

Football Academies Synopsis

In the March edition of the World of Soccer Newsletter earlier this year, we linked you to an article in the British Telegraph newspaper about the Football (soccer) Academies set up by the professional clubs in England.

It was a long article, but a really interesting one. So we have done a synopsis of the article as we feel it is of great importance to anyone involved in the development of elite players both sides of the Atlantic.

While the situation in England is different than the United States and Canada there are many parallels. The chances of making the pro ranks is minimal - both in the UK and in North America. Fortunately, there is a much better chance in Canada and the United States of winning an athletic scholarship to play top-class college soccer. But how many do?

So here is the précis or you might want to go to the full article by clicking [here](#).

Football academies: kicking and screaming

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Football academies were developed by the leading clubs so that they could identify and nurture talented players from as young as eight.

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The 9,000 boys in their ranks are desperate to succeed, but only a handful will make it to the top.

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Last April, Danny, 16, received devastating news. After six years at a London football academy he was told he was no longer wanted.

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Danny is obsessed with football.

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But now his fantasy future is over.

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Danny has not turned his back on the dream. He still plays for a local club and for his school. He still hopes he will be spotted.

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The trouble is, scouts like potential: six-, seven-, eight-, nine-year-olds.

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Danny is not unique, of course. Any elite sport or rarefied field with few slots at the top is underpinned by an invisible stratum of talented also-rans. They are very, very good and work very, very hard. They deserve to be rewarded, but they won't be

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All the Premiership and leading Championship clubs have academies. The rest have schools of excellence. In all, there are some 9,000 boys attending these intensely competitive places. More than 90 per cent of those who join a Premier-ship academy will fail to make it into the first team. Most won't even become professional footballers.

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A friend's eight-year-old was scouted for Chelsea, and he went from being top of the class to the skiver in the back. 'Why aren't you trying any more?' his mother asked. 'I'm a footballer and I'm going to be rich,' he replied. Needless to say, he was 'released' a year later.

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At eight he still had time to recover. At 15 he might have sunk into a depression for the rest of his life. As one observer said: 'The shedding of people at 16 has always been football's hidden secret. The brutality of axing kids hasn't been improved by the academy system in any way. In fact, it's probably made it worse.'

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The key advantage to being in an academy is you get to play as much football as possible (a minimum of three hours' training a week at age eight; five hours for 12-16 years olds - time spent passing, moving, finishing, over and over again, so the skill becomes ingrained in the muscles).

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I look at Number 5, cheated of his dream by heavy legs. Summer-borns are similarly outcast. Far more Premiership footballers are born in October and November than in June and July. 'They are bigger and make more of an impact on the pitch.'

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Football academies were set up in 1998, following a landmark report, Charter for Quality, by Howard Wilkinson, 65, then the Football Association's technical director, and now chairman of the League Managers' Association.

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Before academies, most clubs had 'centres of excellence' for talented young players.

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The pinnacle of football education was Lilleshall Hall in Shropshire, a footballing boarding school for England's elite 18 players, selected in trials at age 14. (Jermain Defoe, Michael Owen, Joe Cole, Scott Parker and Wes Brown are all Lilleshall graduates.)

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'The Lilleshall model was very efficient,' Wilkinson recalls, 'apart from the huge difficulty and inequity of selecting 18 players at such a young age from the whole of England.'

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The aim of academies, he says, 'was to establish a similar model to Lilleshall, but to do it locally and therefore the process of selecting would be fairer because you would have a large pool.'

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At academies, boys are signed from age eight to 16.

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At 16 boys become full-time 'scholars', often moving near the club to lodge with landladies. They are paid £100 a week as an apprentice, and education becomes the responsibility of the academy.

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At 17 they sign a 'professional' contract, which means they can start earning money. Just how much is down to the club. The average is £15-30,000.

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The FA rule is that 8-11s have to live within 60 minutes'

travelling time of the training ground; 12-16-year-olds within 90 minutes. This gives Tottenham Hotspur a catchment area that runs from Bedford and Buckinghamshire through north and south London around to Essex, and a pool of 15-20 million people.

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South-ampton academy, on the other hand, is less lucky. Half its radius is the English Channel.

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Now, of course, academies are under attack. People argue boys are brought in too young; that clubs do too little for the schools and amateur clubs from which boys are taken, and that, ultimately, the pressure on boys and families simply isn't worth it because there are too few places at the end of it all, and those that do make it aren't good enough anyway.

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'Opportunities [at the top level] are very tight,' agrees John McDermott, the academy head at Tottenham. 'Boys have to realize the path is not what it was 10 years ago.' You once had to be among the best players in Britain, now you have to be among the best in the world to make it here

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At age 16 the 90-minute rule goes out of the window and clubs start to bring in boys and their families from all over the world

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Martin Tolworth knows what happened to his son, Robert, 24, after he was 'dumped' from Crystal Palace Academy, aged 16, after six years with the club. 'He went from being as high as a kite to devastation,' he says. 'One Saturday he was told he'd been picked for a scholarship, that after six years of waiting he'd got to the first rung of the ladder, a young apprentice. But then a new manager went in and the following Saturday, he said, "No, we're not going to pick you."  Robert got angry, put on weight, drifted out of football and is now a carpenter in Spain.

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Glenn Hoddle, ex-footballer, former England coach and manager, agrees. 'There are no rights or wrongs in football,' he says, 'One man's opinion doesn't mean it's another's.' And to prove his point, last year Hoddle launched the Glenn Hoddle Academy, a live-in academy in southern Spain, to offer a route back into professional football for those discarded by the system.

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November 13, 2007, and Watford academy under-14s are working out, sprinting the length of the pitch, tracking back and marking. It is 11 on a Thursday morning and the boys should be at school. But they are at school. In September 2007, Watford moved its 11-16-year-olds to Harefield Academy, a secondary school in Uxbridge, west London, arguing that for the club to come to the boys made more sense than the other way around.

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So do academies treat boys like commodities? Some said yes.

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One regime was so 'brutish' that the parents felt too scared to tell the coach their son had glandular fever. 'We didn't want him to look weak,' his father says. Each academy is different. Manchester City's is hugely successful.

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'There is so much pressure at the top, managers want instant results. They don't have time to work on the players and grow them.'

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At the Tottenham academy, John McDermott talks through options for boys who are 'released': lower league club; university (both here and in the States) to study something like sports science; club abroad; other apprenticeships.

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The young players' chances of reaching it were minuscule in the first place. 'The boys are told that, the parents are told that, but you're also trying not to burst their dreams.' That's the thing about football academies, he says. 'We're focused on success, not failure.'

To read the full article click [here](#).

Editor's Comment:

Pretty daunting stuff. Many soccer clubs are immoral. Many parents are driving their children towards failure.

Tough one! As a beneficiary of the privilege of being involved in the professional game for over 30 years, I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

But for the 99.9% who don't make it, it can be a lifetime negative. We must bring a better perspective to the academies. Or develop a different system. More in future newsletters.