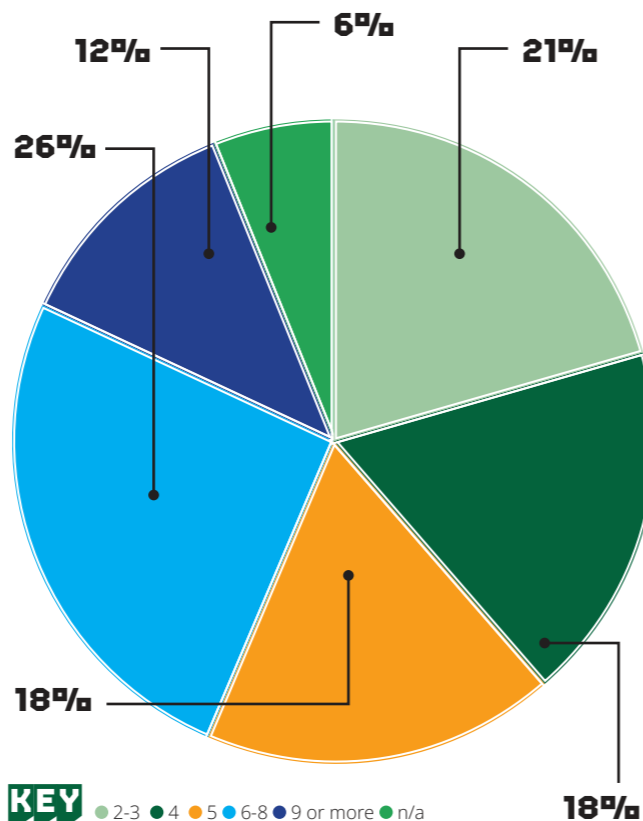
KEY ● 7 or less ● 8 (UEFA min.) ● 9 or more ● n/a

ARE THERE RULES IN PLACE RELATED TO PLAYER NATIONALITIES IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▾



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

WHAT IS THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF FOREIGN PLAYERS ▾



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

KEY ● Yes ● No

KEY ● 2-3 ● 4 ● 5 ● 6-8 ● 9 or more ● n/a

PLAYER NATIONALITY RULES

Finally, restrictions on the nationality of players within the squad are also popular, with most regulators applying a limit on the number of foreign players.

In total, two-thirds of analysed countries have some rules related to the nationality of players. Interestingly, this is less common among the top 20 leagues by UEFA coefficient (55% vs 71% in other countries), showing that the most prominent leagues put less emphasis on the protection of the playing time of domestic players.

Looking at the limit of foreign players, no common approach can be identified either for all leagues or for the subset

of top 20 leagues. Figures range from two foreign players (Italy) to 15 (Moldova).

There are also different approaches on who exactly should be considered foreign, with at least ten countries (Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Cyprus, Czechia, Romania, Slovakia, Finland, Iceland) counting all players from the European Union countries as domestic. Variance is also apparent in terms of the scope of the limits: the majority refer to the entire squad, but in some countries, they refer to matchday squads or starting lineups.

In Türkiye and Israel, there are foreigner limits concerning both the overall squad and those who take part in a game.

INTERNATIONAL VIEW FIFA

While it is not directly related to first team transition, it is important to be aware of the global framework regulating the main areas of youth development in football. FIFA has several regulations in place related to youth players and their career progression. The purpose of the rules is twofold – on one hand, the protection of the best interests of minors (Under-18s) from a human rights perspective, while on the other, **making sure that clubs are properly incentivised to train and educate young players**, sustaining the talent pipeline. FIFA's practical measures related to the topic are documented in the publication entitled 'Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players' (FIFA, May 2023).

Registration of players

All academies (irrespective of being associated with a professional club or not) must report all minors who attend the academy to the national federation, including player data such as nationality or the player's agent. In order to protect the players, federations are responsible for reporting any wrongdoings they are aware of at academies under their jurisdiction.

Transfer of players

As a baseline, since 2001, the international transfer of players under the age of 18 is mostly prohibited. This is explained by a report commissioned by FIFA's Disciplinary Committee that found that moving to a different country at this age is seldom in a

youth player's best interest, considering they get removed from their home surrounding at an age when they are still developing. However, there are some exceptions to this rule, such as in Europe where a player aged between 16 and 18 can also be transferred within the European Union or European Economic Area pending meeting the detailed requirements. FIFA also oversees loan transactions, with the latest regulation in effect since 2022.

Player representation

One of the biggest dangers of the transferring of minor players is the potential exploitation by third parties, mostly in the role of a player representative or player agent. Financial exploitation can happen, for example, because minors are unable to be legally contracted as the beneficiary of their services, while in more serious cases, there is also the risk of illegal migration or even human trafficking (e.g. agents bringing young players from Africa to Europe).

“Clubs need to be properly incentivised to train and educate young players”

Therefore, an agent can only make an approach to a youth player or their legal guardian if they are within six months of the legal age at which they would be able to sign their first professional contract based upon the laws of the country in which they are playing. For example, in Belgium, players can sign their first professional contract from the age of 15, meaning agents start approaching them when they are 14. In Portugal, the age limit is 16, however the Portuguese law states that an agent cannot represent a minor player, putting the age limit at practically 18, resulting in a grey area in the law due to the difficult control and enforcement of the rules. Additionally, there are also further requirements around contracting, renewals, and professional qualifications (FIFA, January 2023).

Dealing with player agents is considered among the biggest challenges of the first team transition based on the club survey (please refer to Chapter 07 for more details) and highlights the importance of a transparent and honest communication between all related parties (player, club, agency) not only when getting close to the level of the first team, but also throughout the youth development process (see *Player Representation in Chapter 04* for more information).

Compensation for player development

In 2001, mainly as a consequence of the Bosman ruling threatening the motivation of clubs to invest in player development, FIFA introduced two methods of securing compensation for the training and development of players: training compensation and solidarity contribution. As FIFA has put it when announcing the new scheme: "This system is designed to encourage more and better training of young football players, and to create

solidarity among clubs, by awarding financial compensation to clubs which have invested in training young players. At the same time, care has also been taken to ensure that the amounts of training compensation do not become disproportionate, and unduly hinder the movement of young players."

Training compensation

The obligation to pay training compensation occurs if one of two conditions are met: either a player signs his first professional contract, or a professional is transferred internationally (between two different national associations) until the end of the season of his 23rd birthday. The compensation must be paid to every club that contributed to the training of the player between his 12th and 21st birthday by the club that registers the player. The exact sums are calculated by a specific equation based on the level of training, multiplied by the number of years spent training. Although there is no FIFA obligation to pay training compensation when a professional player transfers domestically, some national associations (e.g. England) have transfer regulations that make training compensation payable also for domestic transfers.

Solidarity contribution

Contrary to the training compensation, this solidarity mechanism only arises when a player gets sold (internationally) for a transfer fee. The buying club of the player needs to distribute a total of 5% of the transfer fee between all the clubs where this player has played between the age of 12 and 23. Unlike in the case of training compensation, this contribution needs to be paid in case of all transfers, even after the player's 23rd birthday.

SUMMARY

- Instead of regulations aimed directly at first team transition, this area is mostly regulated via general youth development policies which are different from country to country.
- Out of these, player nationality regulations and squad size limits are the most common at the domestic level, followed by homegrown player quotas.

The main regulatory tools that influence the transition are:



Mandatory minimum playing time for youth players



Player registration rules/homegrown quotas



Limitations on player nationalities



Financial incentives



Mandatory youth academies

- A constantly changing environment (prominence of agents, cross-border transfers, etc.) means that the monitoring of regulations and adaptability to new challenges is a must. It is important to receive guidance and leadership from governing bodies as history shows us that they influence the frameworks that are then applied at the country level.
- Could clubs be trusted to play their youngsters if there were no regulations in place? It is difficult to ascertain, but the immediate need for success implies that many would rather turn to more experienced players, often recruited from outside the club.



5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

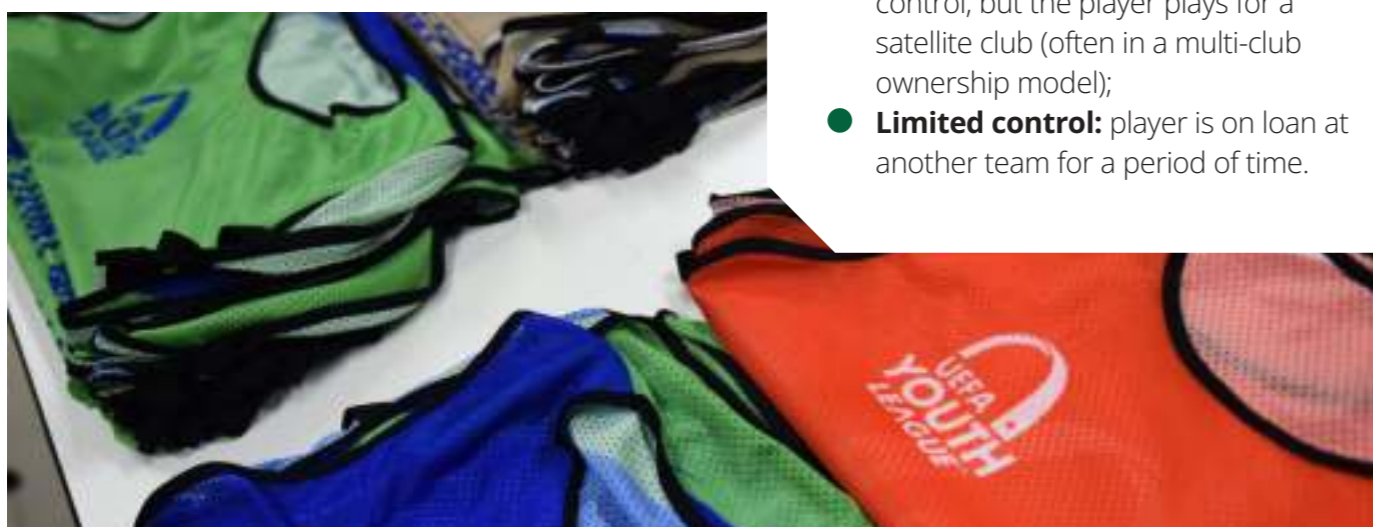
YOUTH COMPETITION STRUCTURES IN EUROPE

It became clear from the interviews conducted with clubs during the study's development that providing an adequate amount of playing time is one of the most important factors to prepare young talent for senior football. Not only the volume of matches, but also the general quality and diversity of the available options has a major effect on the success of transitions. This was confirmed by the club survey responses too, as **86% of respondents said that exposing players to senior football at a young age, even in a lower league tier or in a reserve team, is the most preferred development option.** Every respondent assigned significant importance to this option.

TYPE OF PLAYING TIME OPPORTUNITIES BEFORE FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Nowadays, clubs have a wide range of matches to choose from when planning the last steps in the player pathway before making the step up to the first team. This includes dedicated youth leagues, playing time against senior players in lower divisions or various combinations of the two. Transition strategies vary by the level of control the club maintains, ranging from:

- **Full control:** player only makes appearances in the club's own youth and reserve teams, allowing the club to keep a close eye on their everyday development;
- **Strong control:** still keeping control, but the player plays for a satellite club (often in a multi-club ownership model);
- **Limited control:** player is on loan at another team for a period of time.



Why is control important when players are getting close to the first team?

Based on discussions with several professional football clubs over the course of this study's development, several factors were mentioned as to why teams might want to have direct control over the transition path of their young talents. Below are the most frequently mentioned reasons to keep the players at the club (and not loan them out).

- **Benefits on the pitch:** Even if individual player development is at the forefront of an academy's strategy, winning football games at all levels is not negligible. For example, several clubs consider the "fostering of a winning mentality" crucial in the academy. Keeping the talents who are close to the first team level helps achieve team goals.
- **Getting to know the players' personality as much as possible:** With psychological aspects being one of, if not the most crucial factors of the transition, receiving as much information as possible is crucial for the proper evaluation of first team readiness.
- **Maximise the volume of collected data:** Similarly to mental aspects, a larger sample of physical or technical measurements can result in a more precise evaluation of a player. Several clubs maintain a benchmarking database of past youth prospects.
- **Fully experience the club culture:** In an ideal scenario, academy players can spend a long part of their career at their parent club, which requires the full knowledge of the club culture. This can only be picked up with time spent around the club. Academy prospects at most clubs are required to represent the core values of the club philosophy not only as players, but also as individuals in all areas of their lives.
- **Minimise risk of losing player commitment:** Once a player leaves the club (even for a temporary period), there is always a chance that "his head gets turned" and he does not want to return to the parent club. This can decrease the commitment towards the club.

The emergence of international cooperations and club networks makes it easier than ever to find an option that can benefit the player in transition. The advantages and disadvantages of various competition types that can offer playing time before the first team transition are summarised below.

- **Dedicated youth competitions:** Leagues or cups with restrictions on the maximum age of players (e.g. Under-21 leagues). These are generally considered to be safe playing spaces against players at a similar maturation level, as well as a suitable platform to try and fail at different things before the pressure really kicks in. However, a major disadvantage is that players in this environment do not get any experience against senior players on the pitch, delaying the moment when they need to get out of their “comfort zone”.
- **Reserve leagues:** Secondary competitions without an age limit, but with the primary function to accommodate youth players of clubs who do not get playing time with the first team. Playing against a couple of senior players while not getting completely overwhelmed is a good first step after youth leagues, while having a platform to compete against mature opponents in a low-pressure environment supports the talent development process by focusing on performance progress rather than results. However, the average level of these players is not always high enough to play in first team games. Additionally, there are often no real stakes, which makes it difficult for some to stay motivated.

- **Lower-division leagues:** Second, third or even lower tiers within a domestic football pyramid providing a professional (or high-level amateur), senior football experience. The opponents are mature, senior players, providing first-hand experience of the first team environment from a physical and mental point of view. On the other hand, the experienced technical and tactical level is vastly different to the top level, so the jump to the first team can still be difficult.
- **Friendly games:** Matches that are organised by the club against pre-selected opponents to practise specific situations. Can be flexibly set up and involve opponents tailored to the development needs of the most talented academy players. However, it must be acknowledged that this option can be quite expensive as the club takes care of the organisation and the logistics, instead of an external competition organiser. Finally, these are not competitive games, which might reduce the quality of play.

International Youth Competitions

UEFA Youth League

The lone UEFA youth club competition in Europe is organised mostly in parallel with the UEFA Champions League, providing two paths for youth teams to participate. On one path, the youth teams of the UEFA Champions League participants are competing in the first stage, following the format of the senior teams, while on the other, 32 domestic youth champions are qualified for the first round and eight of them have the chance to qualify for the knock-out stage. Starting from the 2024/25 season (in consideration of the format change of the UEFA Champions League), more teams will have the chance to participate, including all domestic youth champions within UEFA.

Arguably, the lone competition of the UEFA Youth League (that is not completely merit-based) does not provide enough competitive opportunities for the best youth clubs in the current ecosystem. It would be advised to rethink and expand the current system in order to provide international matches to a wider group of clubs and expose young talent to international club clashes at an earlier age more often.



Overview of the UEFA Youth League

Foundation	2013
Total participating teams (including qualifiers) 2024/25	36 (CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PATH) + 54 (DOMESTIC CHAMPIONS' PATH)
Recent champions	AZ ALKMAAR (2023) SL BENFICA (2022) NO COMPETITION (2021) REAL MADRID CF (2020)
Maximum number of matches per team 2024/25	11

National team competitions

Starting from the Under-17 age group upwards, both FIFA and UEFA organise tournaments for youth national teams. FIFA World Cups are staged in the Under-20 and Under-17 categories, while UEFA organise their flagship European Championship competition in the Under-21, Under-19, and Under-17 age groups. Additionally, there are also national team competitions overseen by independent stakeholders, such as the renowned Maurice Revello Tournament in Toulon that hosts players from the Under-17 to Under-23 age groups.



Other cross-border tournaments

While there are no other UEFA-sanctioned international club competitions for youth players, there are multiple other examples of cross-border tournaments. These provide a great solution to mitigate domestic match calendar deficiencies and prepare players for the atmosphere of international club competitions.

One of them is the Premier League International Cup that features 12 academy sides from England and 12 invited squads from the rest of Europe. Others are organised on a regional basis; for example, the Baltic Youth Football League is a competition for Under-15 and Under-16 teams of the three Baltic countries.

5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW OF DOMESTIC COMPETITIONS BY COUNTRY

After highlighting the lack of international competitions, it became clear that domestic competitions provide the backbone of playing time opportunities for academy players on the cusp of first team transition. The question remains: what are the exact competitions in each country and how much do they differ? This section takes stock of the current state of domestic league competitions that provide the most relevant playing time opportunity to those who are close to becoming first team players.

Competition data was collected by Football Benchmark concerning the 2022/23 and 2023 football seasons, focusing only on leagues, and excluding youth cup competitions. As Liechtenstein does not have a professional league system (clubs play in the Swiss football pyramid), the sample of the analysis is 54 countries.

Leagues are considered 'youth' if they have restrictions in place related to the age of the participant players. For example, in the English Premier League 2, only Under-21 players can play, with the exception of one goalkeeper and five outfield players. Similarly, the Liga Revelação U23 in Portugal can only accommodate Under-23 players except for two outfield players in the squad. In contrast, 'reserve' leagues have no such limitations.

The following table on the right summarises the playing time opportunities of players on the verge of transition in the top 20 countries by UEFA coefficient as of June 2023, with the breakdown of all countries available in Appendix 3.

OVERVIEW OF COMPETITIONS THAT PROVIDE YOUTH PLAYING TIME OPPORTUNITY IN THE TOP 20 UEFA COUNTRIES BY COEFFICIENT

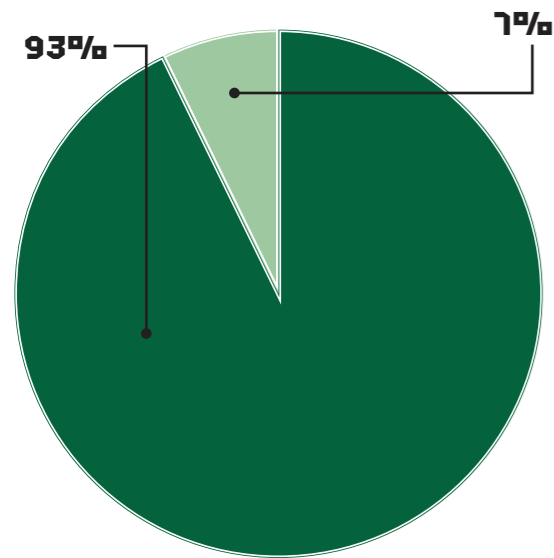
(When considering the number of reserve teams in second and third division leagues, data refers to the 2022/23 or 2023 season)

KEY ● Reserve/B teams in lower divisions ● Number of reserve teams in 2nd division ● Number of reserve teams in 3rd division ● Dedicated reserve league

UEFA RANK	COUNTRY	LOWER DIVISIONS AND RESERVE LEAGUES				YOUTH LEAGUES BY AGE CATEGORY (NUMBERS SHOW THE SIZE OF THE FIRST DIVISION OF THE YOUTH LEAGUE)									
						U23	U22	U21	U20	U19	U18	U17	U16	U15	
1	ENGLAND	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	-	25	-	-	-	
2	SPAIN	YES	1	6	-	-	-	-	-	112	-	-	-	-	
3	GERMANY	YES	-	2	-	-	-	-	50	-	50	-	-		
4	ITALY	YES	-	1	-	-	-	-	18	21	40	40	40		
5	FRANCE	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	56	-	84	-	-		
6	NETHERLANDS	YES	5	2	-	-	-	8	-	8	8	8	8		
7	PORTUGAL	YES	2	2	-	14	-	-	-	24	-	30	-	50	
8	BELGIUM	YES	4	4	-	-	-	12	-	-	12	-	12	12	
9	SCOTLAND	YES	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
10	AUSTRIA	YES	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	13	13	
11	SERBIA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	16	-	-	
12	TÜRKIYE	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	18	-	18	36	36	
13	SWITZERLAND	YES	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	13	14	-	
14	UKRAINE	YES	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	-	-	
15	CZECHIA	YES	3	11	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	16	-	15	
16	NORWAY	YES	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	10	-	25	
17	DENMARK	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	14	-	14	-	14	
18	RUSSIA	YES	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	20	-	-	-	-	
19	CROATIA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	14	-	14	
20	GREECE	YES	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	10	-	8	

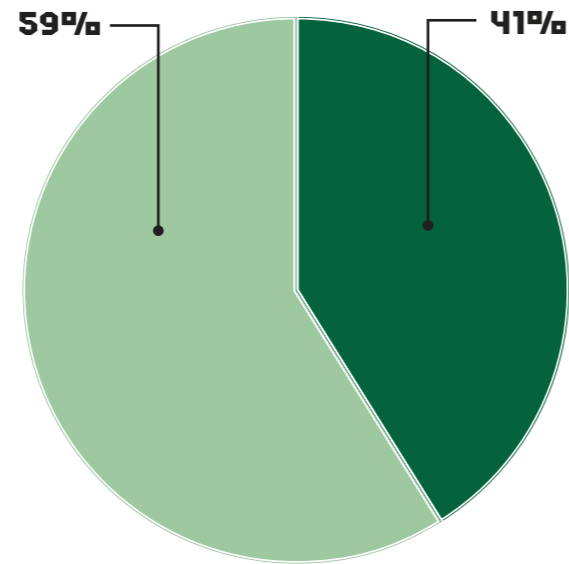
Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis

IS THERE A DEDICATED RESERVE LEAGUE IN THE COUNTRY'S FOOTBALL COMPETITION SYSTEM? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

CAN THE RESERVE TEAM OF CLUBS PLAY IN THE LOWER DIVISIONS OF THE LEAGUE PYRAMID? ▼



KEY ● Yes ● No

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

LOWER DIVISIONS (WITH RESERVE TEAMS) AND RESERVE LEAGUES

First, let's take a look at the landscape of top-tier clubs' reserve teams that play in lower senior football league divisions. Czechia is one of the countries where they make the most use of it; there are 14 teams in the second and third divisions combined that operate as reserve teams of clubs.

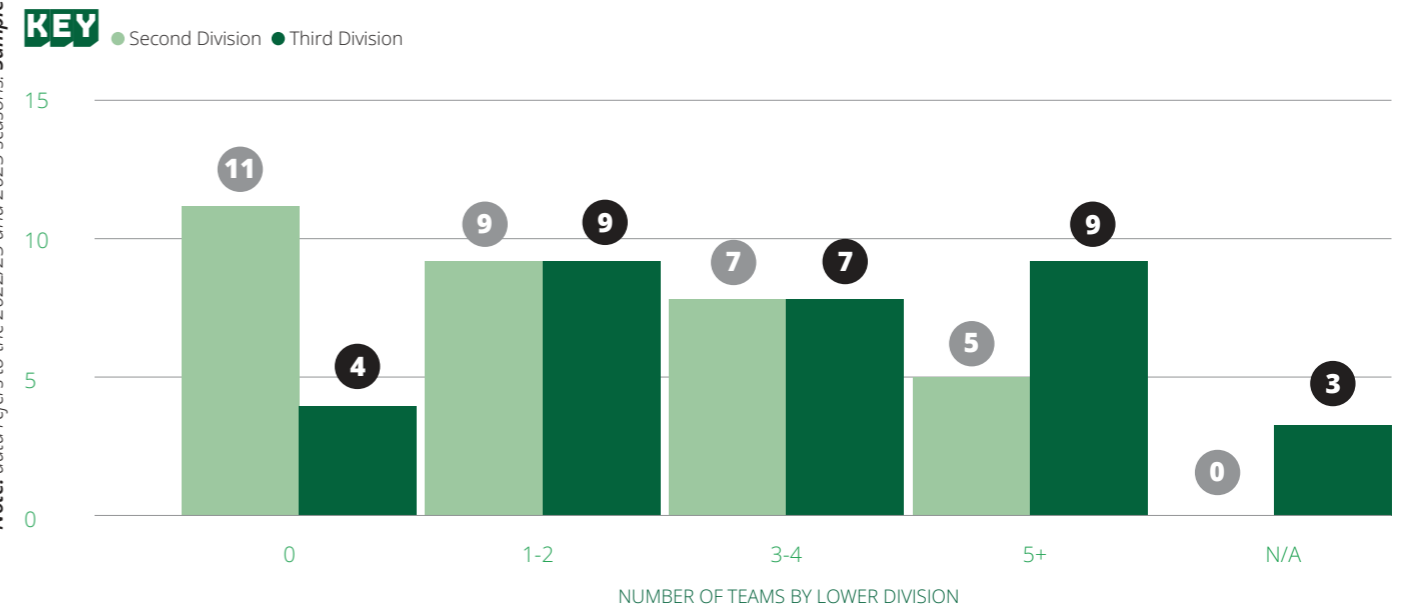
In total, 32 out of the 54 analysed countries allow reserve teams to play in the lower divisions of the football pyramid (59%). There are only five countries where five or more reserve teams play in the second division (Netherlands, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Armenia, and Faroe Islands).

It is more common that only one or two clubs can keep their place at this level with an academy team against squads full of

senior players. This is not surprising, given the resources necessary to maintain a reserve team that can compete at this level; as an example, a "Big Five" league club spent over €6 million on the staff costs of their reserve team playing in the country's second tier in the 2021/22 season. This is the combined salary of reserve players and their related coaching staff. Players at another "Big Five" club's reserve team earn between €35,000 and €160,000 per year.

Second division examples of this phenomenon include Spain (only Villarreal CF B), Portugal (SL Benfica B and FC Porto B) and Austria (Sturm Graz II and FC Liefering – Red Bull Salzburg's reserve team).

HOW MANY RESERVE TEAMS ARE PLAYING IN THE SECOND AND THIRD DIVISIONS? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 32 countries

The distribution of reserve teams in lower tiers implies that there are several clubs in Europe whose academies are strong enough to support reserve teams with quality players that can compete against second or third division professional clubs. However, it should be mentioned that no country allows the promotion of reserve teams to the top division of the league system and there are countries where rules do not allow reserve teams to go higher than a particular division (e.g. third division in Germany, fourth division in France).

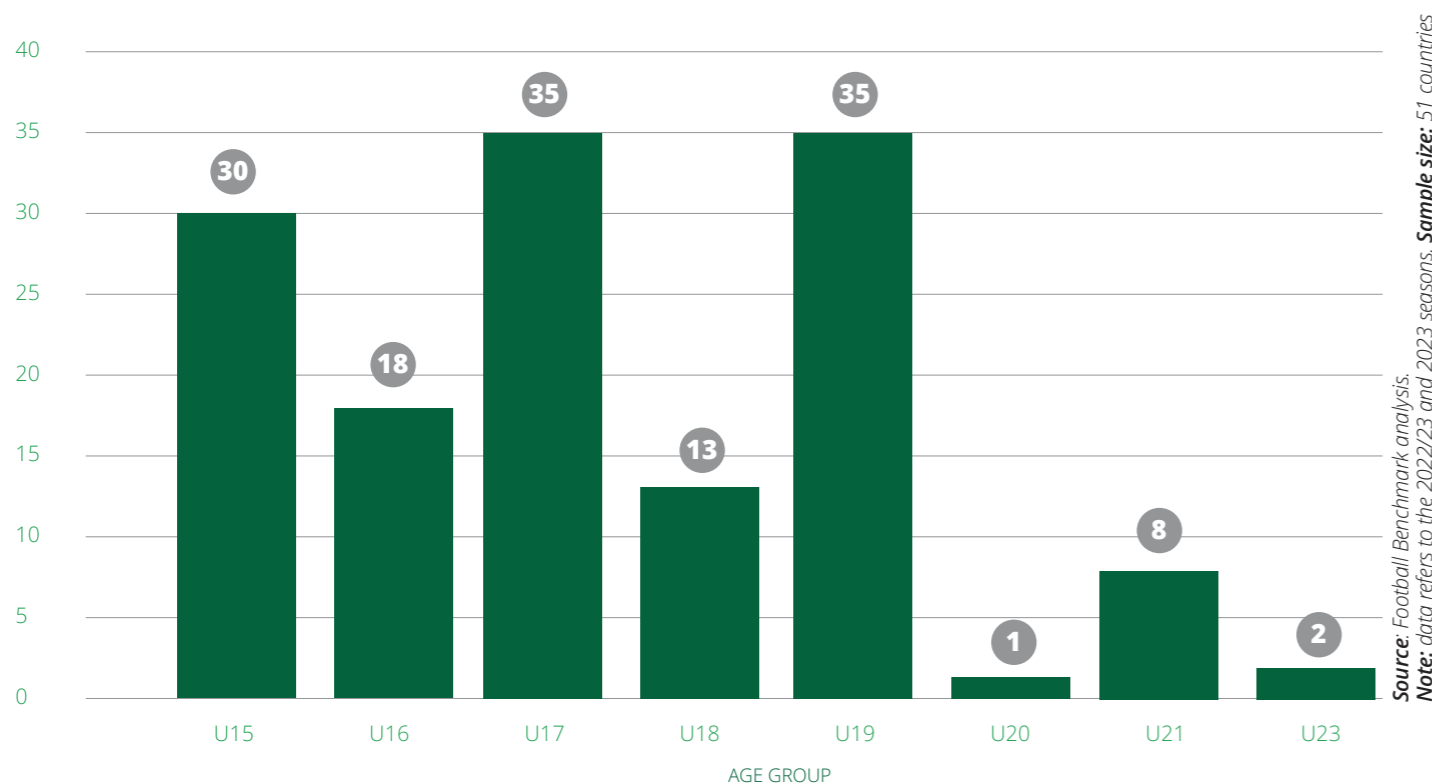
RESERVE LEAGUES

Reserve leagues were popular in the past, however current numbers show that this competition type has somewhat lost its appeal in Europe. Based on the available information, only four UEFA countries organised a dedicated reserve league in the 2022/23 season; in practice, a couple of them essentially function as Under-23 or similar competitions even if there are no age restrictions in place. Out of the top 20 countries by UEFA coefficient, a reserve league could be found in Scotland (with 10 teams) and Türkiye (19).

In lower-ranked countries, reserve leagues are similarly unpopular: only Belarus (with 15 teams) and Luxembourg (12) operate one. The diminishing popularity of reserve leagues without age limits is illustrated by Türkiye: a reserve league was launched in 2022/23 after a ten-year hiatus but was then immediately abolished only after one season of play.



NUMBER OF LEAGUES PER AGE GROUP AMONG UEFA MEMBER COUNTRIES



YOUTH LEAGUES

It is important to emphasise that only national-level competitions were considered, and regional competitions are thus not part of the scope. These are all organised by either the national association or in some cases, by the first division league.

How many countries organise a dedicated youth league competition in each age group? (Only competitions with a national scope and organised by the association or the first division league were considered.)

Under-15 to Under-17

Under-15 to Under-17 age categories rarely precede the first team transition directly. However, they have a critical role

in establishing competition from a young age, getting players used to the rulebook and atmosphere of nationally organised leagues.

Based on the available information, four in every five countries in Europe have at least one officially sanctioned youth competition in this age group, including 16 of the top 20 leagues by UEFA coefficient. There are 11 countries with competitions in all three age categories from Under-15 to Under-17, including the likes of Italy, Netherlands, and Türkiye.

Under-18 and Under-19

Moving to one age category above, Under-18 and Under-19 leagues were treated together in our analysis as –

based on our research – countries usually prefer either one or the other age group when setting up a competition. This phase is crucial from a transition point of view as these are the last age groups in which most players are uniformly still in the academy (with the exception of a few special talents), making these competitions the most important at the academy level in the majority of UEFA countries. They also roughly correspond to the age categories that can qualify for the UEFA Youth League.

There are only five European countries that do not operate either an Under-18 or an Under-19 league and two of those (Finland and Faroe Islands) run a league that is one or two age categories above. At the other end of the range, only two countries (Italy and Lithuania) can be identified that run competitions in both age groups.

There is also a constant evolution as to whether a national association prefers the Under-18 or Under-19 category: in Switzerland, for example, the Under-18 league moved to an Under-19 limit from the 2023/24 season, while in Romania, the league switched to Under-18 starting from the 2022/23 season.

Under-20 to Under-23

The average age of players who have successfully transitioned in recent years is 19.83 years based on our data analysis (please refer to the next chapter for more details). This shows us that if a transition happens, it is likely to take place before the player turns 20, which makes the role of dedicated youth leagues in the Under-20 to Under-23 age increasingly obsolete. The diminishing importance of such competitions provides further proof that the industry views senior playing time as a better way to gain experience.

Out of all UEFA member countries, there are only 11 that have any youth leagues in

these age groups. There are no countries with competitions in more than one of these age groups. An Under-23 league was only identified in Portugal and Gibraltar, with the former providing a unique example of clubs having the option to choose from both participation in lower divisions and players playing against youth opponents until the age of 23.

The only age group in this category with considerable prevalence is Under-21, which in part can be explained by the alignment to the UEFA Euro Under-21 age category. In total, eight countries have Under-21 leagues, including England, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Overview of all age categories

By looking at the entire landscape of youth leagues, it is observed that there is no standardised pathway in use across all countries. However, there is a clear preference towards the ‘odd’ age groups, with the frequency of youth leagues at Under-15, Under-17, Under-19, and Under-21 levels higher than their ‘even’ counterparts.

This also outlines the ‘average’ path of a youth player through the ranks. There are 20 countries that have competitions in Under-15, Under-17, and Under-19 age groups alike, while 27 countries operate leagues at both Under-17 and Under-19 level. The latter equates to around half of all UEFA countries. Finally, it should be mentioned that the only countries without any competitions between Under-18 and Under-23 are Andorra, and San Marino, due to the small number of players.

“If a transition happens, it is likely to take place before the player turns 20”

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

COMPETITION MODEL CASE STUDIES

After the overview of the different competition paths that youth players can go through before the transition, three distinct competition models were identified for a more specific outlook.

1 Abundant variety of options

Portugal

A unique, but at the same time successful competition model is in place in Portugal. Based on their own priorities and premises, clubs can choose from a wide variety of competitions, covering all kinds of individual player development needs. A common development (and transition) path of players is as follows (although it is not unheard of that a special talent skips an entire step in the process):

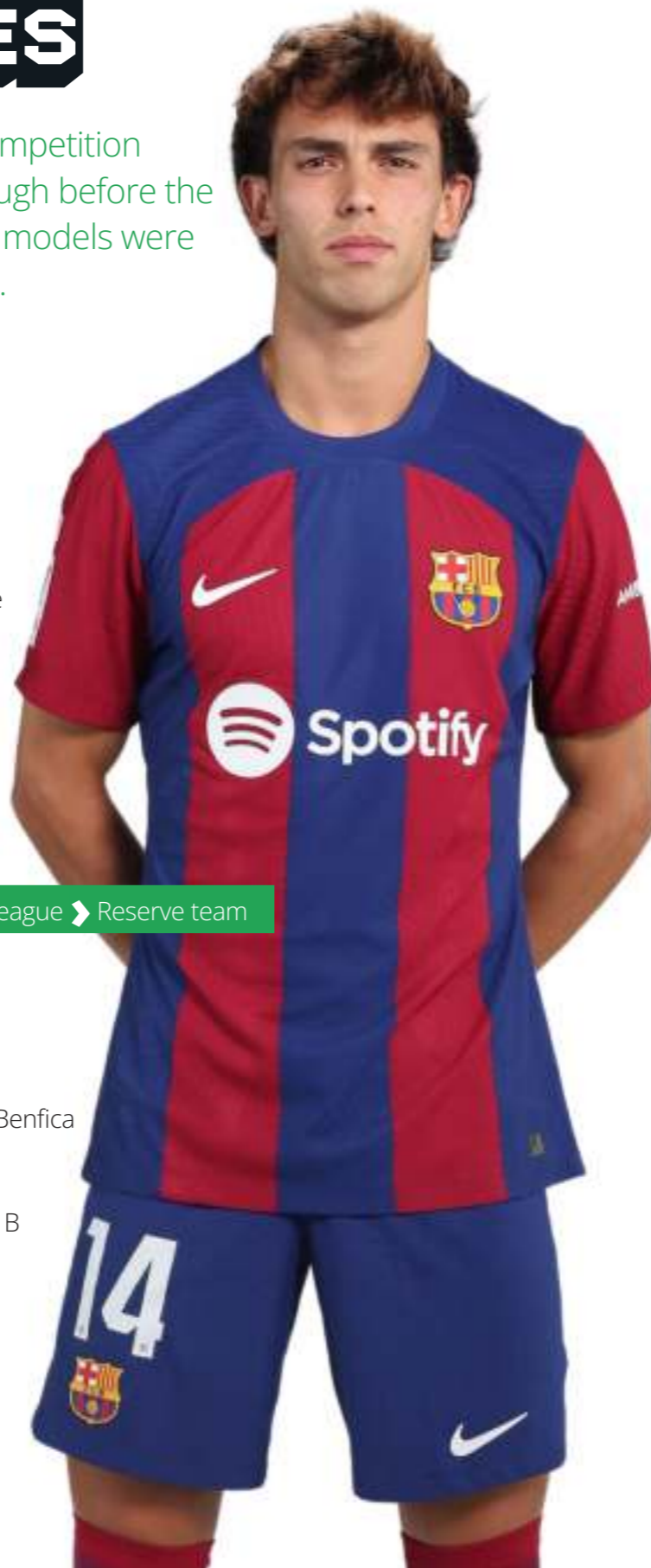
U15 league ➤ U17 league ➤ U19 league ➤ U23 league ➤ Reserve team

PLAYER EXAMPLE

João Félix

- Under-15 league as part of FC Porto
- Under-17 league as part of Padroense FC/SL Benfica
- Under-19 league as part of SL Benfica
- (skipping the U23 league)
- Portuguese second division as part of Benfica B
- First team transition at SL Benfica

Other similar examples of this model include the Netherlands and Belgium (both have different age group category leagues).



2

Clear choices by age – youth system until Under-18 and 19 followed by playing time in a lower division

France

The most popular model in Europe is the combination of youth leagues until the age group of Under-18 or Under-19, followed by the possibility of playing time in lower divisions as part of reserve teams. Such a model outlines a clear path for all players from a young age, making it easier to plan ahead with the advancement of their career. The possible development path through the example of France is as follows:

U17 league ➤ U19 league ➤ Playing time in lower divisions

PLAYER EXAMPLE

Aurélien Tchouaméni

- Under-17 league as part of FC Girondins de Bordeaux
- Under-19 league as part of FC Girondins de Bordeaux
- French fifth division as part of FC Girondins de Bordeaux II
- First team transition at FC Girondins de Bordeaux

Many countries follow a similar model, including Spain, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, Austria, Switzerland, Czechia, Norway, and Russia with only minor differences until the Under-18/Under-19 level.



3 Lack of reserve teams in lower divisions – limited options for senior playing time



England

While the previous two models both include the possibility for a player to get senior playing experience before their first team transition, this is not always the case. For example, in England, no reserve teams are allowed to play in the senior football pyramid of the FA. This creates a need for other solutions, most often in the form of loans to second or third division clubs, shaping the average playing path as follows:

U18 Premier League ▶ PL2 (now U21, previously U23) ▶ Loan at lower division club

PLAYER EXAMPLE

Reece James

- Under-18 Premier League as part of Chelsea FC
- Premier League 2 (U23 league back in 2018/19) as part of Chelsea FC
- Loan at Championship (English second division) club Wigan Athletic FC
- Full first team transition at Chelsea FC

There is a similar model in Sweden, Croatia, Serbia, and Israel, among others. The Croatian model is especially interesting as until the start of the 2022/23 season, reserve teams were able to play in the lower divisions. For example, the GNK Dinamo reserve team plays in the second highest division. However, the federation cancelled this option, leading to severely negative feedback from the academies.



CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

SUMMARY

- Playing time opportunities can be broken down into two main categories: dedicated youth competitions and senior playing time. The latter is crucial for a successful transition, meaning that an optimal path should include both.
- There are not many opportunities to play and compete against international opposition, making domestic competitions the main platform for acquiring playing time.
- A potential suggestion could be the organisation of regional leagues/ tournaments for youth teams that would increase the number of international club matches for an extended group of clubs while keeping the costs at a reasonable level.
- When it comes to competition against senior players, competing in lower divisions is the clear preferred choice of many clubs as reserve leagues have seemingly lost their prevalence.
- The domestic youth league systems mostly follow the Under-15 ▶ Under-17 ▶ Under-19 ▶ Under-21 path. Anything above Under-21 is rare as the majority of successful transitions usually happen before the player turns 20.
- From the perspective of transition success and youth playing time opportunity, Under-18 and Under-19 are the most crucial last steps in the academy system before turning to senior football.

Custom youth match programmes with the support of ECA

- Some clubs are turning to alternative youth match programmes after experiencing competitions that do not provide the expected platform for player development.
- Matches are currently organised through informal channels and using club-to-club relationships.
- At the same time, in April 2023, ECA has introduced a new online platform called ECA Fixture Hub for the coordination of friendly fixtures across Europe.
- Expanding this tool with sections dedicated to singular youth matches and friendly youth tournaments can be an easy way to organise more and better training programmes for youth teams.
- This would also potentially decrease the cost of organising friendly matches, which is among the biggest drawbacks of these types of match programmes.

**ECA[®] YOUTH
FOOTBALL** 2023-24**PART****6****STATISTICAL
ANALYSIS OF
TRANSITION TO
FIRST TEAM IN EUROPE**

There are various pathways young footballers can follow as they become professional first team players. Which ones are the most common? What are the latest trends? Which countries or clubs are relatively more successful in nurturing talents than others? In this chapter, an extensive statistical analysis aims to answer these questions and more. The identified underlying patterns provide further context about the state of first team transitions in European football.

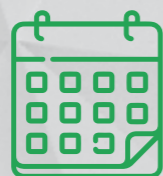
6

OVERALL ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK/ METHODOLOGY

FIRST DIVISIONS OF
UEFA ASSOCIATIONS
& 'BIG FIVE'
SECOND DIVISIONS ▶



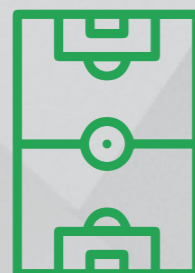
FIVE SEASONS:
2018/19 - 2022/23
2018 - 2022 ▶



PLAYERS WHO HAVE
PLAYED AT LEAST
ONE MINUTE ▶



ONLY
COMPETITIVE
MATCHES ▶



SCOPE OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis aims to examine the transition pathways of football players from academy to first team status across various European leagues. In terms of timeframe, the chapter covers the last five full football seasons, specifically from 2018/19 to 2022/23 (or from 2018 to 2022, in the case of 'summer' schedule leagues). To facilitate the time-series analysis of the chapter, different season types were grouped together: for example, the 2022 and 2022/23 seasons are both referred to as 2022/23 when analysing the data of fall-spring and summer schedule leagues together. Similarly, 2021 is referred to as 2021/22 and so on for all other analysed seasons.

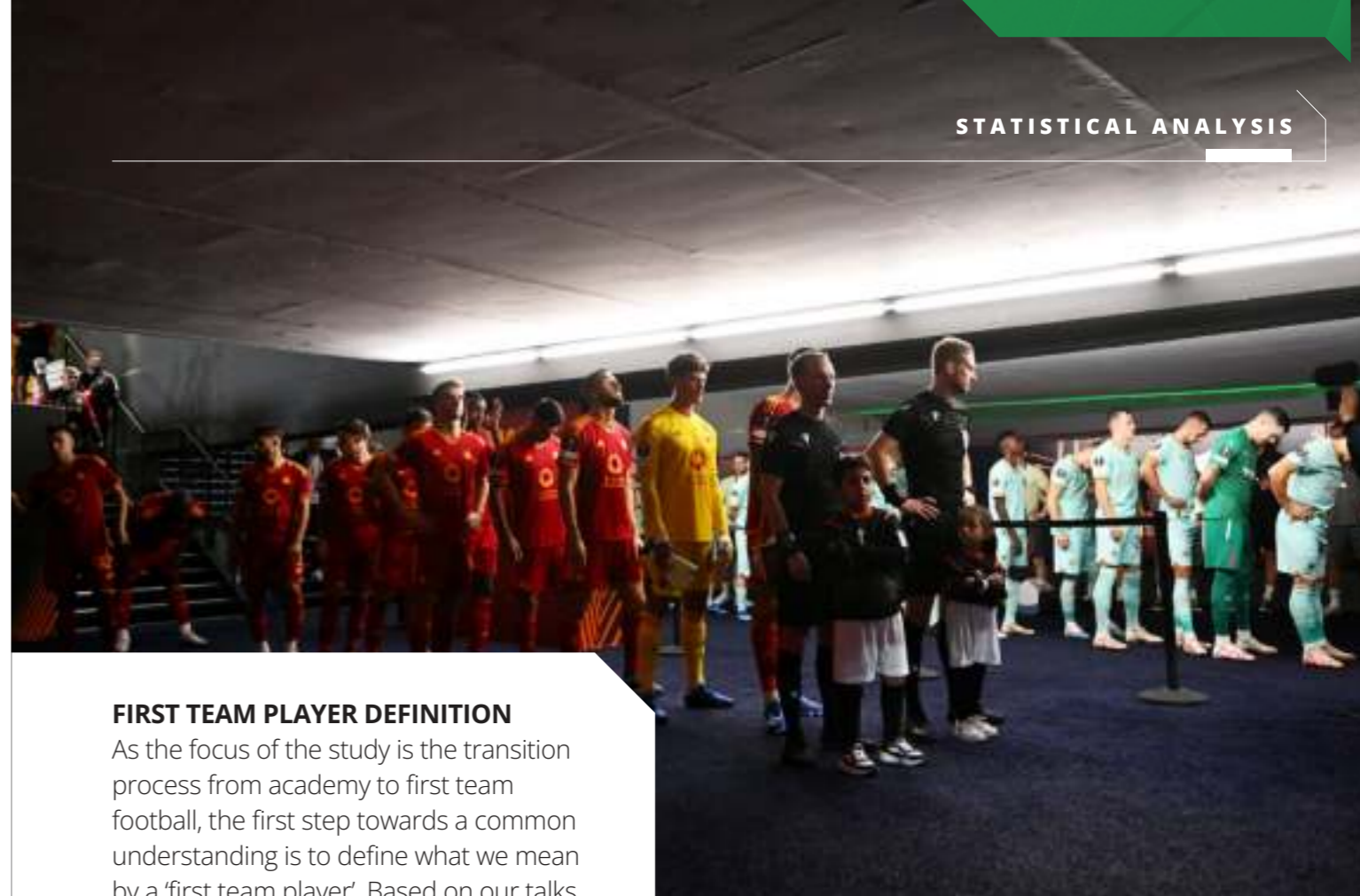
The scope included clubs from almost every men's first division league in UEFA member association countries, as well as the second divisions of the so-called 'Big Five' countries (England, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain). Leagues with limited data availability were excluded from the analysis, thus 52 leagues were considered in total. The underlying database comprises players who played at least one competitive minute in the first team squad of the clubs within the analysed leagues at any point during the last five football seasons.

FIRST TEAM PLAYER DEFINITION

As the focus of the study is the transition process from academy to first team football, the first step towards a common understanding is to define what we mean by a 'first team player'. Based on our talks with several football clubs, we found that several valid criteria are in use, including various qualitative and quantitative perspectives. These are the most common ways clubs define a first team player:

- In possession of a first team licence (official registration) issued by the national federation
- Being part of any matchday squad of the first team during the season
- Having made their debut in the first team (including friendly or exhibition matches)
- Having made a certain number of competitive appearances for the first team
- Having reached a certain number of cumulative minutes played for the first team

† The leagues were top divisions of: Andorra, Faroe Islands, Gibraltar, Kosovo, San Marino, Wales. In addition, Liechtenstein is also not part of the analysis as they currently do not have a domestic professional league.



It was clear that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' first team player definition.

Clubs' approach to this question depends on their traditions, the views of their current coaching staff, as well as the regulatory context. Interestingly, some do not even consider this to be an important question that needs an exact definition.

However, for the study's statistical analysis, there was a need for a commonly applied definition. **Based on club interviews and the results of the club survey (see Chapter 07), once a player reaches 450 minutes of cumulative minutes in competitive first team football matches, then they are considered to be a 'first team player' for the purpose of this analysis and study.** Importantly, the 450 minutes do not need to be accumulated within the same football season; a transition can start in one and end in another.

This approach divides each player's career into three phases; these are used throughout the chapter.

Phase 1 – Academy Player

Generally, players who have not played any first team football but have spent a minimum of three full seasons or 36 months at the same club between the ages of 15 and 21 belong to this category. However, there were cases in our analysis in which the player made his first team debut at a very early age (before turning 18) and thus did not even have the chance to fulfil the original criterion of three seasons at the club. In those cases, a more lenient approach was used. For example, when a player made his debut before the age of 17, it was enough to have spent one and a half seasons with the club to be categorised as an academy player of the organisation. Further examples are provided in Appendix 4.

Phase 2 – Transition Player

Players who have accumulated between one and 450 competitive minutes of first team football. These are the players who have already made their debuts in the first team environment.

Phase 3 – First team Player

Players who have played at least 450 competitive minutes of first team football. This threshold is determined based on club interviews and the results of the ECA Member Club survey conducted in conjunction with this study.

TRANSITION AND DEBUT TYPES

In the statistical analysis, there is a significant emphasis on distinguishing between various types of transitions and debuts in order to better understand the pathways of young talents. There are two distinct types based on the academy player's team at the moment of debut/transition:

Direct transition/debut

The term 'direct' in this context refers to an academy player who makes their debut or transition at the same club to which they belonged as an academy player. It is worth noting that during the interim period between the debut and first team transition, the player may still be on loan at another club. Nevertheless, this type often includes the players who seamlessly transition to first team football where they started their careers. For example, someone who spent their academy years at SL Benfica's youth teams and then makes their professional debut/transition in a competitive match for SL Benfica would fall into this category.

Indirect transition/debut

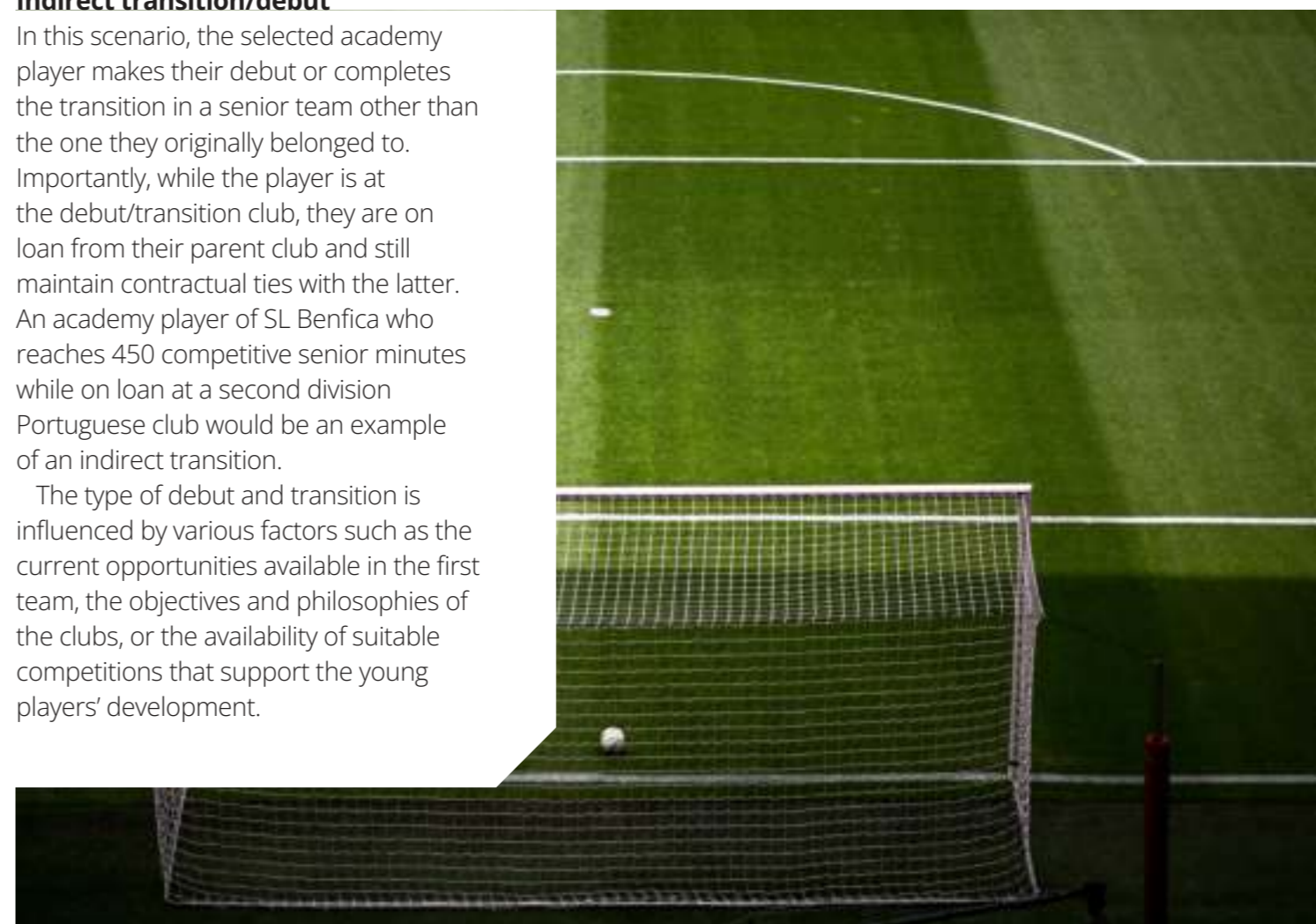
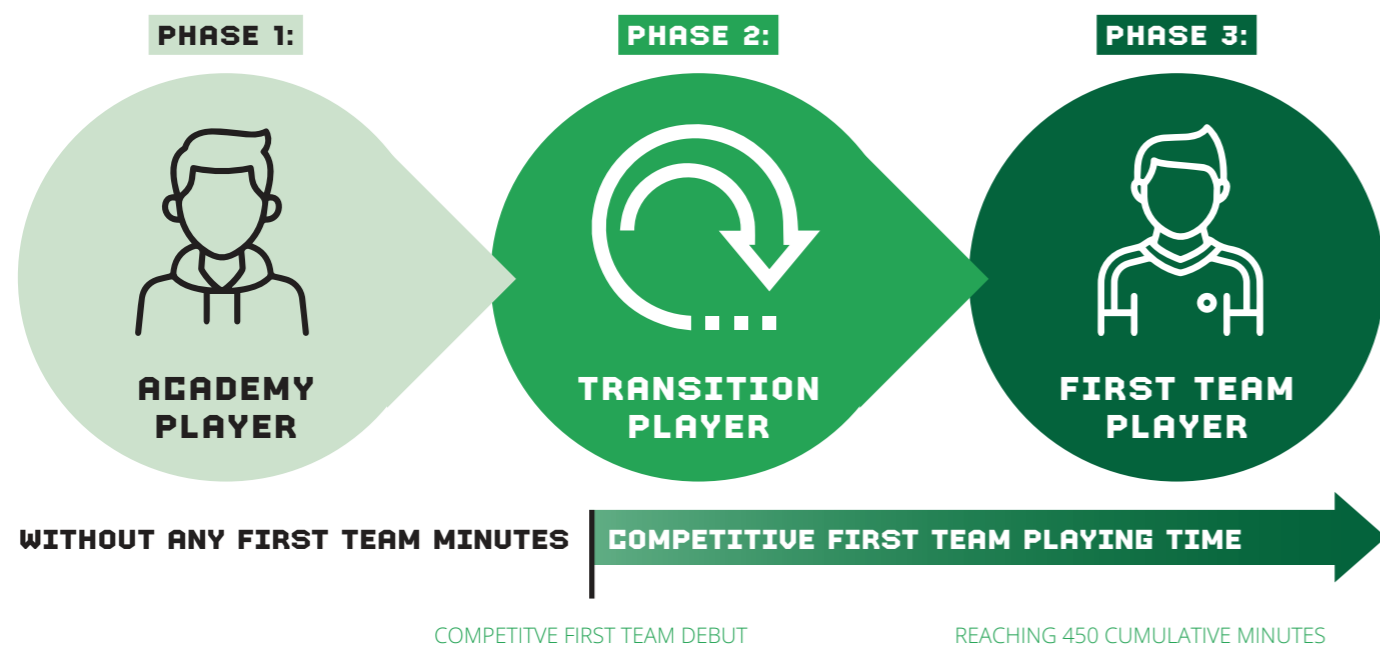
In this scenario, the selected academy player makes their debut or completes the transition in a senior team other than the one they originally belonged to. Importantly, while the player is at the debut/transition club, they are on loan from their parent club and still maintain contractual ties with the latter. An academy player of SL Benfica who reaches 450 competitive senior minutes while on loan at a second division Portuguese club would be an example of an indirect transition.

The type of debut and transition is influenced by various factors such as the current opportunities available in the first team, the objectives and philosophies of the clubs, or the availability of suitable competitions that support the young players' development.

MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS

In order to attain a comprehensive understanding of this complex ecosystem, our analysis applied a multi-tiered, top-down approach to examine first team transitions in European football. The chapter begins with a European-level overview that identifies trends and patterns. It is then followed by a cluster level assessment in which leagues of similar features are grouped and analysed together. The third level is about leagues, whereas the last two focuses on individual clubs and players, respectively.

Please find a detailed description of the methodology in Appendix 4.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

**EUROPEAN
LEVEL**

This section offers an overview of first team transition at the European level over the past five seasons. The data presented encompasses the aggregation of all selected first and second division leagues across the continent. While the subsequent sections will take a deep dive into the disparities among the selected leagues and their clubs, the primary focus here is to present the overarching trends and patterns of transitions. Before diving deeper into the data, it is essential to understand the transformative nature of the analysed period in football and its impact on the playing time and opportunities for young players.



COVID-19 pandemic

The analysis covers the last pre-pandemic season, two seasons heavily affected by COVID-19, and two post-recovery seasons. Its effects had implications both in the sporting context as well as in economic terms.



Increased number of substitutions allowed

Initially introduced as a temporary response to the pandemic in May 2020, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) allowed top domestic and international competitions the option to use up to five substitutes in matches. Recognising its effectiveness, this temporary amendment was permanently approved, becoming a permanent feature in top-level competitions starting from the 2022/2023 season.



Reform of loan regulations

Starting from the 2022/23 season, FIFA implemented new loan regulations limiting clubs to loaning out a

maximum of eight players per season. This will be further reduced to six from 2024/25 onwards. These changes have a notable impact on young players' development plans, as clubs that heavily rely on outgoing loans might need to adopt a different approach to providing first team football opportunities for their players.



New continental club competition

In the 2021/22 season, the UEFA European Conference League was launched, offering more clubs the opportunity to participate in European football. This expansion indirectly created an extra platform for young players to accumulate valuable experience.

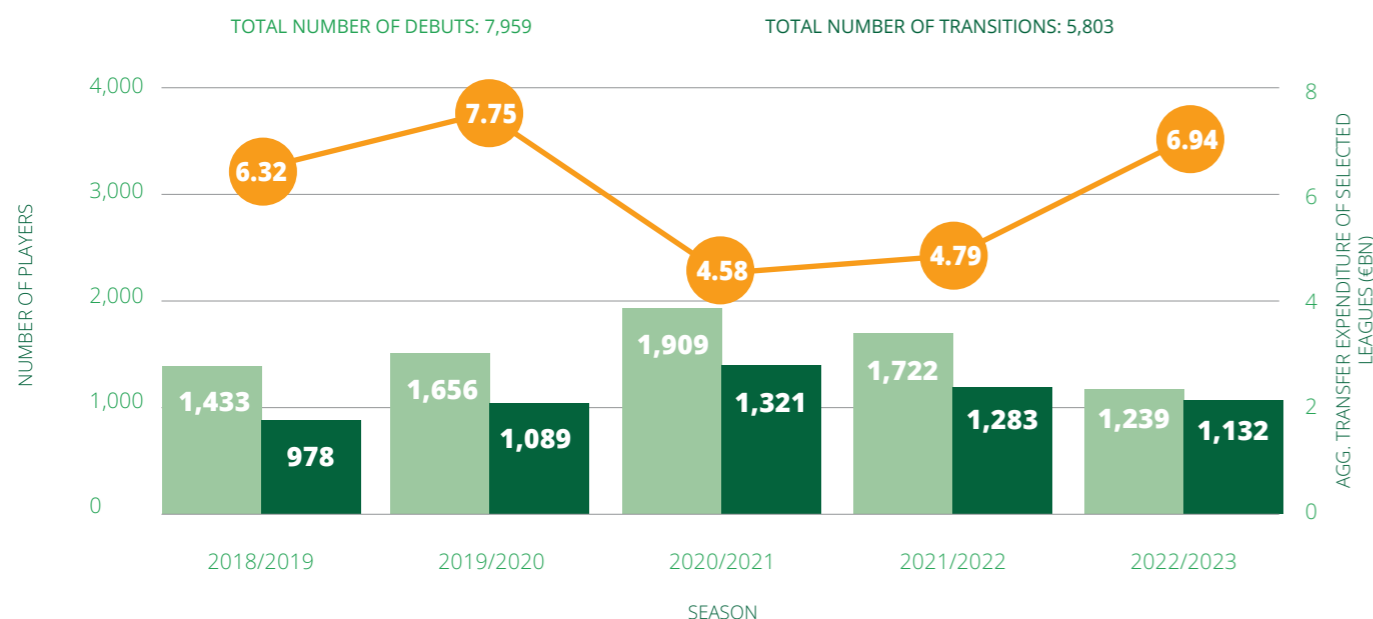


New interpretation of stoppage time

A new interpretation of stoppage time was implemented for the 2022 FIFA World Cup™. This approach aims to compensate for stoppages caused by injuries, time-wasting, and other delays, ensuring higher effective playing time. Although it was not adopted by club competitions in the 2022/23 season, some decided to follow the new interpretation starting from 2023/24. If this approach becomes more widespread, it could lead to more opportunities for young players and it might necessitate the reassessment of the 450-minute threshold used in our calculations to determine first team player status.



EVOLUTION OF TOTAL DEBUTS AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS AT A EUROPEAN LEVEL AND AGGREGATE TRANSFER EXPENDITURE BY SEASON



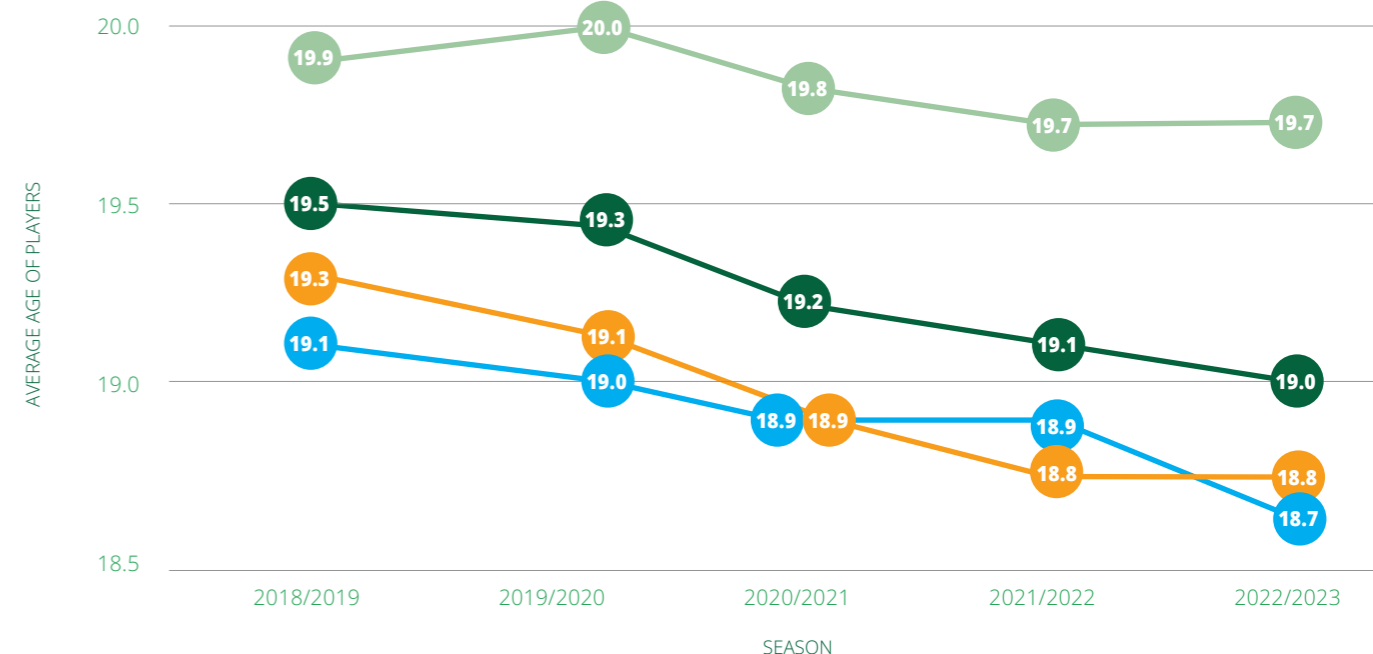
Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis

KEY ● Debuts ● Transitions ● Transfer Expenditure (€BN)

Debut and transitions show significant fluctuations in recent seasons with a notable peak in COVID-impacted years

- On average, close to 1,600 players made their debuts and almost 1,200 players transitioned successfully to first team football every season across all analysed leagues combined since 2018/19. This equates to at least two players making their debut and one player successfully transitioning per club on average during the timeframe of the analysis.
- The data highlights the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a notable influence on the development of young players, too. The peak in both debuts and transitions occurred during the 2020/2021 season.
- While further analysis would be needed to confirm this, it might be attributable to the pandemic's impact. On one hand, with the relegations temporarily suspended, more teams competed in some of the selected leagues compared to previous seasons. On the other hand, clubs were forced to rely more on their own talent pool due to financial constraints, resulting in opportunities for young players to make their debuts.
- However, the upward trend shifted from the 2021/2022 season onwards. The disparity between the number of debuts and transitions became narrower by the 2022/2023 season, primarily because more players made their debuts during the pandemic, while the number of new debutants dropped below pre-pandemic levels.
- The data analysis reveals a clear inverse relationship between aggregate transfer expenditure and the peak of first team transitions. Specifically, the season with the highest number of debuts and transitions coincides with the season marked by the lowest aggregate transfer expenditure, underscoring the significant impact of transfer market activities on academy player transitions.

FIVE-YEAR EVOLUTION OF AVERAGE AGE OF DEBUT BY POSITION GROUP AND BY SEASON



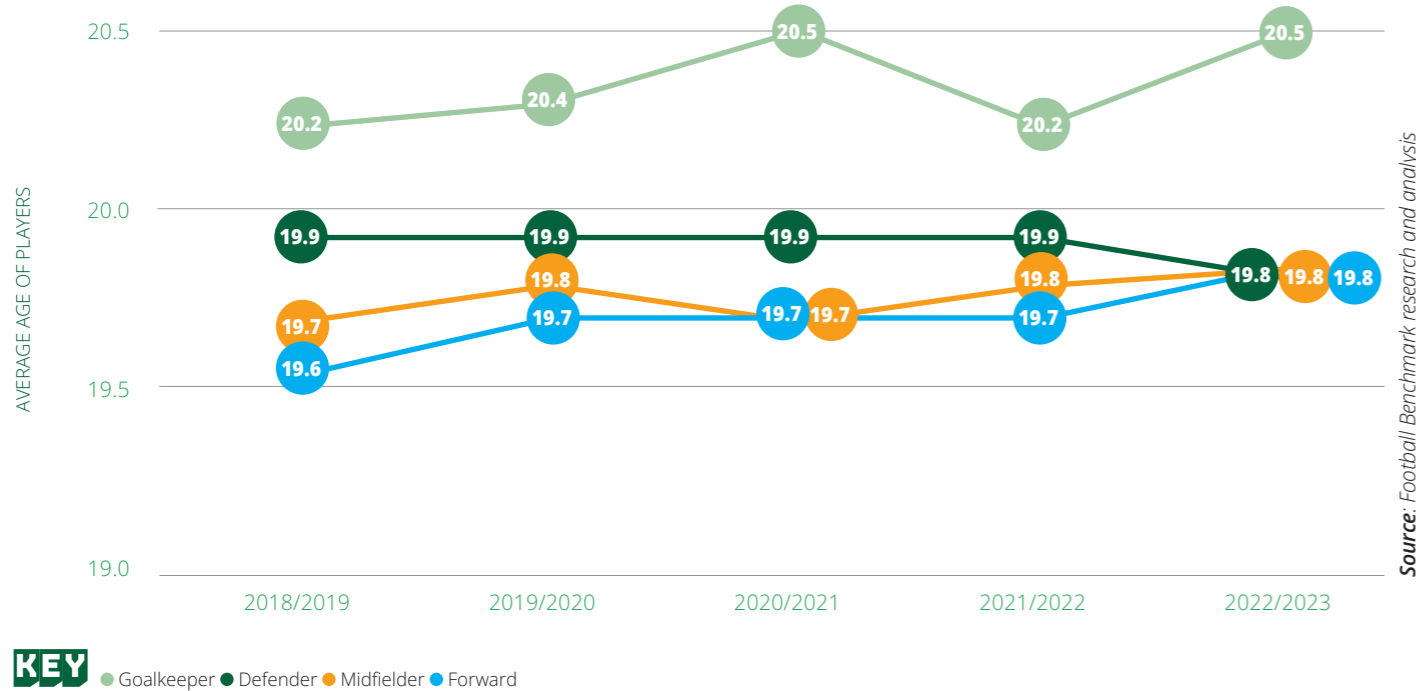
Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis

KEY ● Goalkeeper ● Defender ● Midfielder ● Forward

A clear decreasing trend in the average age of debutants in European leagues

- Across all positions, there is a subtle trend of decreasing average debut age since the 2018/2019 season. This trend could have started earlier, but this study's scope does not include prior seasons. This highlights the shift towards promoting younger talents. This trend was seemingly not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on the industry.
- Outfield player positions (defenders, midfielders, and forwards) have lower average debut ages compared to goalkeepers. This suggests that clubs tend to introduce goalkeepers to first team football at a slightly older age compared to outfield players. This observation aligns with the specialised nature of the goalkeeper position, where developing skills related to shot stopping, positioning, and decision-making often requires more time. The fact that many clubs usually prefer more experienced, older players for the position is also an important factor in the higher average debut age of keepers. Interviewees indicated that the high responsibility of goalkeepers (e.g. commanding the organisation of the defence) is a consideration during debut decisions. Centre-backs have also been mentioned in this context, explaining the slightly higher average debut age compared to the other outfield positions.
- While there is a general trend of decreasing debut age, the differences between positions remained relatively stable throughout the analysed period.

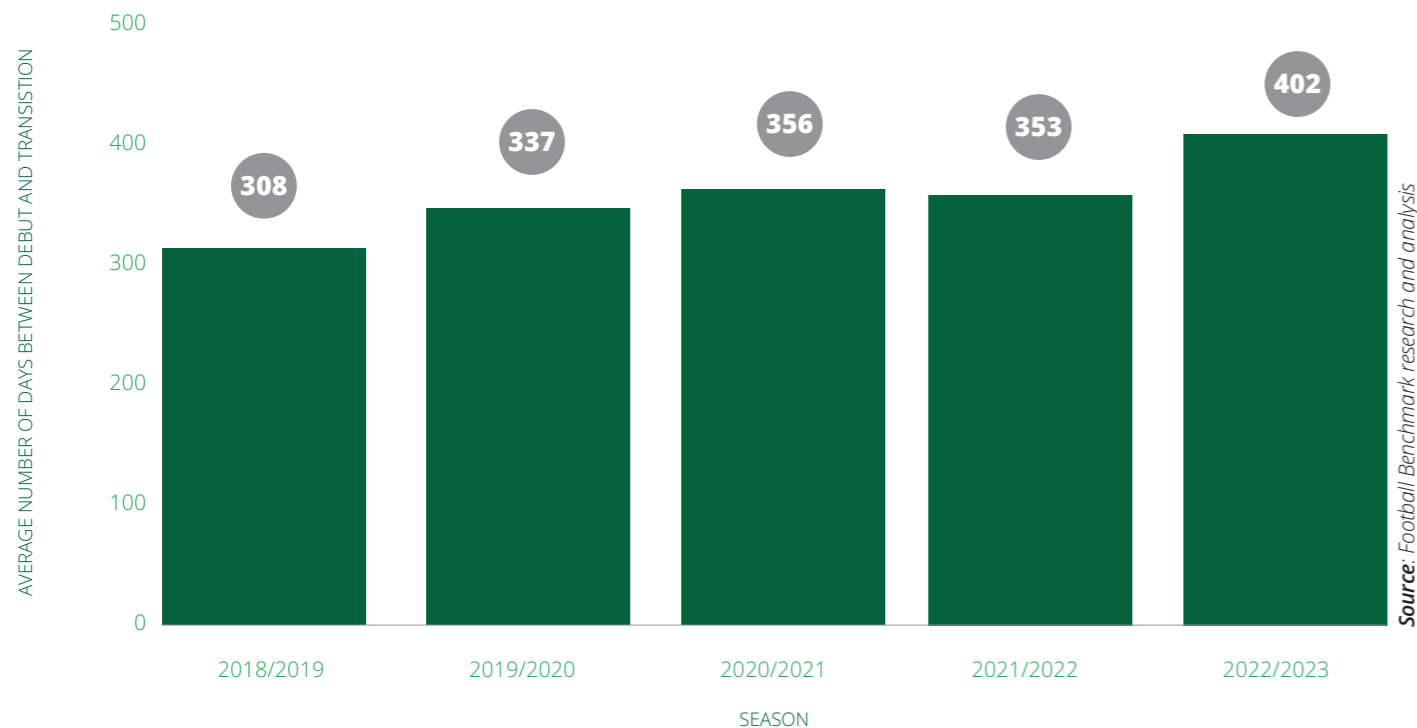
FIVE-YEAR EVOLUTION OF AVERAGE AGE OF TRANSITION BY POSITION GROUP BY SEASON



There are only slight fluctuations in the average age when players transition to the first team

- On average, the age of transition for the different positions remained relatively stable over the five-season period. The average age of first team transition fluctuated between 19.79 and 19.87, a marginal difference. This suggests that clubs maintained a consistent approach to transitioning players from youth teams to the senior squad during this period. It also aligns with the approach we observed in many countries: youth tournaments generally end at the Under-19 level. This recognises that by this stage, many players have already completed their transition to first team football; Under-21 and above youth leagues would only bring marginal benefits to the last stages of the development and are therefore often excluded from the domestic competition structure altogether.
- The data confirms that goalkeepers typically undergo their transitions to professional football at an older age compared to outfield players. Since clubs typically have a designated first-choice goalkeeper, even if a promising young talent does manage to make their debut early, that does not guarantee regular playing time moving forward. Moreover, due to the specific demands of the goalkeeper position, the average age of active goalkeepers is also higher than that of outfield players.
- The data also indicates minor variations in the average age of transition among defenders, midfielders, and forwards, but these variations are relatively small. These positions generally transition at ages close to the overall average.

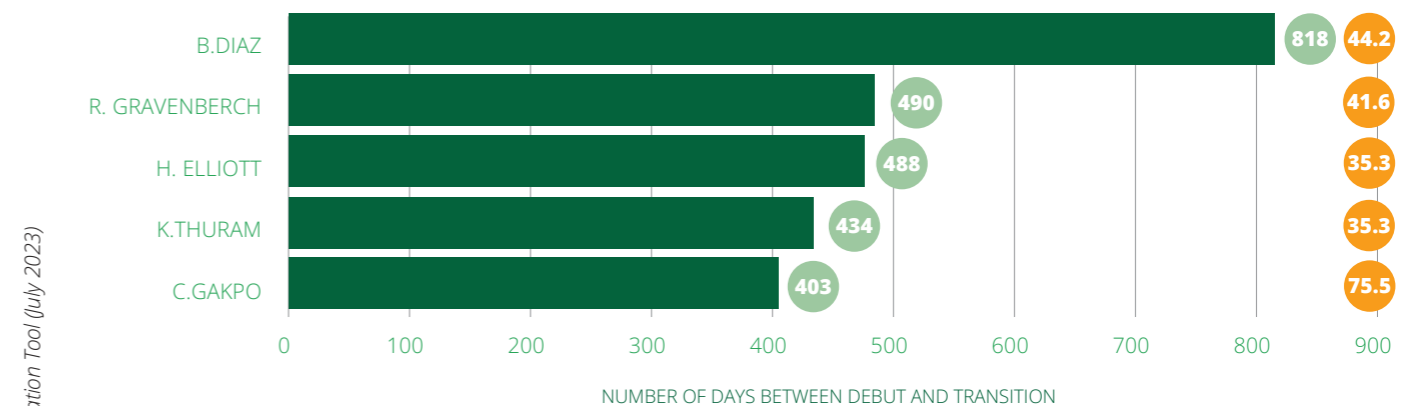
EVOLUTION OF THE AVERAGE DURATION IN DAYS BETWEEN THE DEBUT DATE AND TRANSITION DATE AMONG TRANSITIONED PLAYERS



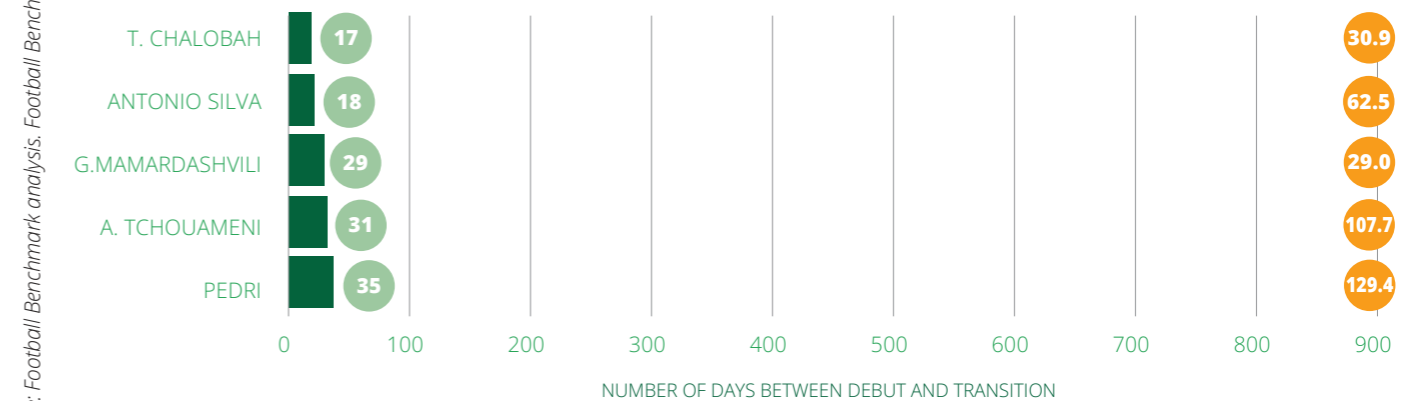
The average duration between debut and transition is gradually increasing

- For an average player, how much time passes between their debut and their successful transition to the first team? While exceptional talents might achieve this in a month or two, for most it is a much longer journey. After their initial introduction to the first team, the majority of players only get playing time sporadically, usually via a string of substitute appearances or starts in less-prioritised competitions.
- In the timeframe of the data analysis, we found that it took 364 days on average to go from Phase 1 (academy player) to Phase 3 (first team player); it takes almost a full year on average to accumulate 450 competitive minutes after debut.
- The decreasing debut age identified earlier implies that clubs are increasingly willing to entrust young talents with first team minutes at an earlier stage of their careers. However, the fact that the average transition age remains stable indicates that these talents may face a longer and more gradual journey to establish themselves in the new environment. One possible implication of this trend is that clubs may be more cautious or patient with their young talents, allowing them more time to develop and gain experience before fully integrating them into the first team environment. It is also possible that some do not fulfil their early promise and thus clubs 'give up' on them.
- This trend was also echoed during our discussions with several clubs that generally 'ease in' youngsters to senior football. While no two transitions are the same, a slower transition pace looks to be more suitable for many.

SELECTED ACADEMY PLAYERS WITH LONG TRANSITION PERIODS



SELECTED ACADEMY PLAYERS WITH SHORT TRANSITION PERIODS

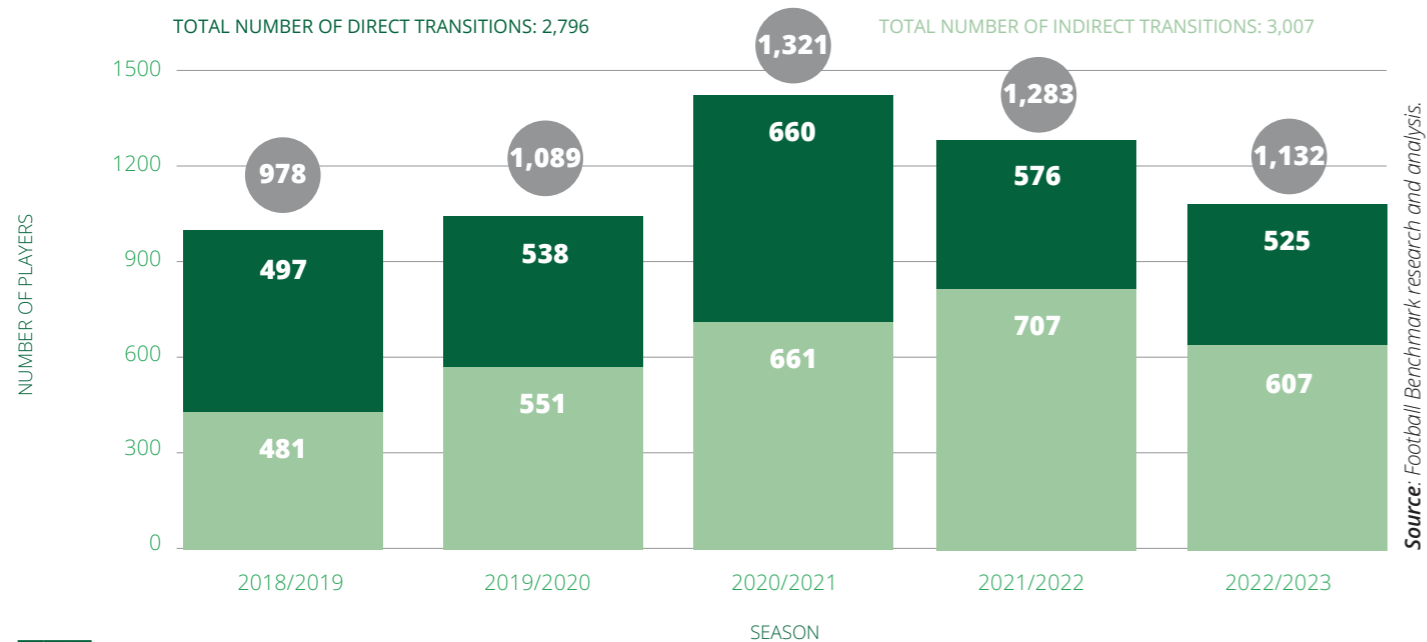


KEY ● Number of days between debut and transition ● Football Benchmark Market Value (€ M)

Case Study: transition duration does not determine subsequent success

- The duration of the transition is influenced by various factors, including the timing of a player's debut within a season, the age at which a player made their first appearance, the availability of opportunities, the overall performance of the first team, and even elements of luck. As such, there are successful players at both ends of the spectrum when it comes to the length of transition.
- This analysis offers insights into a group of players with high market value based on Football Benchmark's Player Valuation Tool. They either experienced a swift full transition to the first team or required an extended period to complete their transitions. For example, Trevoh Chalobah reached 450 first team minutes in a matter of 17 days for Chelsea FC, whereas for Brahim Díaz it took more than two years while at Manchester City FC.
- The data confirms a takeaway from club interviews: **there is no universal way of transition; different pathways can be suitable for different players. The key is to understand the player and their challenges and provide suitable solutions for them.**

NUMBER OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS BY TYPE AND BY SEASON



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

KEY ● Indirect ● Direct

Distribution between direct and indirect transitions remained relatively stable

- As highlighted in the Methodology chapter, a distinction was made between direct and indirect transitions. The term 'direct' denotes a player making their debut or transitioning within the same club at which they were part of the academy, even if they may have been on loan elsewhere temporarily. 'Indirect' relates to players making their debut or transitioning in a senior team different from their academy club while on loan from their parent club. Within the timeframe of the analysis, a little over 3,000 players transitioned indirectly and almost 2,800 via the direct path.
- An important point to note is that, when determining the 450-minute threshold for transitions, only minutes played in first team matches were considered. Minutes from youth or reserve league matches were not considered.
- Over the five-season period, there was a consistent pattern of successful transitions both via the direct and the indirect pathways. The seasonal share of direct transitions ranged between 45% and 51%, while direct transitions ranged between 49% and 55%. This indicates that, at European level, the distribution of successful transitions remained relatively balanced in this regard.
- In the analysis of playing time during the 365 days following a successful transition, it was evident that directly transitioned players, on average, played slightly less (approx. 100 minutes fewer) than indirectly transitioned players. Importantly, it should be highlighted that players who transitioned indirectly often did so in the months of September and October, coinciding with the early stages of most domestic European leagues. Conversely, directly transitioned players exhibit a more even distribution with regards to transition months.

AVERAGE TRANSITIONS PER CLUB BY FIRST-DIVISION LEAGUES DEPENDING ON WHETHER THEIR CLUBS HAVE RESERVE/B TEAMS PLAYING IN LOWER PROFESSIONAL DIVISIONS



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

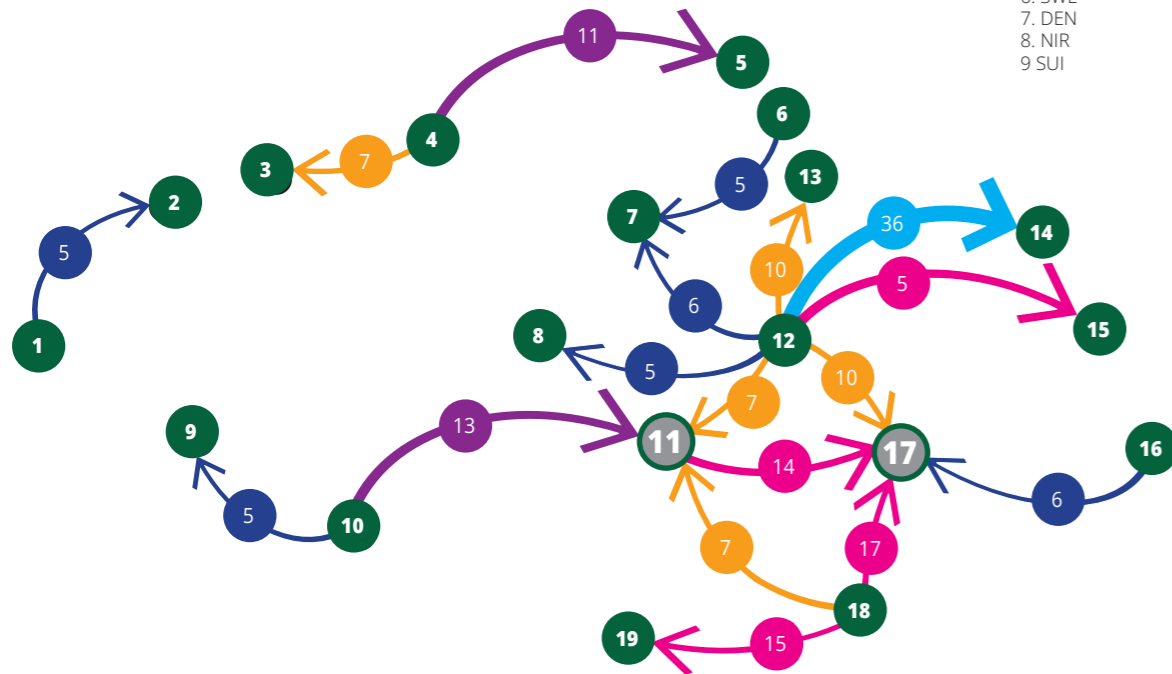
KEY ● Leagues with reserve / B team in lower divisions ● Leagues without reserve / B team in lower divisions

Reserve/second teams of clubs playing senior competitions does not seem to be a major driver of transitions

- Approximately two-thirds of countries under review allow reserve/B teams of top-flight clubs to compete in senior divisions below the first tier. The ten highest-ranked top-flight leagues by UEFA coefficient that fall into this category are Italy (Juventus NextGen playing in Serie C, the third tier of Italian football), Spain (Villarreal CF B playing in the second division), France, Germany, Switzerland, Scotland, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, and Belgium. The data shows that they had slightly more transition success than others.
- The second group in our analysis consists of other countries that allow reserve teams in professional lower divisions. Examples in this group include Hungary, Poland, Norway, and Bulgaria. Their per club transition figures are slightly worse than the others.
- All in all, our analysis shows that first-division leagues with teams that have a reserve or B team in lower divisions may not necessarily achieve superior transition numbers on a per-club basis than others. The evidence is inconclusive.

THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM CLEARLY EMERGED AS PROMINENT SOURCES OF CROSS-BORDER TRANSITIONS

- KEY**
- Country:
 - 1. CZE
 - 2. SVK
 - 3. BIH
 - 4. HRV
 - 5. SVN
 - 6. SWE
 - 7. DEN
 - 8. NIR
 - 9. SUI
 - 10. FRA
 - 11. BEL
 - 12. ENG
 - 13. SPA
 - 14. SCO
 - 15. IRE
 - 16. ITA
 - 17. NED
 - 18. GER
 - 19. AUT



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

Cross-border transitions: there are a few prominent hubs in Europe

- What counts as a cross-border transition? This is a form of the 'indirect' pathway: the player is on loan from their parent club at a team in another country and hence reaches the 450 competitive senior minutes threshold abroad.
- After conducting an in-depth examination of cross-border player transitions, a few 'directions of travel' were identified as quite common. The visual charts those that had a minimum of five transitions during the analysed period. In most cases these connections are frequently shaped by historical bonds, (see Czechia and Slovakia), multi-club ownership groups, as well as geographical and cultural proximity.
- The most prominent destinations are Belgium, and the Netherlands: they have the most such connections with other countries. For example, 13 players belonging to French first-division parent clubs transitioned successfully while on loan at a Belgian club in recent years.
- The historical role of these two countries as 'gateways' to elite European football is evident; their clubs consistently compete in continental competitions which provides players with additional visibility and growth opportunities. During our interviews with clubs, many mentioned these two countries as the best performers in the field of transition. There is seemingly a strong positive overall image of these markets in this regard.
- On the other side, England is a clear driver of cross-border transitions. Their clubs sent several players out on loan to neighbouring and other countries in recent years. The strongest connection is with Scotland (36 players).

6

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
CLUSTER LEVEL

The leagues included in this study showcase considerable diversity and operate within distinctly different financial and economic circumstances. Given these disparities, following the overview of the European landscape, we clustered the leagues to add another layer to the analysis.

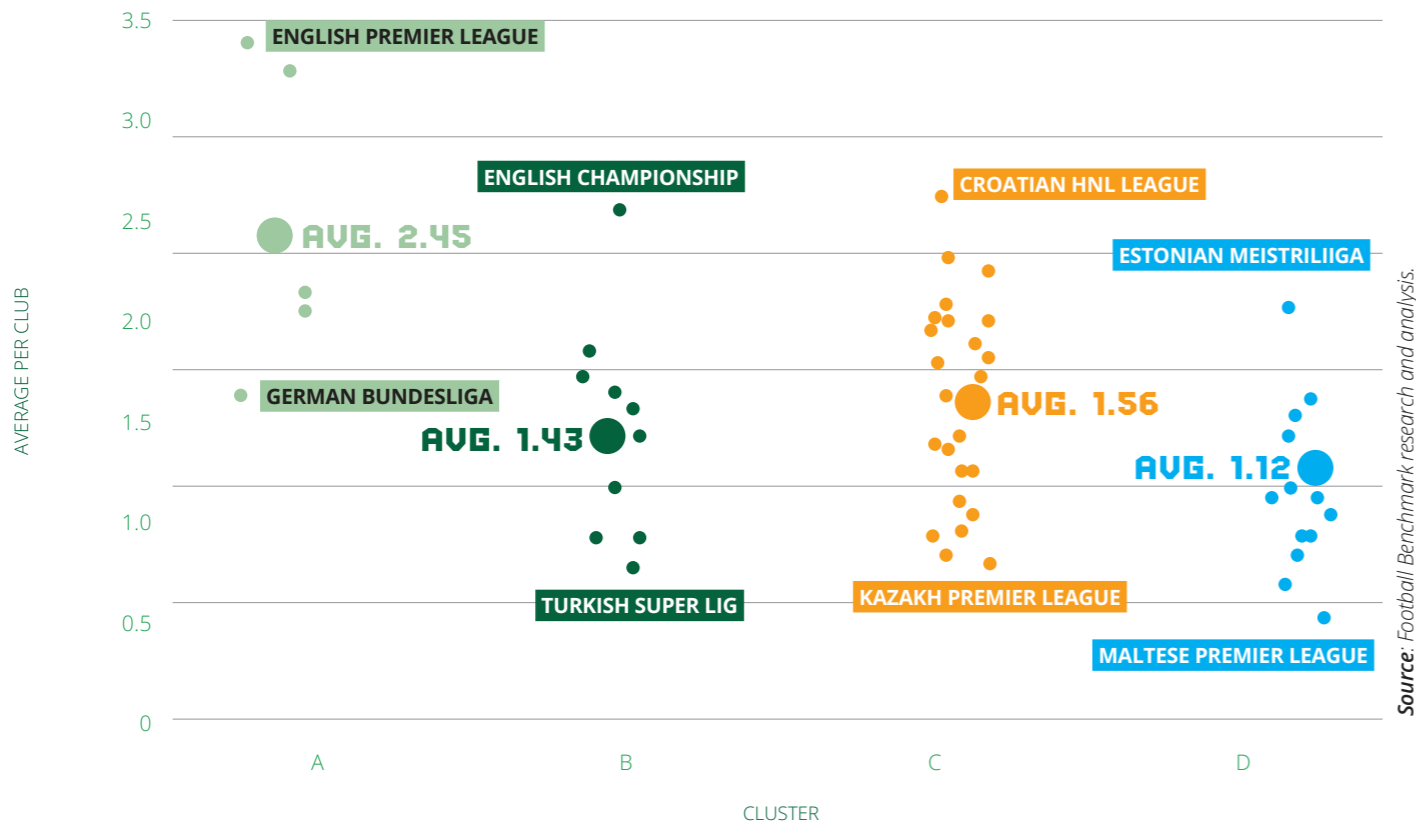
All leagues considered were assigned to one of four distinct clusters based on the level of their aggregate transfer expenditure between 2018/19 and 2022/23 and their UEFA country coefficients. This clustering approach enabled us to assess larger groups of leagues together and identify overarching trends of the market.



CLUSTER OVERVIEW

CLUSTER	LEAGUES	NUMBER OF LEAGUES
A	'BIG FIVE' LEAGUES	5
B	TOP DIVISIONS OF RUSSIA, PORTUGAL, BELGIUM, NETHERLANDS, TÜRKIYE SECOND DIVISIONS OF ALL 'BIG FIVE' LEAGUES	10
C	OTHER FIRST DIVISION LEAGUES WITH ABOVE € 1 MILLION IN AGGREGATE TRANSFER EXPENDITURE OVER THE FIVE-SEASON PERIOD	24
D	REST OF THE LEAGUES	13

ANALYSIS OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS BY CLUSTER (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED)



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

KEY ● CLUSTER A ● CLUSTER B ● CLUSTER C ● CLUSTER D

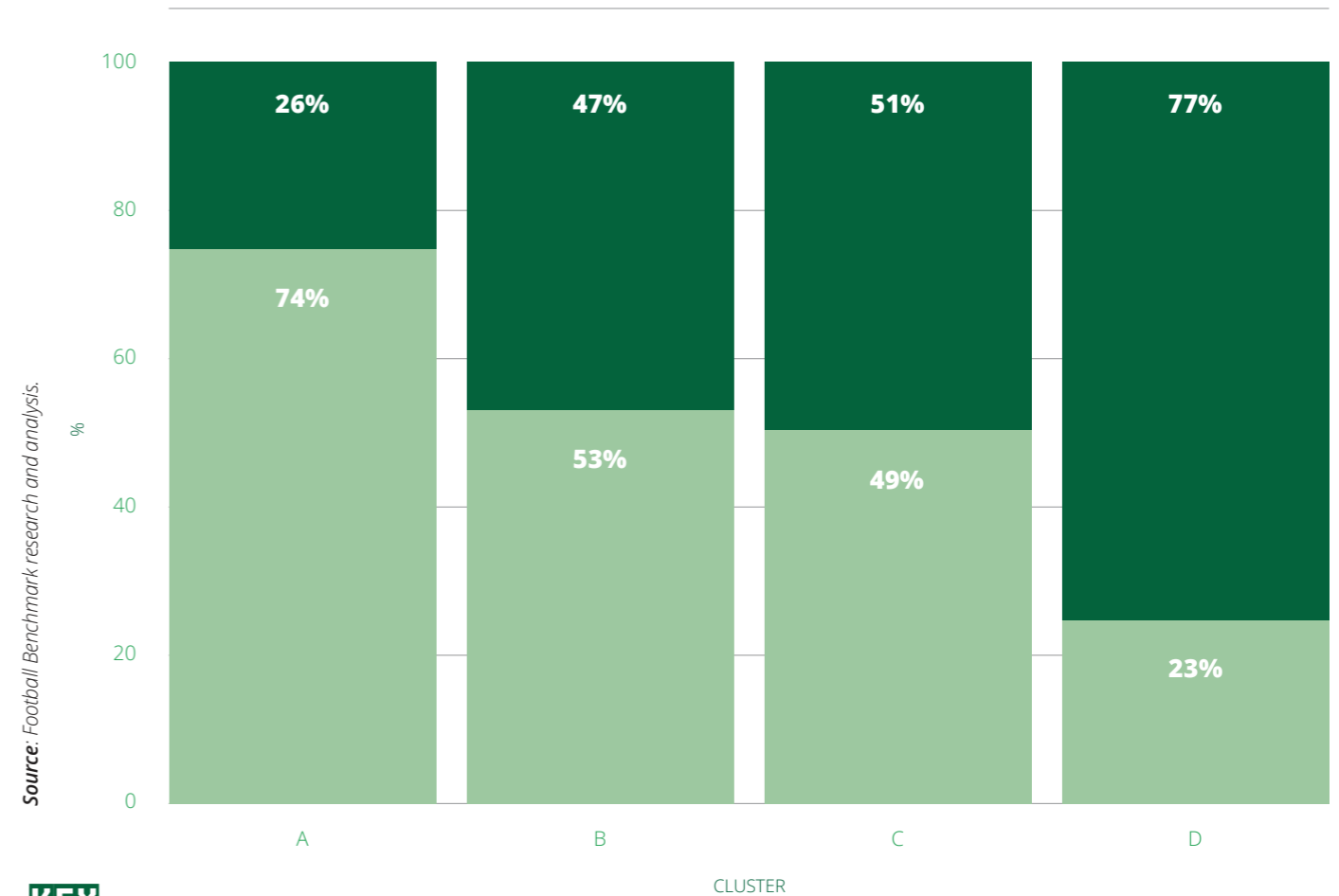
The disparity between the best and worst performing leagues within a cluster is the most pronounced in Cluster B

The visual showcases the performance of each league by cluster and the vast differences in their transition success. Since the clusters are very different in size (ranging from five to 24 leagues), we standardised their transition records into a 'per club' metric. When it comes to the analysis of successful transitions, Cluster A clearly emerges as the frontrunner, demonstrating their strong economic position and their ability to maintain elite academies.

Furthermore, clubs in that cluster have more opportunities to loan players to other, lower-ranked leagues. For example, players who are not ready for the English Premier League often go to Belgium or the Netherlands on loan, but Hungarian or Latvian clubs have more limited opportunities to send young players on loan abroad.

All in all, an average 'Big Five' club in Cluster A had around 2.45 successful transitions on record between 2018/19 and 2022/23. There is not much difference between the other three clusters: all of them are significantly behind Cluster A. Although there are leagues that demonstrated higher average performance within each cluster, these instances are primarily exceptional cases, as seen in Cluster B. In light of this, Cluster C appears to be the real 'talent factory'.

BREAKDOWN OF TRANSITIONS BY TYPE AND CLUSTER (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED)



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

KEY ● Indirect transitions ● Direct transitions

Distribution of transitions by type and cluster

Upon conducting a more in-depth analysis of the data, an interesting pattern is revealed regarding the type of transitions within each cluster. Moving from Cluster A to D, a trend becomes evident: the share of players directly transitioning to first team football increases. On one hand, this implies that clubs in lower clusters tend not to loan out their talented youngsters as there is usually ample playing

time opportunity for them right at the 'parent' club (direct transition). On the other hand, an alternative perspective (as previously highlighted in this chapter), proposes that leagues in lower clusters might face considerably fewer opportunities for loans to begin with. In contrast, leagues associated with the top clusters often enjoy more options for indirectly transitioning players via

(international) loans. Furthermore, in order to maintain their competitive edge, clubs in top clusters increasingly acquire talented players from abroad quite early and then loan them back to their parent clubs. This strategic approach substantially increases indirect transitions in top clusters. It should be emphasised that further research is necessary to validate this hypothesis.

6

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

LEAGUE LEVEL



When undertaking an in-depth analysis of league-level results, it is essential to emphasise the distinctions in the different competition structures and formats. As a result, leagues that feature more teams and consequently more games played during the analysed five seasons are inherently positioned higher in the rankings. In this section, we present the best-performing leagues in terms of number of debutants and transitioned players. In addition, the contextual factors that influence the results such as domestic regulations and competition structures are also highlighted.

LEAGUE RANKING BY NUMBER OF TOTAL DEBUTS (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED) ▼

RANK	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TOTAL NO. OF DEBUTS
1	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	381
2	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	353
3	ITALY	SERIE A	350
4	FRANCE	LIGUE 1	291
5	SPAIN	LA LIGA	296
6	CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	217
=	NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	217
8	TÜRKIYE	SÜPER LIG	211
9	SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	207
10	RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	205
11	POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	204
12	FRANCE	LIGUE 2	202
13	ITALY	SERIE B	199
14	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	198
15	GERMANY	BUNDESLIGA	191
16	PORTUGAL	PRIMEIRA LIGA	181
17	CROATIA	1. HNL	177
18	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	175
19	NORWAY	ELITESERIEN	162
20	BELARUS	PREMIER LEAGUE	161

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

- When considering the number of debutants, England unquestionably takes the lead in the five-year combined ranking, with the Premier League and EFL Championship securing the top two positions, registering 381 and 353 debuts, respectively. As this is an absolute metric, leagues with a higher number of teams have a clear advantage over the rest.
- Besides the size, there are other domestic factors at play. For example, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in England highlighted in Chapter 04 - Regulatory support section, certainly contributed to their good performance.
- The podium is rounded off by the Italian Serie A which is closely behind the EFL Championship with 350 player debuts in the period under review. The Italian top division's performance is a good example of a system built on a myriad of loan deals; many transitions to first team football in Italy are via the indirect pathway.
- Considering a country's population and its influence on the available talent pool, smaller countries such as Serbia, Denmark, Croatia, and Norway clearly stand out in the ranking.

LEAGUE RANKING BY DEBUTS PER CLUB
(2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED) ▼

RANK	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	AVERAGE DEBUTS PER CLUB IN LEAGUE
1	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	3.81
2	CROATIA	1. HNL	3.54
3	ITALY	SERIE A	3.50
4	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	3.00
5	FRANCE	LIGUE 1	2.97
6	SPAIN	LA LIGA	2.96
6	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	2.94
8	ESTONIA	MEISTRILIIGA	2.92
9	SWITZERLAND	SUPER LEAGUE	2.66
10	CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	2.65
11	HUNGARY	NBI	2.62
12	RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	2.56
13	SLOVAKIA	SUPER LIGA	2.52
14	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	2.50
15	SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	2.46
16	SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	2.44
17	POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	2.43
18	NORTH MACEDONIA	FIRST LEAGUE	2.38
19	BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	PREMIJER LIGA	2.32
20	NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	2.28

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

- As explained, league size has a major impact on the statistics of total debuts, hence it is worthwhile to standardise the results and show them on a 'per club' basis. The table shows how many players made their debut on average in a club in the listed leagues over the analysed period.
- Compared to the total, there is only a minor shift in the adjusted ranking. While the English Premier League maintains its lead, the Croatian HNL moves up to claim the second spot, just ahead of the Italian top tier.

- In this ranking, countries with a lower number of teams tend to perform better. Croatia, alongside Estonia and Switzerland 'benefit' from the fact that they had the fewest number of teams in their respective leagues among those listed in the table.

“Compared to the total, there is only a minor shift in adjusted ranking”

LEAGUE RANKING BY NUMBER OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS
(2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED) ▼

RANK	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TOTAL NO. OF TRANSITIONS
1	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	332
2	ITALY	SERIE A	318
3	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	302
4	SPAIN	LA LIGA	210
5	FRANCE	LIGUE 1	199
6	POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	169
6	ITALY	SERIE B	166
8	SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	163
9	CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	157
10	FRANCE	LIGUE 2	156
11	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	149
12	NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	143
=	RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	143
14	GERMANY	BUNDESLIGA	141
15	SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	134
16	SWEDEN	ALLSVENSKAN	131
17	CROATIA	1. HNL	128
=	NORWAY	ELITESERIEN	128
19	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	124
20	PORTUGAL	PRIMEIRA LIGA	123

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

- The ranking of player transitions closely mirrors those of player debuts. Countries such as England, Italy, Spain, and France consistently lead in both categories, reflecting their ability to attract and introduce young talents.
- Apart from that of Spain, the second divisions of 'Big Five' countries also rank relatively high. This highlights the vital youth development role played by lower domestic divisions in these countries. Clubs from top divisions often loan out promising young players to lower-tier

domestic leagues, providing valuable first team football experience and development opportunities.

- In contrast to the ranking by debuts, the leagues of Poland, Scotland, and Sweden are significantly higher placed when it comes to player transitions.
- It is important to highlight that in leagues such as Italy, Poland, Denmark, Germany and Norway, there is a homegrown player rule in place that might explain the high number of players transitioned by clubs in these leagues. While this might be

one reason behind their strong performance, results are impacted by many different factors, thus a more detailed analysis would be required to evaluate the connection between homegrown player rules and successful transitions.

- Despite Belgian clubs and their league being often highly placed in UEFA rankings, and their national team's four-year run at the top of the FIFA World Men's Ranking, it is interesting to observe their absence from both the debutants and the transitions rankings.

LEAGUE RANKING BY TRANSITIONS PER CLUB (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED) ▼

RANK	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	AVERAGE TRANSITIONS PER CLUB IN LEAGUE
1	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	3.32
2	ITALY	SERIE A	3.18
3	CROATIA	1. HNL	2.56
4	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	2.52
5	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	2.26
6	SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	2.20
7	SPAIN	LA LIGA	2.10
8	ESTONIA	MEISTRILIIGA	2.02
9	POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	2.01
10	FRANCE	LIGUE 1	1.99
11	SWITZERLAND	SUPER LEAGUE	1.96
12	HUNGARY	NBI	1.95
13	SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	1.94
14	CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	1.91
15	SLOVAKIA	SUPER LIGA	1.83
16	RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	1.79
17	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	1.77
18	AUSTRIA	BUNDESLIGA	1.75
19	ITALY	SERIE B	1.68
20	SWEDEN	ALLSVENSKAN	1.64

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

● In terms of per club transitions, the English Premier League is still on top, followed closely by the Italian top division. The teams in these leagues transitioned at least three players to first team football since 2018/19 on average, either directly or indirectly.

● Compared to the ranking by total number of players transitioned, there are five new entrants: Estonia, Switzerland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. Although these leagues originate from countries with relatively small populations, limiting their talent pool to some extent, each team in these leagues has managed to successfully transition at least one player, with Estonia even achieving an average of two players per team.

“In terms of per club transitions, the English Premier League is on top”

AVERAGE TRANSITIONS PER CLUB IN LEAGUE: TYPES OF TRANSITIONS IN SELECTED LEAGUES (ORDERED BY THE RATIO OF INDIRECT/DIRECT TRANSITIONS) ▼

COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TRANSITIONS		COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TRANSITIONS	
		INDIRECT	DIRECT			INDIRECT	DIRECT
ITALY	SERIE A	285	33	AUSTRIA	BUNDESLIGA	43	62
ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	281	51	ARMENIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	12	20
ITALY	SERIE B	140	26	AZERBAIJAN	PREMYER LIQA	12	20
SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	100	34	SPAIN	SEGUNDA DIVISIÓN	38	57
HUNGARY	NBI	86	31	MONTENEGRO	FIRST LEAGUE	29	45
ROMANIA	SUPERLIGA	66	25	BULGARIA	FIRST LEAGUE	26	47
ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	216	86	ICELAND	BESTA-DEILD KARLA	31	62
SPAIN	LALIGA	132	78	BELGIUM	FIRST DIVISION A	30	71
GERMANY	BUNDESLIGA	94	47	GREECE	SUPER LEAGUE	22	52
UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	78	46	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	44	105
POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	106	63	BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	PREMIJER LIGA	23	60
RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	86	57	SLOVAKIA	SUPER LIGA	27	83
CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	94	63	FRANCE	LIGUE 2	37	119
CROATIA	1. HNL	76	52	REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	PREMIER DIVISION	12	43
BELARUS	PREMIER LEAGUE	62	48	ESTONIA	MEISTRILIIGA	22	79
MALTA	PREMIER LEAGUE	15	12	SLOVENIA	1. SNL	12	48
ISRAEL	LIGAT HA'AL	51	41	FINLAND	VEIKKAUSLIIGA	12	52
SWEDEN	ALLSVENSKAN	76	55	GEORGIA	EROVNULLI LIGA	9	38
GERMANY	2. BUNDESLIGA	41	38	NORTHERN IRELAND	PREMIERSHIP	9	44
FRANCE	LIGUE 1	101	98	LATVIA	VIRSLIGA	8	54
SWITZERLAND	SUPER LEAGUE	48	50	KAZAKHSTAN	PREMIER LEAGUE	5	42
TÜRKIYE	SÜPER LIG	34	37	LITHUANIA	A LYGA	4	37
NORWAY	ELITESERIEN	58	70	MACEDONIA FYR	FIRST LEAGUE	6	59
NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	62	81	MOLDOVA	SUPER LIGA	3	31
SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	70	93	CYPRUS	1. DIVISION	2	35
PORTUGAL	PRIMEIRA LIGA	51	72	ALBANIA	SUPERLIGA	0	44

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

While certain leagues clearly lean towards indirect transitions, the rest in the sample display a more balanced distribution

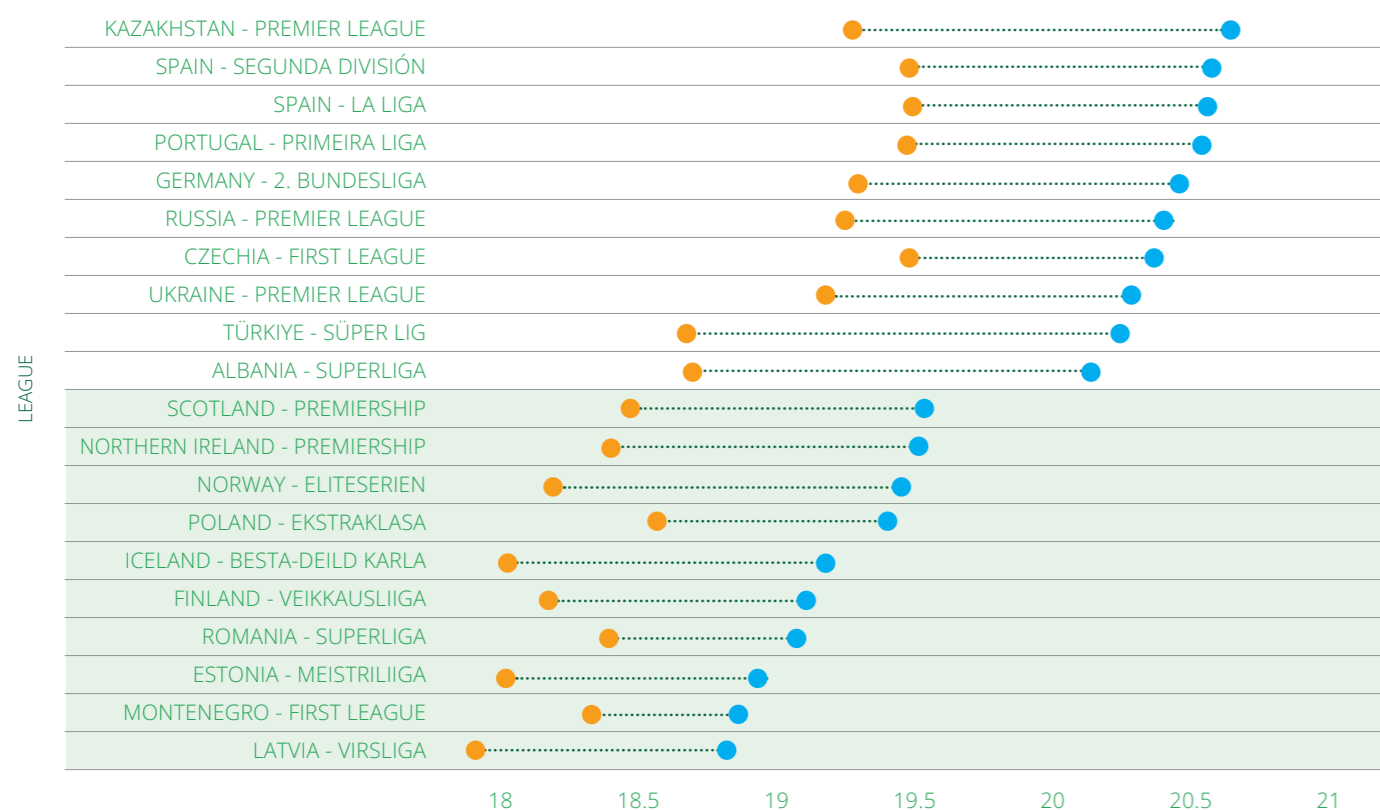
● When it comes to transition methods, certain leagues clearly favour indirect pathways, as seen in the top three leagues by total transition numbers – the English Premier League, Italian Serie A, and English Championship. Teams in these leagues tend to send players on loan (indirect transitions) rather than leaving them stuck in youth competitions. In contrast, leagues like the French Ligue 2, the Danish Superliga, and the Serbian Superliga tend to lean more towards direct transitions.

● Among the so called 'Big Five' first divisions, the French Ligue 1 stands out as the most balanced, with nearly equal numbers of players transitioning indirectly and directly. One possible reason behind this could be that in France once a player signs an aspirant contract at the age of 12, they are obligated to stay there for at least six years, until the age of 18.

● The relatively high percentage of indirect transitions in the top two tiers of England and Italy raises questions about

whether the emphasis on quantity may sometimes come at the expense of quality. Many players may undergo multiple loan spells before settling into the first team, potentially impacting their development trajectory. One possible reason behind multiple loan spells could be the absence of reserve teams in the professional domestic competition structure. In England, reserve teams cannot take part in senior competitions, while in Italy, clubs have limited budgets.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AVERAGE AGES OF DEBUT AND TRANSITION



KEY ● Average age at debut ● Average age at transitionTransition period ■ Early Transition

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

Leagues that are smaller in size tend to transition players at a younger age

- The analysis presents the top and bottom ten leagues based on the average age of successfully transitioned players. Only leagues with at least 40 transitions on record were considered in this analysis so that the average ages are not greatly distorted by a few outliers. The full list can be accessed in Appendix 5.
- Leagues with fewer teams such as Estonia, Montenegro and Latvia have the lowest average age at transition to the first team. Among these the Montenegrin First League had the shortest window between debuts and transitions, just a little over six months on average per player.
- At the other end of the spectrum, there is the Kazakh Premier League, where successful transitions occur the latest. Thus, it is not that surprising to note that it is currently one of the leagues with the highest average age in Europe when considering all players in the competition. Similarly, late transitions occur in Spain (LaLiga and LaLiga2) and Portugal. This could partially be due to the fact that in Kazakhstan, Spain, Portugal, and Czechia, the second/reserve teams often play in the lower professional divisions, providing an alternative to parent club first team football for many.

REGULATORY AND COMPETITION STRUCTURE ASPECTS

COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TRANS. PER TEAM	HG RULE TYPE	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TRANS. PER TEAM	HG RULE TYPE
CROATIA	1. HNL	2.56	NO RULE	AZERBAIJAN	PREMYER LIQA	0.76	NO RULE
SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	2.20	NO RULE	KAZAKHSTAN	PREMIER LEAGUE	0.73	NO RULE
SPAIN	LALIGA	2.10	NO RULE	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	3.32	<10 REQ.
FRANCE	LIGUE 1	1.99	NO RULE	ITALY	SERIE A	3.18	<10 REQ.
HUNGARY	NB I	1.95	NO RULE	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	2.52	<10 REQ.
SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	1.94	NO RULE	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	2.26	<10 REQ.
CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	1.91	NO RULE	POLAND	EKSTRAKLASA	2.01	<10 REQ.
SLOVAKIA	SUPER LIGA	1.83	NO RULE	SWITZERLAND	SUPER LEAGUE	1.96	<10 REQ.
RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	1.79	NO RULE	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	1.77	<10 REQ.
AUSTRIA	BUNDESLIGA	1.75	NO RULE	ITALY	SERIE B	1.68	<10 REQ.
SWEDEN	ALLSVENSKAN	1.64	NO RULE	GERMANY	BUNDESLIGA	1.57	<10 REQ.
FRANCE	LIGUE 2	1.56	NO RULE	PORTUGAL	PRIMEIRA LIGA	1.37	<10 REQ.
ICELAND	BESTA-DEILD KARLA	1.55	NO RULE	REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	PREMIER DIVISION	1.08	<10 REQ.
NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	1.51	NO RULE	FINLAND	VEIKKAUSLIGA	1.07	<10 REQ.
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	PREMIJER LIGA	1.38	NO RULE	GEORGIA	EROVNULI LIGA	0.90	<10 REQ.
BELARUS	PREMIER LEAGUE	1.38	NO RULE	GERMANY	2. BUNDESLIGA	0.88	<10 REQ.
ISRAEL	LIGAT HA'AL	1.31	NO RULE	MOLDOVA	SUPER LIGA	0.81	<10 REQ.
SLOVENIA	1. SNL	1.20	NO RULE	TÜRKIYE	SÜPER LIG	0.74	<10 REQ.
NORTH MACEDONIA	FIRST LEAGUE	1.16	NO RULE	ARMENIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	0.65	<10 REQ.
BELGIUM	FIRST DIVISION A	1.13	NO RULE	MALTA	PREMIER LEAGUE	0.48	<10 REQ.
GREECE	SUPER LEAGUE	1.03	NO RULE	ESTONIA	MEISTRILIIGA	2.02	AT LEAST 10
BULGARIA	FIRST LEAGUE	0.99	NO RULE	NORWAY	ELITESERIEN	1.58	AT LEAST 10
LITHUANIA	A LYGA	0.98	NO RULE	MONTENEGRO	FIRST LEAGUE	1.48	AT LEAST 10
NORTHERN IRELAND	PREMIERSHIP	0.88	NO RULE	LATVIA	VIRSLIGA	1.35	AT LEAST 10
ALBANIA	SUPERLIGA	0.88	NO RULE	ROMANIA	SUPERLIGA	1.20	AT LEAST 10
SPAIN	SEGUNDA DIVISIÓN	0.88	NO RULE	CYPRUS	1. DIVISION	0.89	AT LEAST 10

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

Homegrown player rules do not always lead to more player transitions

In this section, the implications of regulatory and structural factors that were presented in the contextual analysis of Chapter 05 are assessed and cross-checked with the statistical evidence. Can a significant link be established between these measures and the number of players who have successfully transitioned in the analysed leagues?

Regulations

Upon comparing the average number of debuts/transitions per club with the regulatory context of the leagues, it became

evident that squad size limitations had little to no impact on the transition success rate.

Another, perhaps more relevant regulatory tool to consider was the homegrown player requirement. Do leagues that require teams to play a minimum number of young players have better transition statistics compared to those that do not use this tool?

It's worth highlighting the case of Estonia, where the league has maintained an average of over two players per club in the last five seasons, with one of the

strictest homegrown player regulations in place.

Nevertheless, for the vast majority of the leagues the evidence implies that the answer is that these regulations are not that effective. In fact, many leagues that require at least ten homegrown players in a squad sometimes performed worse on a successful transition per club basis than leagues with less strict rules. However, regulatory aspects are only one part of the transition process; they must be assessed in conjunction with other domestic complexities.

Competition structures

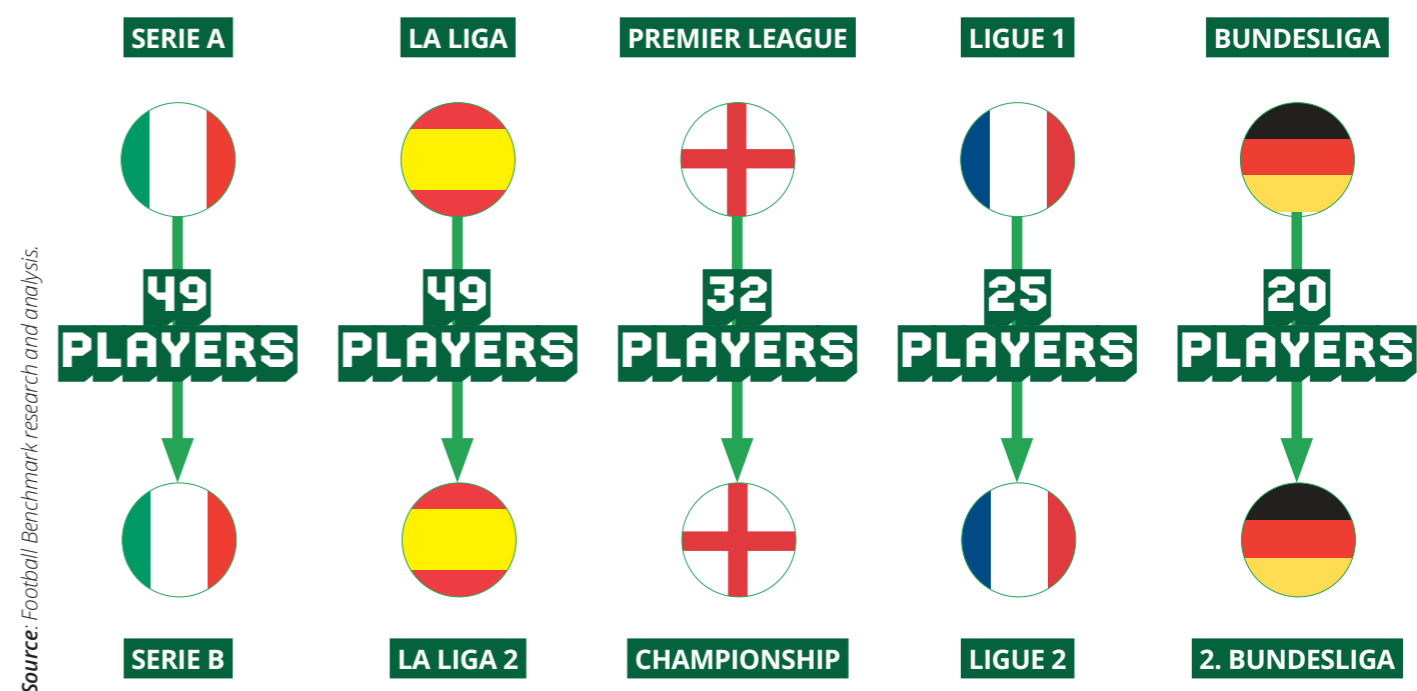
In the contextual analysis, one analysed factor was the presence (or rather the lack of) **reserve leagues** in Europe. Based on the limited dataset (only four countries have reserve leagues), these countries seem to perform well in terms of the number of debuts. However, this did not really translate to transition success as countries with dedicated reserve leagues did not significantly have more successful transitions on a per club basis than the others.

Another important aspect was the presence/use of **reserve teams** in senior competitions. Our data shows that even though many countries permit reserve (or B) teams to participate in lower professional divisions, there was not a clear and consistent pattern that would indicate that they guarantee successful transitions.

On a debuts/transitions per club basis, these leagues did not perform significantly better than those that did not allow reserve teams in their league system. However, this is based on only a five-season sample that was also heavily impacted by a global pandemic. For a more detailed analysis, refer to the 'European level' subchapter.

In conclusion, the above observations suggest that while regulations and competition structures are – partially – implemented with the aim of promoting youth player transition, they may not be the sole driving force behind success rates. More detailed analysis – perhaps over a longer time period – would be needed to properly assess the impact of these mechanisms on youth development.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND DIVISIONS IN "BIG FIVE" COUNTRIES ▼



Note: the values show the number of players that belonged to a first division club and successfully transitioned to first team football while on loan at a second division club in the same country

Second divisions facilitated the transition of up to ten players of first division clubs every season on average in 'Big Five' countries

- The second divisions serve as a crucial intermediary step for academy players aiming to transition to first team football, as they provide a platform to gain senior football experience and showcase their skills to scouts and coaches from top division clubs.
- In this analysis, the focus is on the 'Big Five' countries. The hierarchy is clear: whereas many top division clubs loan young players to the second tier, the relationship is not reciprocal as there were barely any players going the other way.
- Among the five countries, the relationship between the top and second divisions appears strongest in Italy and Spain. Top-division teams in these countries typically transitioned indirectly approximately ten players per season on average. This means that these players reached the 450 minutes of senior playing experience while on loan in the second division.
- It is important to note that, in contrast to others in the 'Big Five' leagues, Germany's top division comprises only 18 teams, which affects the volume of transitions and could be one of the reasons why they had the fewest of such transitions.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

CLUB LEVEL

The type of business model adopted by football clubs can have a fundamental impact on the transition of young players to the first team. Some clubs operate with a youth-centric, talent developing model and they rely on player sales as an important source of revenue. As results of the ECA club survey conducted in Chapter 07 show, there is a notable diversity in how clubs perceive the financial function of their academies, but a slight majority considered them more as a source of income rather than a cost item of the budget.

The clubs that prioritise youth development invest heavily in their academies, creating an environment that fosters the growth and maturation of young talents. By developing their own players, these clubs can potentially save on transfer fees and wages. Furthermore, when these young talents are eventually sold at high transfer fees, the revenue generated can be reinvested into the club, sustaining the cycle.

However, it must be noted that the adoption of this model is partially an involuntary decision: as they cannot compete financially with the biggest clubs of Europe on the transfer market, they need to be better at youth development and scouting. In addition, putting significant resources into youth development does not always guarantee a return on their

investment as there are many factors that influence the outcome.

Young players aspiring to make it to the first team of such clubs have inspiring examples ahead of them. As RSC Anderlecht's case shows in Chapter 08, their talents can learn from the success stories of fellow academy graduates who have not only broken into the first team but have also gone on to excel at top clubs abroad. These role models serve as proof that dedication, hard work, and talent development within the club can lead to a successful career.

On the other hand, other clubs might find it beneficial to supply their first team with talented young players from the transfer market. This group is admittedly more limited as this approach requires major investment and only a handful of clubs can afford it. By doing so, they aim to quickly strengthen their squads with individuals who have already demonstrated their skills and potential at a professional level. This strategy can be particularly advantageous when a club aims for immediate success. It is important to stress that this model does not rule out the option of running an elite academy. Both methods can effectively coexist within a club's structure.

In this section, we analyse which clubs performed the best in terms of number of debutants as well as successful transitions.



From a methodological standpoint, it is important to emphasise that only seasons in which the clubs participated in leagues that are in the scope of the analysis are considered. This implies that if a club was relegated to a league that is out of scope at any point since 2018/19, then those seasons' data is not part of the analysis.

CLUB RANKING BY NUMBER OF TOTAL DEBUTS

RANK	CLUB	COUNTRY	TOTAL NUMBER OF DEBUTS	UEFA COEFFICIENT (JUNE 23)
1	ATALANTA BERGAMASCA CALCIO	ITALY	42	TOP 50
2	FC SHAKHTAR DONETSK	UKRAINE	38	TOP 50
=	FC INTERNAZIONALE MILANO	ITALY	38	TOP 50
4	GNK DINAMO	CROATIA	37	TOP 50
=	FK CRVENA ZVEZDA	SERBIA	37	TOP 50
6	FK KRASNODAR	RUSSIA	36	RANKED 51-100
7	MŠK ŽILINA	SLOVAKIA	34	OUTSIDE TOP 100
=	LIVERPOOL FC	ENGLAND	34	TOP 50
9	FC DYNAMO KYIV	UKRAINE	32	TOP 50
=	READING FC	ENGLAND	32	OUTSIDE TOP 100
=	REAL MADRID CLUB DE FÚTBOL	SPAIN	32	TOP 50
12	HNK HAJDUK SPLIT	CROATIA	31	OUTSIDE TOP 100
=	MANCHESTER CITY FC	ENGLAND	31	TOP 50
14	SL BENFICA	PORTUGAL	30	TOP 50
=	MANCHESTER UNITED FC	ENGLAND	30	TOP 50
=	RANGERS FC	SCOTLAND	30	TOP 50
17	FC NORDSJÆLLAND	DENMARK	29	OUTSIDE TOP 100
=	SPORTING CLUBE DE PORTUGAL	PORTUGAL	29	TOP 50
=	FC BARCELONA	SPAIN	29	TOP 50
=	FC FCSB	ROMANIA	29	OUTSIDE TOP 100
=	CLUB ATLÉTICO DE MADRID	SPAIN	29	TOP 50

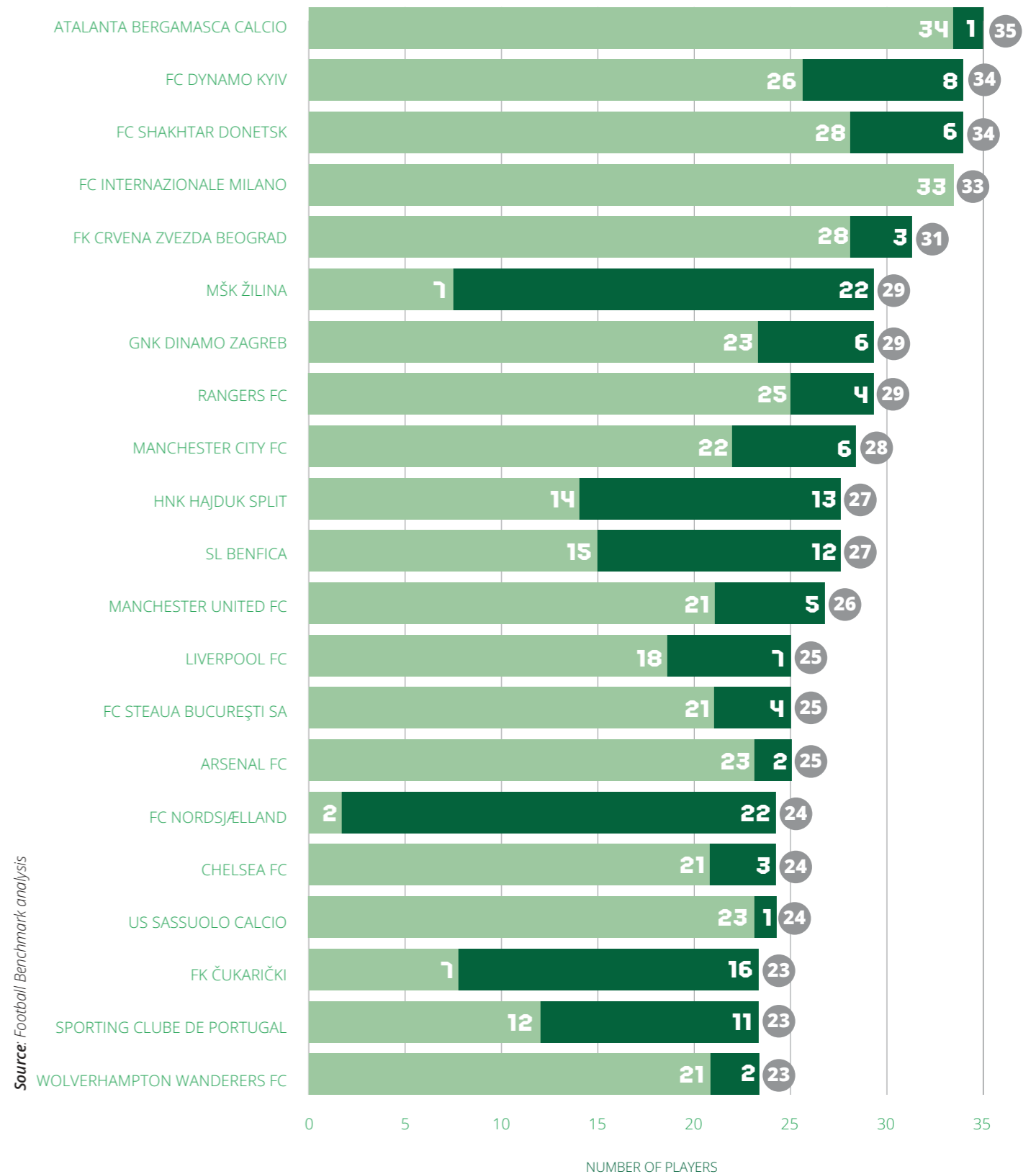
Source: Football Benchmark analysis

- The ranking is composed of mainly highly ranked clubs in the UEFA coefficient ranking as of June 2023. It is worth mentioning that only players that can be clearly assigned to one academy based on the outlined methodology were considered for each club. These figures consider players who debuted directly and indirectly.
- Atalanta BC clearly stands on top of the total number of debutants during the in-scope seasons with 42. That translates to at least eight players debuted per

- season on average (directly and indirectly combined). However, almost all players transitioned indirectly.
- Clubs from Eastern European countries such as Ukraine, Croatia, Serbia, and Russia feature prominently in the list. This potentially highlights the significance of this region in developing and promoting young footballers, possibly due to effective academies and scouting networks.
- The three biggest Spanish clubs are all on the list, further demonstrating their intense rivalry in the pursuit

- of gaining competitive advantage by introducing new talents. There are several other regular UCL participant clubs on the list that have the biggest turnovers in Europe. This indicates that clubs with higher revenues are well-positioned to develop young talents to first team football.
- Several historic clubs, such as Arsenal FC, Chelsea FC and AFC Ajax came close to making the overall top list, but eventually fell just short. They had 27, 27 and 25 debutants, respectively.

TOP CLUBS BY TOTAL NUMBER OF TRANSITIONS (INCLUDING DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE)



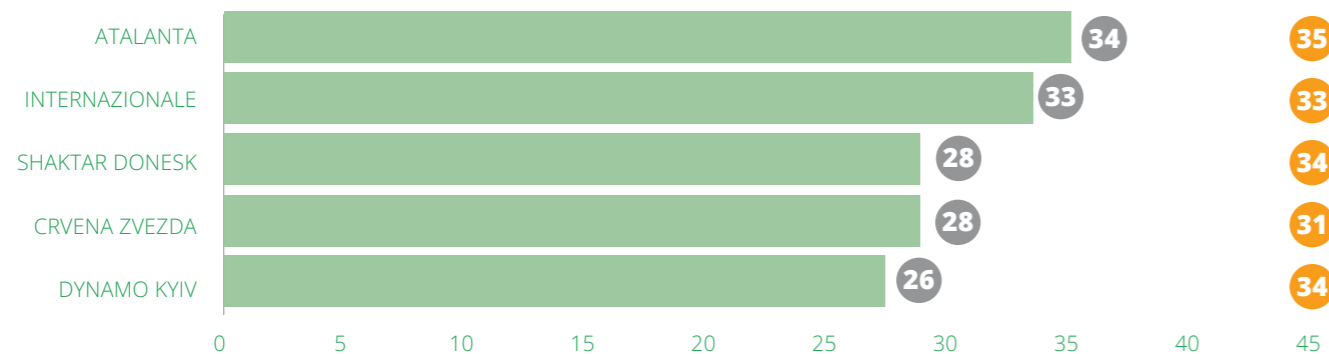
Source: Football Benchmark analysis

KEY ● Indirect transitions ● Direct transitions ● Total

Club ranking by number of successful transitions

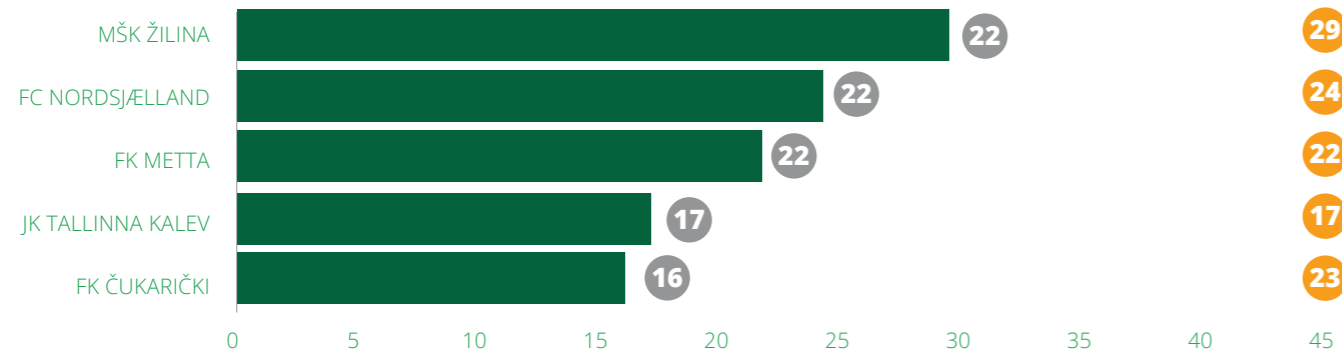
- The list of top 20 clubs by total number of successful transitions to first team football is dominated by English clubs, as five of their clubs are included in this ranking. Italy is the only other nation represented from the 'Big Five' leagues with three clubs.
- In terms of direct and indirect transitions, the majority of the clubs clearly favour one or the other approach, while clubs such as HNK Hajduk Split, SL Benfica, Sporting Clube de Portugal balanced the two types.
- When it comes to direct transitions, clubs such as MŠK Žilina, FC Nordsjælland and FK Čukarički are among the most prominent ones. While both Žilina and Nordsjælland transitioned at least four players directly per season on average, Čukarički managed three.

TOP 5 CLUBS BY NUMBER OF INDIRECT TRANSITIONS (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED)



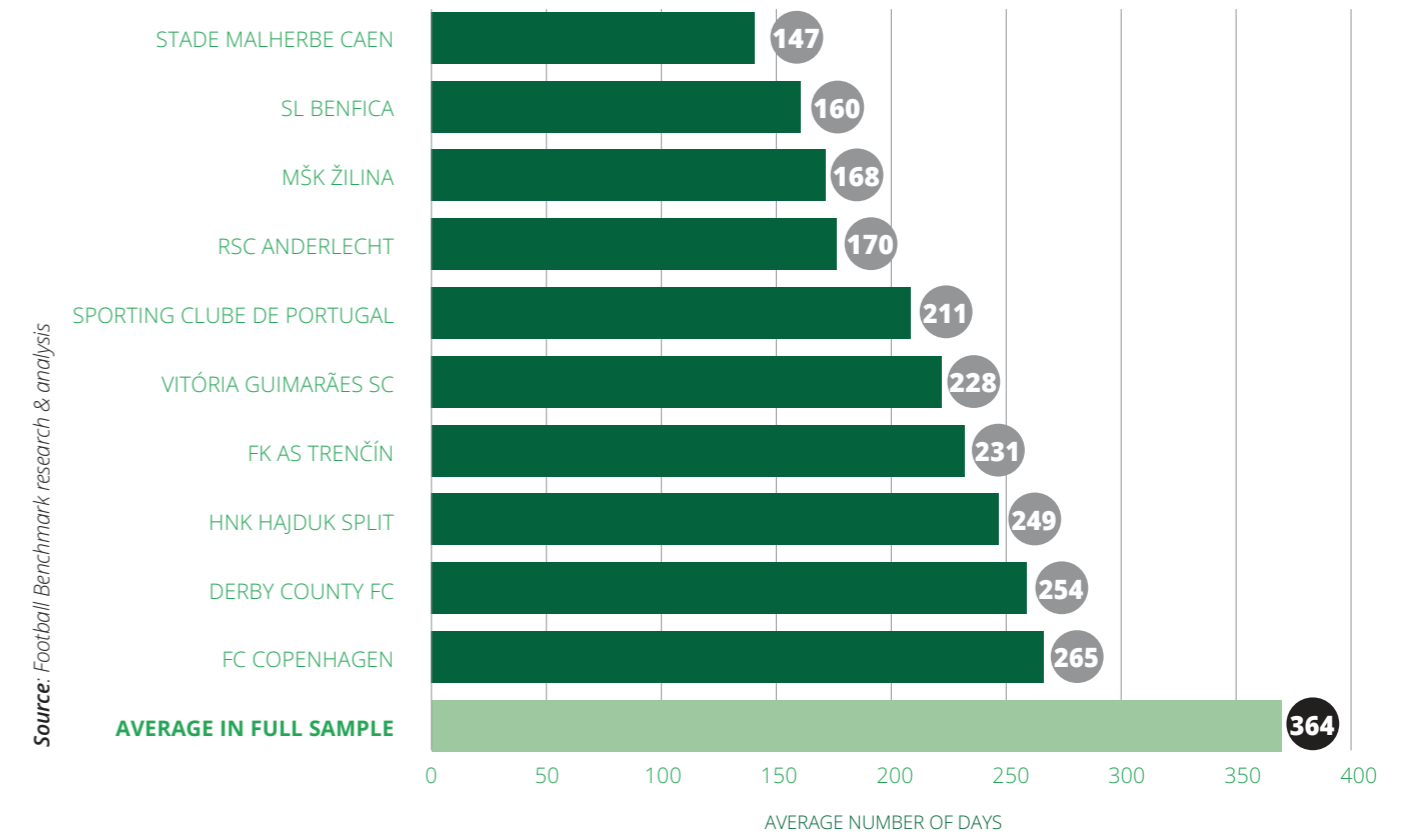
KEY ● Indirect transitions ● Total transitions

TOP 5 CLUBS BY NUMBER OF DIRECT TRANSITIONS (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED)



KEY ● Direct transitions ● Total transitions

AVERAGE DURATION IN DAYS BETWEEN DEBUT AND SUCCESSFUL DIRECT TRANSITION PER PLAYER AT THE CLUB



Club ranking by average transition duration

- Considering all direct transitions, the average length between the debut and transition was approximately a year (364 days). One key factor fundamentally influencing this metric is the date of debut. Those players that made their debut in the final phases of a season distort the average as their eventual transition duration tends to be longer due to the off-season break.
- The best-performing team in this metric was SM Caen from France. Most of their direct transitions occurred following their relegation from Ligue 1 in 2018/19 and during the COVID-affected seasons; these two factors undoubtedly contributed to the fast inclusion of young players.
- Considering only the top 30 leagues by UEFA coefficient (as of June 2023) and clubs with at least ten direct transitions on record, Portuguese teams SL Benfica (160 days on average), Sporting Clube de Portugal (211 days) and Vitória Guimarães SC (228) are all among the ten clubs with the quickest transitions. It is a sign that debuts are not 'one-off' opportunities at these clubs and players tend to receive additional chances to make it in the first team.
- Interestingly, there are two Slovakian teams in the top ten. Similarly, compared to Portugal, Slovakia has a league system that allows reserve teams. This could be another factor as talented youngsters can be better prepared by the time they get their opportunity in the first team.

6

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

PLAYER LEVEL

In this section, the analysis focuses on the players individually, identifying those that played the most, immediately after their successful transitions to first team football and presenting individual case studies about the potential diverse journey of players.

TOP PLAYERS BY MINUTES PLAYED AFTER TRANSITION

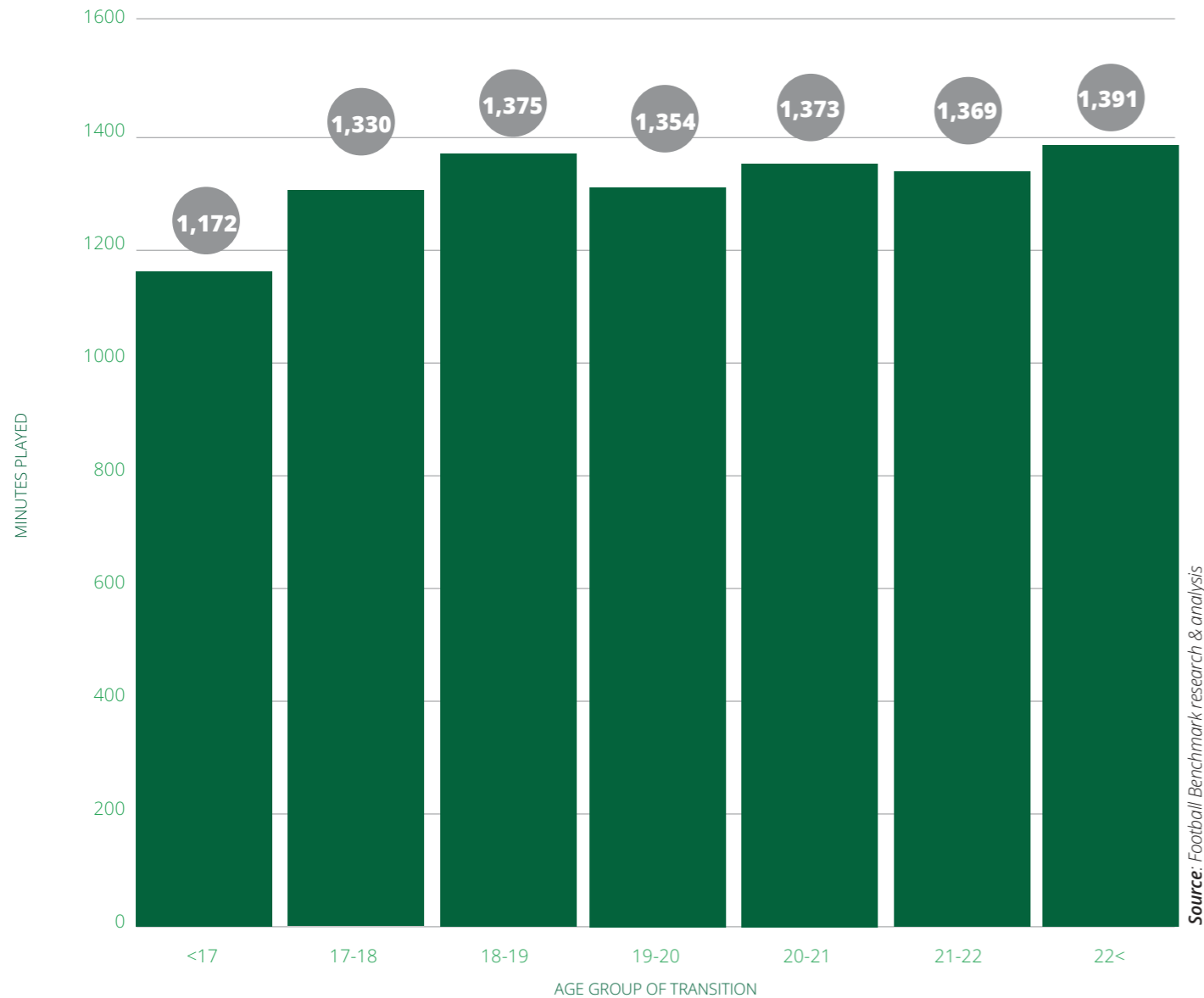
RANK	PLAYER	POSITION	ACADEMY	TOTAL MINUTES PLAYED 365 DAYS POST TRANSITION	"FOOTBALL BENCHMARK VALUE (JULY 2023, £ M)"	TYPE	MONTH OF TRANSITION
1	JOSH GRIFFITHS	GOALKEEPER	WEST BROMWICH ALBION FC	5,214	1.28	INDIRECT	10
2	BRENNAN JOHNSON	FORWARD	NOTTINGHAM FOREST FC	4,993	30.75	INDIRECT	10
3	CONNOR TAYLOR	DEFENDER	STOKE CITY FC	4,492	1.72	INDIRECT	9
4	FRAN GARCÍA	DEFENDER	REAL MADRID CLUB DE FÚTBOL	4,471	16.62	INDIRECT	10
5	RAPHAEL ONYEDIKA	MIDFIELDER	FC MIDTJYLLAND	4,446	11.32	DIRECT	8
6	JORDAN TEZE	DEFENDER	PSV EINDHOVEN	4,428	9.75	DIRECT	9
7	TRAI HUME	DEFENDER	LINFIELD FC	4,420	2.26	INDIRECT	11
8	JAYDEN BOGLE	DEFENDER	DERBY COUNTY FC	4,383	3.33	DIRECT	9
9	FERRO	DEFENDER	SL BENFICA	4,319	2.27	DIRECT	3
10	JURRIËN TIMBER	DEFENDER	AFC AJAX	4,215	53.81	DIRECT	1
11	MAX AARONS	DEFENDER	NORWICH CITY FC	4,072	13.25	DIRECT	9
12	JONATHAN DAVID	FORWARD	KAA GENT	3,994	51.39	DIRECT	11
13	MADS HERMANSEN	GOALKEEPER	BRØNDBY IF	3,992	3.58	DIRECT	8
14	DANIEL BALLARD	DEFENDER	ARSENAL FC	3,931	3.11	INDIRECT	10
15	ÁLVARO TEJERO	DEFENDER	REAL MADRID CLUB DE FÚTBOL	3,919	1.08	INDIRECT	8
16	ARNAU MARTÍNEZ	DEFENDER	GIRONA FC	3,905	14.9	DIRECT	4
17	REECE JAMES	DEFENDER	CHELSEA FC	3,889	72.3	INDIRECT	8
18	ANDY DIOUF	MIDFIELDER	STADE RENNAIS FC	3,886	3.01	INDIRECT	8
19	CONOR GALLAGHER	MIDFIELDER	CHELSEA FC	3,886	36.06	INDIRECT	8
20	CALVIN STENGs	FORWARD	AZ ALKMAAR	3,883	8.27	DIRECT	11

Source: Football Benchmark research & analysis

By featuring 24 teams, the English Championship dominates the ranking of most minutes played in 365 days following transition

- Achieving the transition to first team football is one thing; whether the player then can keep their place in the squad is another. In this section, we analyse playing time over the one-year period immediately following a successful transition.
- Considering all players who transitioned to the first team in the analysed leagues since 2018/19, the average playing time was close to 1,300 minutes in the 365 days following their transition. This equates to between 13 and 14 full matches.
- Looking at the 20 players with most minutes recorded, it is noticeable that five of them belonged to EFL Championship clubs in the English second tier. As the league features 24 teams and 46 regular season gameweeks, there are plenty of opportunities for young players.
- There is a fine balance between direct and indirect transitions in the list of top 20. From a position perspective, most of them are outfield players with only two goalkeepers featuring.

ANALYSIS OF PLAYING TIME BY TRANSITION AGE (AGE AT TRANSITION AND AVERAGE MINUTES PLAYED IN THE FOLLOWING 12 MONTHS) ▾



Players who successfully transitioned to first team football before turning 17 played slightly less in the 12 months following the transition than those who did it at a later age

- In terms of methodology, it is essential to provide context. The analysis focuses on players who transitioned to first team football before 30 June 2022; the sample for this analysis is slightly smaller than the full database.
- The analysis of playing time after transition to the first team reveals that there was not much difference depending on at what age a player made this step. The only real outliers were those who transitioned before turning 17; they played 10-15% fewer minutes than those in older age groups. However, even they could accumulate over 12 matches' worth of playing time in the 365 days after transition on average.

Playing time following transition is significantly influenced by player position



- Goalkeepers tend to play the most on average in the 365 days following a successful transition to first team football. As highlighted before, this is also the position for which transitions generally happen at an older age. Defenders closely follow in terms of average playing time post-transition.
- The data suggests that midfielders and forwards tend to have slightly fewer opportunities compared to other positions. For example, an average forward played almost four full matches fewer in a year than an average goalkeeper or defender after transitioning. This could be partially due to forwards being substituted more often than defending players.

Finally, it should be mentioned that post-transition playing time was almost identical for players who played for their parent club's reserve team in a lower professional division and for those who did not. Further research would be required to

uncover the complex reasons behind this finding, but seemingly prior experience in reserve teams did not make players more likely to sustain their place in their club's first team after a transition.

6

CASE STUDIES

In the following section, we explore how several prominent young players in today's game reached the pinnacle of first-team football. Their journeys, marked by their own difficulties and challenges, demonstrate that there is no standardised recipe for success. While exceptionally talented players may have better chances, it is equally important to recognise that the supportive areas identified in this report play a significant part in these success stories. These case studies show that the road to success is as diverse as the individuals who travel it.

“Player journeys that are marked by their own difficulties and challenges show that there is no standardised recipe for success”





CASE STUDY

JUDE BELLINGHAM

MIDFIELDER, ENGLAND, REAL MADRID CF

Direct transition at a (very) early age

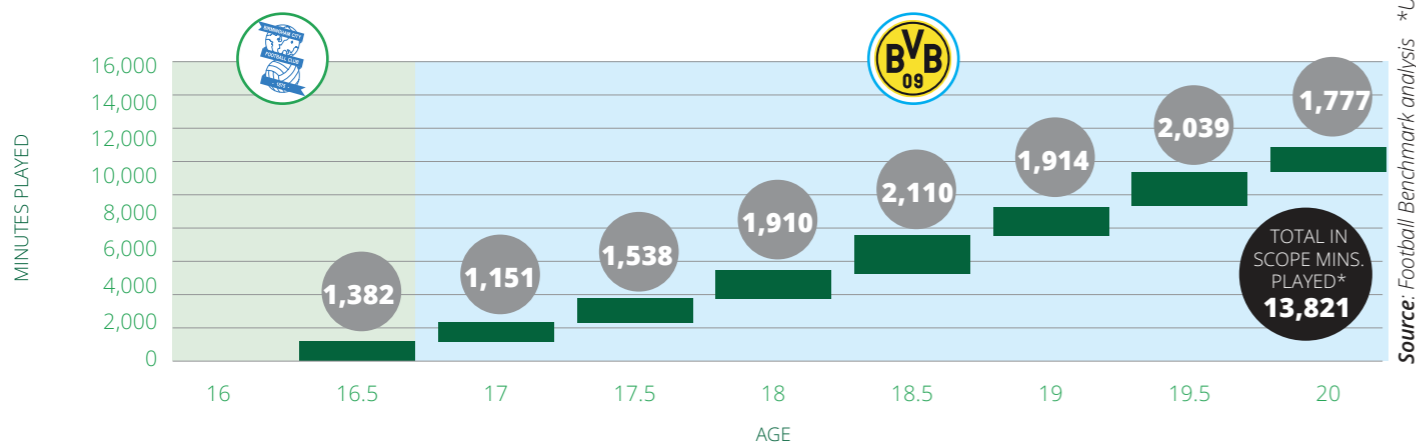
Jude Bellingham joined Birmingham City FC as an Under-8 player and swiftly climbed through the ranks of the academy. By the age of 14, he was already competing with the Under-18 team and a year later he was already playing with the Under-23 team. His example showcases the value of playing talented youngsters against older players. If a player experiences such an environment at a young age, the first team transition will usually not be as much of a 'shock' as without it.

When it comes to his integration into the first team squad, the club developed an individual plan for him, that had a gradual

approach, demonstrating the value of individual coaching in the case of talented youngsters. At first, the player was invited to first-team training on an ad-hoc basis, which soon evolved into a regular one. As a next step, the club made him part of the first team matchday squad as an observer, then later allowed him to take part in pre-match warm-ups, too. He was offered a two-year scholarship contract at the start of the 2019/20 season and was invited to the first team's pre-season training camp in Portugal.

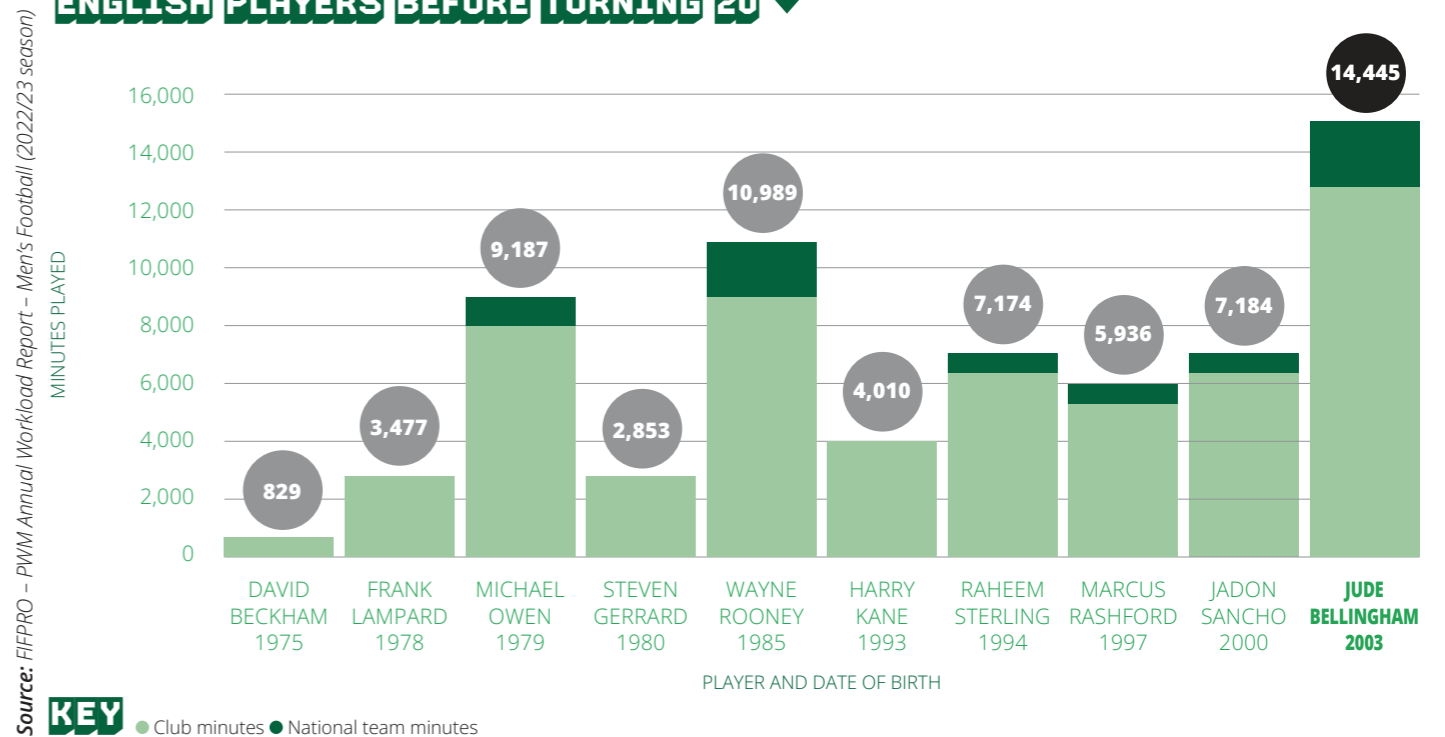
Bellingham made his professional debut early that season as he started against Portsmouth FC in the EFL Cup. This made him Birmingham City's youngest-ever first team player at the age

EVOLUTION OF MINUTES PLAYED BY JUDE BELLINGHAM BY AGE UNTIL JUNE 30 2023 (COMPETITIVE MATCHES ONLY)



Source: Football Benchmark analysis *Until 30/6/23

TOTAL MINUTES PLAYED BY BELLINGHAM AND OTHER HIGH-PROFILE ENGLISH PLAYERS BEFORE TURNING 20



Source: FIFPRO - PWM Annual Workload Report - Men's Football (2022/23 season) KEY: Club minutes (light green), National team minutes (dark green)

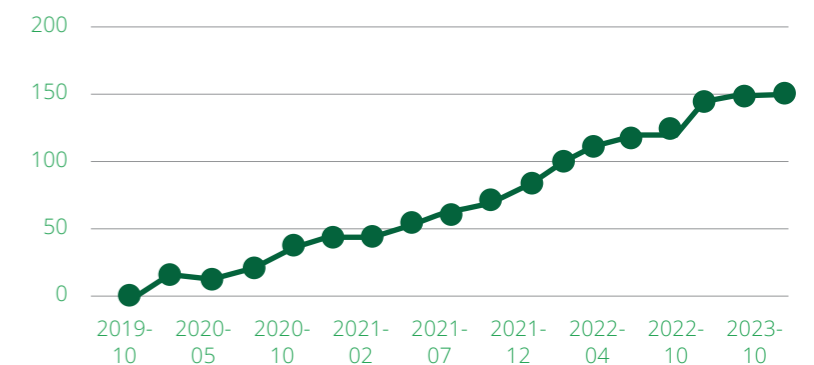
of just 16 years and 38 days. He completed his first team transition in two and half months later in October 2019, reaching 450 competitive minutes.

Since his debut, Jude Bellingham accumulated almost 14,000 minutes of competitive club football in just under four seasons. Considering that he achieved this figure before his 20th birthday is nothing short of extraordinary. To put this achievement into context, Football Benchmark compared the player's teenage match workload to other former and current English national team players. Bellingham played by far the most minutes even in this elite group, far exceeding the workload of former prodigies like Michael Owen or Wayne Rooney before turning 20. While it is crucial to provide young talents with opportunities to develop and showcase their skills, it is equally important to protect their wellbeing and ensure their long-term success. Cases like his bring attention to the importance of mental

health support for young players, even during extremely successful journeys.

Since the start of his career, Jude Bellingham's Football Benchmark market value gradually increased, which besides the playing time also takes into account on-field performance metrics as well as his contract situation. Consequently, his value surged when he transferred to Borussia Dortmund and the upward trend continued until his transfer to Real Madrid CF in June 2023.

FOOTBALL BENCHMARK MARKET VALUE EVOLUTION (€ M)





CASE STUDY

GONÇALO RAMOS

FORWARD, PORTUGAL, PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN FC

Direct transition path via reserve team

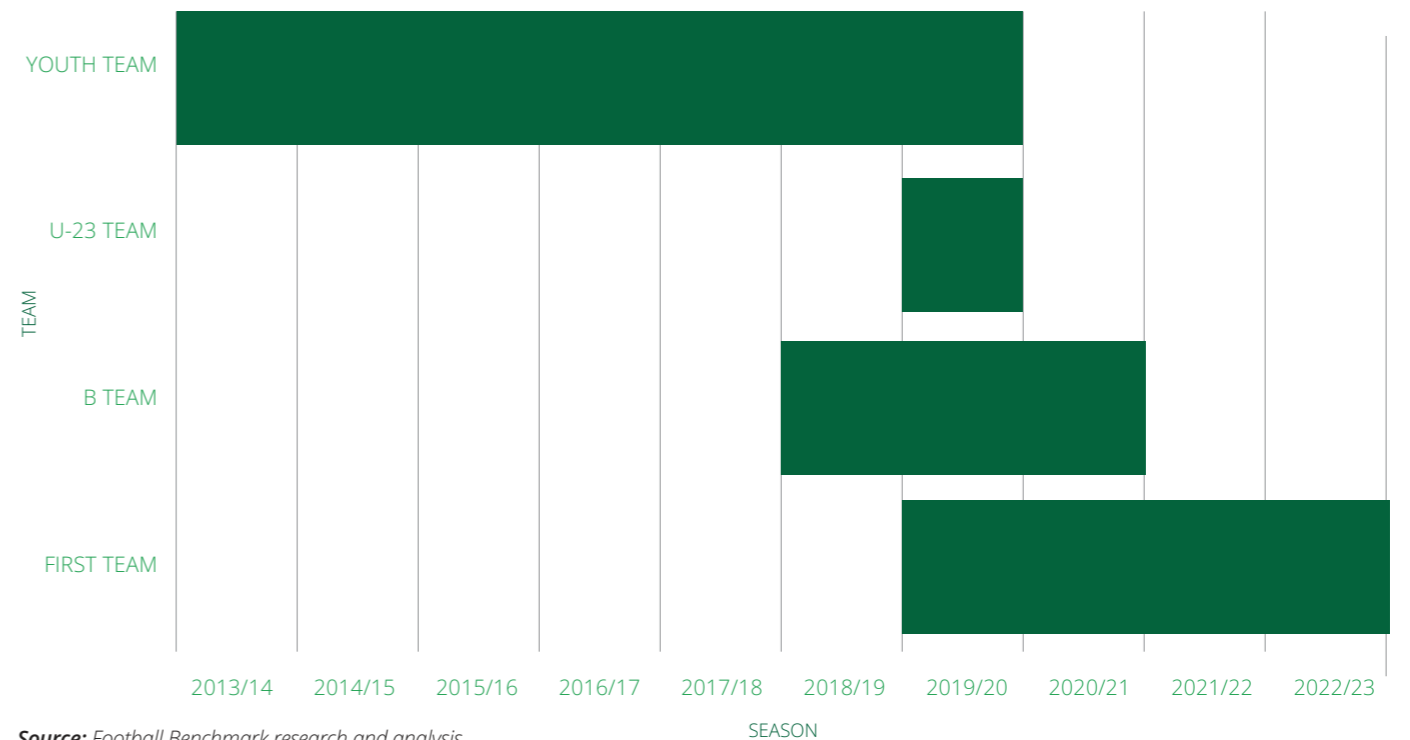
Gonçalo Ramos joined SL Benfica's academy at the age of 12 in 2013. He had to wait until the age of 19 for an opportunity in the first team; it is fair to say that he took it. However, his journey into professional football had already started in January 2019 when he appeared for Benfica's reserve team in the Portuguese second division.

The 2019/20 season was a key milestone in his development, as Ramos not only contributed to Benfica's youth team, U-23 team, and B team but also showcased his adaptability in the first team.

He scored goals in all four teams, a remarkable achievement. That season also saw him excel as the top scorer in the UEFA Youth League, a competition in which he made 16 appearances over two seasons, gaining valuable international club competition experience at youth level. In the subsequent season (2020/21), he once again demonstrated his goal-scoring ability by recording 11 goals in just 12 matches while playing for the reserve team.

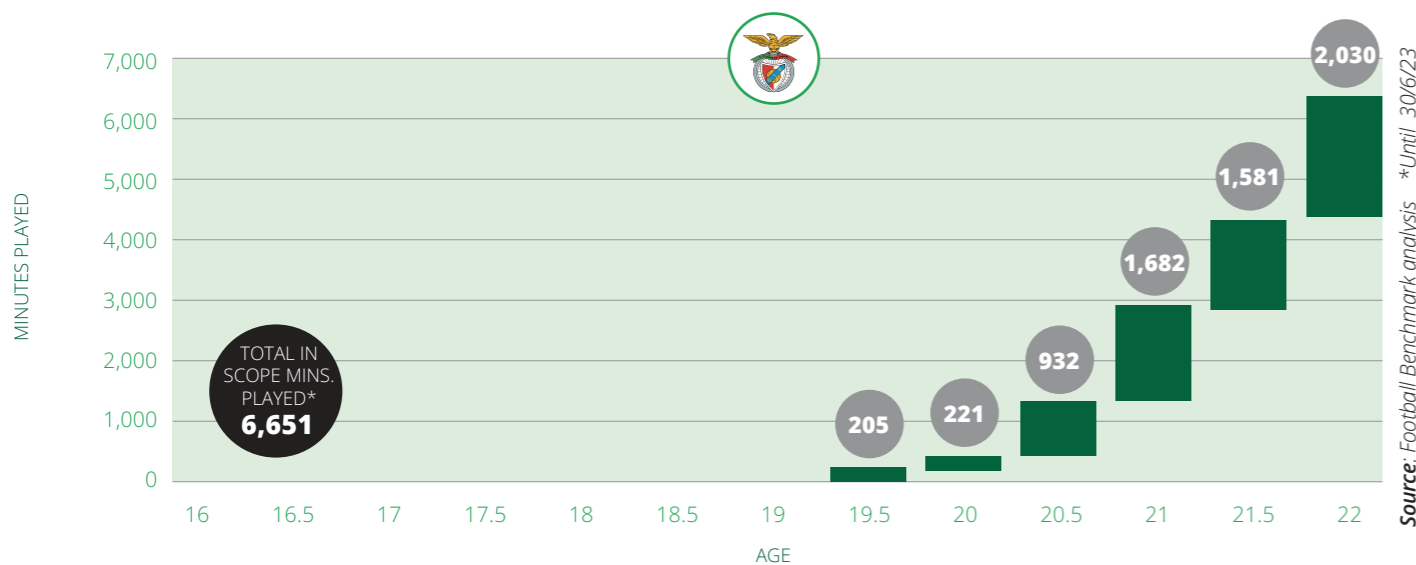
His path shows the value of getting experience in an international competition at the youth level. In 2022, he became the second youngest player to score in the UEFA Champions League knockout rounds

TYPES OF TEAMS GONÇALO RAMOS MADE AN APPEARANCE FOR BY SEASONS



Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis

EVOLUTION OF MINUTES PLAYED BY GONÇALO RAMOS BY AGE UNTIL JUNE 30 2023 (COMPETITIVE MATCHES ONLY)



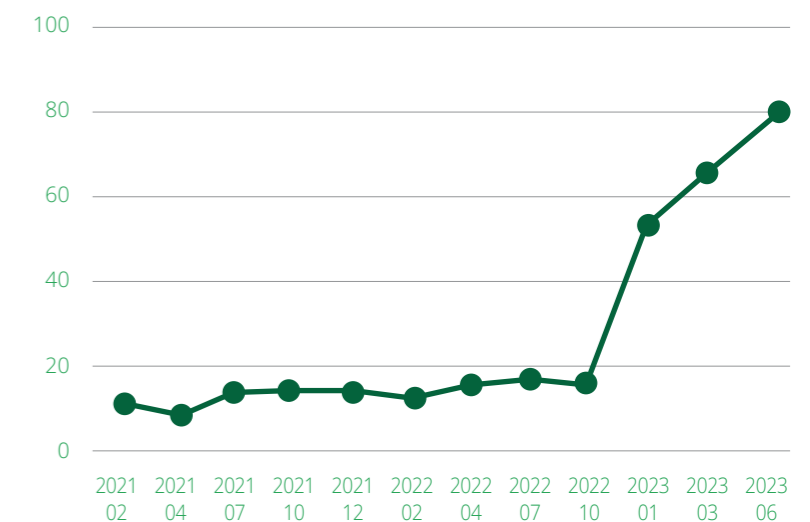
and the first player ever to score a hat-trick in his FIFA World Cup debut (which was also his first senior, competitive start in the national team).

Ramos finally completed his transition to first team football in August 2021 reaching the 450-minute threshold. In the following months his playing time was limited, but when the former coach of the reserve team, Nélson Veríssimo, was appointed as the caretaker head coach of the first team in December, he started to be involved more regularly. This shows the importance of 'luck' in early player development; Ramos benefitted from playing under a head coach who knew him well from SL Benfica B.

During the initial phase of his career, the forward's market value remained consistent. The breakthrough moment occurred during the World Cup when he made a name for himself as Portugal's emerging talent and attracted the attention

of many top clubs. In the summer transfer window of 2023/24, Paris Saint-Germain signed the player on loan with an obligation to buy.

FOOTBALL BENCHMARK MARKET VALUE EVOLUTION (€ M)





CASE STUDY

RAYAN CHERKI

MIDFIELDER, FRANCE, OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS

Direct transition path with setbacks

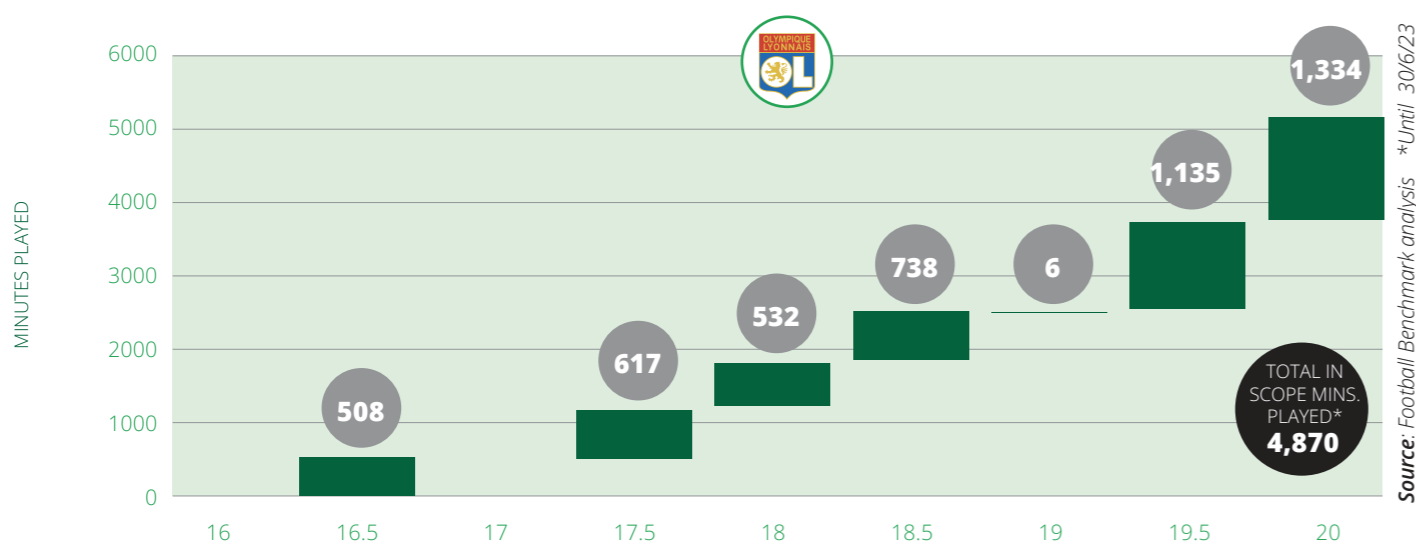
Rayan Cherki is considered as one of the top talents coming from the academy of Olympique Lyonnais in recent years. When analysing his playing time data, it is apparent that the player has accumulated minutes at a substantially slower rate compared to the rest of the players in this analysis. But it must be noted that he made his debut for the Olympique Lyonnais first team in October 2019 at the age of 16 years, two months and two days, making him the fourth youngest player in OL history. A month later, he also played his first

UEFA Champions League match, making him the third youngest player to ever appear in the tournament's history. He completed his transition to first team football three and a half months after his debut, while still only 16 years old.

Despite the early success, his case demonstrates the importance of timing of a young player's breakthrough to first team football. His club's challenging recent seasons have added an extra layer of complexity to Cherki's journey: he has already played under three different head coaches. Furthermore, in the 2021/22 season he faced a major obstacle at



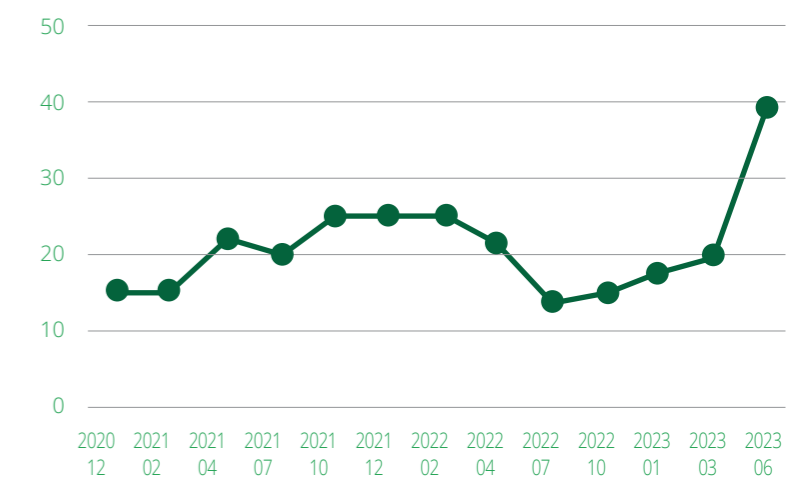
EVOLUTION OF MINUTES PLAYED BY RAYAN CHERKI BY AGE UNTIL JUNE 30 2023 (COMPETITIVE MATCHES ONLY)



individual level as he suffered a metatarsal fracture that forced him off the pitch for three months and halted his development. The injury slowed down his integration into the first team squad, as he was barely able to start games for almost a year. His example shows that the importance of availability and injury prevention cannot be understated.

His Football Benchmark market value reflects these challenges, with a noticeable decline in value in 2022, which was primarily attributed to his injury. In contrast, his performances along with a contract extension caused his value to surge at the end of the 2022/2023 season, doubling its previous high point.

FOOTBALL BENCHMARK MARKET VALUE EVOLUTION (€ M)





CASE STUDY

JAMAL MUSIALA

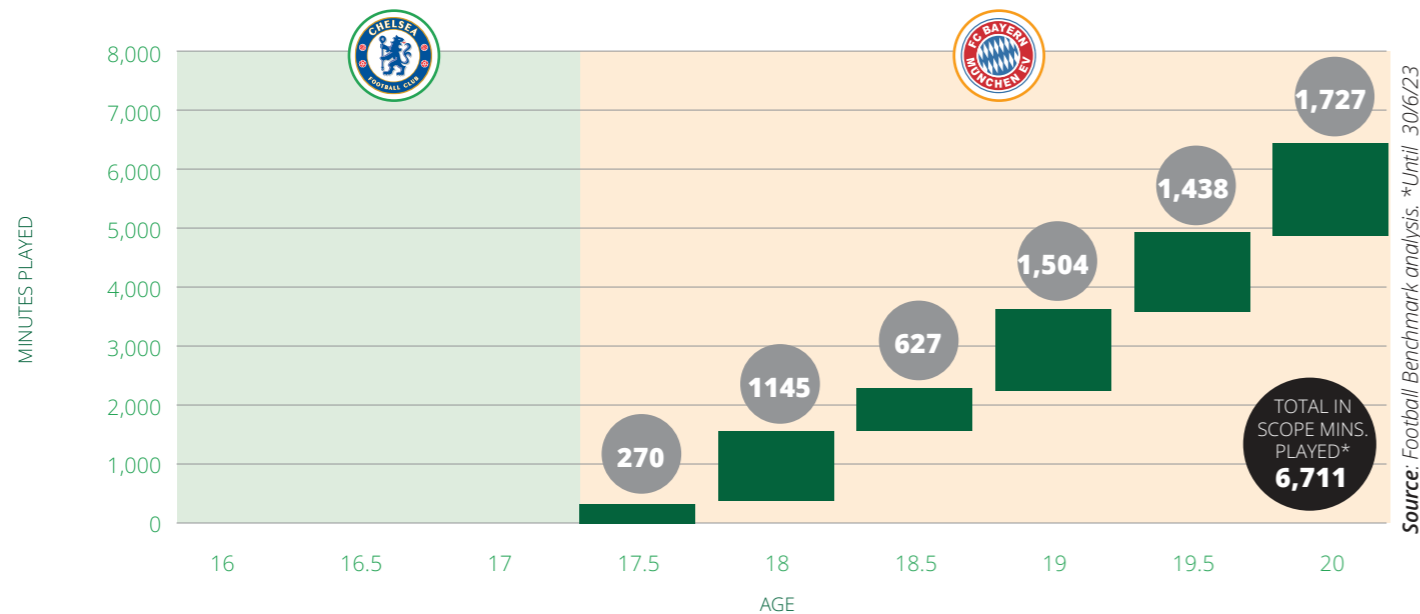
MIDFIELDER, GERMANY, FC BAYERN MÜNCHEN

Direct transition after international transfer

Although born in Germany, Musiala spent most of his childhood in England. After spending only four months at the academy of Southampton FC, he joined Chelsea FC at the age of eight. He swiftly progressed through the different teams of the academy and like others in this section, he was frequently ahead of his peers and played in higher age groups. In the meantime, he also played for the youth national teams of both England and Germany, but he ultimately committed to

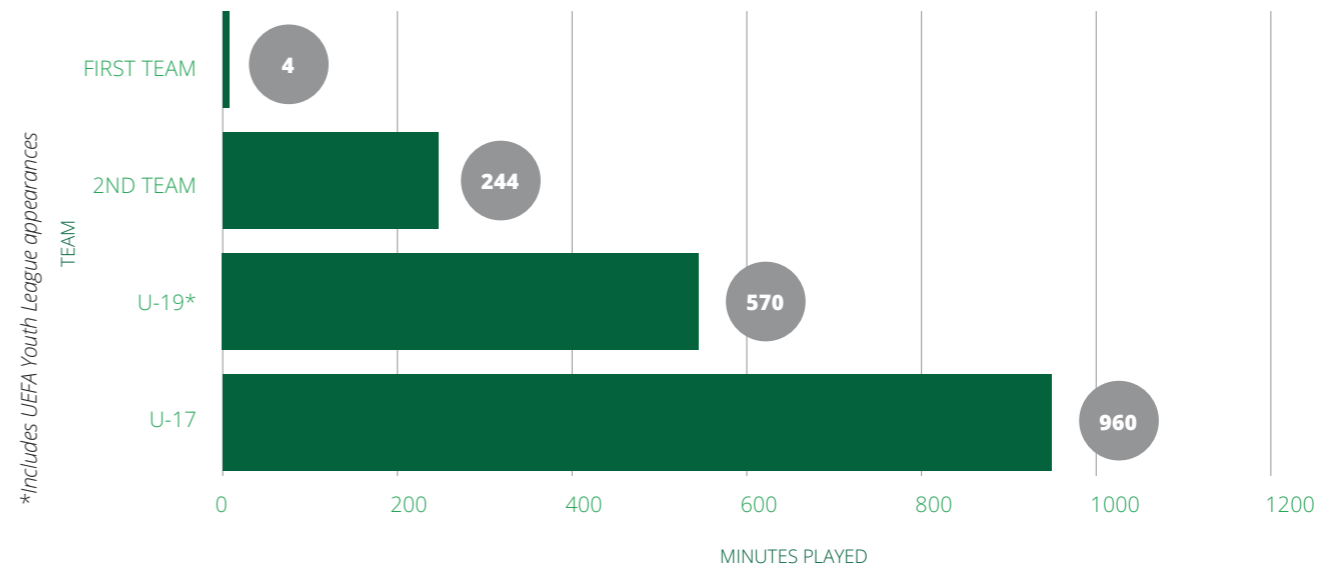
the latter at senior level. In search of first team football, Musiala signed for FC Bayern München in 2019. An international transfer is always challenging, and this is especially true when they occur at youth level. However, he managed to settle in quickly as there was no language barrier. He spent most of his first season with the youth and reserve teams, but also made his professional debut and became FC Bayern's youngest ever Bundesliga player at the age of just 17 years and 115 days. From the following season, he was undoubtedly a first team player

EVOLUTION OF MINUTES PLAYED BY JAMAL MUSIALA BY AGE UNTIL JUNE 30 2023 (COMPETITIVE MATCHES ONLY)



Source: Football Benchmark analysis. *Until 30/6/23

MUSIALA'S MINUTES PLAYED BY TEAM IN THE 2019/2020 SEASON



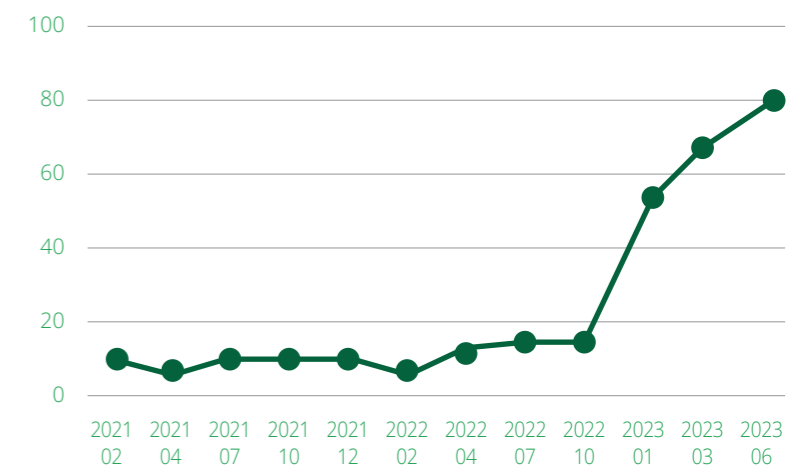
*Includes UEFA Youth League appearances



and established himself as a key player for the club.

Since transitioning to first team football, Jamal Musiala's market value experienced a rapid and steep growth. This was especially true for the 2022/23 season; he ended up winning the Bundesliga for FC Bayern with a late goal on the last matchday in a fierce title race. He has without a doubt positioned himself among the top ten most valuable players in the world in recent years.

FOOTBALL BENCHMARK MARKET VALUE EVOLUTION (€ M)





CASE STUDY MASON MOUNT

MIDFIELDER, ENGLAND, MANCHESTER UNITED FC

Indirect transition via multiple loans

Mason Mount joined the Chelsea Academy in 2005, at the age of six. Similarly to Jude Bellingham, he often played in older age groups during his youth career. At that time, only a limited number of academy graduates could transition to the first team of the Blues, which was mainly due to the blend of the club's success, its transfer market strategy, and the depth of talent in the first team. However, the player was not discouraged.

At the end of the 2016/2017 season he was chosen as Chelsea's Academy Player

of the Year. In order to gain senior football experience, he completed two loan spells before returning to Stamford Bridge as an established first team player.

For the first loan, Mount joined Eredivisie's SBV Vitesse; he made his professional debut for the club on 26 August 2017, just one month after joining. In three months, he also completed his first team transition at the Dutch club by exceeding the 450-minute threshold of competitive club football experience. His is a case of indirect transition, as it happened on loan and not at his parent club. Mount was one of the 28 players that were loaned



from Chelsea FC to SBV Vitesse, a unique relationship between the two clubs that offered Chelsea academy players the opportunity to gain significant first team experience, while Vitesse benefitted from the quality of those players as they ended up winning a major trophy after 125 years.

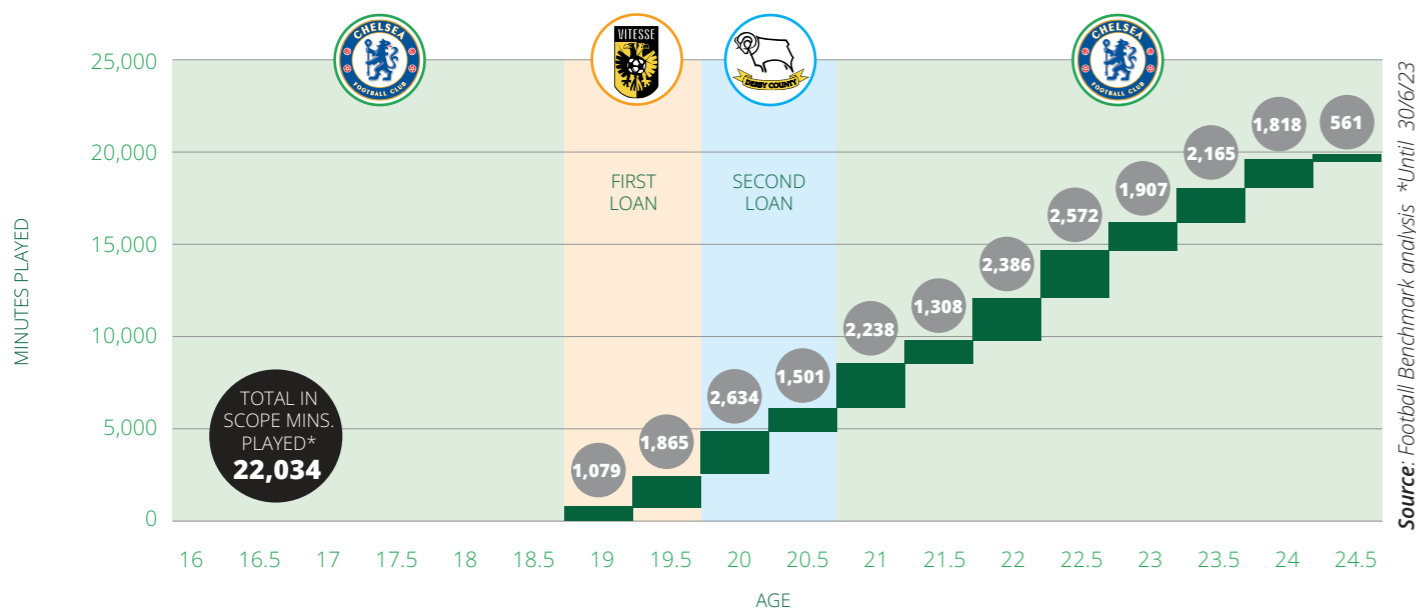
During his loan at Derby County, he faced a significantly longer, more intense schedule. Along with the consistent match rhythm, he highlighted in an interview (*Derby Telegraph*, 2023) that the loan experience not only benefitted him on the pitch, but off the pitch as well, by being around more experienced players. His journey also highlights the potential value of multiple loans: the first one is often about getting used to a new environment and senior football, while during subsequent loans the player can feel more at ease and concentrate solely on their play.

Upon his return to Chelsea FC, he signed a five-year contract and made his debut for the Blues on the opening weekend of the 2019/2020 season. On 22 July 2022, he became the first Chelsea Academy graduate to make his first team debut and complete 50 appearances in the same season.

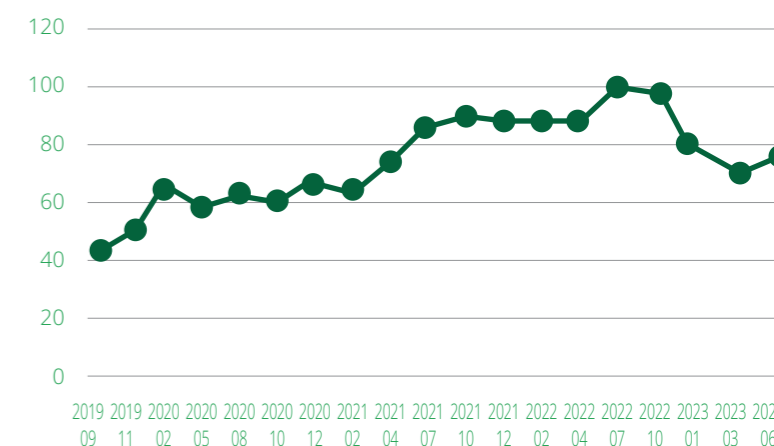
As he established himself in the first team his Football Benchmark value gradually increased and peaked at the end of the 2021/22 season, following two

seasons in which he was voted Chelsea's Player of the Year. His market value then started to drop as he was getting closer to the expiration of his contract. Mount eventually signed for fellow Premier League club Manchester United FC in the summer of 2023.

EVOLUTION OF MINUTES PLAYED BY MASON MOUNT BY AGE UNTIL JUNE 30 2023 (COMPETITIVE MATCHES ONLY) ▼



FOOTBALL BENCHMARK MARKET VALUE EVOLUTION (€ M) ▼



DETTE E
ASPMYRA!



STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

SUMMARY

- In recent seasons, player debuts and transitions have shown significant fluctuation with both peaking during the COVID-19 impacted seasons. On average, each club had at least two debutants and one successful transition during the five-season timeframe of the analysis.
- The data analysis revealed a clear inverse relationship between aggregate transfer expenditure and the number of debuts/transitions; the COVID-induced downturn of the transfer market 'opened the door' for more young talent.
- The average time between the first team debut and the complete transition (reaching 450 minutes) was 364 days in the analysed timeframe. While the average debut age of players has slightly decreased in recent years, the average age at transition to the first team remained relatively stable.
- Distribution between direct and indirect player transitions was stable over the five analysed seasons. About 3,000 players transitioned indirectly, and 2,800 transitioned via the direct pathway. The preferred type of transitions are mainly determined by club strategy, competition structures and the country-specific context.
- The findings presented in this chapter imply that regulations and competition structures, while designed to encourage youth player development, may not be the exclusive drivers of successful transitions to the first team.
- Evidence from 'Big Five' countries suggests that second divisions play a crucial role in facilitating the transition of young academy players to first team football. An average of up to ten players from top division clubs made their successful transition to senior football while on loan in the second division.
- Case studies of prominent young players presented in this chapter show that there is no standard path to success. While exceptional talent is a factor, each player faces different hurdles to overcome and have to rely on various supporting areas. As such, the road to success is as diverse as the individuals who travel it.
- After successful transitions to first team football, players in analysed leagues averaged around 1,300 minutes of playing time over the year following their transition. This translates to approximately 13-14 full matches. Playing opportunity post-transition is highly dependent on the players' position on the pitch, as well as the timing of the transition.

ECA[®] YOUTH
FOOTBALL 2023-24

PART

7

CLUB
SURVEY

With a topic as diverse and extensive as the transition to first team football, it is important to understand the views of as many stakeholders as possible. To achieve this, a survey was prepared and circulated among European professional football clubs focusing on three topics:

- 1) strategy and goal setting
- 2) internal club processes
- 3) transition models and areas

The key results of the survey and the identified overarching trends are discussed in this chapter.

7

CLUB SURVEY SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the survey was to collect a wide scale of primary inputs concerning the most relevant dimensions of the transition process as seen by those who are closest to the topic: academy directors, sporting directors and transition coaches at professional clubs across Europe.

The list of questions was prepared by the project team and validated by the members of the Task Force.

After finalisation of the questionnaire, an online survey was prepared in several languages in order to get authentic and clear answers from a wide group of professionals. The primary target group were all Member Clubs of ECA, but the survey was also sent to non-member European clubs, too. Answers were collected between June and August 2023.

In total, 95 respondents filled in the questionnaire, representing 45 different UEFA countries.

QUESTIONS WERE GROUPED INTO THREE MAIN TOPICS: ▼



STRATEGY & GOAL SETTING



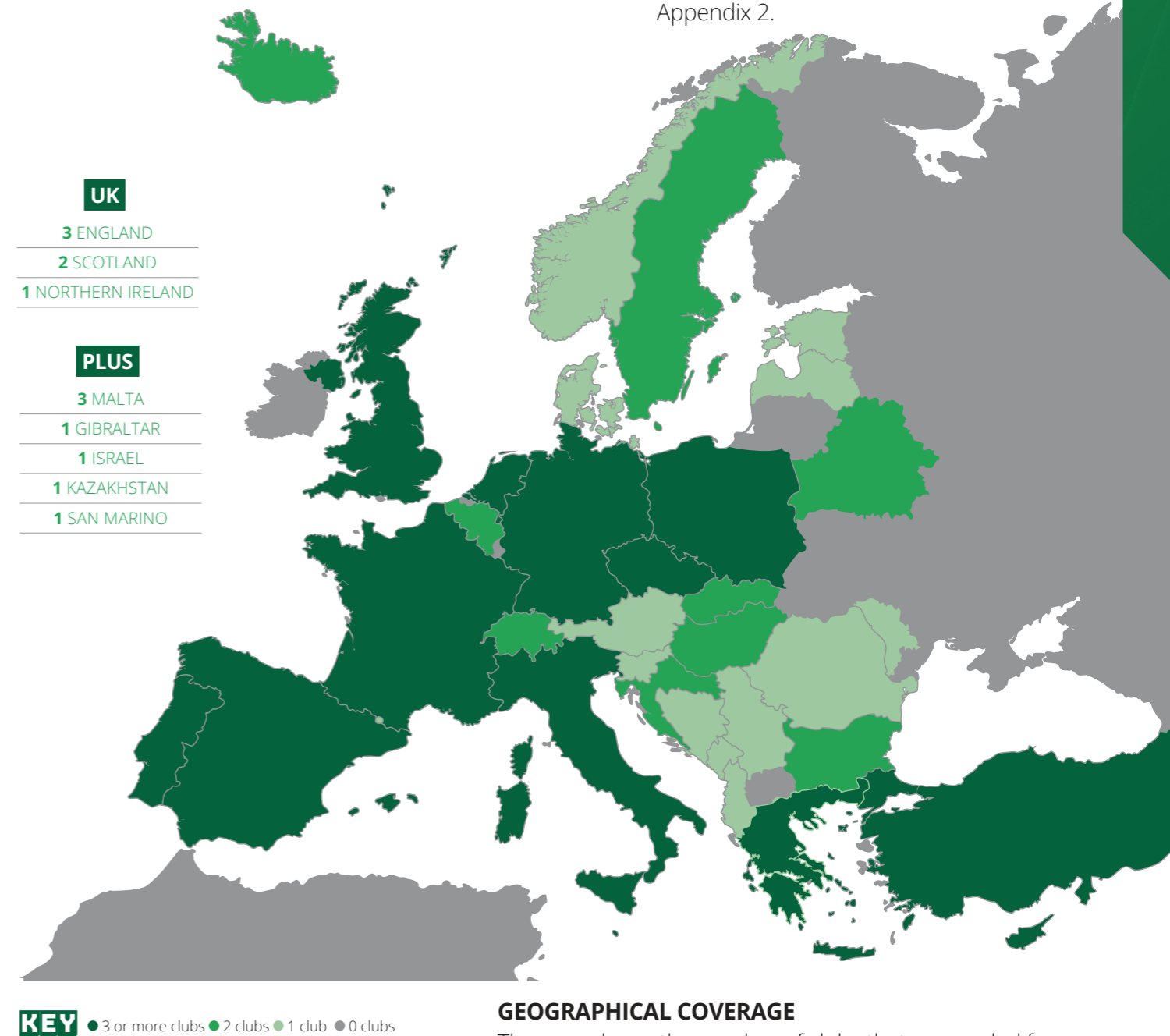
INTERNAL CLUB PROCESSES



TRANSITION MODELS AND AREAS

BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS ▼

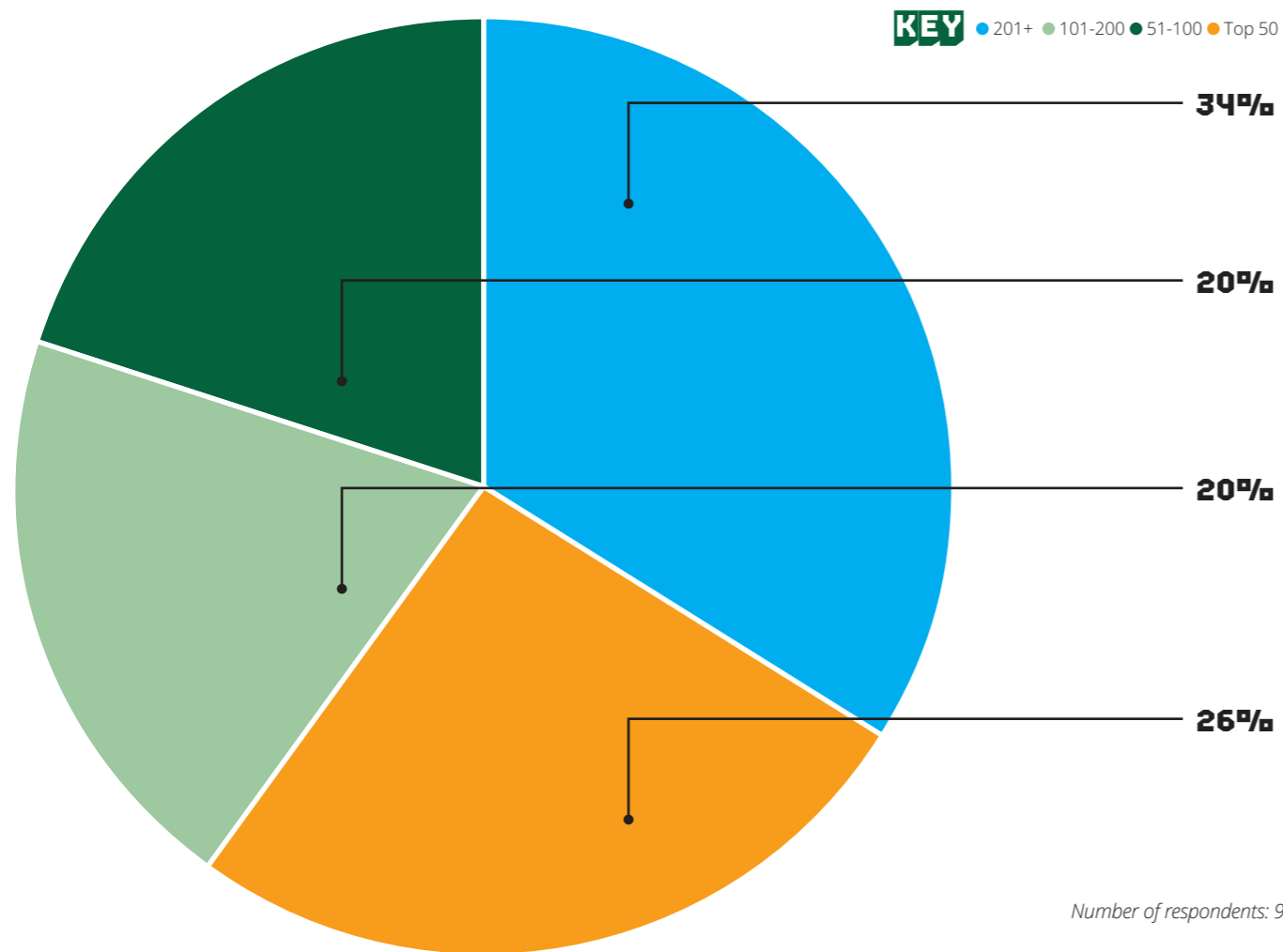
A key goal of the survey was to have a diverse sample of respondents, covering different geographical regions, club sizes and job types. Here, a breakdown of the respondents is presented to provide context for the results. For a detailed list of clubs who participated in the survey, please refer to Appendix 2.



GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

The map shows the number of clubs that responded from each UEFA country. There are only a few countries without a single representative club in the sample due to a lack of responses to the survey.

UEFA CLUB COEFFICIENT RANKING OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



CLUB SIZE COVERAGE

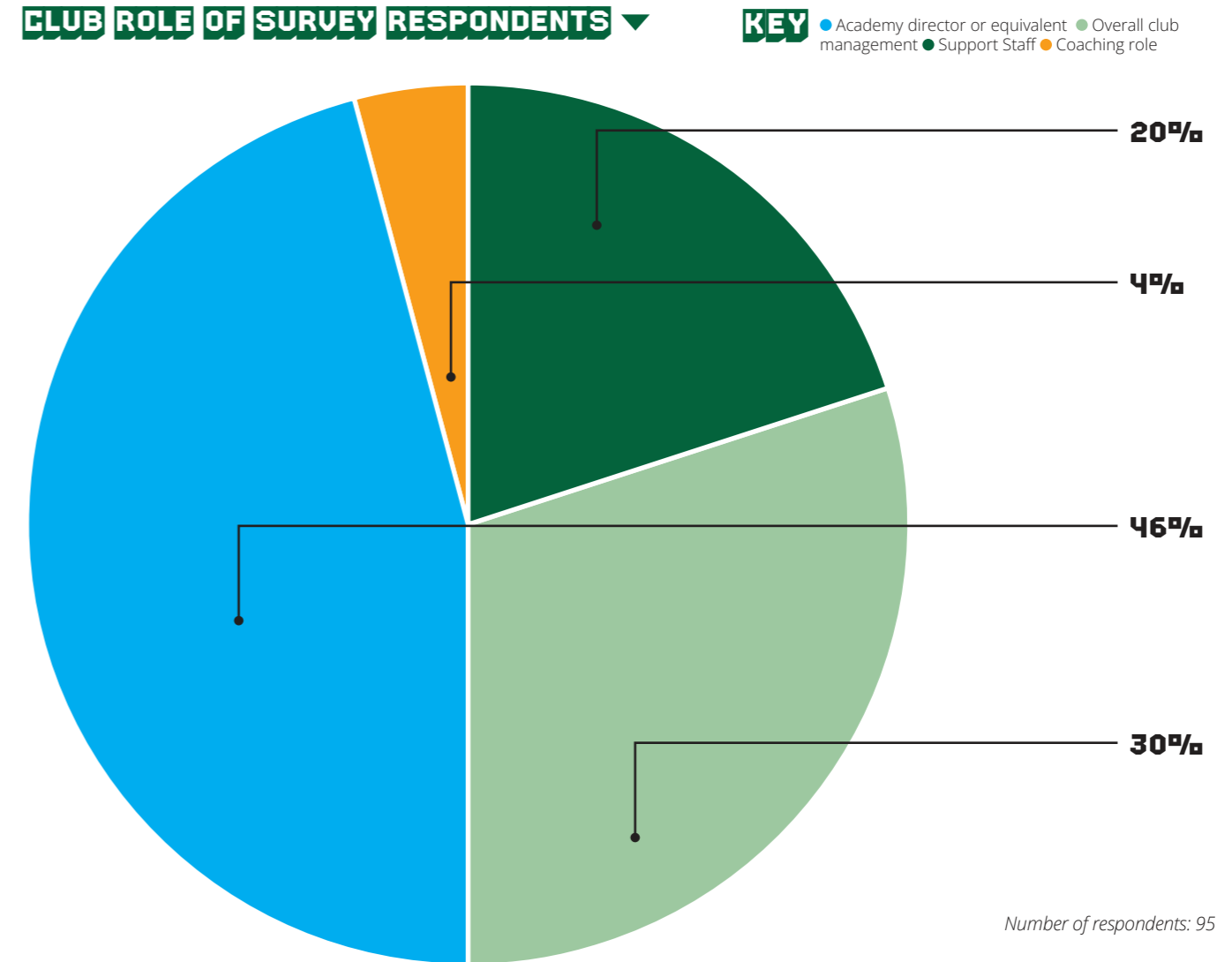
The study aims to provide learning points for clubs of all sizes; thus, it was crucial to have a diverse survey sample composition from this perspective, too. To illustrate this, respondent clubs are categorised according to their UEFA club coefficient rank as of the conclusion of the 2022/23 season (June 2023). Almost half of the Top 50 were represented among the respondents, while there were also a high number of respondents outside the Top 100 (54%), with the majority of them having no or limited recent experience in UEFA club competitions.

Most members of the 'Top 50 by UEFA

coefficient' group are dominant clubs on and off the pitch, leading from both financial and sporting perspectives. Throughout the analysis, this sub-group is simply referred to as the Top 50. The category includes 'Big Five' league representatives that regularly play in European competitions (e.g. Real Madrid CF, Paris Saint-Germain FC, Manchester United FC, etc.), as well as historic clubs of non- 'Big Five' countries that are successful in European competitions (e.g. AFC Ajax Amsterdam, SL Benfica, Rangers FC).

Based on data from Football Benchmark's Club Finance & Operations platform, referring to the 2021/22 and

CLUB ROLE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



2022 season, the average revenue of Top 50 clubs that filled in the survey is estimated at €201 million, with two thirds of the clubs boasting a revenue of over €100 million. In comparison, the average revenue of the rest of the respondents is around one tenth of the Top 50's average, estimated at €22 million. There are only six clubs above the revenue threshold of €100 million among the 'non-Top 50'.

PROFESSIONAL POSITION COVERAGE

It is also worthwhile to look at the breakdown by the official role/position of the respondents. As there are several

variations and job titles in this area, every respondent was assigned to a loosely defined category to aggregate the responses of those working in similar positions.

While decision-makers specific to the academy (e.g. head of academy, academy manager) make up the majority of respondents, there were also answers from general club officials (e.g. sporting director, CEO, board member), support staff (e.g. conditioning coach, head of methodology, youth team coordinator) and coaches (e.g. transition coach, academy head coach), resulting in a varied sample of views and experiences.

7

CLUB SURVEY MAIN SURVEY FINDINGS

In total, the survey included 23 questions, covering three focus areas of the primary research. The selection presented on the following pages covers most of the topics addressed and describes the most fundamental and relevant findings for the purposes of the study.

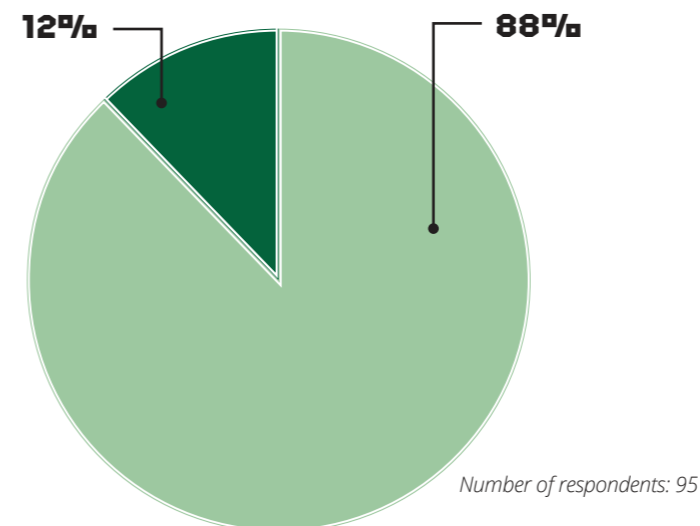
STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING



Does your club have a written youth development/youth academy strategy? In this youth development strategy, do you have any specific goals related to first team transition?

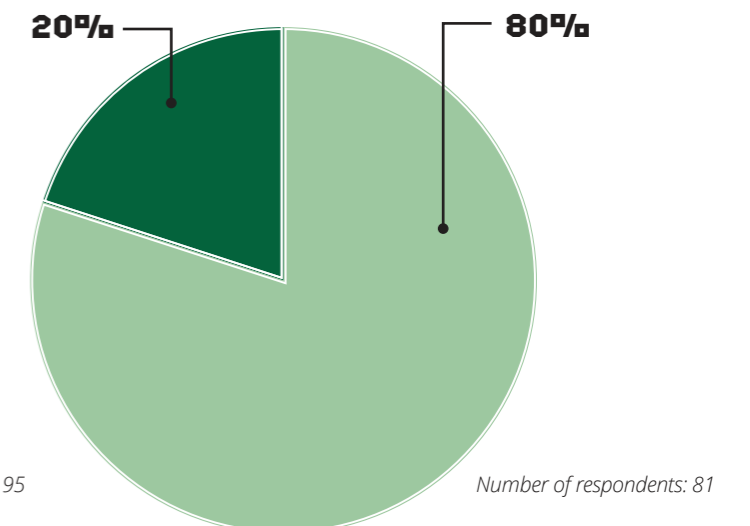


AVAILABILITY OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



KEY ● Yes ● No

AVAILABILITY OF SPECIFIC GOALS RELATED TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION



KEY ● Yes ● No

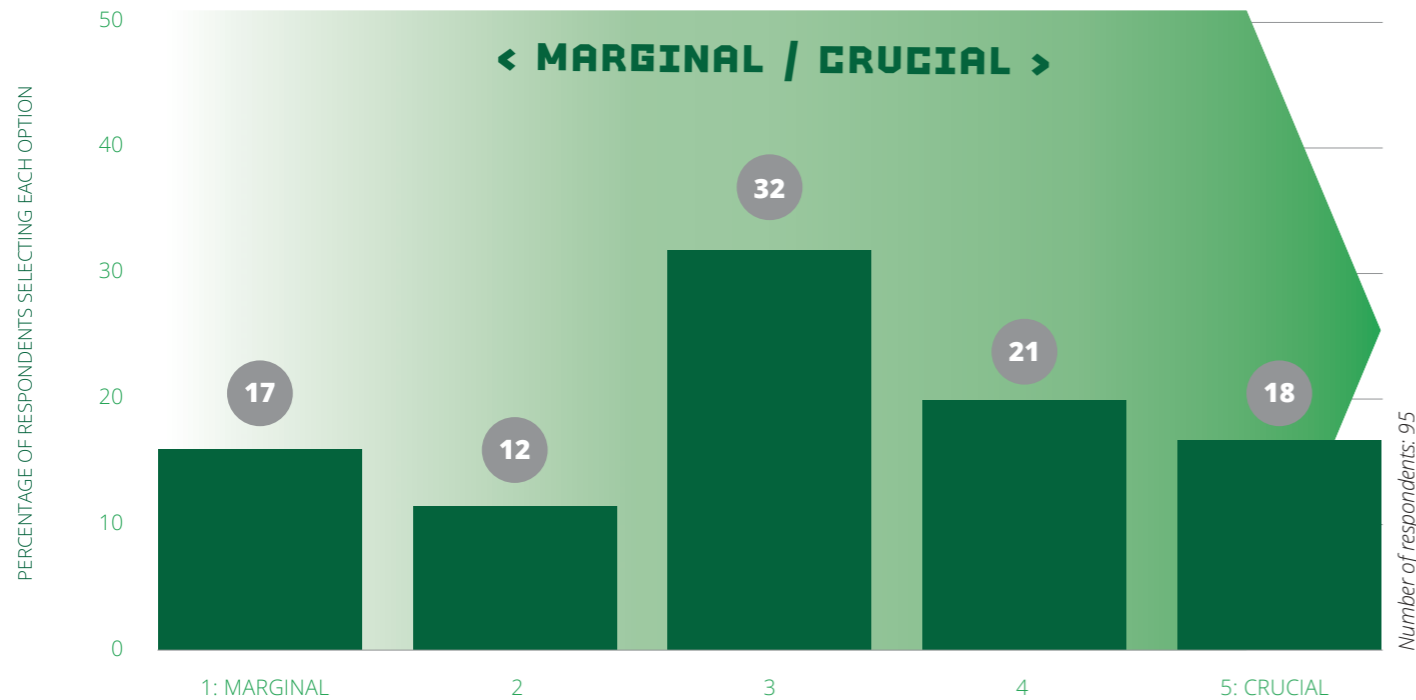
Youth development and academy operations are essential parts of a modern football club. This was also confirmed by the survey results, as approximately nine out of ten respondents have a written youth development strategy, defining specific goals related to this area. Almost all clubs (11 out of 12) that indicated they do not have a youth development strategy are currently placed outside of the Top 50; this implies that the majority of the most successful clubs in European club competitions have a dedicated youth development strategy. Further research and discussions confirmed that almost every club

in this category also operates a youth academy. It was also confirmed that transition is a key element of youth development activities, with 80% of respondent clubs having a specific goal related to first team transition in their youth strategy. The exact goals vary from club to club, with a variety of transition-related goals mentioned in the responses. Over 30 clubs indicated that their main KPI is related to the number of transitions to the first team squad per year. Eighty per cent of these clubs target two or three successful transitions each season. There were also four respondents who set goals related to the overall

percentage of academy graduates in the first team squad, with targets ranging from 20% to 50%. Additional responses also included goals related to minutes played, the signing of a professional contract, and the number of players training with the first team. Some even cited the number of transitions to their reserve team as an important goal.

STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

Q2 On a scale of 1 (marginal) to 5 (crucial), how would you rate the importance/role of your club's academy in terms of first team reliance/composition? Columns show the percentage of respondents selecting each option.



Transition goals are not only relevant for the academy side but are also an important metric for the entire club. Around 29% of respondents considered the academy to be a marginal or slightly more than marginal factor when it comes to squad building of the club's first team. Crucially, 39% stated that transitioning academy players is a very important or crucial building block for the first team.

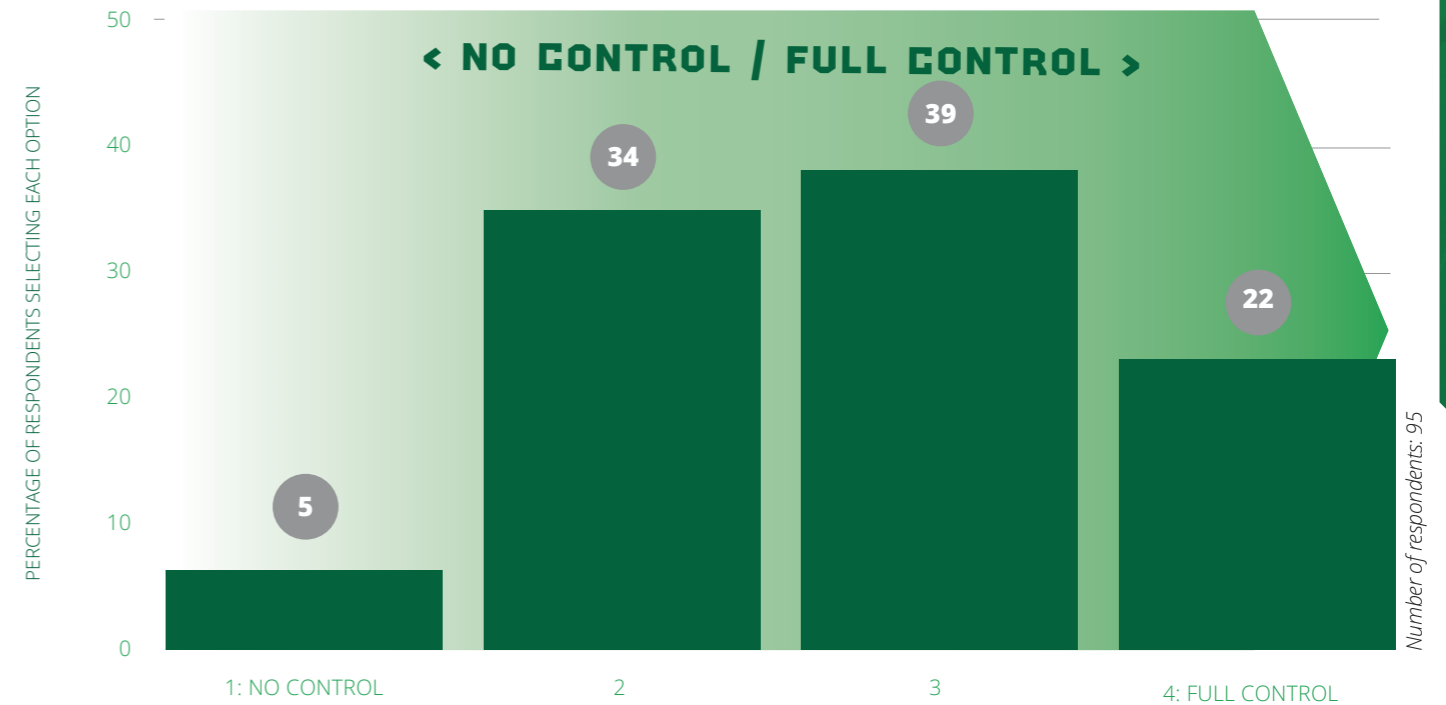
Unsurprisingly, those clubs that do not have a youth development strategy gave a lower importance rating to the academy from a first team composition perspective (average score of 2.5 versus 3.2 for those who do have a strategy).

Furthermore, no major difference was observed based on the respondent clubs' revenue size, with the answers of Top 50 clubs being very similar to all other clubs.

“39% stated that transitioning academy players is a very important or crucial building block for the first team”

STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

Q3 On a scale of 1 (no control) to 4 (full control), how much can the academy leadership influence whether first team transitions are successful? Columns show the percentage of respondents selecting each option.



In parallel with the importance of the transition process, it is also worth looking at how much academies can actually influence and control the fulfilment of the set goals. Considering the complex nature of the process and the club-wide cooperation that needs to be in place, opinions differ on this matter.

On one hand, 39% of clubs are of the opinion that there is only a limited amount or no control at all when it comes to success rates. They strongly believe that factors such as the lack of first team squad spaces, or simple luck, is a substantial part of the process. This is also likely to be connected to the importance of

the external environment in the transition process, both in terms of the impact of stakeholders outside of the club (e.g. parents, agents) and the key role of regulations in success rates. On the other hand, around one in five clubs believe that academy leadership has full control over the transition process, with a strong belief that hard work brings better results. Again, like the previous question, responses of Top 50 clubs were similar to the rest, indicating no difference in terms of the perception of control based on club size.

Interestingly, there is not much difference in the actual transition track record between clubs where academy leadership is an

influential factor and those where it is not. The average number of annual successful transitions at clubs that answered three or four to this question is 2.52 since 2018; at clubs answering one or two it is slightly higher at 2.59 players per season and per club in the same period. A successful transition in this case is a player accumulating 450+ first team minutes.

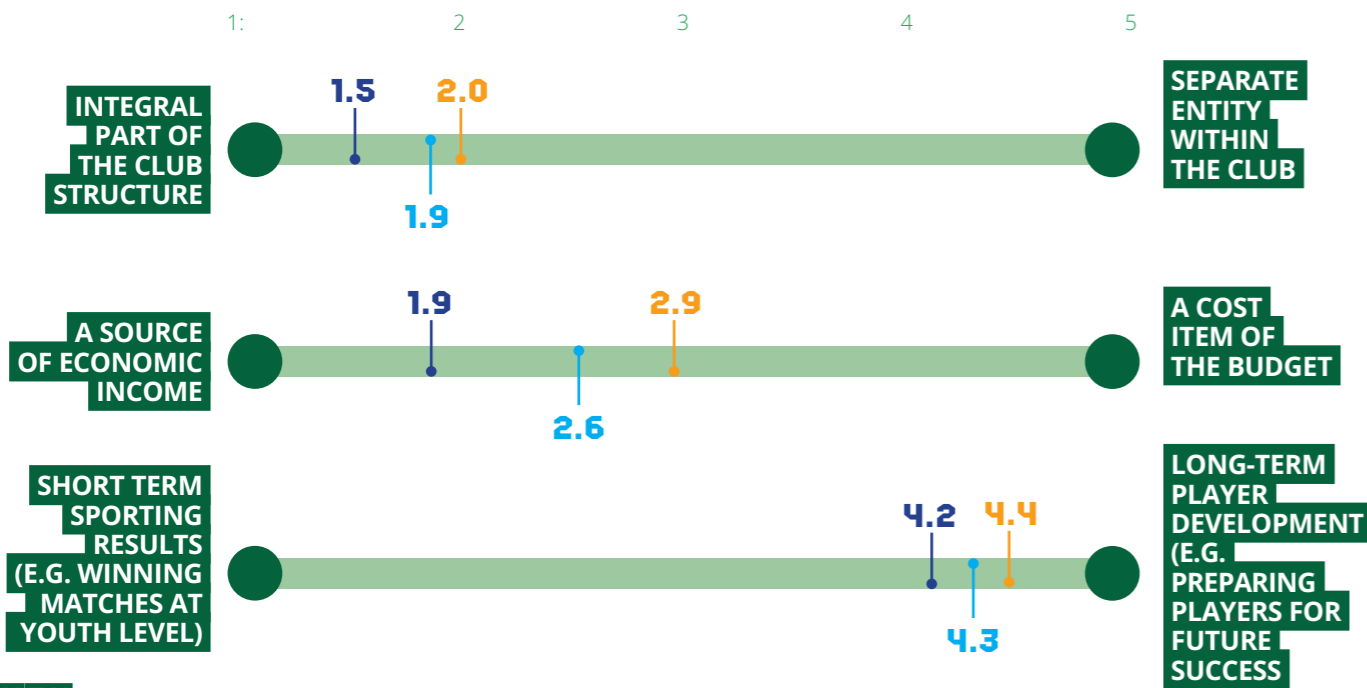
It should be noted that almost all clubs with the best track record answered that their academy leadership has high influence on the success rate. This implies the average of those answering three or four is modified downwards by a group of clubs with a less stellar track record.

STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

Q4 How would you characterise the role and focus of the academy in the following club aspects?



AVERAGE SCORE WHERE 1 REPRESENTS THE LEFT STATEMENT AND 5 REFERS TO THE RIGHT STATEMENT



KEY ● Average ● Top 50 ● Out of top 50

We were also interested in the perceived role of the academy within the club's wider strategic context, asking respondents to indicate how they would characterise the club's philosophy in terms of three questions connected to the transition. Firstly, academies in Europe are often strongly integrated into the overall club structure, providing a good foundation to work as one unit instead of two departments during the player transition process. Academies of Top 50 clubs are slightly more integral parts of their clubs' structure.

Secondly, there is a significant variance in how respondent clubs view the financial role of

their academies, with a slight majority indicating that it is more a source of income in general. In total, 51% of respondents treat their academy as a revenue generator, while only 26% indicated it is more of a cost item. The remaining 23% of respondents could not decide between the two.

Among the Top 50, with some exceptions, there are two distinct club types. In the first group, we find those with significantly higher revenues even compared to the rest of the Top 50. These clubs can afford to maintain an elite academy, which will ultimately produce a number of players who can then go on to have a career at a high level.

However, due to the strength of these clubs' first team squads, only a few players can make it directly, with some of the rest almost guaranteed to be sold for a transfer fee, generating revenues.

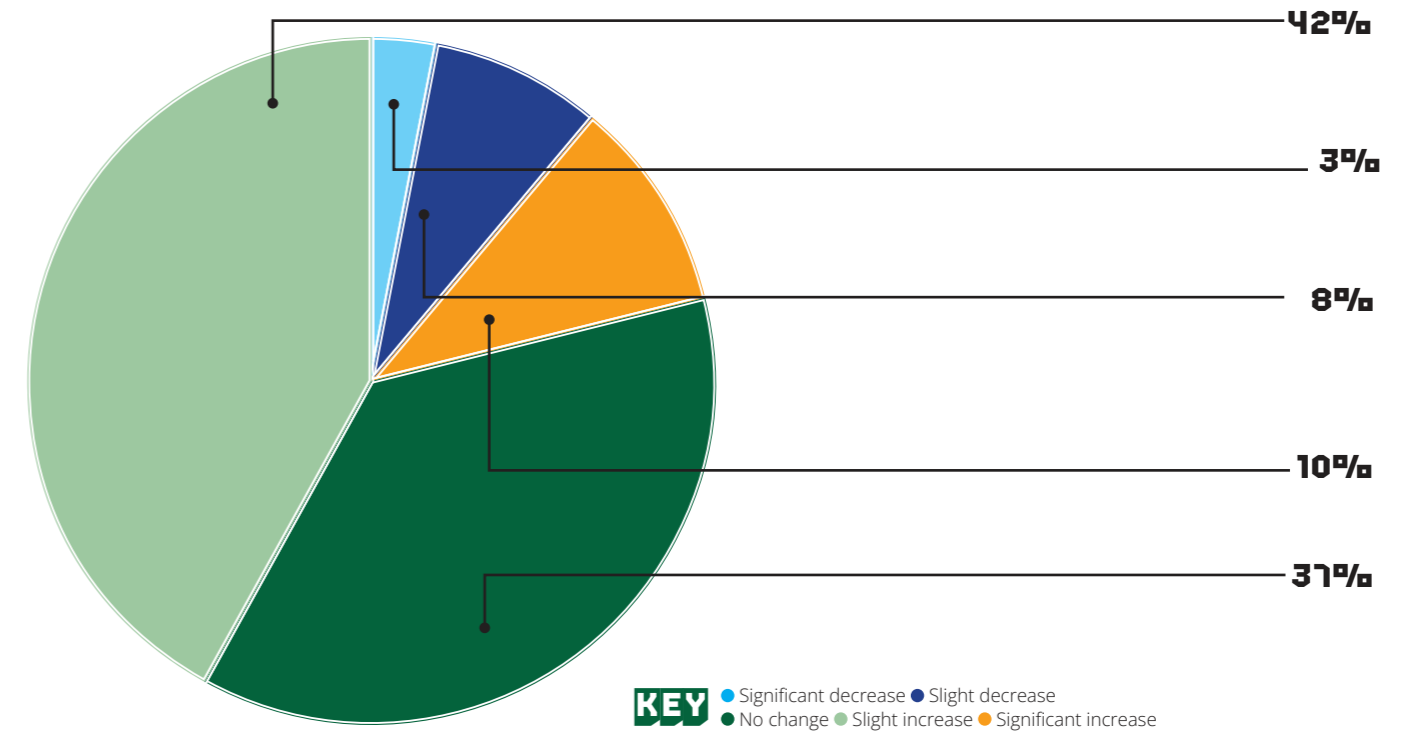
The other group's business model is more dependent on players sales and lower traditional revenue from media, due to small market size.

Lastly, most clubs seemed to agree that the focus of academies should be long-term player development instead of short-term success on the pitch. The average score of 4.3 means that maximising team performance at youth level is not a crucial factor for most.

Number of respondents: 95

STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

Q5 On a scale of 1 (significant decrease) to 5 (significant increase) how did the budget/resources in the academy change during the past season compared to previous years (as a % of overall club budget)?



KEY ● Significant decrease ● Slight decrease ● No change ● Slight increase ● Significant increase

A club might have every intention to improve its transition processes, but possibilities often depend on the size of the budget, too. In case there is a need to hire more coaches and staff members, or some materials need to be purchased, financial means are either available or not.

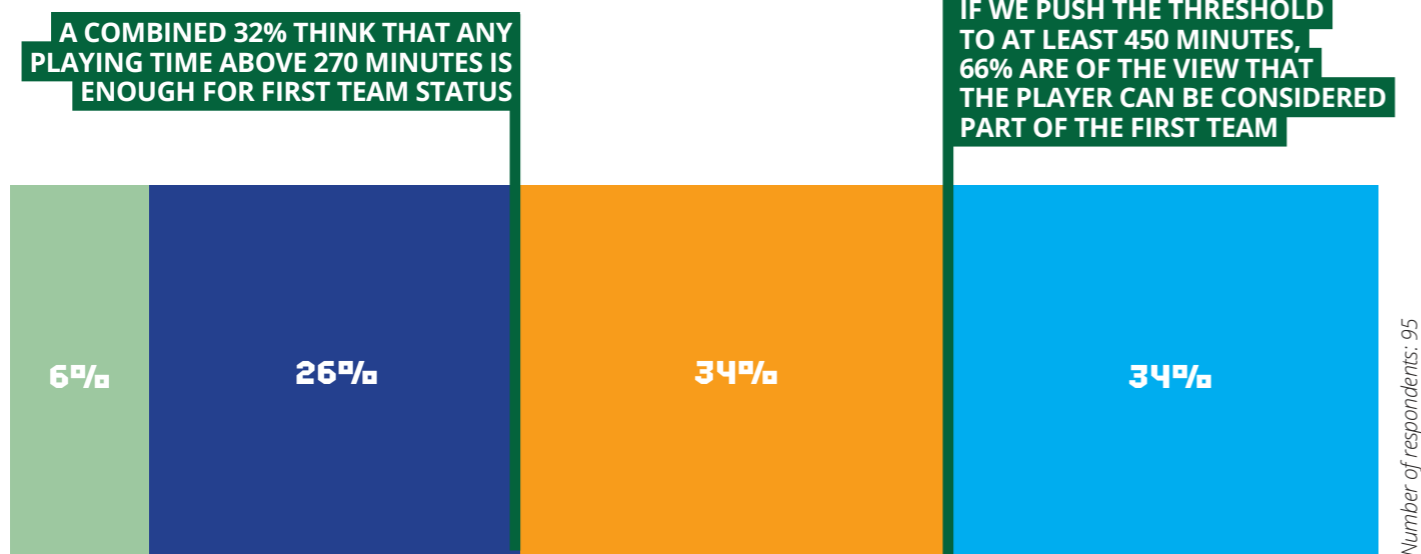
To gauge the financial landscape, clubs were asked about their academy budget trends. Looking at the entire sample, a slight budget increase can be observed on a European level, with only 13% of respondents reporting a decrease at all and more than 50% experiencing some increase.

There are relatively minor differences even if we segment responses by geographic region or club size. Interestingly, no western European respondents decreased their academy budget, whereas in other regions most clubs did not report an increase.

Number of respondents: 95

INTERNAL PROCESSES

Q6 In your view (regardless of your club's policy), after how much senior football playing time can someone be considered a first team player?



Number of respondents: 95

KEY ● Anything above zero ● 270+ minutes ● 450+ minutes ● 630+ minutes

INTERNAL PROCESSES

After the strategic aspects of transition, it is also worthwhile to assess the operational activities of clubs in relation to the transition to first team process.

As a starting point, we were interested in the clubs' view on when exactly a player can be considered a first team player.

As explained in Chapter 04, it is a complex topic and there is not a common, European, or international definition. The most widespread view (52% of responses) is that a player becomes part of the first team as soon as he is on the squad list at the beginning of the season (or at the beginning of the second half of the season). However, there were more

nuanced, quantitative answers, too, which influenced the methodology applied in the statistical analysis earlier in the study.

Asophisticated approach is to define a minimum threshold of senior playing time and have an objective and measurable view on transition status categories.

This begs the question: what exactly should the minimum threshold be? Based on the responses to a follow-up question, there is no consensus in the industry, but two thirds of the respondents believe that anything above 450 minutes (or five full matches) is enough to consider someone a first team player.

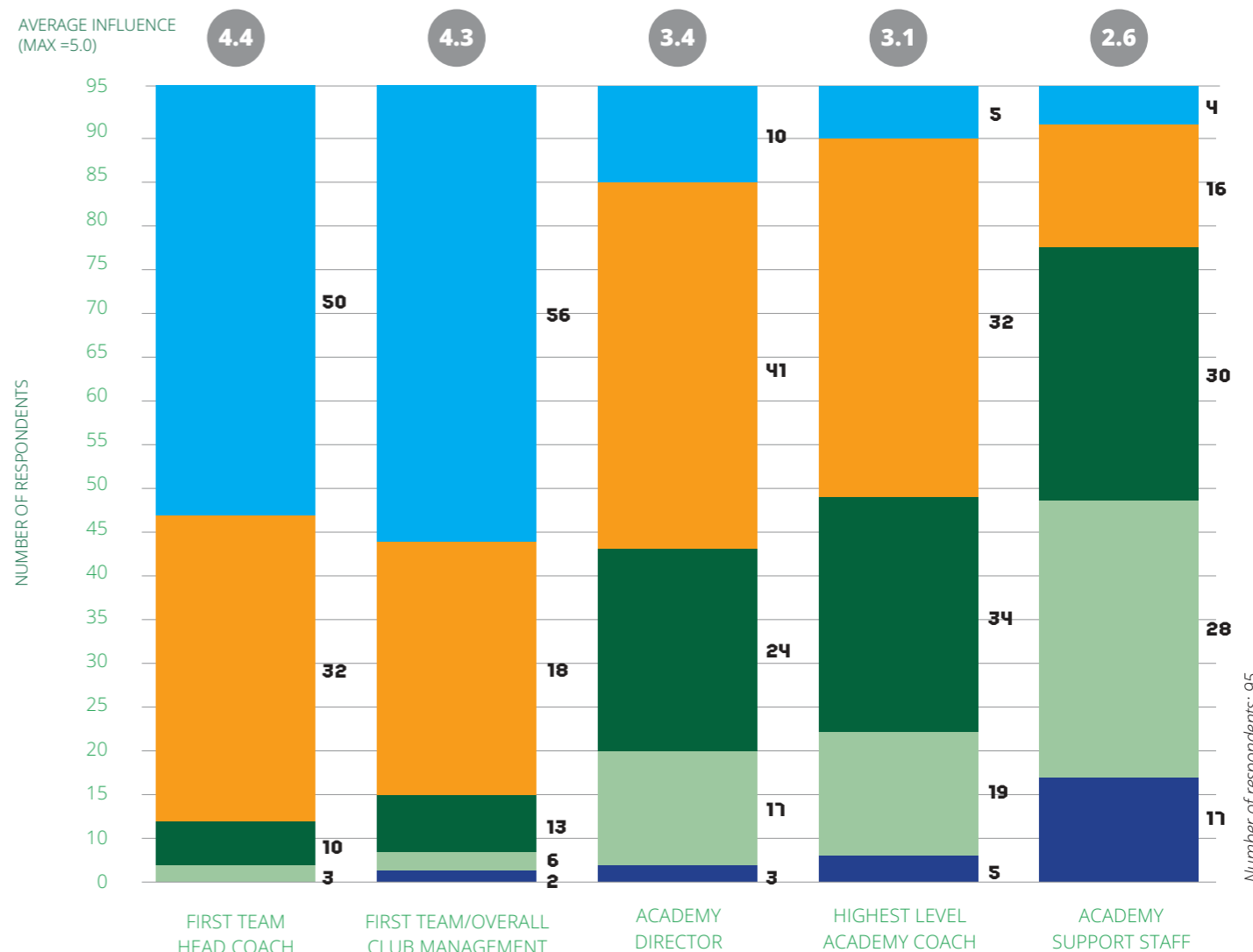
Based on more detailed discussions and interviews, this threshold is used in practice by dozens of clubs in their everyday operations.

As a conclusion, this threshold was decided to be used throughout the report as the rule for a player to gain first team status. Importantly, there is no major difference between the Top 50 clubs and the others in their responses to this question.

Lastly, some other definitions are also in use, albeit by only a minority of clubs, such as the player receiving a first team licence (officially registered as part of the squad), regularly participating in training sessions with the first team or getting a place in the first team dressing room.

INTERNAL PROCESSES

Q7 On a scale of 1 (no influence) to 5 (final decision-making power), how would you rate the influence of the following stakeholders (in terms of decision-making power) on first team transition decisions?



Number of respondents: 95

KEY ● No influence ● Very limited influence ● Quite influential ● Major influence ● Final decision making power ● Average influence

Referring to the level of control that clubs have on the process, it is important to emphasise that control is inherently connected to the distribution of decision-making power within a club. Survey results show that the first team hierarchy has the final say in most cases, but there is no consensus about who exactly

should make those decisions. The first team head coach and the primary decision maker in management (usually the sporting director) were both frequently named by respondents as the one responsible for this role. Interestingly, the role of academy directors is less prevalent in this regard – more than 20% of clubs

evaluated their influence as either very limited or practically zero despite them overseeing the academy development of the players. Does this imply that academy directors in most club settings do not enjoy enough authority in shaping transition decisions, even though they oversee the academy development of the players?

INTERNAL PROCESSES

Q8 On a scale of 1 (marginal significance) to 5 (crucial importance), evaluate the importance of each listed internal factor based on how much they impact the success rate of first team transition.

In any case, before first team transition decisions are made, a long and complex academy process awaits: the club needs to balance the work of many stakeholders, consider the impact of several factors, and oversee the individual development of each player in addition to the management of academy teams as a whole.

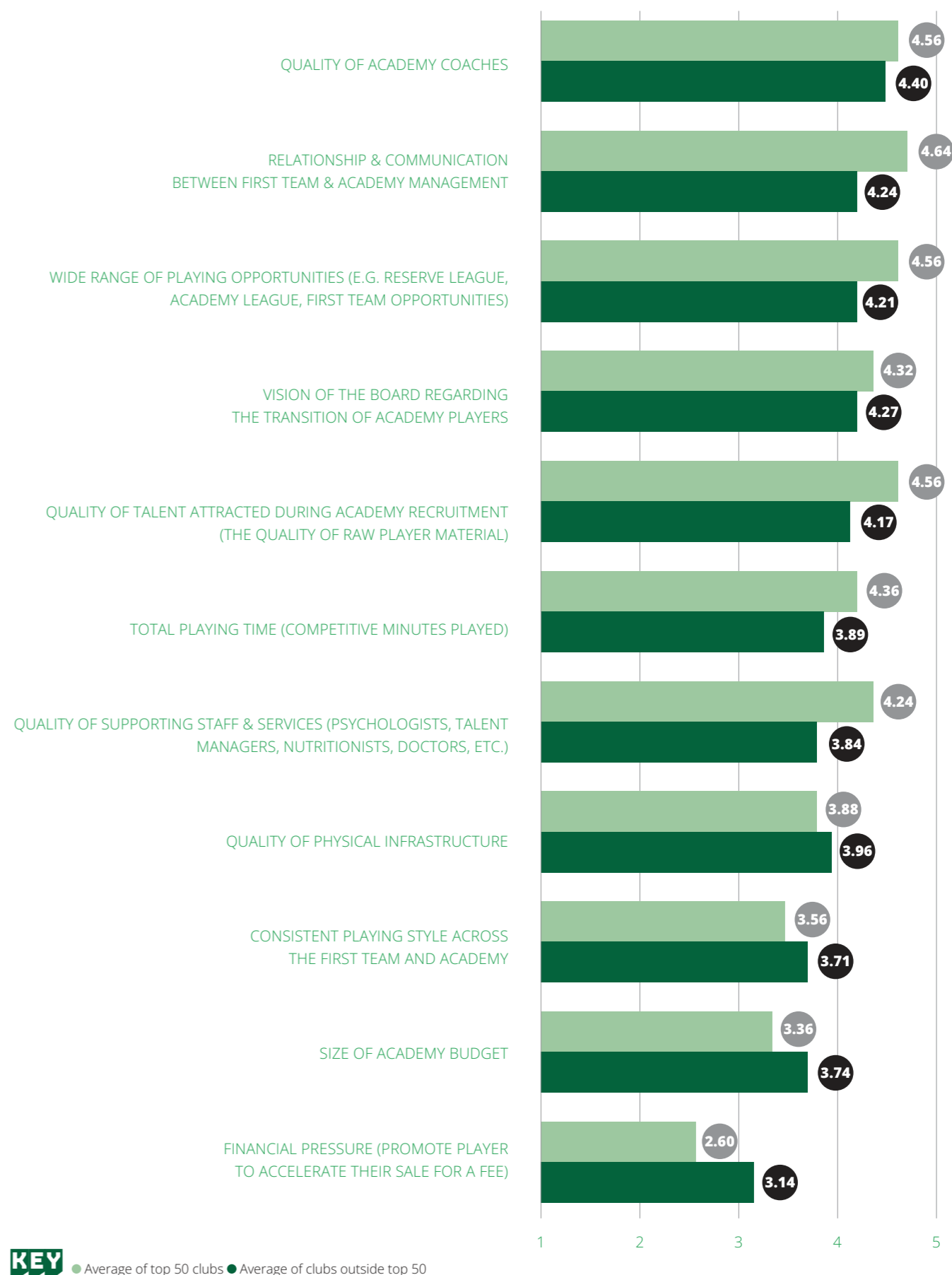
The complex nature of the transition is echoed by the survey results, as highlighted by the importance of different internal factors: eight of the listed 11 factors (see right) were deemed to have a large importance, scoring at least an average of 3.88 on a scale of 1-5 according to both Top 50 clubs and the others. The most crucial aspects according to the respondents are the quality of coaches, the relationship between the academy and the first team and providing a wide range of playing time opportunities for players. Interestingly, financial considerations such as the size of the academy budget and the overall financial pressure from the club management are considered the least important factors.

Looking into the responses of the Top 50 clubs specifically, the relationship between the first team and the academy was selected as the most crucial factor. As opportunities to get into the first team are often more limited at these clubs, it is important that the academy and first team leadership understand each other well and can cooperate in transition decisions. It is followed by the quality of coaches, the importance of playing time and the quality of talent attracted during academy recruitment. Clubs outside the Top 50 have selected the same factors as the most important; however, pressure from financial considerations is more frequent in this group.

There is also a contradiction with Question 8. Even though the level of academy coaches is considered as the most crucial factor behind a successful transition, they have a very limited say when it comes to the actual transition decisions.

This finding of the survey was also confirmed during the club interviews conducted for the study. This presents a dilemma for clubs: should coaches – whose primary responsibility is to educate – get more involved in transition decisions as they are also well positioned to evaluate readiness? If yes, what could be the best way to make their opinion count?

While the answer could vary based on the structure and culture of the club, one possible solution is to hold meetings with the involvement of both the decision-makers and the coaches (and potentially other supporting staff) where everyone can share their opinion about the players in question, stimulating a constructive conversation. Ultimately, this could only benefit the career progression of the player.



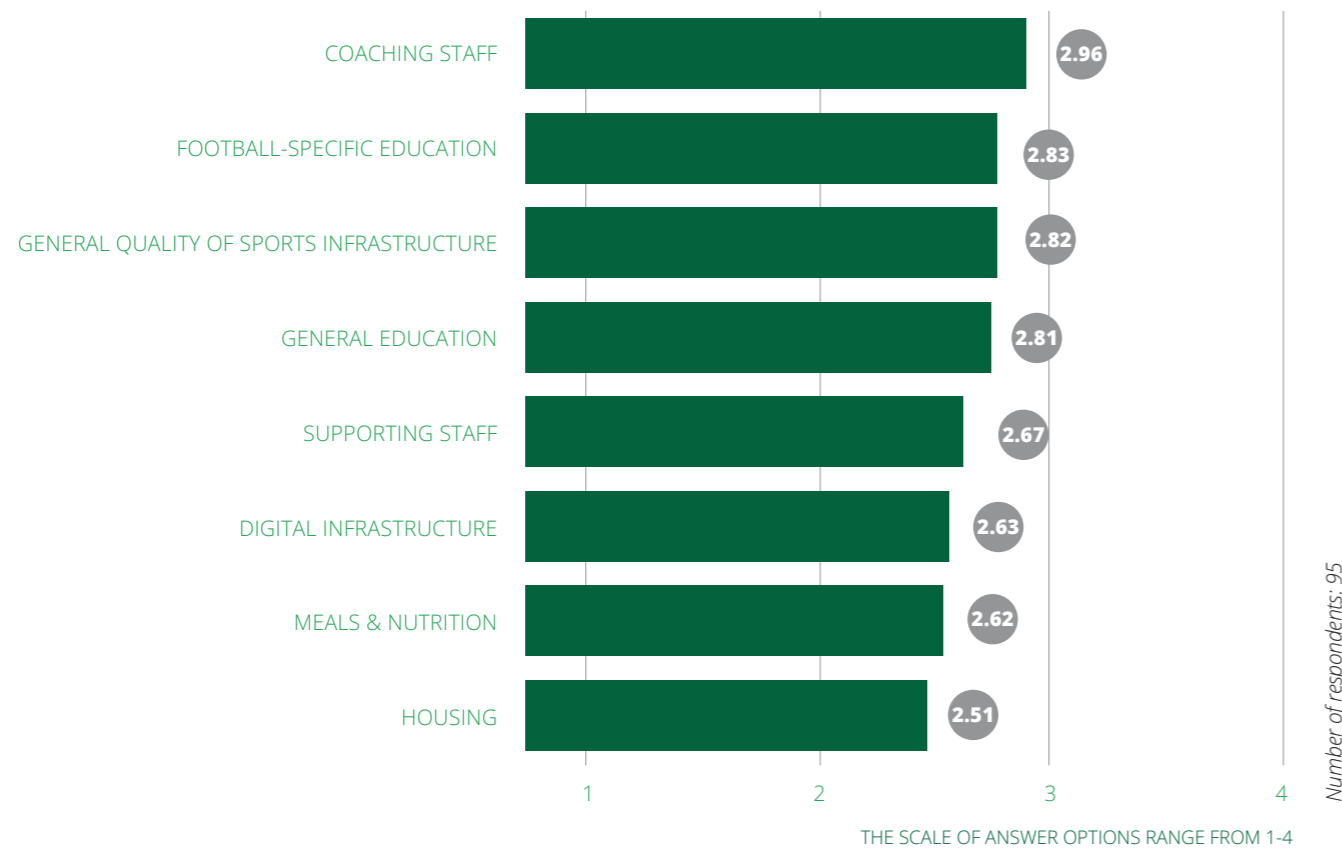
KEY ● Average of top 50 clubs ● Average of clubs outside top 50

Number of respondents: 95

INTERNAL PROCESSES

Q9 How do you rate the quality of the following player support services of your club in relation to academy players on a scale of 1 (The quality of the support should be improved significantly) to 4 (I am content with the quality of the support)?

< UNSATISFIED / SATISFIED >



While theoretically, clubs are aware of the many drivers and the large amount of necessary work behind a successful transition, it was interesting to find out how they rate the quality of this work. One key aspect of this is the various services they provide to academy players. Importantly, survey respondents were asked to rate these factors compared to clubs that are similar in size and resources to theirs. Self-evaluation questions

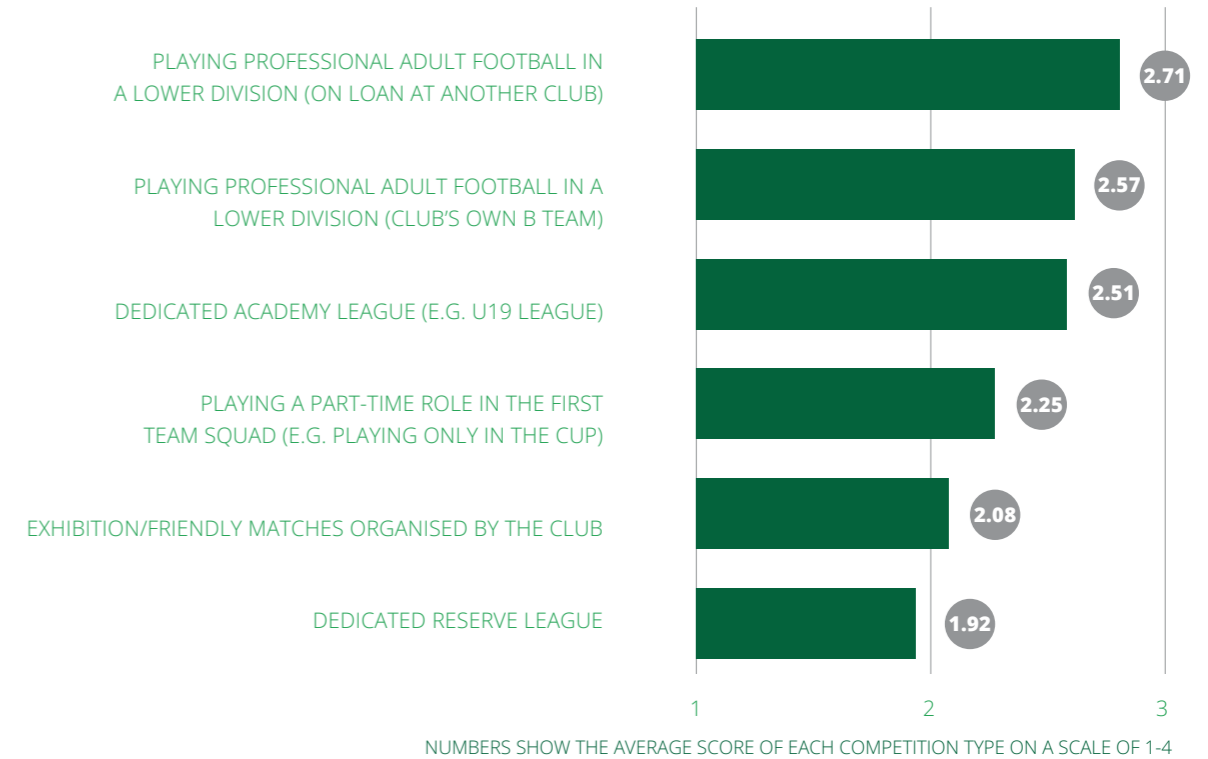
are inherently sensitive to a bias towards a more positive evaluation, which is also reflected in the answers. However, even with this caveat, the findings paint a useful picture.

The results show a positive overall situation throughout all listed services as no area had a less than 50% "satisfaction" rate (an average score lower than 2.5). However, no areas scored above 3, showing that there could be room for improvement.

Aspects that were rated the most favourably include the level of coaching staff, football-specific education, and general education. On the other hand, improvement is needed in terms of housing, meals and nutrition, and digital infrastructure at many clubs, even according to their own evaluation.

TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

Q10 In terms of playing time, which competition types do you usually prefer when preparing a player for first team transition? Answer options range from 1 (not preferred) to 4 (preferred).



TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

The last part of the survey focused on transition models (player pathways and playing time opportunities) and the different types of transitions that all happen at once during the process.

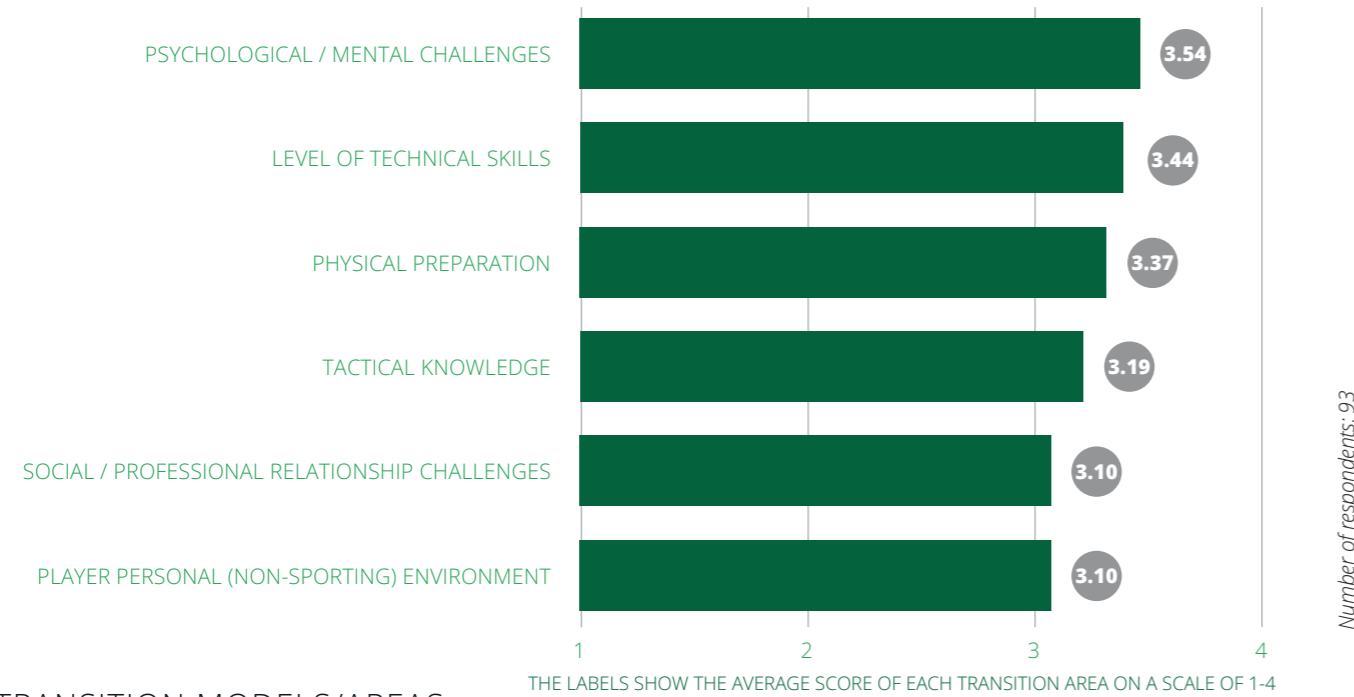
When it comes to playing time preferences, the analysis shows that the preference of clubs is that young talents should get experience in competitive and senior games instead of playing in youth leagues, reserve competitions or friendly matches.

Specifically, the most preferred competition types are lower-level senior leagues. In this regard it does not seem to matter if it is for the club's own reserve team or at another club on loan.

Reserve leagues and friendly matches are the least preferred options for player development prior to transition to the first team. There is no significant difference in the answers provided by clubs of different sizes or from different geographical regions, qualifying this finding as a strong opinion of the entire sample.

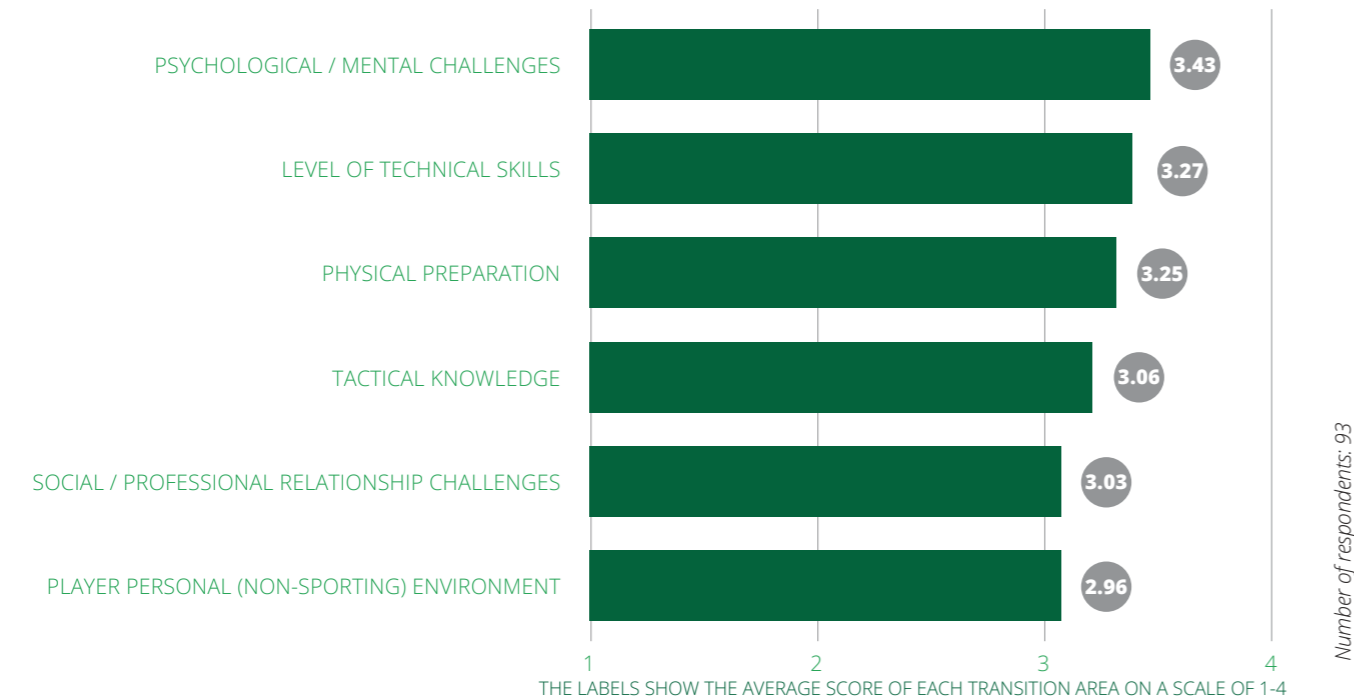
TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

Q11 Based on your experience, please rate the importance of the following factors to the success of a player's transition? Answer options range on a scale of 1 (not particularly important) to 4 (absolutely crucial).



TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

Q12 Please rate the importance of the following factors by how much shortcomings in them can lead to a failed transition? Answer on a scale of 1 (not particularly important) to 4 (absolutely crucial).



Regarding the importance of different transition areas, psychological/ mental factors are deemed the most important – a player showing strong traits in this aspect not only means a bigger chance of success, but also a lower rate of failure. Once again, comparing the responses to this question with the decision-making power of different club stakeholders, it can be

concluded that the supporting staff, who have a large impact on a player's psychological evaluation, might be under-represented when it comes to decision-making. This implies that clubs might consider making changes to their processes for better results.

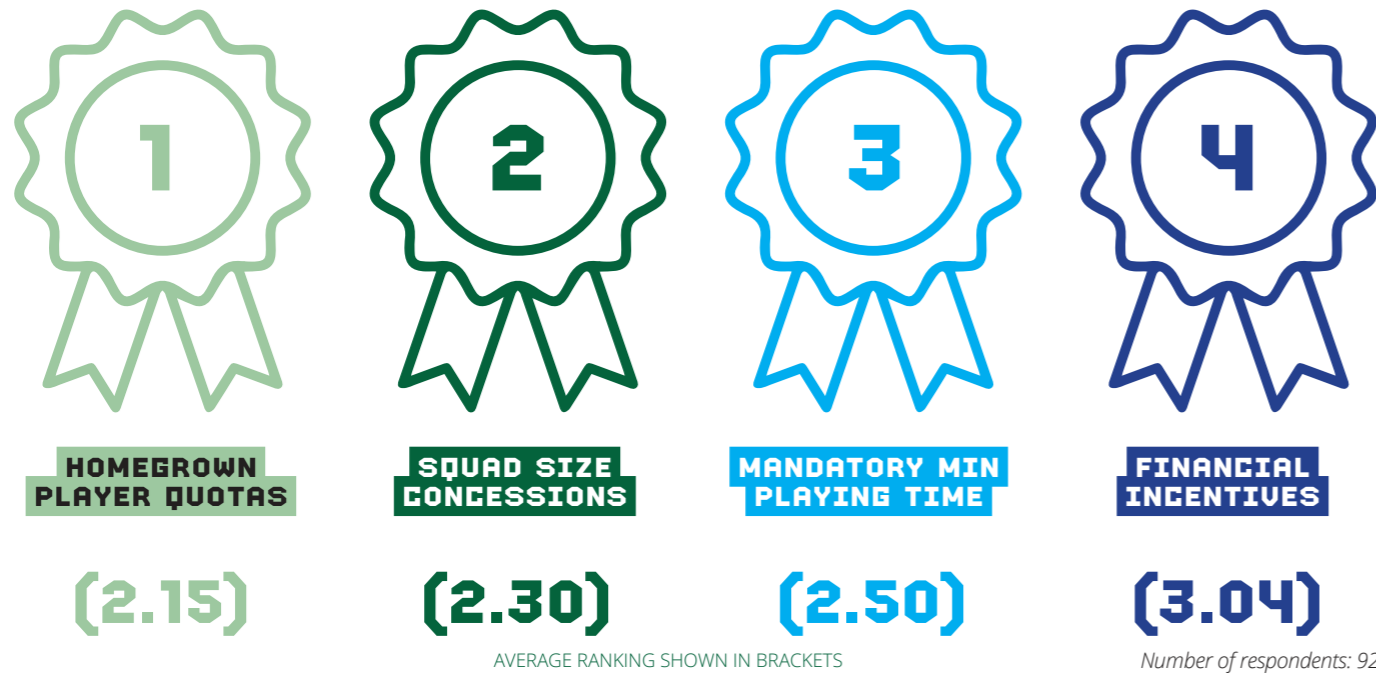
Having an adequate physical level is also important, while a certain level of technical skill can significantly boost the chances of

a successful transition. It should be highlighted that while the players' non-sporting environment in itself is not deemed to be a crucial success factor, issues and challenges in that regard can derail the entire process. According to the clubs, both in the survey and in interviews, failed transitions are often the product of shortcomings in the social environment of the player.



TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

Q13 How would you rank the effectiveness of the following regulatory tools in terms of increasing the success rate of first team transitions? Answer options range from (1 – most effective) to (4 – least effective).



A more indirect, but similarly important factor connected to competition structures is the landscape of national youth regulations; tools in the hands of regulatory bodies to promote the playing time of youth players in all senior competitions, including first divisions (please refer to Chapter 05 – Contextual analysis for more details). The preference of respondents was to use homegrown player quotas, such as the ones in effect in UEFA competitions or the English Premier League, to boost the success rate of first team transitions.

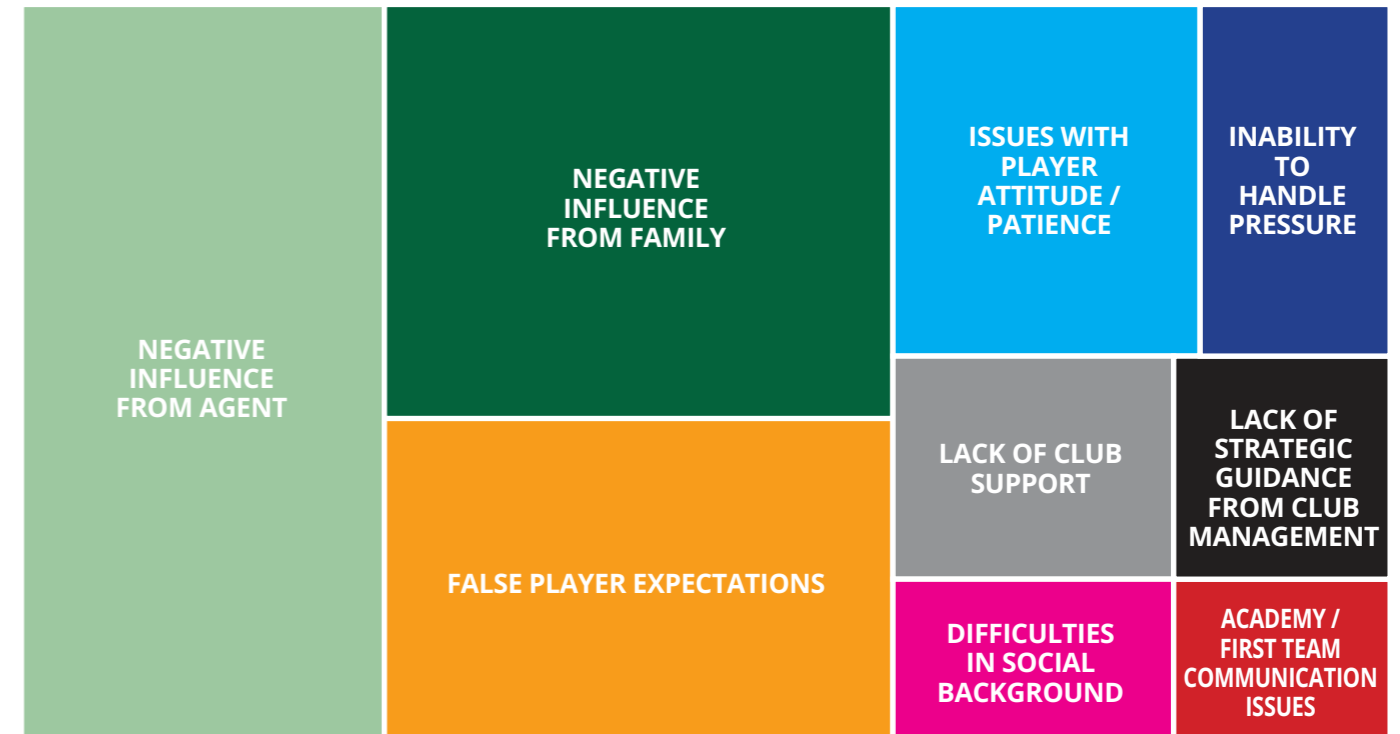
It is followed by squad size concessions, a similar tool that can define the maximum or minimum size of a club's squad. Mandatory playing time, the most direct intervention tool out of those listed, was not favoured by the majority of respondents, possibly due to its strict framework which might have a detrimental effect on the overall quality of play. Interestingly, financial incentives are the least preferred, probably due to their relatively minor perceived impact. Even respondents from leagues that actually use this tool (e.g. German Bundesliga) were of this opinion.

The results of this question are in line with the perceived current regulatory landscape in UEFA countries, as squad size limits and homegrown player quotas – together with player nationality limitations – are the most common tools.

Additionally, mandatory playing time requirements and financial incentives are only in effect in a handful of countries.

TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

Q14 Please share some of the most usual transition issues based on your experience.



Number of respondents: 71. The relative size of the boxes shows the frequency of an issue mentioned.

The survey also presented the chance for clubs to list their most usual transition issues. At the top of the list, we find the negative influence of external stakeholders – mostly the agents and parents. This is followed by aspects that can only be controlled by the players themselves – the level of expectation they have towards the process and their negative attitude/impatience.

While transition challenges and the most frequently mentioned issues above are crucial talking points of the study, the survey format is not the most suitable to identify frequent challenges, best practices, and solutions to specific situations. Thus, these aspects are discussed in detail in the next two chapters, looking at specific practical cases.

CLUB SURVEY

SUMMARY

- Youth development (and first team transition specifically) are confirmed to be strategic areas of football clubs with key performance indicators attached to them in practice at most clubs.
- The perception of control is highly debated among clubs – while the majority is of the view that some factors related to transition are to a great extent dependent on luck (e.g. first team opportunity opening up due to injury), there seems to be a mindset among the most successful ones that the club can actually control the outcome with hard work.
- In terms of club philosophy, differences can be observed by club size: Top 50 clubs (by UEFA coefficient) often consider their academies more of an integral part of the club, as well as a bigger source of economic income than clubs outside of the Top 50.
- The survey results provided confirmation that the best possible threshold for players to be considered as part of the first team is 450 minutes (approx. five full match appearances).
- While the quality level of academy coaches and supporting staff is considered among the most important factors for a successful transition, these stakeholders often have a relatively low influence during the decision-making process. This is a contradiction worth looking into.
- Mental factors are considered to be the most important out of the five main transition areas. This was also confirmed by various one-on-one interviews with club representatives.
- As an overarching conclusion to this chapter, there was not much correlation between the responses and the geographic region of clubs, indicating that transition-related challenges and operational activities do not really depend on the location of clubs. This is in line with the findings of the statistical analysis: there are clubs from many different countries and regions that perform well in terms of transition success.
- While we acknowledge that the size of the domestic market and the revenue of the club matters a lot, these results can be ‘good news’ for clubs all over Europe, indicating that efficient internal processes can yield positive results regardless of their local context.
- A higher but still limited correlation was identified between club size (as measured by UEFA club coefficient) and the answers provided. Even though top European clubs generally have more resources, the answers they provided to the survey questions only rarely differed from the opinion of the others. This once again indicates that transition is not purely dependent on financial resources; a high level of internal effort can go a long way.

ECA[®] YOUTH
FOOTBALL 2023-24

PART

8

CLUB CASE STUDIES

After a high-level overview of the opinions and thoughts of European clubs, 12 of them were selected for a more qualitative, deep-dive analysis in order to identify best practices and unique transition tools. The presented case studies are also suitable to introduce specific club contexts and showcase different transition strategies – a knowledge that is not shared often from within the industry.

8

CLUB CASE STUDIES

**INTRODUCTION TO
CLUB CASE STUDY
METHODOLOGY**

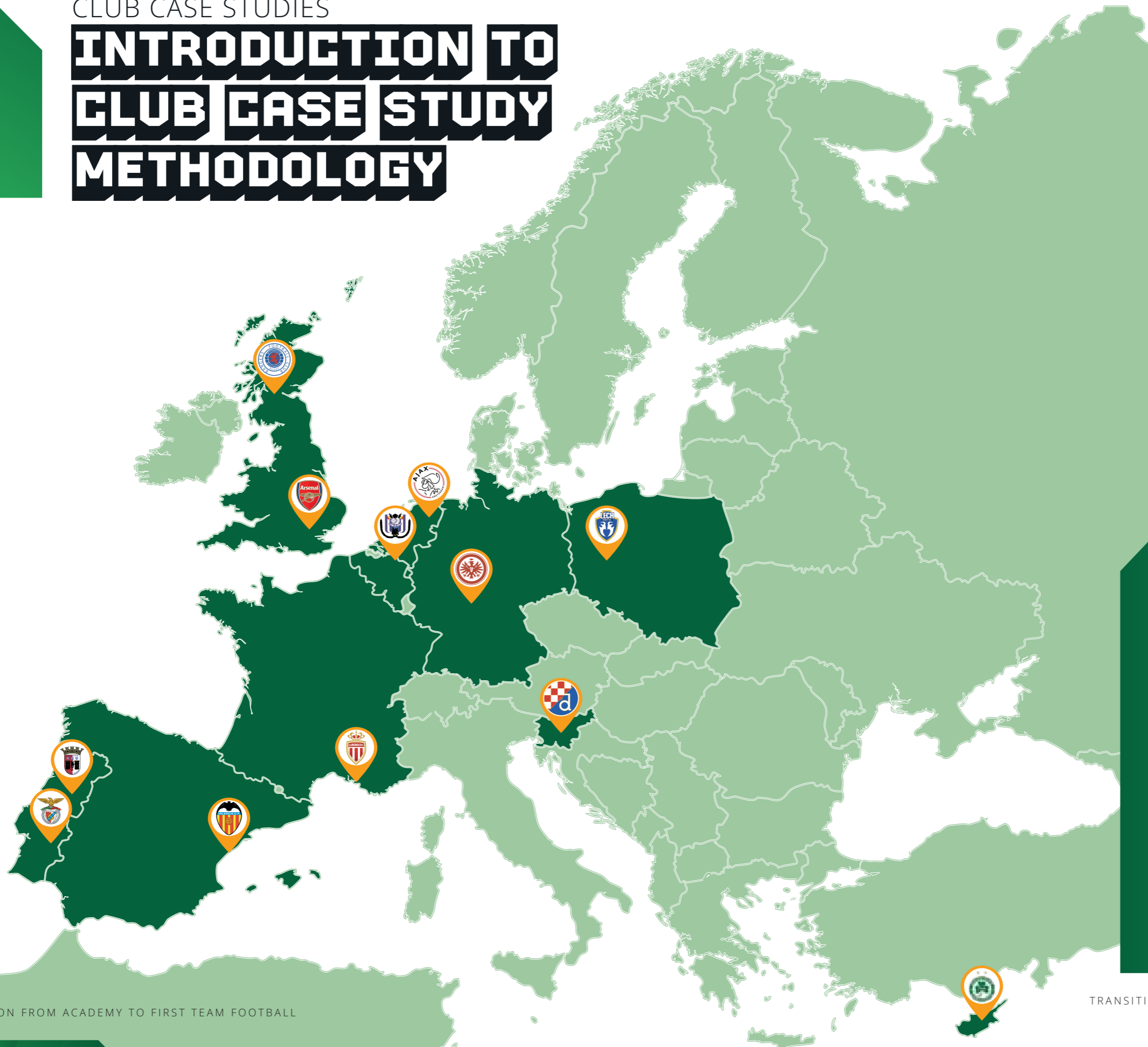
The collective opinion of 95 European clubs analysed in Chapter 07 is a good starting point for the evaluation of our hypothesis. However, to identify improvement opportunities, a more qualitative analysis method is needed. In order to assess different transition strategies, processes and best practices, in-depth interviews were conducted with club representatives who are either responsible for, or are deeply involved with the transition process. The findings are presented in a case study format in this chapter.

Clubs were selected on the basis of the following parameters:

- Above average transition success in recent years or historically (*see Chapter 06 for more details*)
- Diverse geographical coverage
- Coverage of different-sized clubs based on revenues and UEFA coefficient
- Unique or innovative transition tools in place

THE 12 SELECTED CLUBS

AFC Ajax	198
Arsenal FC	202
AS Monaco FC	206
Eintracht Frankfurt	210
GNK Dinamo	214
KKS Lech Poznan	218
Omonoia FC	222
Rangers FC	226
RSC Anderlecht	230
SC Braga	234
SL Benfica	238
Valencia CF	242





AFC AJAX

Capitalising on the Jong Ajax team playing in the Dutch second division, the club follows a two-step transition approach; before joining the first team, players already get a taste of professional football in a controlled environment.



Club foundation
1900



eredivisie
2022/23 league position
3rd

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **12**

Team in professional lower division?: **Yes***

**Jong Ajax in Dutch second division*

Academy teams age range: **U8 - U18 + Jong Ajax**



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Edmond Claus** – Interim Head of the Youth Academy

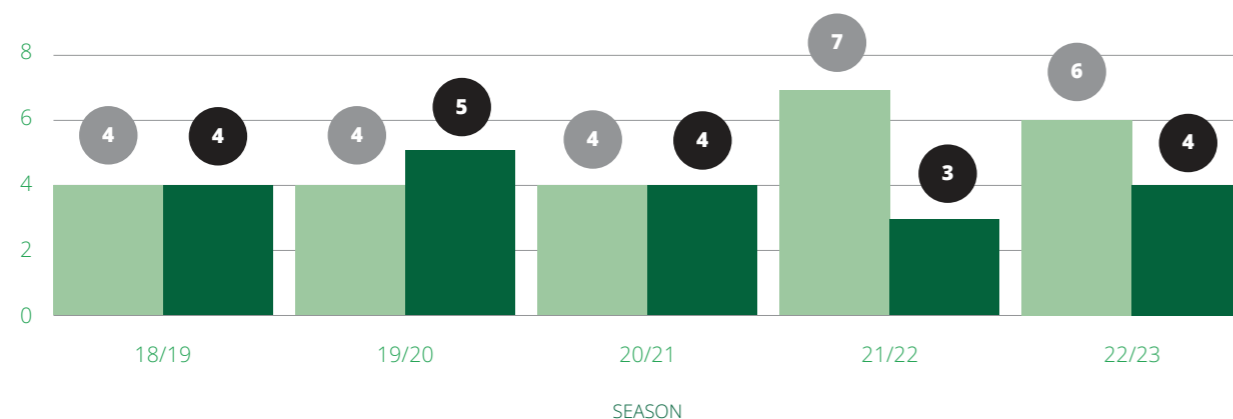
The AFC Ajax Academy is among the most renowned 'talent factories' in the world, consistently producing top players year-on-year. Ajax's vision reflects both the storied history of the club and future ambitions: "To continue to be the most successful youth academy." What makes the organisation unique is the ever-present nature of results, built on a foundation of a consistent playing style and values across all age groups. The club's 'DNA' is rooted in its ownership structure, with the main shareholders still being the fans, therefore youth development is naturally embraced by the whole club hierarchy.

However, as the business aspects of football cannot be ignored, this 'DNA' also involves the business model of the club. The sale of young players is an important revenue-generating avenue. Especially in a small market like the Netherlands, even clubs like Ajax need to develop and transition players who are then sold on for a significant profit. This strategy is executed with the help of three main pillars: 1) scouting and recruitment of talented players up to the ages of 17-18; 2) bringing in veteran players who can guide and mentor young players; 3) giving plenty of first team chances to young players.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of AFC Ajax
Transition: Number of players at AFC Ajax reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON

KEY ● Debut ● Transitions



CLUB HIGHLIGHT

THE PATHWAY OF A YOUNG AJAX PLAYER

The structured pathway that the club has set up for their academy players ensures that the traditional first team transition process is broken down in two phases, separating the professional environment from 'real' pressure.

During the first phase, players get promoted from the U18 team to the Jong Ajax squad, getting their first impressions of professional football. This is the

step where players are tasked to take more ownership of their development journey, while also playing against experienced senior players for the first time in their career. During this step, they also get more experience of the fans, the stadium environment, the pressure and their media duties. Only those who prove they can cope with the professional environment can take the next step to the first team, where they experience further mental challenges, strong internal competition and the pressure to perform increases.



U8-U16:
FORMATION
PHASE

U17-U18:
FIRST STEP TOWARDS
BECOMING
PROFESSIONAL

JONG AJAX:
FIRST PHASE OF
TRANSITION TO
PROFESSIONAL
FOOTBALL

FIRST TEAM:
SECOND
PHASE OF
TRANSITION;
FULL
TRANSITION



AFC AJAX

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

First team composition – balancing youth with veteran leadership

A smart way of providing guidance to a squad that consistently includes recent academy graduates is to recruit veteran, older leaders. They are the ones who possess the necessary experience and personal characteristics to take responsibility for delivering results and educating young talent in how to become a professional footballer. Players such as Dušan Tadić, Davy Klaassen, Marten Stekelenburg, Daley Blind and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar are prime recent examples.

Players are tasked with taking ownership of their own development

The club has a great opportunity to control the full transition path with the Jong Ajax team in the Dutch second division. Even the best players are pushed if it seems like they are not giving their best; everyone is encouraged to take ownership of their own development. When players get to the Jong Ajax squad, they no longer rely solely on a plan set by the academy; instead they need to produce their own plan and use their initiative about how they want to play on the pitch. They still receive support from the staff and learn how to execute the plans.

Workload-sharing within the staff

Ultimately, the integration of academy players comes down to the first team Head Coach's willingness and a philosophy that

fits the club's policy of integration of young (academy) players. However, it's important to emphasise that it's not only his responsibility to track the Jong Ajax team; the support staff also has a major responsibility in tracking talents. Assistant coaches and specialist staff members also have an important role: representatives from both the academy and the professional department have at least one formal meeting per week to discuss what each player needs individually and how their set pathway can be maintained.

Clear expectation management, transparent communication

Even with the most progressive coaches, there will always be moments when on-pitch results and pressure impact the long-term development plan. As such, transparent communication is key at Ajax. In addition to weekly meetings, first team coaches attend Jong Ajax matches, while the entire professional development department has a strong formal and informal relationship with the academy, often leading to key decisions. The same principle applies to the relationship with families and agents. From the first moment, they share their envisioned path for the high potential player and then visually demonstrate (e.g. with video analysis) their progress to them.

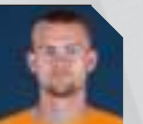


NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Matthijs de Ligt

Debut: 2016

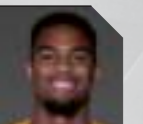
No. of matches: 77



Ryan Gravenberch

Debut: 2018

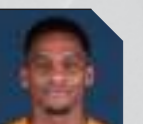
No. of matches: 72



Jurriën Timber

Debut: 2020

No. of matches: 85



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at AFC Ajax



ARSENAL FC

A clear guidance from the top of the hierarchy is supported by specialised staff such as the team responsible for loans. Key principles include a strong club culture, clarity and honesty.



Club foundation
1886



2022/23 league position
2nd

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **10**
Team in professional lower division? **No**
Academy teams age range: **U9 - U21**

ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Per Mertesacker** – Academy Manager

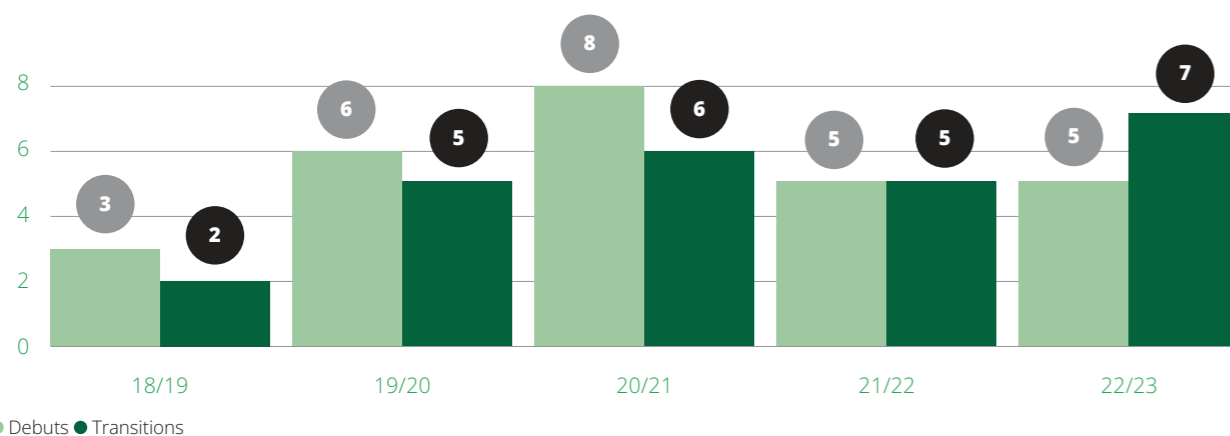
The development and transition of youth players has long been part of Arsenal FC's club DNA. As Arsène Wenger put it in 2007, "we (Arsenal) don't buy superstars, we make them." However, after Wenger's departure and a more turbulent period on and off the pitch, Arsenal had to redefine their academy operations under the guidance of a new leadership team. Based in Hale End (London), the academy currently consists of ten men's teams starting from the Under-9 age group up to the Under-21s (U21).

With no reserve or B teams in England, it is the U21 team that serves as the last 'stop' within the club before players start their transition path towards senior football.

"We believe that better people make better players" – Arsenal FC's academy philosophy outlines the focus of their player development on and off the pitch, too. As Per Mertesacker, the club's Academy Manager puts it, "the framework needs to be player focused and coach directed, with individual development programmes driving the day-to-day work."

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of Arsenal FC
Transition: Number of players at Arsenal FC reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

LOAN MANAGEMENT

The role of loans during the transition process is key for clubs in England as the gap is often deemed too big between the development league, the Premier League 2 and the English top division. Such a gap can only be handled by 'generational talents' who are hard to come by.

For others, a four or five-year detailed plan is more suitable, which includes one or more loan

moves before they can realistically transition to the first team. Subsequently, the efficient management of loans is key for the success rate of the process.

With the ultimate goal of providing sufficient and suitable game time for young players, Arsenal built a network with possible loan clubs and created an internal process to ensure the loans are going as planned.

Arsenal FC's loan management overview



Phase 1 – Pre-loan: As a starting point, the club needs to set goals in harmony with the player's development goals. Usual considerations include game-time expectations at the loan club, level of competition in that squad, and the playing style of the coach at the loan team.

Phase 2 – Contracting & Onboarding: Before any loan is negotiated, it's crucial to approach both the player and his agent about the entire process. During the negotiating phase, tools for contractual protections include break clauses and incentive-based loan fee structures which suit the goals of both the player and the club. After everything is agreed, the onboarding can start. This is an important phase as the first impressions regarding the player's personality and work ethic can have a long-lasting effect on the trust of the loan club, potentially making or breaking the entire loan season.

Phase 3 – Monitoring: Throughout the loan period, the club needs to stay in touch with both the player and the loan club to monitor the progress and receive feedback related to all areas outside the pitch. As for game performances, Arsenal's loan team watches every second of each loanee and evaluates them accordingly.

Phase 4 – Post-loan phase: After all loans, the club brings back the players for a full evaluation and physical testing. Reflecting on the loan is useful before looking ahead for the next period or experience. The overall key of a successful process is clarity before, during and after the loan.

Loan team composition:

The process needs to be managed and overseen by a dedicated team. At Arsenal, three people are considered as part of the loan department: it is headed by the loan manager, who in turn reports to the academy manager and the sporting director.



LOAN MANAGER
RESPONSIBLE
FOR THE
ENTIRE PROCESS



LOAN COORDINATOR
DAY-TO-DAY
LOAN
OPERATIONS



LOAN COACH (U21 ASSISTANT COACH)
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
AND PLAYER VISITS



ARSENAL FC

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

The importance of handling transition decisions on a strategic level

At Arsenal, transition-related decisions are discussed among the Sporting Director, the First Team Head Coach and the Academy Manager. Ultimately, the Sporting Director oversees the process, ensuring that the aspects of both the academy and the first team are carefully evaluated and considered before any final decision is made.

Club culture at the centre of sustained transition success

While processes and operational practices are good tools for improvement, it is a strong club culture that creates the foundation for long-term success. If all club employees, including the first team staff and players, naturally care about the academy prospects, the overall experience will make the transition much smoother, creating an environment that can make the most out of the players' inherent talent.

Strengthening the academy experience and mindset inside the club building

An important mindset that has been mentioned during the interview with Per Mertesacker (Academy Manager) is the conscious attempt to strengthen the ties between the academy and the first team by increasing the number of first team staff members who have a previous academy experience. The expectation is that this way the academy perspective will inherently be more represented during

day-to-day operations and when strategic decisions are made at first team level.

Training camp and pre-season tour as tools for facilitating transition

The summer preparation period is the perfect platform for players on the cusp of transition to train with the first team and impress the coaching staff. This is the period to build relationships, gain trust and showcase a behaviour that fits into the team. Arsenal try to give a head start for academy players by starting practice with them usually a week before the first team arrives back from their off-season break. Depending on the first team squad situation, this is the time where there could be more opportunities than usual.

Player tracking as a combination of athletic metrics and human interactions

Just like most clubs, Arsenal also track the physical parameters of players throughout their development, including aspects such as the number of high-speed runs or sprint distance, with specific performance indicators for each position. The club also has a framework to decide when the next step in the career progression is due (e.g. U18 → U21 → loan). In addition, human interactions and coach observations also count and they are major inputs into the decision-making process. Observing the player's interactions in everyday situations can inform the club about their development not only as a player, but also as a human approaching adulthood

Coping mechanism as a key characteristic

The concept of talent not only refers to technical skills or physical attributes, but also to mental resilience and the ability to cope in different circumstances. Arsenal believe that loans provide a great opportunity to test the adaptation skills of players as they must be humble, learn quickly and get used to a different, often lower-quality environment (in terms of level of facilities, quality of pitches, player services). In order to fit into a new, senior changing room, players have to conduct themselves in the proper manner to earn respect and provide value for the loan club.

Managing player expectations

The keywords are communication, clarity and honesty. First of all, the club needs to communicate with the players as much as they can. At Arsenal, the Academy Director (sometimes joined by the Loan Manager) sits down with all players at the beginning and at the end of the season to provide a general idea on their possible paths. This provides an understanding and clarity about what the next step is in the player's career.

However, plans are often changed due to uncontrollable factors, such as changes in the first team squad. Thus, promises should not be made and instead, an honest discussion is needed that outlines the best possible idea at that specific moment.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Bukayo Saka

Debut: 2018
No. of matches: 135



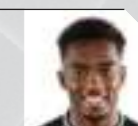
Eddie Nketiah

Debut: 2017
No. of matches: 89



Joe Willock

Debut: 2017
No. of matches: 40



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Arsenal



AS MONACO FC

AS Monaco FC are building a new transition strategy on the optimisation of time around the first team which is enabled by an interconnected structure and a custom games programme mixing a variety of opponents.



Club foundation
1924



2022/23 league position
6th

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **4**

Team in professional lower division? **No***

*Withdrew from the French fifth division before the 2022/23 season

Academy teams age range: **U16 - U21†**

†Elite Development Group instead of a traditional U21 team, teams from U6 as part of the Amateur section

ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Pascal De Maesschalck** – Youth Development Director

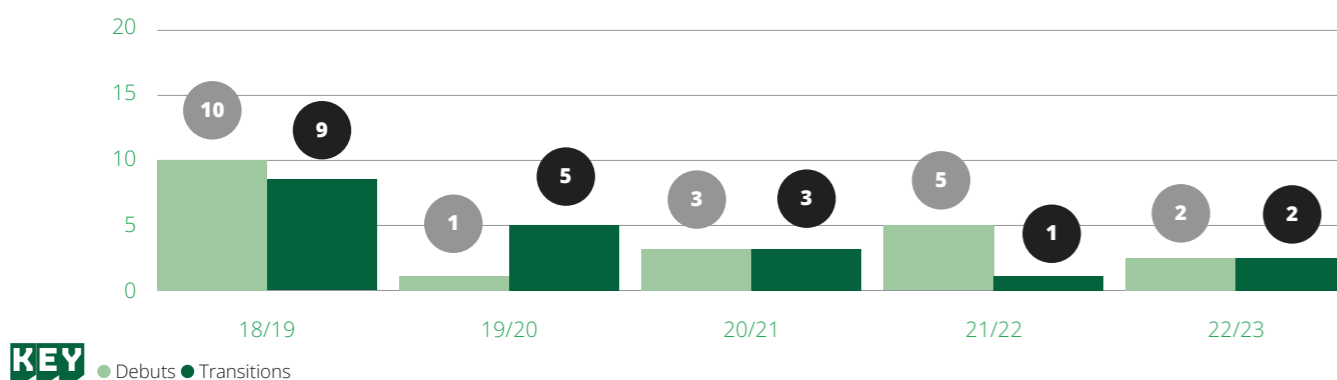
While the academy of AS Monaco FC is well known for producing World Cup-winning superstars such as Kylian Mbappé, Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet, the club's focus seemed to slightly shift in the second half of the 2010s. The club spent close to €500 million over the three-season period of 2017/18 – 2019/20, bringing in many established stars. However, after this brief spell, the leadership of the club made a strategic change to emphasise the traditions and the DNA of the club, putting youth development – specifically first team transition – at the centre of operations once again.

Facilitated also by the new state-of-the-art

performance centre opened in 2021 at La Turbie, the soul of the academy's new transition strategy is the optimisation of touch points between the academy and the first team. This strategy aims to help the club reduce the gap between the academy and the first team experience, while also naturally introducing players to the First Team Head Coach.

Initial results are encouraging, with players such as Eliesse Ben Seghir, Edan Diop and Soungoutou Magassa coming through the ranks in recent seasons. There were more than ten academy players training with the first team squad at the start of the 2023/24 season.

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of AS Monaco FC
Transition: Number of players at AS Monaco FC reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

OPTIMISATION OF GAMES PROGRAMME

The French league pyramid does not allow second/ reserve teams in or above the third division, so clubs like AS Monaco FC can only play their youngsters against low-tier amateur clubs. While these games are good opportunities to play against senior competition, the club decided to explore practices that provide a varied and more professional setting – including but not limited to infrastructure and a wide range of playing styles – to create the best possible environment for future professionals. Thus, prior to the beginning of the 2022/23 season, the club decided to withdraw from the league system and created a new reserve team called 'Groupe Elite' with a more flexible and appropriate games programme.

In this new calendar, there is space for additional fixtures that can also be scheduled flexibly (taking into account considerations like the first team's schedule), against teams from a much wider pool, creating a better mix of different opponents. These include the best amateur teams from the close vicinity, top youth teams from all over France, as well as international matches against both youth and lower-level/amateur senior opponents. During the 2022/23 season, the Groupe Elite played a total of 35 games in 13 different countries (e.g. England, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium, Slovakia, etc.), while also combining some first team clashes with youth matches. For example, on one occasion, the first team Monaco squad

played against Olympique Lyonnais on a Friday night, followed by a youth match one day later. This not only presented the opportunity to play against one of the best academies in the country, but it also made additional playing time possible for those players who made the squad the day before but didn't feature with the first team.

Overall, the team can play against better or more diverse opponents (from both a technical and tactical perspective), while also providing new experiences to the players, helping their adaptation. Additionally, the organisation is much more flexible in terms of timing and synergies with first team activities, be it participation in first team training sessions or involvement in competitive games. The possibility for additional first team contact points are crucial in the team's transition strategy.

On the flip side, the organisation of such a programme is expensive, requires a lot of logistical work and doesn't provide official, competitive matches. However, the experience of the club is that player motivation at this level is usually not dependent on the competitive nature of games. The stature of the opponent is often more important; playing against the likes of Chelsea FC, even in a non-competitive setting, is more motivating than matches against lower-tier amateur teams in France. Ultimately, these varied experiences speed up the transition, preparing players for different realities at a young age.

THE IDEAL GAMES PROGRAMME OF YOUTH PLAYERS ACCORDING TO AS MONACO FC





AS MONACO

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Capitalising on the local (football) culture

France has a large pool of football talent, as well as a unique mix of player profiles due to the colonial past of the country. In addition, the amateur football culture is extremely influential, enabling players to stay at their local club up until the age of 15 and express their personality on the pitch in an independent, inclusive way. This context inherently produces a varied base for academies to build upon. The club consciously uses this advantage, embracing diversity – 85% of their academy players have family roots in another country (mostly former French colonies).

Organisational pillars of the transition strategy

Driven by the club president, the club has a strong belief that player sales are the most efficient way of remaining sustainable in football. Developing and promoting/transitioning players to the first team thus became the core purpose of the club. In practice, this is reflected in the selection philosophy of the club's main decision-makers. As a core professional expectation, the Sporting Director of Monaco must be open to working with young players, preferably also bringing past experience to the club, while the First Team Head Coach needs to be brave and courageous in giving chances to young players. Working with young talent needs to be the passion and vision of the core club staff.

Essential transition areas of AS Monaco FC

When it comes to the influence of the academy's work, technical and tactical elements are at the forefront, with player qualities grouped into two levels. Basic skills and qualities are essential to earn the chance to train with the first team, while specific qualities mean the difference between first team players and others. Technically, aspects such as first touch, passing, disguise or set-piece skills are paramount, while tactically, players need to learn the principles of the club such as forward passing and handling transition moments. Mental aspects are difficult to measure, but the club follows the growth mindset model, focusing on hard work, getting out of the comfort zone and players constantly challenging themselves. Physicality is also measured with GPS tracking and tests around performance and medical parameters.

Optimisation of the first team exposure

At the core of the transition strategy of the club, we find a simple concept: focusing on the optimisation of time that each individual talent can spend in the first team environment, be it match experience or training sessions. This has been introduced with the formation of the 'Elite Development Group'. There is a conscious effort to make sure that the third option in each playing position is an academy player who provides strong competition and is

often ready to replace the players ahead of him, not only in case of injuries, but also simply because of performance. These players need to be involved with the first team, so the Head Coach gets familiar with their profile and builds trust towards them. Many of them ultimately get first team exposure in matches as well. International breaks and off-seasons also create a prime opportunity to include more academy players in first team training.

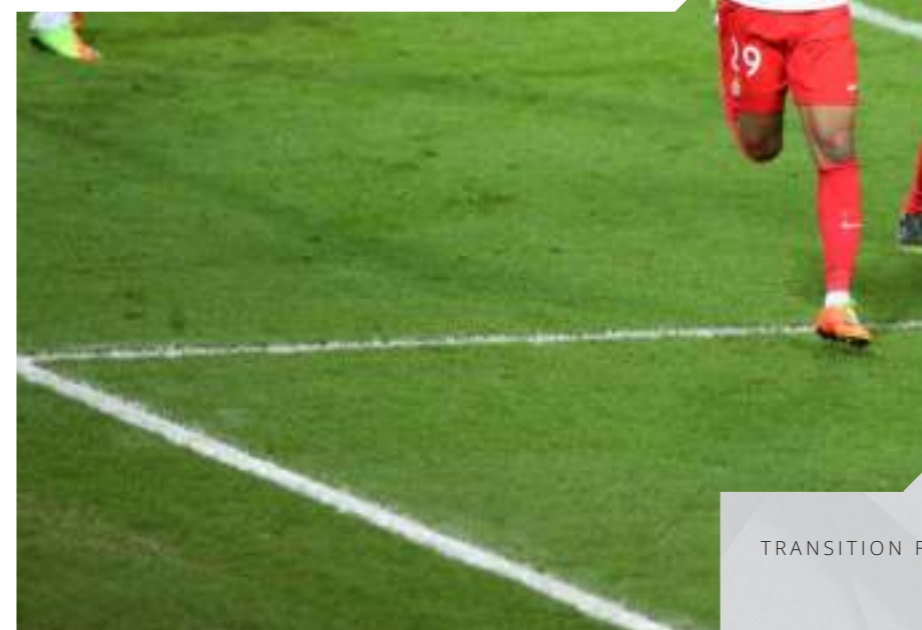
More contact points also mean better feedback towards both the player and the academy coaches, which can further improve the development plan. However, this can only work assuming an interconnected and transparent relationship between the academy and first team staff, built through both formal and informal channels.

Management of external stakeholders (agents and parents)

As competition increases between player agencies, 'extra' services such as video analysis, individual training camp organisation, or mental coaching are becoming more and more important to entice players to sign with an agent. AS Monaco FC have recognised the dangers of such services, that can often lead to avoidable injuries during off-season

training activities. This is only one example but shows why the club must proactively communicate and try to involve the agents in as many areas as possible. If a player believes that his agent has better information than the club, it can result in bad experiences. Additionally, insincere positive feedback from agents can often interfere with the club's message on how to improve.

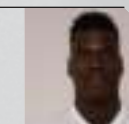
Parents also need to be involved in the development process. The club organises workshops around a variety of topics to educate them in a proper way and keep control of the conversation. Hearing about topics such as nutrition, sleep or attitude can improve how the family supports the player. Moreover, there are also online calls between the player, the parents and the coaches, providing updates about the progress of their child.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Benoît Badiashile

Debut: 2018
No. of matches: 106



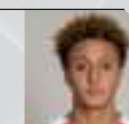
Kylian Mbappé

Debut: 2015
No. of matches: 41



Eliesse Ben Seghir

Debut: 2022
No. of matches: 19



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at AS Monaco



EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

Employing a dedicated transition coach is the first step for clubs like Eintracht Frankfurt that aim to implement a club-wide strategy for individual player development.



Club foundation 1899



2022/23 league position 7th

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): 10
 Team in professional lower division? **Yes***
*Eintracht Frankfurt II in German 5th division
 Academy teams age range: U9 - U21



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Ralph Gunesch** – Head of Transition & Individual Training

As the numbers show, Eintracht's transition track record is not among the best over the past five years. However, the club's case is a prime example of a conscious decision to focus more on transition support and individual player development in order to improve the process.

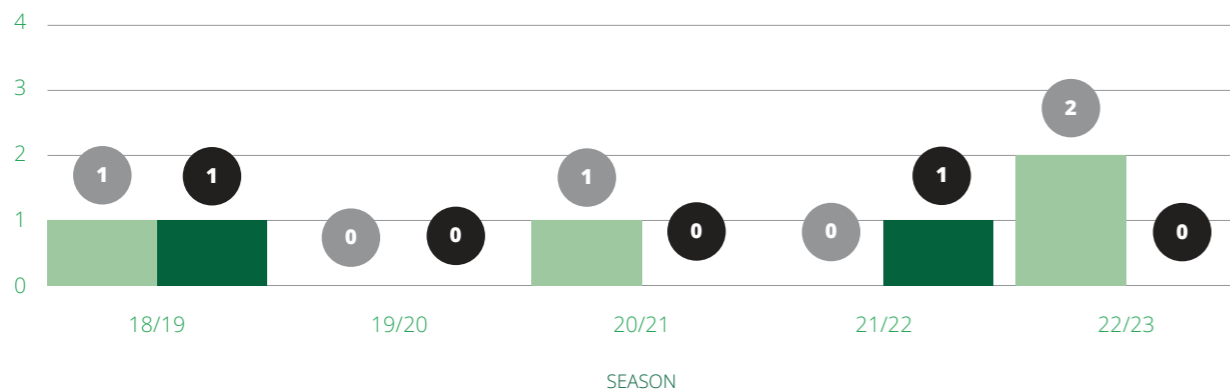
The overhaul of the academy philosophy started in 2021 when Markus Krösche was appointed as a Member of the Board. As part of the restructure, he appointed Ralph Gunesch to be the first-ever Transition Coach of the academy, with an eye on individual player development. Since then, Ralph Gunesch was promoted to Head of Transition and

Individual Training, with three other colleagues recruited to the area of individual coaching. Now, there is a dedicated individual coach in each age group which ensures attention towards the best talents.

On top of developing professional footballers, the club also puts a large emphasis on school education and personality development, with all players having to follow the club's Code of Conduct. This includes the following values: Respect, Discipline, Conscientiousness, Openness, Maturity, Team spirit, Self-confidence and Passion.

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON

KEY ● Debuts ● Transitions



Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of Eintracht Frankfurt
 Transition: Number of players at Eintracht Frankfurt reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

'CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT' PROGRAMME

In order to have a structured framework for the tracking and evaluation of the individual player development work performed by transition coaches, the club recently created the 'Challenge and Support' programme. The main objective of this programme is to provide customised, specific feedback to all participating players while setting challenging but realistic goals that bring them closer to their full potential. Players are selected for the programme based on the consensus of academy decision makers.

The process starts with **goal setting**, as the Individual Development Coach identifies areas that need more work. This is often done via video analysis. A maximum of two or three goals are then selected and broken down into sub-goals.

For example, one specific sub-goal might be the improvement in forward passing (see below). The goal in this case is to pass fewer balls backwards and instead bring the ball forward, even if it comes with risks.

It is followed by discussions with the player, explaining what he needs to do exactly, including **assistance** on why and how to do it in practice. In our example, the player needs to scan the area more, not defaulting to a backwards pass, but being forced to go forward. The next step is observing whether the player's behaviour has changed. In case it has not, the coach needs to find a **motivating factor**. In the given example, doing five push-ups every time after a backwards pass can be a way to encourage the player to focus even more.

PLAYER GOAL SETTING EXAMPLE



POSITION:
DEFENSIVE MIDFIELDER

"CURRENTLY PLAYING LIKE PIRLO WITH A GOAL TO BECOME MORE SIMILAR TO GATTUSO"



GOAL NO.1:
FOCUS ON THE MENTALITY

- MISTAKES ARE PART OF THE GAME, ACCEPT THEM
- BECOMING A LEADER, THE 'QUARTERBACK' OF THE TEAM



GOAL NO.2:
FOOTBALL-SPECIFIC SKILLS

- BRING THE BALL FROM THE DEFENDERS TO ATTACKERS. ATTEMPT NOT JUST SAFE PASSES, BUT RISKY ONES TOO
- BECOMING A MORE AGGRESSIVE BALL-WINNER



GOAL NO.3:
ATHLETIC AND PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

- EXPLOSIVENESS
- MORE INTENSITY

Each goal setting cycle's duration is between four to eight weeks, with the player and the coach discussing and analysing the progress throughout. The key is to present a challenge, showcase the tools and give feedback, so the player can discover by himself how he can solve the situation. While one coach can only focus on three to five players in such a programme at one time, it can be expanded by the involvement of more coaches. Overall, the club's philosophy is that even if one detail can be improved for every player, the programme is worth it.



EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Changing the mentality of players:

In Germany, academy players are accustomed to promotion through the age groups, they do not have to reach a specific goal to get promoted. However, the jump to professional level is entirely different and Eintracht believe that players need to be prepared for this jump in advance. To aid this, the club fills their pathway with challenges (e.g. part of the 'Challenge and Support' programme) to get them accustomed to the hard work and dedication needed for success.

Bridging the physical distance between academy and first team:

At Eintracht Frankfurt, a specific challenge in a joint academy and first team process is the physical distance as the two training centres are 17 kilometres away from each other. The transition coach can act like a 'bridge' in these cases, visiting both locations daily, ensuring the continuous flow of information.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Timothy Chandler

Debut: 2011
No. of matches: 158



Sebastian Jung

Debut: 2009
No. of matches: 115



Luca Waldschmidt

Debut: 2015
No. of matches: 15



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Eintracht Frankfurt



GNK DINAMO

By creating a strong, competitive and professional environment, GNK Dinamo are working towards finding the best Croatian talents, and helping them to build a long career in football.

Club foundation **1911**

2022/23 league position **1st**

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **12**

Team in professional lower division? **No***

*Dinamo Zagreb II played in 2nd division until the 2022/23 season when the federation removed reserve teams from lower divisions.

Academy teams age range: **U7 - U19**

ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

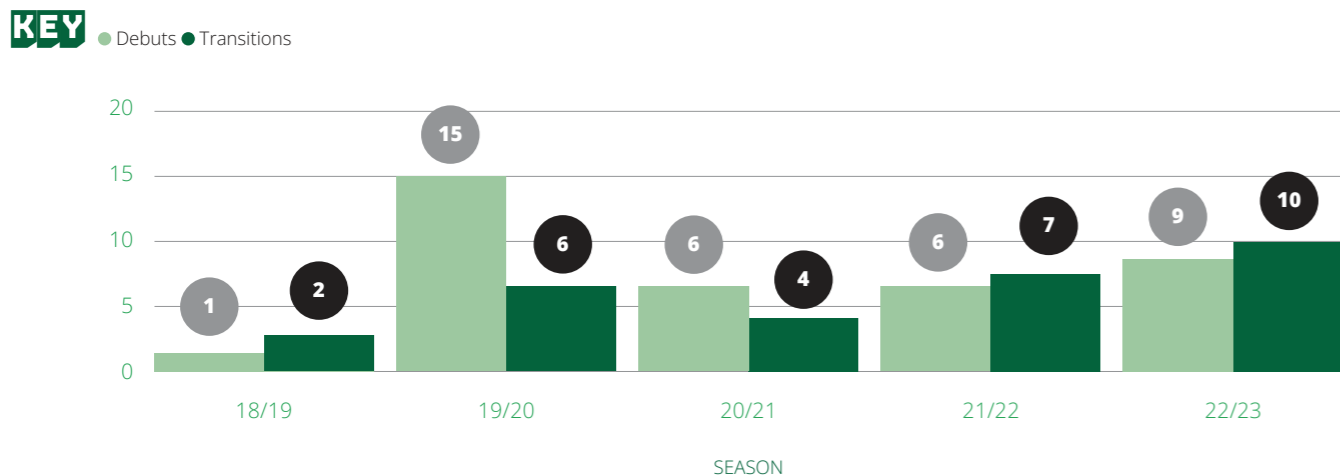
Interview conducted with: **Andelko Ivanjko** – Assistant Academy Director

Established in 1967, GNK Dinamo's Hitrec-Kacian Academy is considered as one of the best youth academies in Eastern Europe, consistently producing world-class players who then progress to the biggest clubs in the world and become mainstays in the Croatian national team (14 academy graduates were part of Croatia's squad at either the 2018 or the 2022 FIFA World Cup). In addition, looking at players born between 1995 and 2003, 83% of academy graduates are still playing professional football, with an additional 8% finding their calling in coaching.

The academy's philosophy is to focus on the education of Croatian talents and produce players at the top level in terms of technical and tactical aspects. The entire academy is devoted to reaching this goal. There are high standards; for example, only assistant coaches with at least a UEFA B licence can be part of the academy staff, while head coaches must possess a UEFA A licence. When working with players, the academy stresses the following overarching objectives: 1) cultivating healthy lifestyle habits; 2) fostering personal growth; 3) promoting enjoyment in sports; 4) emphasising academic responsibility; 5) developing players for the first team.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of GNK Dinamo
Transition: Number of players at GNK Dinamo reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



CLUB HIGHLIGHT

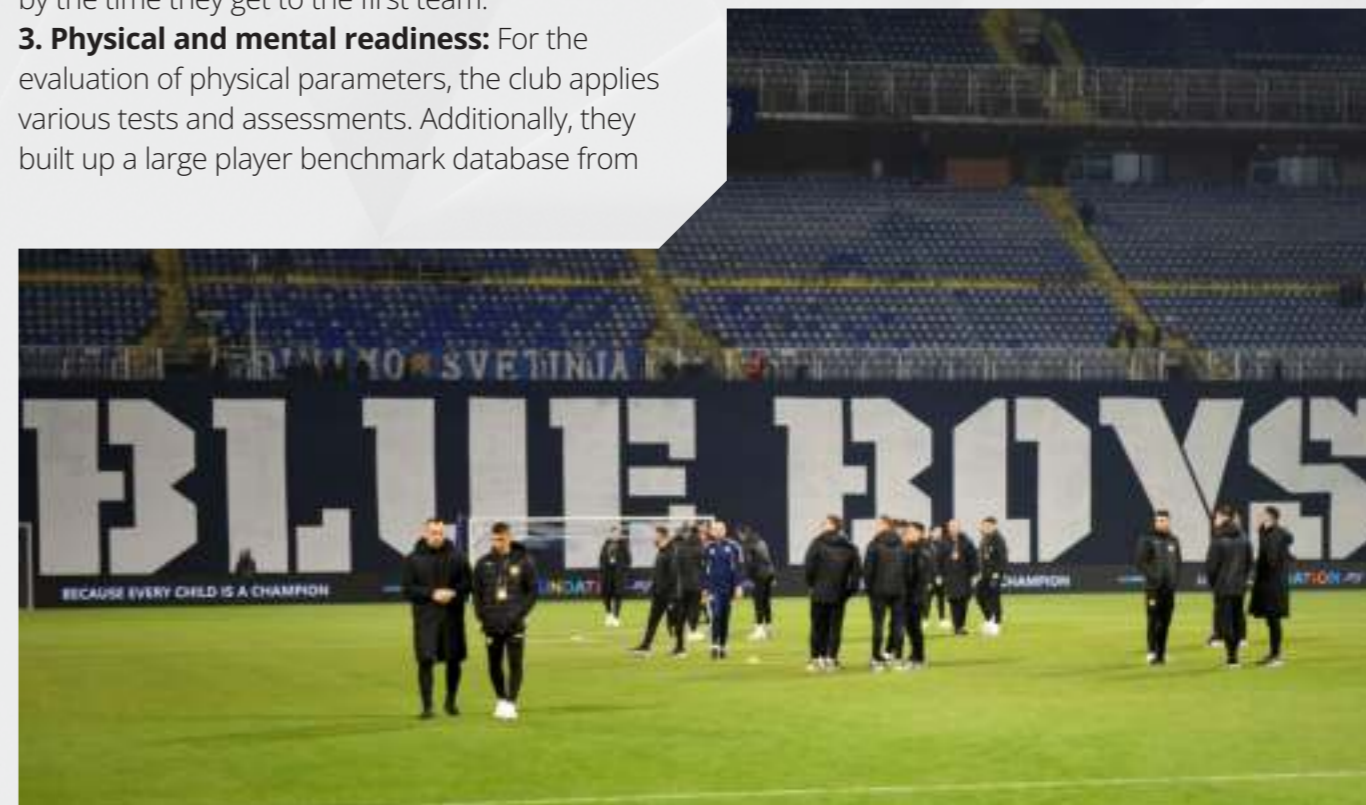
EVALUATION OF READINESS

In the view of the club's Assistant Academy Director, Andelko Ivanjko, transition to the first team is the toughest period of a player's career, mostly due to the big jump in the age and maturity of the opponent players. Therefore, correctly evaluating the first team readiness of players is the key to succeed. At GNK Dinamo, the following aspects are heavily analysed.

- 1. Age:** As a club policy, GNK Dinamo believe that no player under the age of 17 should make this jump as they couldn't be ready physically.
- 2. Evaluation of on-pitch performance and ability:** Considered as the most crucial aspect, the belief is that technical ability is not enough; long-term consistency is also needed to be shown by the players. This applies to both matches and application at training sessions. The club believes in making a habit out of always giving '100%'; this raises the floor of the players' performance level by the time they get to the first team.
- 3. Physical and mental readiness:** For the evaluation of physical parameters, the club applies various tests and assessments. Additionally, they built up a large player benchmark database from

previous academy graduates, enabling the comparison of a player's profile with past player paths. Mental factors are equally important, but it's more difficult to measure these objectively. The club uses mental mapping as one tool to do it.

4. Player evaluation by coaches: While objective, quantifiable player parameters are considered in the evaluation framework, the knowledge and experience of the coaching staff is just as important. For example, GNK Dinamo are famous for their midfielder education: factors such as player positioning, ball safety and forward progression all need to be considered. They are best evaluated by video analysis from training and matches. It is extremely important at the club to understand the reasons behind the success (or failure) in every player's case. Direct input from coaches supports this process.





GNK DINAMO HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

National context as a major external factor

The success of Dinamo (and the Croatian national team) is especially noteworthy compared to the country's population of only four million people. One aspect behind it is a virtuous cycle of success: past results fuel children's motivation to take up the sport and build a career in it. This does not guarantee success but contributes via a larger talent pool. However, in the experience of the club, when Croatian football is less successful, the talent pool also shrinks.

Identifying and preserving creativity from a young age

Tactical understanding and player ability develop at a different pace, which often causes a negative experience for players. For example, they might be able to correctly identify a pass, but physical and technical limitations prevent them from correctly executing it. At Dinamo, coaches pay attention to creative thinking and encourage such solutions. The goal is to give room to academy players to develop, sometimes even at the expense of on-pitch results.

Loss of reserve teams from lower divisions hit the club hard

Recently, before the start of the 2022/23 season, the Croatian football federation decided to remove second teams from the lower divisions of the national football league system. This impacted Dinamo and

created a major gap in the club's transition path as presence in the second division was previously used as a bridge between the Under-19 level and the first team. Senior football playing time is not something clubs can simulate in training. To soften the blow, the club decided to loan out more players than before; they are also looking for a suitable partner club to maintain the previous best practice in the long term.

The value of positional versatility

By utilising players in multiple positions from a young age, not only their transition opportunities widen (more chance for an opening in the first team squad), but also their understanding of the game improves. Learning the consequences of mistakes in various positions (e.g. a winger experiencing full-back duties) also increases awareness and cooperation with teammates, indirectly making the later transition easier.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

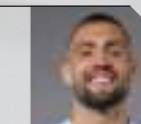
Luka Modrić

Debut: 2005
No. of matches: 73



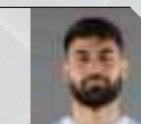
Mateo Kovačić

Debut: 2010
No. of matches: 43



Joško Gvardiol

Debut: 2019
No. of matches: 36



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at GNK Dinamo



KKS LECH POZNAN

The club sets the standard for player development in Poland through strategy, objectives and monitoring. This approach enables the club to smoothly transition young talents.

Club foundation **1922**
 2022/23 league position **3rd**

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **11**
 Team in professional lower division? **Yes***
*Lech Poznan II in Polish third division
 Academy teams age range: **U7 - U19**



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with:
Marcin Wróbel – Academy Director

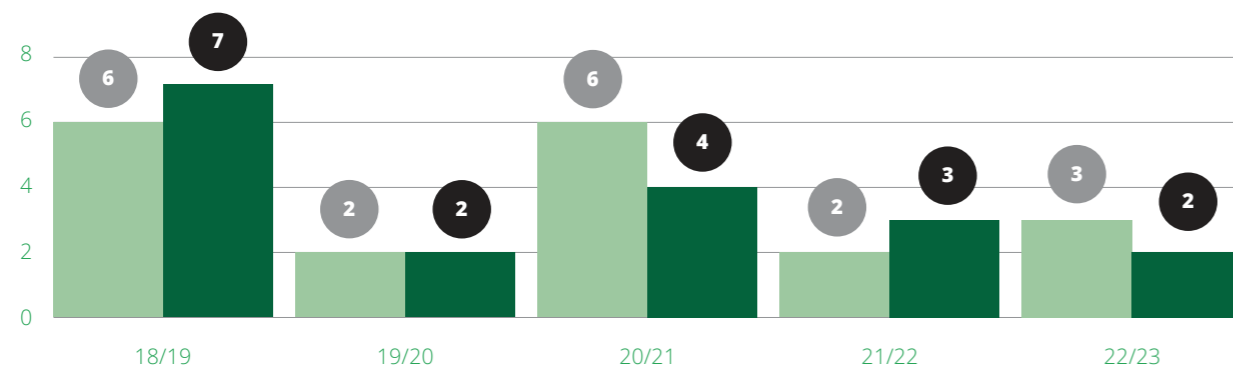
The academy of KKS Lech Poznan stands at the heart of the overall club strategy, enjoying an elevated importance. With a business model that heavily relies on player sales, the academy must develop and equip young talents to excel in the first team and facilitate their transitions to top-tier European leagues. Having the same owners since 2006 has created a favourable environment for the academy to prosper, benefiting from sustained backing and guidance.

Following substantial investment, the club unveiled its state-of-the-art Research and Development facility in November 2022.

The facility not only serves as the new headquarters for the academy but also plays a role in hosting the first team on select occasions. This season (2023/24) in particular, the facility was utilised for a mini training camp for the first team.

Technological innovations, coupled with new capabilities, empower the staff to be more efficient, save valuable time and support the development of Lech's next generation. The approach of focusing on the development of young talents also brought success to the first team: the club won the league in 2021/22 and reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA Europa Conference League in 2022/23.

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of KKS Lech Poznan
 Transition: Number of players at KKS Lech Poznan reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

MONITORING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF PRE-SET GOALS

Recognising the importance of accountability and progress tracking, the club developed a goal monitoring tool across the different stages of player development in a shared spreadsheet format. The included metrics focus on basic statistics such as minutes played, goals or information related to training sessions and injuries. Within the tool, a 'traffic light' system was implemented that utilises the universally recognised red-yellow-green colour scheme to intuitively convey a player's progress at a glance, without delving too much into the details.

The use of the system streamlines the assessment process, enabling coaches and support staff to quickly identify players who are excelling (green), those who may need further attention (yellow), and those facing challenges (red). The tool also offers a chance to step in early and address potential challenges a player could have throughout the season. In addition to focusing on quantitative data, it is equally important to understand the underlying reasons for someone falling short of the goals. Factors such as injuries or national team call-ups could contribute to certain disparities.





KKS LECH POZNAŃ

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Ambitious goals related to first team transition

Lech Poznan's pathway to success in terms of transition of academy talent to the first team is built on a well-defined goal, widely known throughout the club. With the full support of the board, this strategic goal is to have 50% of the first team squad comprising of club-trained players.

Despite challenges that sporting results might bring, the club remains committed to providing playing opportunities for young talents, driven by a long-term vision for sustainable growth and development.

Detailed Transition Action Plan

To achieve the stated goal, the club devised a player development pathway that spans

various stages from the age of 14 to first team transition. This structured approach serves as a roadmap for young players, guiding them from their early teenage years to potential first team participation. Each stage is accompanied by specific goals in relation to playing time and training that they are expected to achieve. While the pre-defined goals for each stage provide the framework, the club acknowledges the individuality of each player. Consequently, the goal-setting process is heavily collaborative and involves the player, coaches and management. It is important to tailor the process to the person as much as possible to facilitate their unique growth.



STAGES OF THE TRANSITION ACTION PLAN

The graphic starts with Stage IV, when the players join the professional environment of the second team from the youth teams



STAGE IV: PLAYER OF THE SECOND TEAM

THE PLAYER IS IN THE SECOND TEAM, FIGHTS FOR THE MINUTES IN THE SECOND TEAM, IS INVITED TO THE TRAINING OF THE FIRST TEAM AND HAS A CHANCE TO GO TO THE SUMMER OR WINTER CAMP

- TRAINING WITH THE FIRST TEAM
- MINUTES IN THE SECOND TEAM
- NUMBER OF TIMES IN STARTING XI OF SECOND TEAM / MONTH

STAGE V: '11' OF THE SECOND TEAM

THE PLAYER IS IN THE SECOND TEAM, IS INVITED TO THE TRAINING AND SQUAD OF THE FIRST TEAM, AND HAS A CHANCE TO GO TO THE WINTER OR SUMMER CAMP

- TRAINING WITH THE FIRST TEAM
- MINUTES IN THE SECOND TEAM

STAGE VI: PLAYER OF THE FIRST TEAM

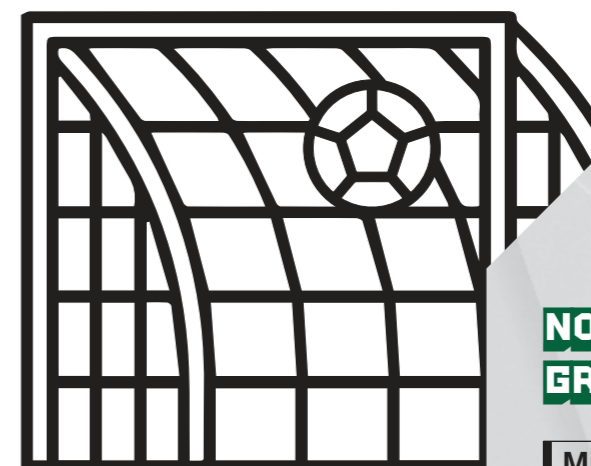
THE PLAYER IS IN THE FIRST TEAM, PLAYS (IN THE '11' OF THE SECOND TEAM) AND FIGHTS FOR MINUTES IN THE FIRST TEAM

- DEBUT IN THE FIRST TEAM
- MINUTES IN THE SECOND TEAM

STAGE VII: LOAN V '11' OF THE FIRST TEAM

THE PLAYER IS LOANED TO THE EKSTRAKLASA OR I. LEAGUE IN POLAND, OR RECEIVES MORE PLAYING TIME IN THE FIRST TEAM

- MINUTES IN THE FIRST TEAM




STAGE VIII: FIRST TEAM '11'

PLAYER READY TO PLAY IN THE STARTING LINE-UP OF THE FIRST TEAM - TRANSITION COMPLETED


- REGULAR MINUTES IN THE FIRST TEAM

NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

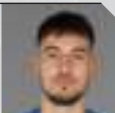
Michał Skóraś
Debut: 2019
No. of matches: 92



Jakub Kamiński
Debut: 2019
No. of matches: 85



Jakub Moder
Debut: 2018
No. of matches: 41



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Lech Poznan



OMONIOIA FC

Cyprus has a low population, but Omonoia are committed to the early promotion of youth players to the first team, which helps the best talents secure moves to higher-ranked leagues.



Club foundation
1948



2022/23 league position
6th

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **6**

Team in professional lower division? **No**

Academy teams age range: **U13 - U19**

ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with:
Andreas Miliotis – Academy Director

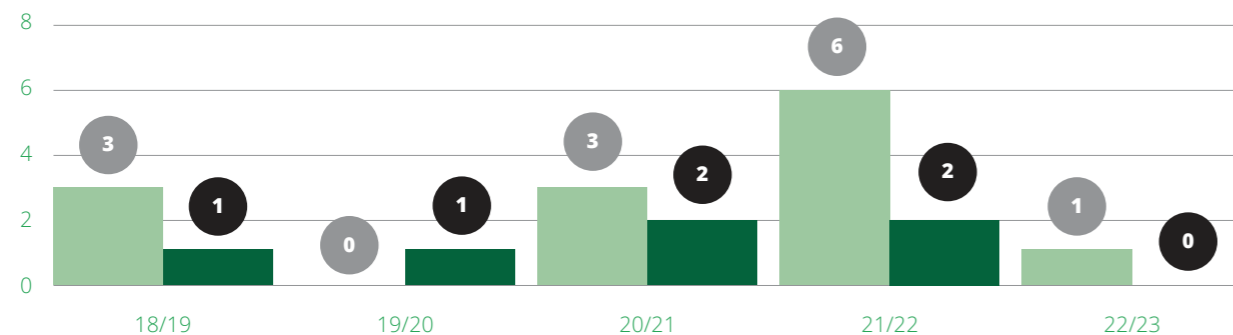
Since a change in management in 2018, the club has undergone significant structural changes, with a notable shift towards placing a greater emphasis on the academy and transition of young talents to the first team.

Omonoia operates within a relatively small country (in terms of population size), which means a limited talent pool. Recognising this, the club proactively seeks out and gathers top prospects from across the island of Cyprus, making them one of the largest academies in the country.

At the grassroots level, the academy has four development centres: two of them are in Nicosia, while there is one each in Limassol and Larnaka. At the elite level, the academy has six teams spanning age groups from Under-13 to Under-19. With a distinctive playing philosophy guiding their approach, the academy aims not only to develop the players' skills but also to facilitate a smoother and more successful transition to the first team. This strategic alignment shows the club's commitment to providing a pathway to professional football for as many players as possible.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of Omonoia FC
Transition: Number of players at Omonoia FC reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

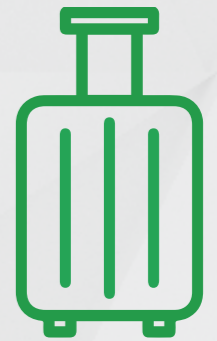
THE PATHWAY OPTIONS FOR ACADEMY PLAYERS



DIRECT TRANSITION



LOAN TO SECOND DIVISION



TEMPORARY RETURN TO YOUTH TEAM

Recognising each player's unique journey, Omonoia's academy offers diverse transition paths:

1. Early Integration Path

Players that are ready for the intensity of professional football may join the first team. If they prove themselves and achieve proper playing time in three to six months, they continue as part of the first team; otherwise, the club considers other paths.

2. Loan Path

Players that are not expected to secure playing time in the short term with the first team are sent on loan to a second division club in Cyprus to gain experience.

3. Under-19 Development Path

The third path takes players that are lacking in specific areas back to the Under-19 team for individual training and attention. This approach is tailored to their unique needs and the varied pace of player development.





OMONIOIA FC

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Overcoming initial challenges and gaining stakeholder support

In the wake of the 2018 management change Omonoia decided to focus more on the club's academy. However, convincing stakeholders of the necessity of this shift required a strategic approach. The club diligently communicated the long-term benefits, emphasising the potential impact on player development and the positive influence on the team's competitiveness. It was important to highlight long-term benefits and avoid the pressure for immediate on-pitch results.

Mission for the Future

Up to 33% of the first team will consist of former academy players in ten years' time. As part of the overhaul, it was necessary to set a clear goal for the academy. The overarching objective is that a third of the first team squad should be made up of academy products within a decade (by 2028). This not only provided a tangible target but also motivated the academy staff to streamline their efforts and methodologies.

Providing international experiences not only for players but also for coaching staff

In addition to actively seeking participation in international youth tournaments, the club places significant emphasis on enhancing the skills and knowledge of their staff, too. This involves international

knowledge exchanges and academy visits to ensure that the coaching team is well-equipped to support player development.

Staff with first-hand experience on transition

Throughout the season, scheduled discussions take place regarding the future of academy players. These meetings involve key participants such as the academy director, sporting director, first-team coach, and the head of scouting for the first team. Some of them are former players who therefore had first-hand experience of the transition to first team process; this can often help the discussions. Additionally, there is a coach dedicated to the transition phase who guides players through this crucial step of their development and also monitors those who are on loan at other clubs.

Acknowledging the club's role in the ecosystem

To support players in pursuing their dreams, the club focuses on early promotion, giving them a chance in the first team when possible. If someone proves that they have the necessary ability and application, then the club generally does not 'stand in their way' when it comes to transfers to higher-ranked European clubs.

Mitigating external factors such as military duty

In Cyprus there is an active military draft, meaning that all male citizens above 18



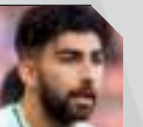
must serve for a year. While Omonoia cannot make their players exempt from this duty, they are in constant communication with the Ministry of Defence to mitigate the negative impact on the players' development. As part of this relationship, the club provides detailed training programmes and schedules to their players serving in the army.

NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Andronikos Kakoullis

Debut: 2018

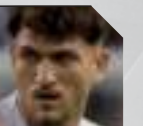
No. of matches: 97



Marinos Tzionis

Debut: 2018

No. of matches: 65



Loizos Loizou

Debut: 2020

No. of matches: 101



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Omonoia



RANGERS FC

Tapping into innovation and out-of-the-box methods to gain a competitive advantage and build the most exciting learning environment in sport.



Club foundation
1872



2022/23 league position
2nd

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **9**
 Team in professional lower division? **Yes***
*Rangers II in Scottish 5th division
 Academy teams age range: **U10-U18 + B team**



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with:
Zeb Jacobs – Former Academy Director (now Feyenoord's Head of Academy)

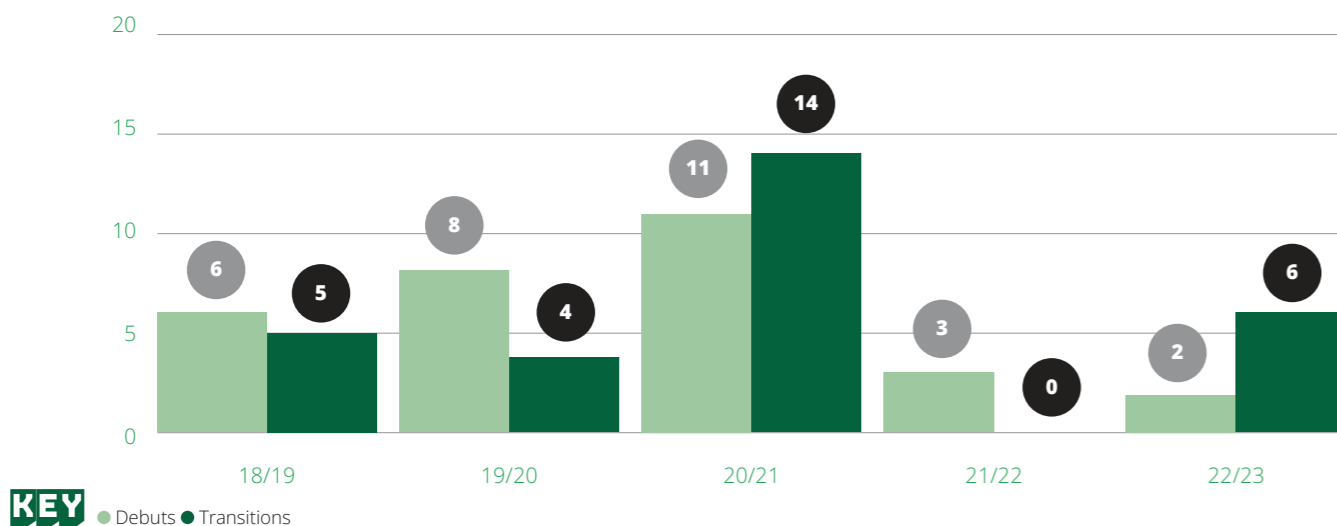
Rangers FC's Academy is a unique case study because of future ambitions and a fresh, dynamic approach towards player development and first team transition.

Zeb Jacobs, the former Academy Director of the club was appointed in June 2023. His perspective and vision is a compelling one that could be insightful for many academy professionals. Jacobs set the ambitious goal of creating the most exciting learning environment not just in Scotland or in football, but in all sports.

As part of the high-performance environment, the club's vision is built on long-term thinking, alignment between the different departments of the club and a high level of individualisation. Combining these principles with creativity, innovation and differentiation is what makes Rangers an exciting academy to follow in the years to come. With 12 academy players already in the first team squad during the previous 2022/23 campaign, the basis for further growth in place at the Glasgow club.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of Rangers FC
Transition: Number of players at Rangers FC reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

HIGH POTENTIAL PLAYER PROGRAMME

One keyword at the centre of the club's new academy operations is 'individualisation'. Rangers have created the High Potential Player Programme which focuses on five of the most talented academy players at any one time and puts them under the supervision of a talent development coach. In addition to their general training load, those selected become part of an extra programme offering a personalised and diverse development plan.

Selection of players: grading ('potential score') with a combination of measurable, objective parameters (e.g. physical parameters, technical level) and non-measurable, more qualitative (experience-based) factors.

Coordination and control: all players in the programme work under a specialised talent development coach, who was recruited to bring in new ideas and a fresh mindset. In terms of profile, a person in his 20s or 30s was targeted to be able to connect with the academy players more easily. Adaptability, attention to detail and general 'football knowledge' were key selection parameters. The coach has a responsibility to develop players from all perspectives (e.g. physical, medical and football); this delegates control of the process to a single person instead of multiple staff members being involved and creating a fragmented journey.



1. Short-term (two/three days) international trips so players step out of their comfort zone and experience a different learning environment.



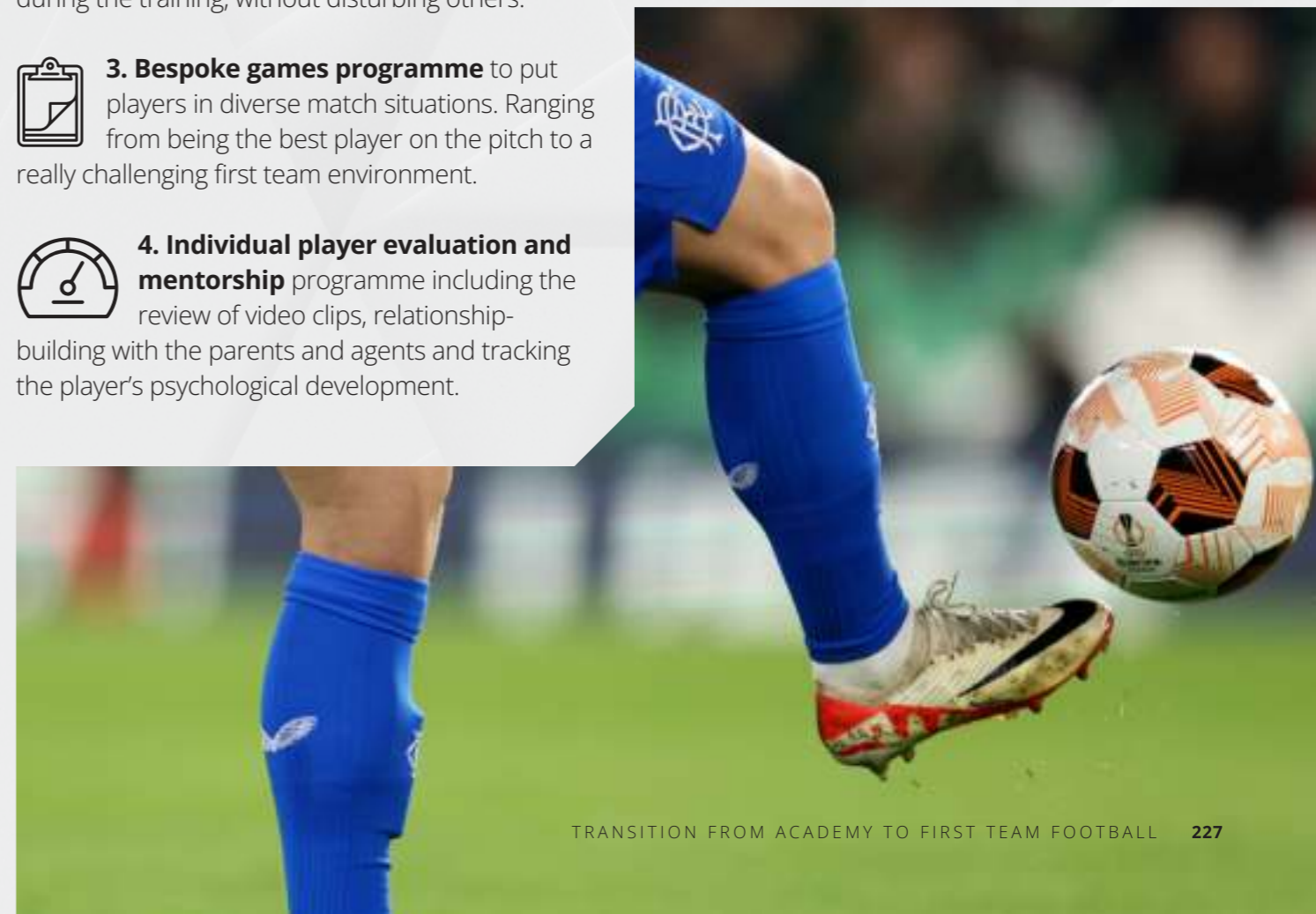
2. Individual live coaching sessions with a headset where the development coach has live conversations with a player during the training, without disturbing others.



3. Bespoke games programme to put players in diverse match situations. Ranging from being the best player on the pitch to a really challenging first team environment.



4. Individual player evaluation and mentorship programme including the review of video clips, relationship-building with the parents and agents and tracking the player's psychological development.





RANGERS FC

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Long-term planning

The role of the Sporting Director during transition decisions is to represent long-term thinking (five-ten years) while also balancing the integration of academy players with the immediate needs of the first team squad. If a talented academy player is coming through the ranks, recruitment decisions must take his progress into consideration and allow him to make the next step if possible.

Close alignment with the first team

A close connection needs to be built between the first team and the academy leadership to think together and be aligned with their goals. In the case of Rangers, the Academy Director and the first team staff are in constant dialogue; informal communication can strengthen their connection well beyond what the platform of formal meetings can provide. In addition, the club brought the B team closer to the first team by having an academy coach around the first team staff and having a first team staff member join individual player sessions at the academy.

Tailoring playing time opportunities to your own needs

The Rangers academy team played in the Scottish fifth division team until the conclusion of the 2022/23 season. However, they were not fully content with the quality and diversity of opposition and the players were not challenged enough. Thus, the club decided to create their own

match programme: 35 matches against opponents from the UK and from all over Europe. This included first teams from first and lower divisions and high-quality youth sides, as well. In the meantime, Rangers FC are still intent on exploring opportunities to play the academy team in a league setting, but in a higher division than before.

Cooperation with agents and parents

Agents and parents are crucial for the success of the players and confrontations with them rarely have a positive outcome. Instead, Rangers pays a special attention to bringing them on board and communicate transparently with them so that they can also carry the club's messages to the players.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

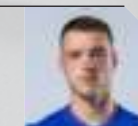
Ross McCrorie

Debut: 2017
No. of matches: 41



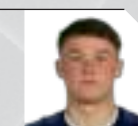
Leon King

Debut: 2022
No. of matches: 20



Nathan Patterson

Debut: 2020
No. of matches: 13



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Rangers FC



RSC ANDERLECHT

Anderlecht is embracing its local social and cultural context. Instead of generalising the transition process, efforts are focused on identifying unique opportunities in a sustainable manner.



Club foundation
1908



2022/23 league position
11th

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **11**

Team in professional lower division? **Yes***

*Anderlecht II in Belgian 2nd division

Academy teams age range: **U8 - U23†**

†No U21 team since the start of the 2022/23 season as it got replaced by Anderlecht II (=U23 team).



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Jean Kindermans** – Technical Director Youth; **Frédéric Delooz** – Youth Football Academy Director, both now at Royal Antwerp

Anderlecht's youth academy is often considered as one of the best in the world and this status only strengthened after the 2005 appointment of Jean Kindermans as the club's Youth Technical Director. After developing and transitioning elite players such as Romelu Lukaku, Vincent Kompany, Youri Tielemans and Dries Mertens, many clubs are curious about the secret behind their success.

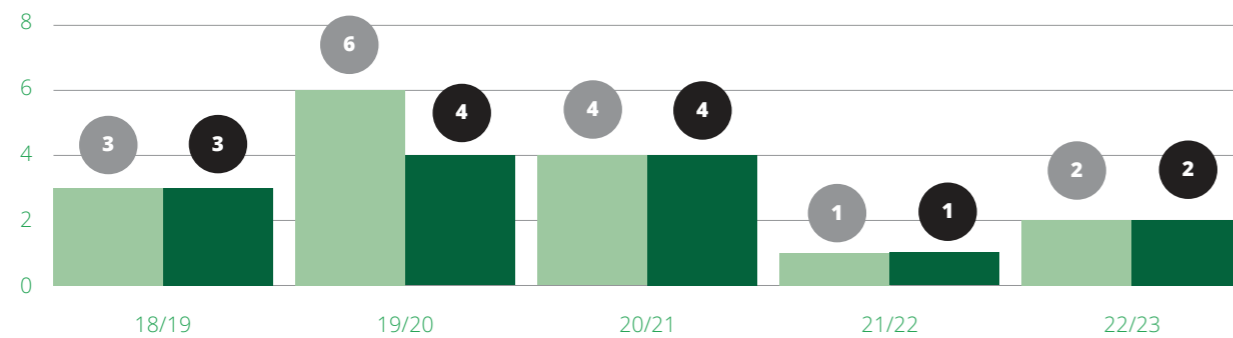
Unfortunately, there is no 'magic formula' according to Kindermans; the key is rather having a vision and always striving for improvements when it comes to processes and applied methodologies. The club's vision is built on a few key pillars:

1) developing and transitioning of young players who can join the first team, 2) reaching sporting success with Anderlecht before ultimately being sold to clubs in bigger markets and 3) playing an important social role in the community.

One advantage of Anderlecht and other clubs in Belgium is the diverse range of playing opportunities they can provide – the club's second team is in the second professional division, while the Under-18 team competes in a national youth league, making it easier to find suitable opportunities for everyone. There is also a reserve/Under-21 league in Belgium, but the club has not participated in it since 2022/23.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of RSC Anderlecht
Transition: Number of players at RSC Anderlecht reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

MULTIPLE MEASURES OF TRANSITION SUCCESS

While this study's focus is on the transition from a club's academy to its first team, Anderlecht's definition of a successful transition process provides a different point of view that emphasises the broader impact of the work performed at academy level.

On top of playing for Anderlecht's first team, the club also indirectly benefits from their academy graduates joining clubs in 'Big Five' leagues and playing for their national teams. According to our

interview participants, the examples of well-known Anderlecht academy graduates have a significant effect on the recruitment efforts of the club; these players often act as quasi-ambassadors, talking about their positive experiences at Anderlecht.

Last, but not least, the club also takes pride in its high level of general education, which is a guarantee that even those who don't make it in professional football can successfully transition into a different career.



FIRST TEAM TRANSITION



SIGNED BY THE 'BIG FIVE'



NATIONAL TEAM CAPS



TRANSITION TO ANOTHER CAREER



RSC ANDERLECHT

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Clubs need to find their own opportunities regarding the transition

Anderlecht are aware of the club's (and the entire Belgian market's) perceived role as a 'stepping stone' towards richer clubs in other top leagues for the best players. However, the club has embraced this role and built a strong income stream from the sales of young players that provides a foundation for the operations of the entire club. In this business model, revenues from the sales of academy players are now a strong pillar. Assessing a club's role and framing it as an opportunity instead of a limitation is the mindset that many clubs and academies should follow.

Transition of exceptional talents

Anderlecht has had their fair share of top-level talents over the years; the consensus among the staff is that the transition of the very best players is usually a smooth process that requires little intervention. Exceptional talents always make their way to the first team, sometimes by the age of 16. The real challenge is the identification of talents of this quality and attracting them to the club. Having a track record of developing star players in the past is a big help in this regard; being able to point to several success stories is a valuable tool when new youngsters need to be convinced to join.

'Team watchers' – looking after the emotions of players

Anderlecht have an informal system in

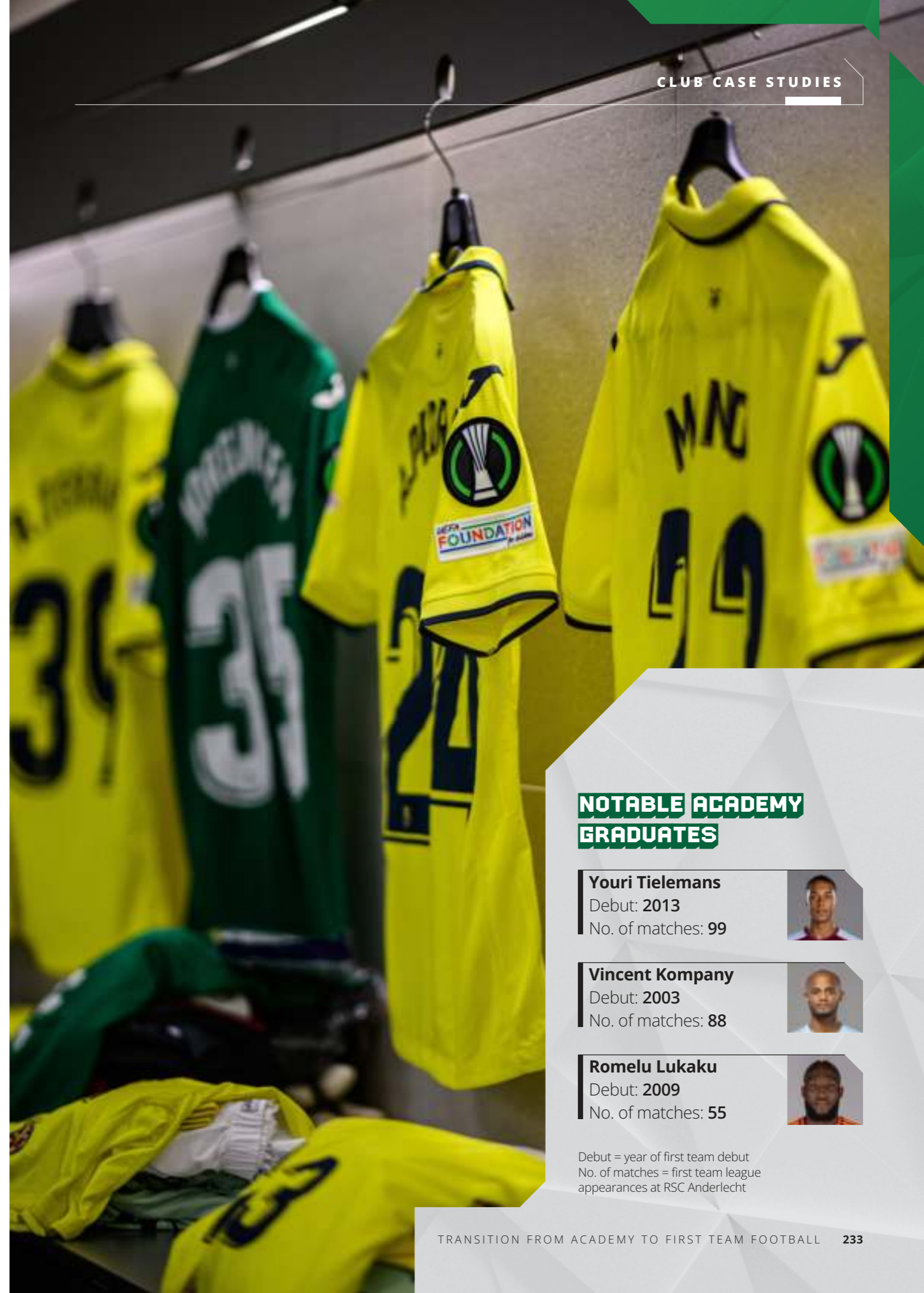
which each staff member looks after the young players and, if necessary, reports the diagnosed problem to the relevant persons in the technical staff. Players rarely share emotions and feelings tied to their social background with the club proactively, so there needs to be a system in place that detects and handles this – the academy, including coaches and the rest of the staff, need to look after the players and make them feel like a member of a family to ease their anxieties.

Navigating an unpredictable environment

Predicting a likely transition is not only down to individual and controllable factors; luck and momentum often play a big part behind success stories. Instead of controlling these factors, Anderlecht tries to foster an environment in which these moments and interactions are more likely to happen. For example, evaluators are looking for players who can distinguish themselves with a unique ability on the pitch, while also having patience and mental resilience off it.

The impact of board stability

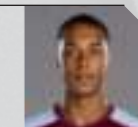
A strong vision and consistent decision-making principles are key fundamentals of developing successful academy (including transition) processes. In case of frequent decision-maker changes, it is difficult to develop a successful transition methodology. The board needs to represent rationality instead of emotions.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Youri Tielemans

Debut: 2013
No. of matches: 99



Vincent Kompany

Debut: 2003
No. of matches: 88



Romelu Lukaku

Debut: 2009
No. of matches: 55



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at RSC Anderlecht



SC BRAGA

A relatively new academy among the most successful in Europe, Braga have built a model geared towards player development and sales, while keeping family values at the core of the strategy.



Club foundation
1921



2022/23 league position
3rd

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **7 + 16**

Team in professional lower division? **Yes***

**Braga II in Portuguese 3rd division*

Academy teams age range: **U6 - U23 + B team***

**7 teams in national competitions + 16 U6-U13 teams in regional competitions*



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with:
Antonio Pereira – Youth Technical Director

Braga's academy has gone through a significant evolution during the past decade, producing results that are admired and closely watched by many European clubs. The club has not only sold academy players for a combined €100+ million during the past five seasons but have also sent 48 players to youth national teams in 2022/23, including 27 who have been also capped during this time. Another notable feat is that in the club's 2022/23 squad, 13 players have been trained by the club's academy before getting promoted to the first team. What makes these achievements even more impressive is the fact that the academy's new

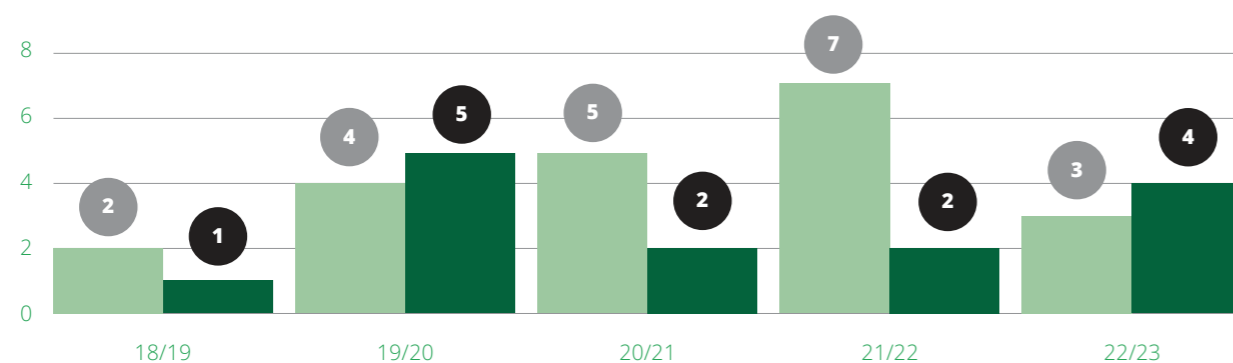
training centre, Cidade Desportiva, opened only six years ago. The facility, together with investment in human resources, enables the club to compete with the best academies of Portugal.

The ambition is driven by Braga's owner and president, Antonio Salvador, who is passionate about his vision of youth at the centre of the club's strategy. This is also reflected in the academy budget as around €4-5 million (10% of the total club budget) is spent each year to continue the progress.

The club is proud of its identity, combining a family environment with professional methods.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of SC Braga
Transition: Number of players at SC Braga reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

MULTIPLE MEASURES OF TRANSITION SUCCESS

With a B team (playing in the Portuguese third division) and an Under-23 team (in a closed youth league), SC Braga have a vast range of different opportunities to provide to youngsters before first

team transition. The ultimate purpose of this structure is to be able to ensure that every player can play an adequate number of minutes, specific to their individual needs.



B TEAM

ON ONE HAND, THE B TEAM PROVIDES PLAYING TIME FOR PROSPECTS WHO ARE ALREADY TRAINING WITH THE FIRST TEAM BUT CAN'T GET REGULAR MINUTES THERE. ON THE OTHER HAND, UPCOMING PLAYERS CAN TASTE THE FEELING OF FIRST TEAM FOOTBALL AGAINST SENIOR TEAMS, BUT IN AN ENVIRONMENT WITH LESS PRESSURE ON THEM.



UNDER-23

IN REALITY, THE TEAM IS COMPOSED OF ONLY U21 PLAYERS, WITH A FEW PLAYERS AGED 17-19 ALSO INVOLVED. THIS WAY, PLAYERS CAN ALREADY PLAY AGAINST OLDER OPPOSITION THAN THEMSELVES AT A YOUNG AGE, BUT IN A CLOSED AND CONTROLLED YOUTH ENVIRONMENT.



SC BRAGA

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Embracing 'learning by doing' as a principle

While the academy has methods to prepare the players for first team football and evaluate their readiness through different stages of development, they can only be tested and challenged when they actually join the first team environment. For Braga, "age is only a number" and thus opportunities are provided based purely on merit. Subsequently, transition success is measured through the number of minutes played throughout the different youth teams of the club as well as the number of (youth) national team appearances.

President-led, efficient decision-making

Transition decisions at Braga are made in monthly meetings, but, with an unusual participant: the president of the club. His hands-on involvement ensures that there is sufficient focus on the topic.

Experience-based demonstration of player readiness

The gap between reality and the players' own expectations is often a major challenge during the transition. In order to demonstrate that a player needs more work and development, the club puts the players into the first team environment relatively soon (training session), so they can experience what is really needed and might realise that they are not there

yet. This tool is perfect to manage expectations, but also to create motivation for the future.

IT platform to have all data in one place

Braga are currently developing their own platform, in cooperation with a performance intelligence company. The platform makes it easier to discuss anything between the academy and the

first team through the inclusion of performance data (e.g. GPS tracking, training and game data) and video cuts as soon as 20 minutes after the end of a game (both individual and collective clips).

Expanding the club's reach through academy development and successful transitions

The staff at Braga believe that the best way to build a strong local community and fanbase is to have many from the future generation of supporters come through the club academy. Successfully transitioned players can become 'unofficial' ambassadors of the club, increasing its reputation and how it is perceived externally.

Easing in players when joining the first team

The club has several tools to decrease pressure and make the transition smoother. These include the careful choosing of the date to join the first team environment, the provision of playing opportunities in different environments through the club's various teams and educational sessions about topics such as autonomy, resilience, or dealing with stress.

Last, but not least, the club often introduces young players and their skills on social media so supporters can get familiar with the new faces in a positive way.

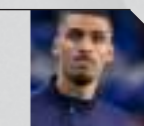


NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

David Carmo

Debut: 2020

No. of matches: 42



Vitinha (Vitor Manuel Carvalho Oliveira)

Debut: 2021

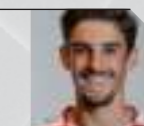
No. of matches: 42



Francisco Trincão

Debut: 2019

No. of matches: 31



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at SC Braga



SL BENFICA

Adapting academy players to new environments by keeping them one step ahead compared to their age group, while offering a realistic path to achieve their dreams.



Club foundation **1904**



2022/23 league position **1st**

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): **11 + 8***
 †11 teams at Benfica Campus + U6-U13 teams at a different location in Lisbon and around the country
 Team in professional lower division? **Yes***
 *Benfica II in Portuguese 2nd division
 Academy teams age range: **U14 - U23 + B Team**



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: **Pedro Mil-Homens** – Academy Director of Benfica Campus

Located in Seixal (Lisbon), the Benfica Campus accommodates all teams of the Benfica Academy starting from Under-14 up to the B team, hosting the development of 250 players. More than 80 of them are housed in the boarding school of the complex, too. Additionally, the club also has five talent centres spread across Portugal, taking the total number of young players associated to Benfica's academy system to almost 500.

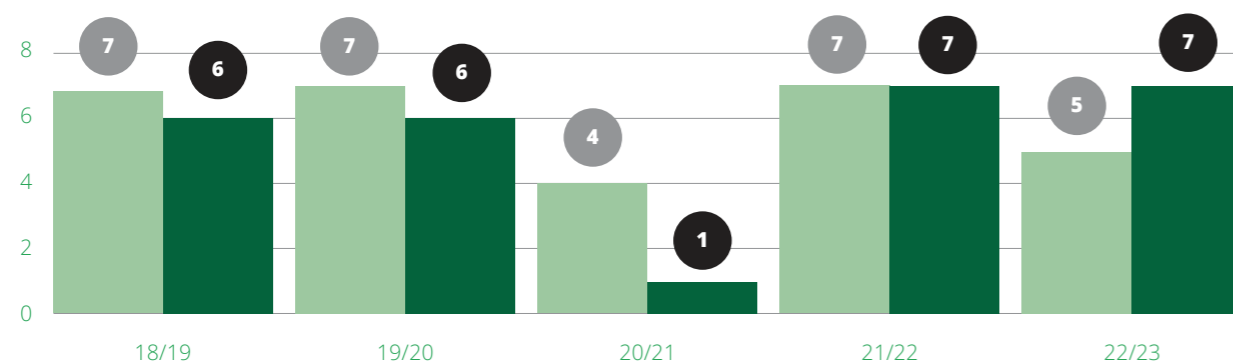
This large player base is a crucial factor behind the success of the academy when it comes to transition and sale of talented young players.

While Pedro Mil-Homens, the Academy Director of Benfica Campus, warns that there will always be better and worse generations, it feels like the latter is quite rare in this club's case. Consistently ranked among the best talent centres in the world and selling players for hefty sums, Benfica is an ideal club for a case study about the transition of players.

Through a mission of guaranteeing the quality of technical training, the educational enrichment of all age groups, and promoting human values such as respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice and tolerance, there is a clear focus on the integration of academy prospects into the Benfica first team.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of SL Benfica
 Transition: Number of players at SL Benfica reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

PLAYING AND COMPETING ONE STEP AHEAD

The key behind the transition strategy of SL Benfica is the B team that competes in the second division of the Portuguese league system; FC Porto is the only other club that has a B squad at this level. The division is perfect for providing senior, professional football experience for players on the verge of first team transition. According to Pedro Mil-Homens, this experience is vastly superior to playing time in any youth league.

With an average age of less than 21, Benfica B is practically an Under-21 team in the second tier, already providing one part of the transition (loud stadiums, some pressure to perform, media attention, etc.), but still in a safer environment. If this option were not available for the club, they could only turn to loans or search for a satellite club – neither option is preferred by the club management.

This situation also provides a 'sneak-peek' of certain first team scenarios. For example, in the 2022/23 season, Benfica B were fighting against relegation due to four of their players getting promoted to the first team in the middle of the campaign. Those who remained found themselves in a challenging situation with increased responsibility.

The Portuguese football federation also started a dedicated Under-23 youth league in 2018, which was welcomed by Benfica as it was seen to plug an age gap with their B team philosophy.

The club soon started to use this competition as a platform for their Under-19 team. Previously, it was difficult to find a place for players around the age of 18 who might not be completely ready for the level of Benfica B.

Lastly, the Portuguese Under-19 youth league is used as a platform for Benfica's Under-18 players, occasionally also involving the best talents from the Under-17 age group.

Having these diverse options also enables the club to promote and demote players flexibly, based on their individual development needs. This is also a useful tool to put them into different scenarios and see how they adapt. For example, during the 2017/18 season, when playing in the B team, João Félix was asked to become a leader of the Under-19 team. After some initial doubts, he embraced the task, which eventually aided his development and helped him secure a promotion to the first team a year later.

All in all, Benfica are using the competition structure of the country not as 'officially' intended, but as a means to consistently push their academy players to play and develop against better opposition. This often presents them with challenges earlier than at most European academies. The number of players competing one step ahead is also a key performance indicator at the academy: at the moment they have 16 players falling into this category of advanced development.

PORTUGUESE SECOND DIVISION



PRACTICALLY AN U21 TEAM

U23 YOUTH LEAGUE



PRACTICALLY AN U19 TEAM

U19 YOUTH LEAGUE



PRACTICALLY AN U18/17 MIX TEAM



SL BENFICA

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Evaluating future potential

Starting from the Under-16 age group, the club evaluates and estimates every player's future potential. While this is only a preliminary estimation that can change based on performance, it gives a good indication of the talent pipeline and facilitates recruitment as well as resource allocation in these age groups. If they identify several players with high potential who play in the same position/role, then they relay that information to the first team to inform their recruitment process. Similarly, if there is a perceived lack of talent in a position, then the club can also act accordingly. There is a similar monitoring system in place below the Under-16 level too, which also considers the expected time required to reach certain milestones for every player.

Showcasing real-life stories to educate players

The club has a general educational programme based on eight core pillars to cover the most important general educational topics, such as financial literacy, responsible driving or the use of social media. Based on the experience of Benfica, the key behind the effectiveness of these educational activities and workshops is to bring practical examples and personal stories rather than written materials or classroom presentations. Examples even include first-hand stories from former Benfica players with past financial troubles or who had car accidents.

Classification of families to monitor player environment

The educational department classifies the social background of academy players with green/yellow/red distinctions to be aware of individual external circumstances. In case of players who have less support from their families, better assistance can be offered. In parallel, parents are also often educated about how they can help their children.

Dreams becoming realities motivate future generations

Year after year, players see that generations ahead of them fulfil their dream of debuting in the first team. This starts a self-fulfilling virtuous circle that boosts motivation levels throughout the academy. Seeing that there is a realistic chance to make dreams come true at the club makes a huge difference; this is not something that every club can offer to their youngsters.

First team scouts evaluate B team players similarly to any other player

On one hand, data about academy players is handled in a live system, evaluated three times per year by the academy and the first team staff together in a traditional player evaluation method. On the other, the scouts of the first team report on B team players just as any other players from other clubs, producing 'independent' reports as an additional evaluation layer. These reports go directly to the First Team Head Coach.

Exploring innovation in psychology

The club currently employs sports psychologists and follows more traditional psychological evaluation methods. With training and tracking tools getting more prevalent in the physical, technical and tactical areas, Benfica are also looking into potential innovations in terms of training and measuring the mental capabilities of players. This could ultimately help them set more objective psychological goals and influence how training is conducted at various age groups. While no clear methodology has been implemented yet, the club is looking into tools from Europe and the United States, such as cognitive abilities detection and mental analytics assessment.

High quality infrastructure can either help or become detrimental in the transition phase

A state-of-the-art training centre has a huge impact on the training conditions and influences the quality of development. However, its role in the transition to first team is more nuanced. For example, a well-equipped medical facility can make a huge difference when an injury occurs. Players at the club receive quality treatment, something they might not get if they were on loan. However, this support system can create an excessive sense of comfort. If players become accustomed to 'getting everything' by default, their attitude can be influenced negatively. For some, it's better to get out of the comfort zone and experience a different environment (often via a loan). The club also built practices into their operations that ensure that players experience hard work and more widespread social contexts. For example, all academy teams take part in social responsibility programmes (e.g. organising activities for physically disabled players, giving out meals for those in need, etc.)



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

Rúben Dias

Debut: 2017

No. of matches: 91



Gonçalo Ramos

Debut: 2020

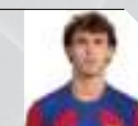
No. of matches: 64



João Félix

Debut: 2018

No. of matches: 26



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at SL Benfica



VALENCIA CF

Adapting to the wider club context not only in terms of philosophy, but also recognising the transition opportunity during a period of difficulty for the first team.



Club foundation 1919



2022/23 league position 16th

Reserve and Academy teams (as of the 2022/23 season)

Total number of teams (men's): 21
 Team in professional lower division? **Yes***
*Valencia CF Mestalla in Spanish fourth division
 Academy teams age range: U6 - U19 + VCF Mestalla



ACADEMY INTRODUCTION

Interview conducted with: Luis Martínez – Academy Director

The club's academy is built on a strong philosophy and identity defined by core values and a clear playing style across all age groups. It is based on the mission statement of the academy, "Winning is not enough", as besides developing elite footballers, the education of players is a similarly important goal.

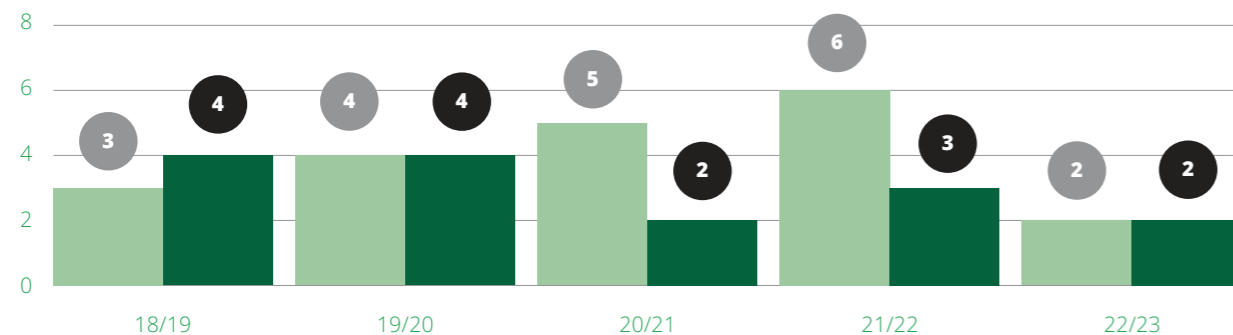
Coaches at the Valencia CF academy currently work with 27 teams (21 men's and six women's) and more than 440 players in a unique organisational philosophy that puts the players formally at the centre of the academy's structure. This makes it clear for all employees of the academy that they are

ultimately working towards the same goal: developing the players individually. Club identity is built on the following traits: sentiment, bravery and fellowship, with players encouraged to represent the following values: "Exemplary, Fighter, Intelligent, Technical and Energetic".

The goal of the academy is to consistently promote at least one player every year who can be part of the first team setup. In total, 110 players have made their debut in a competitive match with the first team since the 1992 inauguration of the club's training complex, Ciutat Esportiva de Paterna.

Debut: Number of players making their debut in the first team of Valencia CF
 Transition: Number of players at Valencia CF reaching the threshold of 450 cumulative, senior, competitive minutes

NUMBER OF FIRST TEAM DEBUTS AND FULL TRANSITIONS BY SEASON



KEY ● Debut ● Transition

CLUB HIGHLIGHT

PLAYER EVALUATION

Evaluating and measuring the progression and readiness of academy players can be a tricky and complex task, especially with the increasing amount of data at the disposal of clubs.

In order to have a structured approach to the evaluation, Valencia developed a practical framework around six core areas:

- 1) Fitness and health
- 2) Club values and psychoeducation
- 3) Player identity
- 4) Elite player characteristics
- 5) Talent development
- 6) Long-term player development

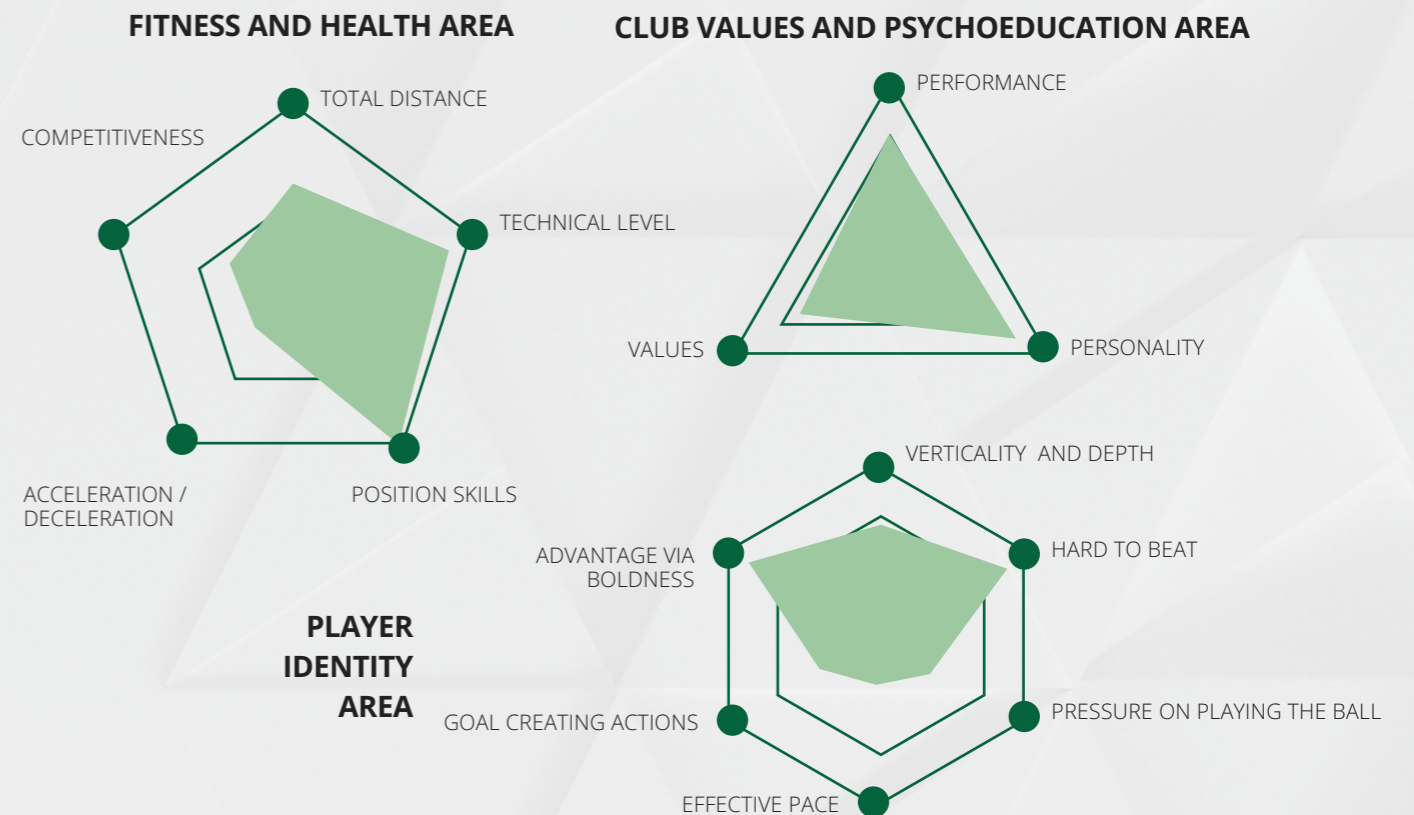
Each area is tracked and evaluated separately, with results collected into so-called evaluation sheets that serve as a visualised performance evaluation summary. This summary offers an easy-to-understand way to track each player's progress.

Each core area is broken down into more detailed parameters (e.g. technical level, position skills or competitiveness in the 'Fitness and Health' area). In each core area, the player's actual performance is benchmarked against a theoretical, desired profile via a spider chart that is often customised by age group and position.

Some parameters consist of other sub-parameters – for example, a physical evaluation parameter can include the player's basic physical measurables, such as height, weight, muscle weight and composition at the same time.

By looking at the results of each parameter, the coaches can evaluate the previous goals set for the player and can also define new ones for the next evaluation period. Furthermore, a standardised system like this helps the interpretation of the decision-makers, too.

EVALUATION SHEET SPIDER CHART EXAMPLES





VALENCIA CF

HANDLING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM

Proactive voice on first team squad strategy

The academy always tries to be an active participant in squad planning by informing the club management about upcoming prospects and by taking part in meetings about the squad and the transfer strategy. For example, if there is a talented academy player on the verge of making the leap, the first team management should be made aware of this fact and instead of signing an expensive younger player, they can turn to their own prospect straight away. Alternatively, they might be advised to sign an older, more experienced player who can fill the short-term gap while also mentoring the young player coming from the academy.

Flexibly adapting to first team reality

Factors such as the strength of the first team squad can't be directly influenced; however the academy can adapt to the actual needs and identify opportunities with a flexible mindset. In the case of Valencia, the first team's recent struggles and a period of difficulty opened the door for the inclusion of more academy players in the first team squad. In such cases, academies need to be ready to provide internal solutions to fill the gaps in the first team, which can also result in unexpected (or sooner than expected) successful transitions.

Challenges of the reserve team playing in a division that lacks quality

The club's reserve team is currently playing in the fourth tier of Spanish football. While gaining experience against senior players has its own merits, clubs must be aware of the disadvantages, too. For example, the lack of variety in opposition playing style can result in inadequate practice of certain game elements (e.g. playing against technical, attacking teams), and can possibly slow down the pace of the development.

Balancing the short- and the long-term

There are situations in which clubs need to make decisions between a player who would be ready right now and a player who still needs time but is projected to have a bigger (on-pitch) potential in the long-term. While the decision is ultimately based on

factors such as the philosophy of the club or the level of outside pressure, assessing the situation correctly is the first step. At Valencia, they created a matrix in which they visualise these two aspects for multiple players at once, clearly showcasing the implications of each potential choice.

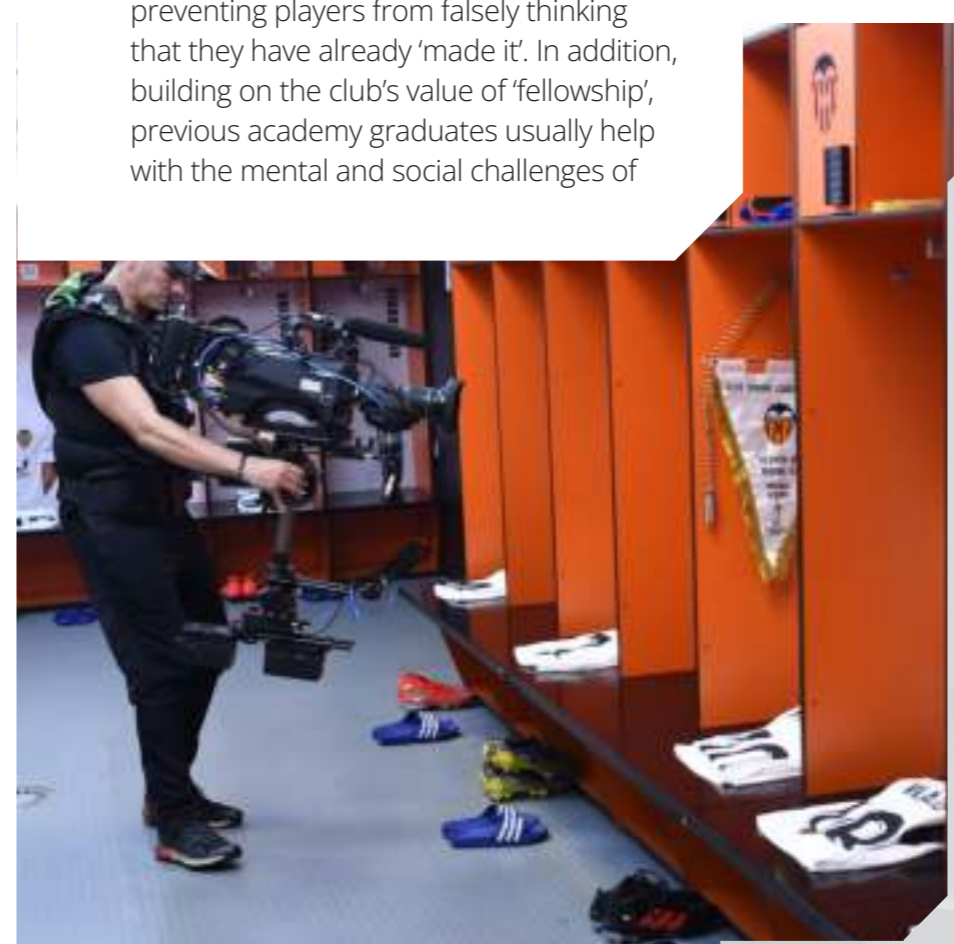
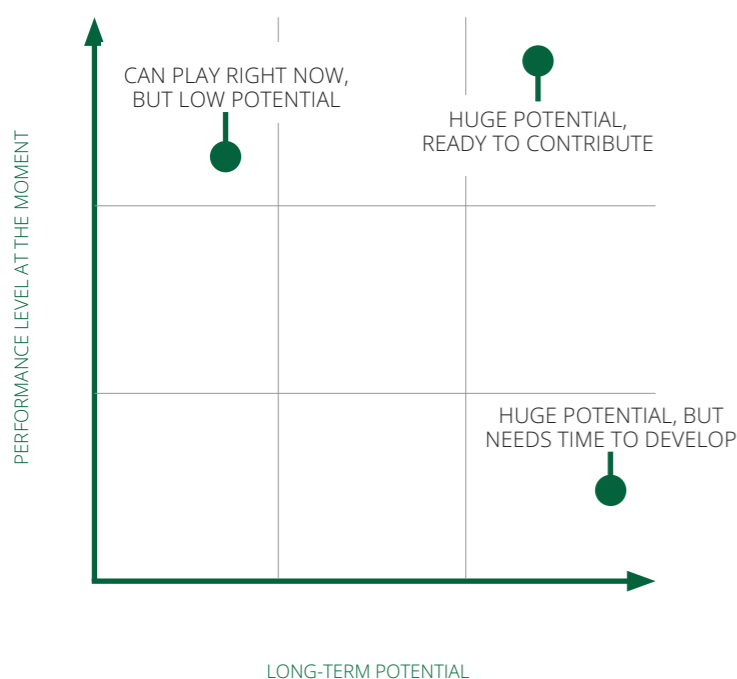
Managing expectations and setbacks

The difficult part of managing the transition is not during the step up, but rather when the first setbacks happen, and the player must go back to the academy setting. In order to handle these transition setbacks and initial struggles, the club employs talent managers (including former players) who discuss sensitive topics with the youngsters and offer emotional support. Furthermore, policies such as using a different changing room to the first team until getting a first team licence are attempts to manage the 'ego' aspect, preventing players from falsely thinking that they have already 'made it'. In addition, building on the club's value of 'fellowship', previous academy graduates usually help with the mental and social challenges of

the transition by sharing their own experiences with the academy players and providing guidance during this early phase of the transition.

Management of parents and family

External support from those closest to the player is essential, but it needs to come in a specific way. Educating and involving them through organised activities and workshops is key; however, they must be kept away from the day-to-day work so as not to confuse the players with different expectations. Thus, all academy training at Valencia is behind closed doors, to create a stable environment with as little external pressure as possible, and a 'school of parents' has been introduced where the club can explain their methodology and educate the parents about how they can support their son's career in the long-term.



NOTABLE ACADEMY GRADUATES

José Gayà

Debut: 2012
No. of matches: 266



Carlos Soler

Debut: 2016
No. of matches: 182



Ferran Torres

Debut: 2017
No. of matches: 71



Debut = year of first team debut
No. of matches = first team league appearances at Valencia CF


9

CONCLUSIONS


1 A CRUCIAL CAREER MILESTONE
 First team transition is one of, if not the most challenging step during a player's entire career. Over the five-year period between 2018/19 and 2022/23, less than 6,000 players have transitioned successfully (using the methodology of our statistical analysis) in first division or 'Big Five' second division UEFA leagues. This means that, on average, around 1.5 players made a full transition per club in the analysed sample during the analysed timeframe.

2 BOARD VISION AND CLUB PHILOSOPHY ARE THE MAIN STRATEGIC PREREQUISITES
 The foundation behind any successful, long-term transition strategy is a consistent, stable vision from the club hierarchy. Interview respondents were in great unanimity that strategic direction and the role of youth development in the overall club philosophy define the end results in almost all cases.


3 FIRST TEAM TRANSITION AMONG THE PRIMARY ACADEMY OBJECTIVES
 Eighty per cent of our club survey respondents indicated that there are some objectives and KPIs related to first team transition success in their academy strategy. This was confirmed during club discussions, as the majority of our interview candidates mentioned it is a key area to evaluate their own academy performance.

4 EXTERNAL CLUB CONTEXT DEFINES THE BOUNDARIES
 Clubs across Europe have different (involuntary) roles in the youth development 'pyramid' of the industry. Therefore, strategies and ambitions need to be aligned with the reality that surrounds the club, be it the size of the local market, existence of financial limitations or sporting ambitions of the first team. Together with transfer market dynamics, this club context already defines the type of transition models that clubs can pursue.


5 A CHALLENGE THAT LIES IN ITS COMPLEXITY
 What makes the transition even more challenging than other major career changes is the fact that multiple major shifts happen at the same time both professionally and personally. Dealing with all of these can be an overwhelming experience.

6 MENTAL CHALLENGES ARE THE MOST DIFFICULT TO COPE WITH
 Club survey respondents indicated that mental factors are the most usual causes behind both successful and failed transitions. High expectations and pressure lead the list as the most frequent psychological barriers to overcome.

7 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PLAYERS
 Motivation, commitment and realistic expectations: without players taking ownership of their own transition, even the best, most advanced supporting environment will fail. In the case of unrealistic expectations or a lack of willingness to make sacrifices, not even the best talents succeed. In contrast, successful transition examples all seem to have two things in common: understanding what is needed to achieve the dream and mental resilience to not give up during the journey.

8 SUCCESS REQUIRES A HOLISTIC APPROACH
 First team transition success is largely dependent on how the entirety of an interconnected environment impacts the player that is going through the first team transition. Creating an integrated approach should be the first step when internal operations and processes related to the transition are created or changed.

9 GRADUAL PROMOTION AS THE DEFAULT TRANSITION METHOD
 The results of the statistical analysis indicate that a longer transition period is becoming more preferable in Europe. Club discussions also pointed to the benefits of slowly introducing players to senior professional experience instead of putting players in extremely stressful situations right away. Gradually increasing playing times and multiple loans are some ways to slow down the process intentionally.


10 IMPOSSIBLE TO SUBSTITUTE SENIOR PLAYING TIME
 Even if squad places are not available for direct first team transition, clubs must find alternative senior playing opportunities as training experience or youth matches are not like for like replacements for senior playing time. The club survey respondents also placed senior playing opportunities above any alternative match programme.

11  **CONTRADICTION BETWEEN ACADEMY INVOLVEMENT AND POWER**

Club survey responses highlighted a potential contradiction between the transition importance of major academy stakeholders, such as the academy director and the academy head coach, compared to their level of involvement in the decision-making process. This raises an interesting question: should these stakeholders be more involved in the decisions if they are the ones understanding the development of players the most?

12  **HONEST AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION AT ALL LEVELS**

The importance of communication and collaboration between both the transitioning player and the club, as well as between the academy and first team hierarchy can simply not be overstated. Generating regular feedback, trust, and transparency at all levels within this environment is crucial for efficient operations.


13  **HOLISTIC, PLAYER-CENTRIC EDUCATION FROM A YOUNG AGE**

Instead of solving transition problems, clubs can also choose to prevent the occurrence of these issues with timely and strong education programmes. Content-wise, the key is to teach players what it takes to complete the journey, how to take care of themselves and what are some techniques to cope. It is the responsibility of clubs to provide the resources and time for

their players; however, these are not expensive cost items, with some knowledge can also provided by the first team environment.

14  **QUALITY COACHES CREATE QUALITY PLAYERS**

Knowledge and passion originates from the coaches who develop the players. Having and nurturing talent is thus not only a success criterion when it comes to the players, but also when it comes to the coaches who have been rated by club survey respondents as the most important internal success factor behind first team transitions.

15  **THE EMERGENCE OF INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION COACHING**

Sixty-eight per cent of the club survey respondents indicated they have one or more staff members providing individual support during the transition. This position is a new addition to the academy structure even at some 'Big Five' league clubs; however, it is getting increasingly common. Having a dedicated person to oversee the integration of the different transition areas in an individualised manner provides a high value for clubs.

16  **DATA AND EXPERIENCE-BASED MAPPING OF PLAYER POTENTIAL TO BOOST TRANSITION SUCCESS**

With the emergence of data analysis and new technologies, it has become possible to predict the potential of players in some areas (e.g. physical tools,

cognitive functions) that are crucial for a successful transition. By regularly evaluating these criteria, clubs can make more informed decisions. However, it is important to emphasise that there are always player exceptions on a data basis, so the personal experience of the academy staff is not negligible either.

17  **DEVELOPMENT ABOVE, BUT NOT INSTEAD OF, WINNING**

From a transition objective perspective, the individual development of players is more important than winning as a collective at the academy level. The work of coaches should primarily be evaluated based on their capabilities to maximise individual potential; however, players also need to embrace the culture of winning as that will be the main objective at the senior level.

18  **THERE IS DESIRE AND SPACE FOR MORE COMPETITIVE YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES**

Multiple clubs indicated that they are not fully content with the available youth playing time opportunities. This can be due to a lower-than-desired level of opponents, difficult access to merit-based international competitions or the lack of variety in match experiences. Therefore, pioneering clubs have already started to organise their own, customised match programmes – however, due to the associated costs, it is not a possibility for everyone. There is momentum to reform and innovate the system of youth competitions at the regional and international levels.

19  **THE VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF TRANSITION EFFORTS**

By committing resources, time and energy into the transition process, not only short-term results are boosted; long-term expectations are also impacted positively. The examples of successful transition stories will generate outside promotion that will attract more players to the academy and will also boost the commitment of players, seeing that somebody else has already realised their dream from the exact same starting point.



20



ACCEPT THAT YOU CANNOT CONTROL EVERYTHING

Due to the complex nature of the transition process, it is simply not possible to be on top of everything. Even if everything is managed perfectly, uncontrollable elements such as major injuries or external stakeholders can come up and put an end to a transition. Rather than committing major resources to fight these elements, it is a smarter strategy to embrace the role of luck.

21



IS THERE VALUE IN YOUTH LEAGUES BEYOND THE AGE OF 20?

Results of the statistical analysis clearly indicate that the vast majority of transitions happen before the age of 20, indicating that there is not a major need for youth playing time beyond that age group. Indeed, practical trends confirm this notion, as there are only ten UEFA countries that have any dedicated competition above the Under-19 level, while reserve leagues are even less common. With the importance of senior playing time opportunities, the value of age limits quickly erodes beyond this level, posing the question about the existence of Under-21 and Under-23 leagues.

22



SEPARATION FROM EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS INVITES INCREASED RISKS

The handling of external stakeholders often poses a headache for clubs based on the club survey, mainly due to having no control over their behaviour. However, instead of running

away from the challenge, it might be better to involve them proactively rather than monitor the potential risks they can bring at some point.

23



COLLABORATIVE, BUT PRIMARILY PLAYER-CENTRIC REGULATORY ATTITUDE IS NEEDED

From a regulatory perspective, policies should primarily follow the interests of players in order to provide protection in an environment that is tricky to handle, especially as a minor. Clubs usually do not like external limitations and will rarely take actions voluntarily, without either incentives or mandatory obligations. The positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of transitions is the perfect example why the active oversight of regulators is beneficial for the overall industry.

**ECA[®] YOUTH
FOOTBALL** 2023-24

PART

10

APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: List of interviews conducted for the preparation of the study
- Appendix 2: List of clubs participating in the survey
- Appendix 3: Full results of the contextual analysis
- Appendix 4: Detailed methodology of the statistical analysis
- Appendix 5: Additional statistical analysis tables
- Appendix 6: References

APPENDIX 1:

LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE STUDY

(Club and position as of the date of the interview)

CLUB	NAME(S)	POSITION
AFC AJAX	EDMOND CLAUS	INTERIM HEAD OF THE YOUTH ACADEMY
ARSENAL FC	PER MERTESECKER	ACADEMY MANAGER
AS MONACO FC	PASCAL DE MAESSCHALCK	DIRECTOR OF YOUTH FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT
EINTRACHT FRANKFURT	RALPH GUNESCH	HEAD OF TRANSITION AND INDIVIDUAL TRAINING
FC INTERNAZIONALE MILANO	DARIO BACCIN	LOAN MANAGER AND VICE SPORTING DIRECTOR
GNK DINAMO	ANDELKO IVANJKO	ACADEMY ADMINISTRATION DIRECTOR
KAA GENT	ARNAR VIDARSSON	FORMER YOUTH TEAM HEAD COACH AND POST-FORMATION MANAGER, NOW SPORTS MANAGER
KKS LECH POZNAŃ	MARCIN WRÓBEL	ACADEMY SPORTS DIRECTOR
LEEDS UNITED FC	PACO GALLARDO	UNDER-21 MANAGER
OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS FÉMININ	MANON ELUÈRE	HEAD OF DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND COHESION
OMONIOIA FC	ANDREAS MILIOTIS	ACADEMY DIRECTOR
QUEEN'S PARK FC	MARIJN BEUKER	DIRECTOR OF FOOTBALL
RANGERS FC	ZEB JACOBS	ACADEMY DIRECTOR
RSC ANDERLECHT	JEAN KINDERMANS AND FRÉDÉRIC DELOOZ	TECHNICAL DIRECTOR YOUTH AND YOUTH FOOTBALL ACADEMY DIRECTOR
SC BRAGA	ANTÓNIO PEREIRA	TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
SC VITÓRIA	RUI FERNANDO DO NASCIMENTO BORGES AND CARLOS MESQUITA	FORMER YOUTH FOOTBALL DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF PERFORMANCE AT VITÓRIA LAB, NOW BOTH AT ROYAL ANTWERP FC
SK RAPID WIEN	WILHELM SCHULDES	HEAD OF ACADEMY



CLUB	NAME(S)	POSITION
SL BENFICA	PEDRO MIL-HOMENS	GENERAL DIRECTOR OF BENFICA CAMPUS
TOULOUSE FC	JULIEN LACOUR	TRAINING CENTRE DIRECTOR
VALENCIA CF	LUIZ MARTÍNEZ	HEAD OF ACADEMY
FC PORTO	ANDRÉ VILLAS-BOAS	FORMER HEAD COACH
-	ARSÈNE WENGER	CHIEF OF GLOBAL FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT, FIFA
-	JEAN-FRANÇOIS DOMERGUE	HEAD OF ELITE YOUTH PLAYER DEVELOPMENT, UEFA
-	JOHAN DJOUROU	FORMER PROFESSIONAL PLAYER
-	LUDO POLLERS	HIGH PERFORMANCE EXPERT
-	VINCENT GOUTTEBARGE	CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER, FIFPRO

APPENDIX 2:

LIST OF CLUBS PARTICIPATING IN THE SURVEY

CLUB	COUNTRY	UEFA COEFFICIENT RANK (JUNE 2023)
ACF FIORENTINA	ITALY	78
AEK ATHENS FC	GREECE	122
AEK LARNACA FC	CYPRUS	126
AFC AJAX	NETHERLANDS	13
ALANYASPOR	TÜRKIYE	318
ANORTHOSIS FAMAGUSTA FC	CYPRUS	156
APOLLON LIMASSOL FC	CYPRUS	96
ARSENAL FC	ENGLAND	23
AS MONACO FC	FRANCE	60
ASTON VILLA FC	ENGLAND	NOT RANKED
ATHLETIC CLUB	SPAIN	NOT RANKED
BAYER 04 LEVERKUSEN	GERMANY	24
BIRKIRKARA FC	MALTA	349
BORUSSIA DORTMUND	GERMANY	14
BORUSSIA MÖNCHENGLADBACH	GERMANY	77
BREIDABLIK UBK	ICELAND	180
BSC YOUNG BOYS	SWITZERLAND	51
CRUSADERS FC	NORTHERN IRELAND	212
DEBRECENI VSC	HUNGARY	373
DJURGARDENS IF FOTBOLL	SWEDEN	93
EINTRACHT FRANKFURT	GERMANY	22
FATİH KARAGÜMRÜK SK	TÜRKIYE	NOT RANKED
FC ARARAT-ARMENIA	ARMENIA	175
FC BATE BORISOV	BELARUS	101
FC BAYERN MÜNCHEN	GERMANY	2
FC DINAMO MINSK	BELARUS	188
FC DINAMO TBILISI	GEORGIA	162
FC FLORA TALLINN	ESTONIA	124
FC INTERNAZIONALE MILANO	ITALY	11
FC KAIRAT ALMATY	KAZAKHSTAN	140
FC LUGANO	SWITZERLAND	192
FC NORDSJÆLLAND	DENMARK	325
FC PETROLUL PLOIEȘTI	ROMANIA	NOT RANKED
FC PRISHTINA	KOSOVO	239
FC SALZBURG	AUSTRIA	27
FC SHERIFF TIRASPOL	MOLDOVA	80
FC UTRECHT	NETHERLANDS	358
FERENCVÁROSI TC	HUNGARY	62
FEYENOORD ROTTERDAM	NETHERLANDS	35
FH HAFNARFJARÐAR	ICELAND	240
FK BUDUĆNOST PODGORICA	MONTENEGRO	159
FK CRVENA ZVEZDA	SERBIA	43
FK KUKËSI	ALBANIA	216

CLUB	COUNTRY	UEFA COEFFICIENT RANK (JUNE 2023)
FK MLADÁ BOLESLAV	CZECHIA	322
FK RABOTNICKI	NORTH MACEDONIA	416
FK TEPLICE	CZECHIA	NOT RANKED
FK TUZLA CITY	BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	385
GABALA SC	AZERBAIJAN	234
GNK DINAMO	CROATIA	29
HAMRUN SPARTANS FC	MALTA	303
HATAYSPOR	TÜRKIYE	NOT RANKED
HNK HAJDUK SPLIT	CROATIA	137
ISTANBUL BASAKSEHIR FK	TÜRKIYE	56
KASIMPAŞA S.K.	TÜRKIYE	NOT RANKED
KRC GENK	BELGIUM	86
LEGIA WARSZAWA	POLAND	120
LINCOLN RED IMPs FC	GIBRALTAR	147
LOSC LILLE	FRANCE	59
LUDOGORETS RAZGRAD	BULGARIA	76
MACCABI TEL AVIV FC	ISRAEL	71
MALMÖ FF	SWEDEN	65
MFK RUŽOMBEROK	SLOVAKIA	252
MKS CRACOVIA	POLAND	335
MKS POGOŃ SZCZECIN	POLAND	267
MOLDE FK	NORWAY	70
MONTPELLIER HSC	FRANCE	NOT RANKED
NK MARIBOR	SLOVENIA	132
OLYMPIACOS FC	GREECE	46
OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS	FRANCE	26
OMONIA FC	CYPRUS	127
PANATHINAIKOS FC	GREECE	330
PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN FC	FRANCE	6
PFC CSKA SOFIA	BULGARIA	109
PSV EINDHOVEN	NETHERLANDS	41
QUEEN'S PARK FC	SCOTLAND	NOT RANKED
RANGERS FC	SCOTLAND	31
REAL BETIS BALOMPIÉ	SPAIN	48
REAL SOCIEDAD	SPAIN	52
RIGA FC	LATVIA	130
ROYAL STANDARD DE LIÈGE	BELGIUM	98
SAMSUNSPOR	TÜRKIYE	NOT RANKED
SC BRAGA	PORTUGAL	40
SEVILLA FC	SPAIN	12
SIVASSPOR	TÜRKIYE	94
SK SLAVIA PRAHA	CZECHIA	34
ŠK SLOVAN BRATISLAVA	SLOVAKIA	69
SL BENFICA	PORTUGAL	17
SP TRE PENNE	SAN MARINO	238
SPORTING CLUBE DE PORTUGAL	PORTUGAL	33
SSC NAPOLI	ITALY	19
TOULOUSE FC	FRANCE	NOT RANKED
VALENCIA CF	SPAIN	45
VALLETTA FC	MALTA	217
VITÓRIA SC	PORTUGAL	177
WEST HAM UNITED FC	ENGLAND	36

APPENDIX 3:

FULL RESULTS OF THE CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

REGULATORY OVERVIEW OF UEFA FIRST DIVISION LEAGUES (RANKED 21-55 BY COUNTRY COEFFICIENT)

UEFA RANK	COUNTRY	MAXIMUM SQUAD SIZE LIMIT	HOME-GROWN RULE	MINIMUM NUMBER OF HOMEGROWN PLAYERS	PLAYER NATIONALITY RULE	PLAYER NATIONALITY RULE DETAILS
21	ISRAEL	45	-	-	YES	MAX 6 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN SQUAD, MAX 5 ON PITCH
22	CYPRUS	25	YES	10	YES	MAX 5 NON-EU PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
23	SWEDEN	-	-	-	YES	MAX 9 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE MATCHDAY SQUAD
24	POLAND	25	YES	8	-	MAX 2 NON-EU PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
25	HUNGARY	-	-	-	-	-
26	ROMANIA	25	YES	12	YES	MAX 4 NON-EU PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
27	BULGARIA	30	-	-	-	-
28	SLOVAKIA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 5 NON-EU PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
29	AZERBAIJAN	30	-	-	YES	MAX 7 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE MATCHDAY SQUAD
30	KAZAKHSTAN	25	-	-	YES	MAX 12 FOREIGN MIN 13 KAZAKH PLAYERS IN SQUAD
31	SLOVENIA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 3 FOREIGN PLAYERS ON THE PITCH
32	MOLDOVA	-	YES	8	YES	MAX 15 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
33	KOSOVO	35	-	-	YES	MAX 8 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
34	LIECHTENSTEIN	-	-	-	-	-
35	LATVIA	30	YES	15	YES	-
36	REP OF IRELAND	25	YES	8	-	-
37	FINLAND	-	YES	9	YES	MAX 3 NON-EU PLAYERS ON THE PITCH
38	LITHUANIA	25	-	-	YES	MAX 4 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
39	ARMENIA	30	YES	4	-	-
40	BELARUS	N/A	-	-	-	-
41	BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 4 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
42	LUXEMBOURG	-	-	-	YES	MAX 6 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
43	FAROE ISLANDS	-	-	-	YES	MAX 4 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
44	NORTHERN IRELAND	20	-	-	-	-
45	MALTA	25	YES	3	-	-
46	GEORGIA	30	YES	5	YES	MAX 9 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
47	ESTONIA	30	YES	N/A	YES	MAX 5 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
48	ICELAND	18	-	-	YES	MAX 3 NON-EU PLAYERS ON THE PITCH
49	ALBANIA	21	-	-	YES	MAX 5 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE STARTING 11
50	WALES	-	-	-	-	-
51	GIBRALTAR	25	YES	4	-	-
52	NORTH MACEDONIA	-	-	-	YES	MAX 8 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
53	ANDORRA	25	-	-	-	-
54	MONTENEGRO	-	YES	15	YES	MAX 3 FOREIGN PLAYERS IN THE SQUAD
55	SAN MARINO	25	-	-	YES	DETAILS NOT AVAILABLE

LEAGUE RANKING BY NUMBER OF TOTAL DEBUTS (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED)

KEY ● Reserve/B teams in lower divisions ● Number of reserve teams in second division ● Number of reserve teams in third division ● Dedicated reserve league

UEFA RANK	COUNTRY	LOWER DIVISIONS AND RESERVE LEAGUES				YOUTH LEAGUES BY AGE CATEGORY (NUMBERS SHOW THE SIZE OF THE FIRST DIVISION OF THE YOUTH LEAGUE)									
						U23	U22	U21	U20	U19	U18	U17	U16	U15	
21	ISRAEL	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	-	-	
22	CYPRUS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	10	10	10	
23	SWEDEN	-	-	-	-	-	-	21	-	14	-	28	30	-	
24	POLAND	YES	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	-	-	
25	HUNGARY	YES	-	15	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	12	12	12	
26	ROMANIA	YES	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	24	24	48	94	
27	BULGARIA	YES	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	16	-	16	
28	SLOVAKIA	YES	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	14	14	44	
29	AZERBAIJAN	YES	9	N/A	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-	-	-	
30	KAZAKHSTAN	YES	3	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	
31	SLOVENIA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	14	-	14	
32	MOLDOVA	YES	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	8	8	8	
33	KOSOVO	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	16	-	16	-	-	
34	LIECHTENSTEIN	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
35	LATVIA	YES	4	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	-	10	17	
36	REP OF IRELAND	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	22	-	23	-	-	
37	FINLAND	YES	1	3	-	-	-	-	20	-	-	20	-	12	
38	LITHUANIA	YES	5	6	-	-	-	-	-	8	13	-	12	12	
39	ARMENIA	YES	8	N/A	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	8	9	8	
40	BELARUS	YES	-	2	YES	-	-	-	-	-	19	16	16	42	
41	BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	12	-	12
42	LUXEMBOURG	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	6	-	6
43	FAROE ISLANDS	YES	6	9	-	-	-	13	-	-	-	12	-	15	
44	NORTHERN IRELAND	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	16	-	16	-	
45	MALTA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	10	-	10	
46	GEORGIA	YES	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	9	-	10	
47	ESTONIA	YES	3	5	-	-	-	-	-	11	-	12	10	12	
48	ICELAND	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	-	-	-	
49	ALBANIA	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	10	-	10	-	10	
50	WALES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
51	GIBRALTAR	-	-	-	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	
52	N MACEDONIA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
53	ANDORRA	YES	3	N/A	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
54	MONTENEGRO	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	16	-	-	
55	SAN MARINO	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

APPENDIX 4

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS: ASSUMPTIONS, TERMS, AND DEFINITIONS

SCOPE OF THE ANALYSIS

Q What is the timeframe of the statistical analysis?

A The statistical analysis covers the last five full football seasons, specifically from 2018/19 to 2022/23 (or 2018 to 2022, in the case of summer schedule leagues).

Q Which leagues and clubs are included in the analysis?

A The scope includes clubs from almost every men's first division league in UEFA Member Association countries, as well as the second divisions of the 'Big Five' countries (England, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain). Leagues with limited data availability are excluded (Andorra, Faroe Islands, Gibraltar, Kosovo, San Marino, Wales), while Liechtenstein is outside of the scope of the analysis as they currently do not have a domestic professional league. Fifty-two leagues are considered in total.

Q Which players are included in the database for analysis?

A The database includes players who played at least one competitive minute in the first team of the clubs of the analysed leagues at any point during the last five football seasons.

Q Which competitions are considered when assessing playing time in first team football?

A The analysis considers playing time only in competitive club matches in the senior (first) team of a club. Consequently, transitions in reserve, B, or Under-23 teams are not considered. For example, even though Villarreal CF B competed in the Spanish LaLiga 2 in the 2022/23 season, it is technically not a first team environment, so players cannot transition purely on minutes played in such B teams.

TRANSITION PATHWAYS & PHASES

Q What stages do players pass through as they progress towards first team football?

A Our analytical framework utilised three phases with regards to transition:

Phase 1 - Academy player:

generally, players who have not played any first team football but have spent a minimum of three full seasons or 36 months at the same club between the ages of 15 and 21 belong to this category. However, there were cases in our analysis in which the player made his first team debut at a very early age (before

turning 18) and thus did not even have the chance to fulfil the original criterion of spending three seasons at the club. In those cases, a more lenient approach was used. For example, when a player made his debut before the age of 17, it was deemed enough to have spent one and a half seasons with the club in order to be categorised as an academy player there.

Phase 2 - In-transition player:

those who have accumulated between one and 450 competitive minutes of first team football. These are the players who have already made their debuts in the first team environment but are yet to accumulate enough minutes to be considered first team players.

Phase 3 - First team player:

includes players who have played at least 450 competitive minutes of first team football. It is a cumulative measure, so it is acceptable if these minutes are not recorded within a single football season.

The threshold of 450 minutes was determined based on club interviews and the results of the ECA Member Club survey conducted in relation to this study.

Q If a player was part of two different academies between the ages of 15 and 21 for three seasons (or 36 months), are both clubs credited when the transition to the first team occurs?

A No, the player is assigned to their chronologically last academy for the purposes of the analysis. This ensures that each player is related to a single academy in the study.

Q What kind of transition pathways are analysed?

A Transitions in the analysis can be:

1. Direct: The term 'direct' in this context refers to an academy player who makes their debut or transition at the same club to which they belonged as an academy player. It is worth noting that during the interim period between the debut and first team transition, the player may still be on loan at another club. The key is which team they play for when an important milestone is reached.

2. Indirect: In this scenario, the selected academy player makes their debut or completes the transition in a senior team other than the one they originally belonged to. Importantly, while the player is at the debut/transition club, they are on loan from their parent club.

Q Is there an age limit for players to transition to first team status?

A Based on our discussions with various industry stakeholders, the common view is that ideally, a player should have already transitioned to first team status by the age of 23. As a result, once a player turns 23 years old at the start of a season, they are no longer considered in our analysis.

APPENDIX 6:

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