

The Elite Player Development



Introduction

The following essay outlines a personal way of understanding the football phenomenon focusing in particular on the formation of the elite player. It is an individual perception formed through the author's specific experience, knowledge and analysis.

The goal of this analysis does not intend to dogmatize nor establish unchangeable maxims. It does, however, intend to encourage further analysis and generate discussion regarding the important labor of developing elite level footballers.

The Elite Player versus the Player in Formation:

It is necessary to commence by clearly distinguishing what is an elite player or a 'developed' player, and a player that is 'developing'. This process is made easier when we appreciate that a child is not a 'mature human being' and does not yet possess adult capabilities.

- Elite player: a player that is part of a team that participates in an elite professional competition. In Spain, this would be the top two football divisions.
- A player in formation (Young Talent): a young player that possesses sporting development potential that can enable them to reach a high performance level in the future, even though their current performance level is not one of the highest or distinguished ones.
- A player that is developing is a being in development where the learning process needs to prevail over the immediate or early performance levels. In this manner there is a link with the young boy or child that needs to develop all of his potential.

A 'developed' player is a mature being; here performance levels prevail over the learning process. In this case we find those players that can participate in official adult competitions at the highest level. This leads us to consider how necessary it is to differentiate between 'performance' and 'potential' or learning process. The youth that has natural or genetic physical sporting characteristics (Nature) will have more possibilities to reach future high performance levels than those less developed. But it seems that genes alone do not determine us; they only predispose us and it is necessary to pit the individual against adequate stimuli (Nurture) that enable the necessary interaction for the full development of individual potential.



There is no doubt that when both aspects come into perfect play (Nature+ Nurture) we will obtain the 'genial' player. But 'geniuses' do not work less, they only begin with an advantage from the starting line, and thus it is wholly necessary to put in the effort to take full advantage of the 'genes'. It is evident that our intervention over nature is not possible, and because of that we need to focus our efforts on the organization of the most adequate stimuli. By creating the best 'vital surrounding' or 'ecological niche' the child can take the initiative to interact with their surroundings guaranteeing the full and optimum development of his potential.

Our formation goal will thus be to ensure that every child is able to fulfill their full potential.

Accordingly, the fact that we are not able to intervene (at least at the moment) on nature does not mean that we should not know, as best as we can, the starting point of every subject, and in doing so, use that knowledge to facilitate the application of the most precise measures according to each individual. Currently there is a prevailing form of knowledge or valuation used in the evaluation of a child that has arisen from the 'adult' dynamic, and thus, is inadequate for the being in development.

It is necessary to know and assume with all of its consequences the differentiating measures that are needed at each level. In this regard, we cannot continue to classify the child with the references of adult criteria, such as "the immediate, premature, momentary or current performance level". Meaning, we classify a player from the youngest age (6, 7, 8

years old), in the same way as we also classify a professional player. This applies a 'diagnosis' that only considers the superficial and not the profound, and it is because of that that we usually say that we have a 'future football star' when we see them perform well in one or various games. During the formation process we are in need of a valuation criteria more in tune with the essential propriety of the being in development, which is no other than their future possibilities: their 'potential'.

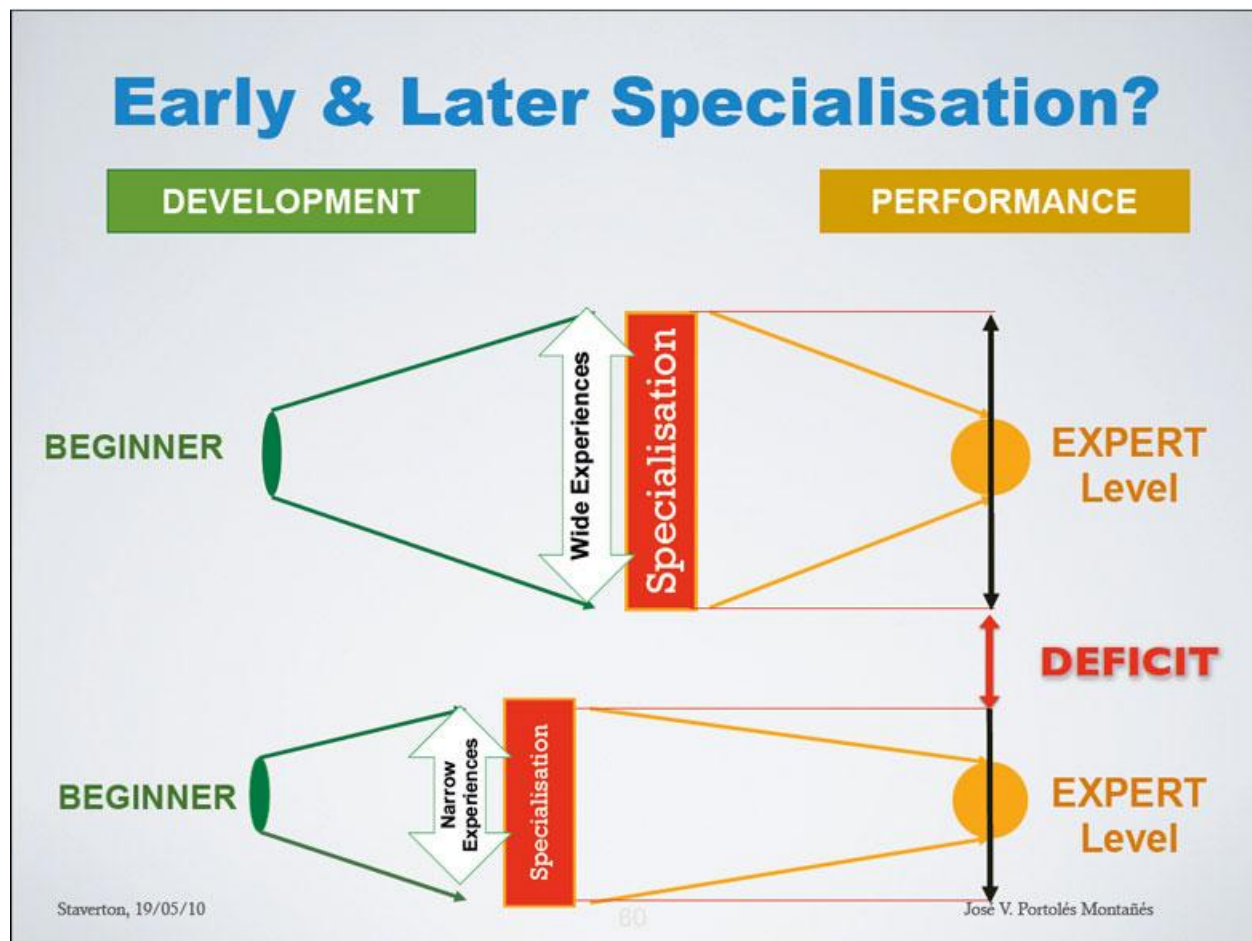
Accordingly, a process of "PRO-gnosis" is proposed for application, more in tune with the knowledge that will bring us closer to defining how far each individual can go in the future in accordance with the potential that is available to them. In this case we have to 'play down' the actual performance, pondering its value in relation with other criteria more relative to what is purely 'human' and less relative to the 'football sense'. At this point we can say that 'talent in football' or the future elite player is not only the one that performs well at an early age, but also has a greater development potential than other players.



The beginning of Delayed Performance

To be coherent with the preceding point it is necessary to establish action measures that ensure the full development of individual potential. To respect this goal requires us to respect the maturity stages of the being in development and all the stages that all human beings go through in different moments and with different rhythms.

Our work with children cannot turn into a speed race, with expectation of great performance levels as soon as possible and at the earliest possible ages. The use of means and methods that lead to an early specialization will have an inevitable negative effect, seeing that -as is evident in any profession-any specialization implies a narrowing towards a determined direction.



The deficit shows the loss of potential

Additionally, the premature or early performance level does not guarantee future performance levels at a mature age. A clear example follows: if you analyse the first four senior teams in the World Cup finals, you will see that there is no correlation between those that reach the four privileged positions in the Under-17s, Under-19s, and Under-20s.

In an analysis of the age of optimum performance levels of FI FA's 'best players' of the 2006 World Cup, we can see that during the tournament they were on average 29.9-years-old, and what is more important, they started to take part in the senior team on average when they were 22.65-years-old. This research leads us to a process that suggests that the peak performance level is reached around the 22-year-old mark and that there is a clear possibility of seven continuous years of high performance levels.

To not respect this principle and to be in a hurry to speed up performance levels, leads to, among other things, suffering what has been called the 'Relative Age Effect'; that is to say, to have more children in a team that are born in the first semester of the year (the competitions that consider that every age category is organized according to the natural year of birth). Normally these are children that have an advantage in their growth and maturity. At an early age that is a really important advantage in the "immediate

performance”, but that is lost overtime as they start to reach maturity and they can even be overtaken by those children that have matured in the latter stages.

The children that are born first are given the priorities and opportunities that the children born later do not have, but that is still a loss of future resources because it has been demonstrated at the professional level that the differences between those born in the first semester and the second semester are equal to the point of reaching percentages of 55% to 45%.

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