

A world class academy in professional football: The case of Ajax Amsterdam

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Abstract

The holistic ecological approach puts an emphasis on the environment in which prospective elite athletes develop. Applying the holistic ecological approach, this article examines talent development among male under-19 football players at Ajax Amsterdam which has a history of successfully developing several of its juniors to top-level international players. Principal methods of data collection include interviews, participant observations of daily life in the environment, and analysis of documents. The environment was centred around the relationship between players and a clubhouse community consisting of a team of coaches, teachers, experts, and managers that helped the players to focus on: Handling dual careers (sport and school), developing mental toughness, social skills and work ethic. Furthermore, the environment was characterised by a strong, open, and cohesive organisational culture based on each player as an investment, social responsibility and individual development before winning matches. We argue that the holistic ecological approach holds the potential to inspire coaches and practitioners to be sensitive to and analyse not only the individual player's athletic development but also the overall strategies and organisational settings, in the talent development environment.

Keywords: athletic talent development environment, career transition, organisational culture, talent development, soccer, elite sport

Introduction

In professional football, the primary concern is achieving good results and winning the next game, thereby satisfying the expectations of sponsors and the media (Storm, 2012; Mielke, 2007). Moreover, the overall aim of every professional football club is to develop talented players for their own team or at a later age trading player for other teams for a reasonable transfer fee. In order to do so, sports organisations must provide a constantly marketable product (i.e., results, entertaining performances, star players) to a set of highly demanding external stakeholders (e.g., fans, media, sponsors) (Mielke 2007) for the business to achieve its short and long-term aspirations (Cruikshank & Collins, 2012). This "short-termism" of football (i.e., a need to win, avoid relegation and survive at all costs) impacts the organisational position, philosophy and subsequent operating culture of the organisation (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012).

The vast majority of the research within the field of talent development has focused on the individual and how external factors influence one's athletic performance (Stambulova, 2009; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Being part of a professional football team could, however be quite challenging for most talented football players, as indicated by a high dropout rate (Güllich, 2014). A common assumption would be that the best players are the ones with the best skills at an early age, indicating the importance of talent and high-level skills

compared to their peers. Studies on talented football players trying to find common predictors on factors affecting the likelihood of succeeding as professional players have ended up short, even though differences have been found between the identified players in skills such as: physiological skills (Huijgen, Elferink-Gemser, Lemmink, & Visscher, 2014), dribbling and ball control (Figueiredo, Goncalves, Coelho e Silva, & Malina, 2009), and psychological skills such as: motivation (Forsman, Blomqvist, Davids, Liukkonen, & Konttinen, 2016), and self-referential cognitions (Höner & Feichtinger, 2016).

Others have, however, highlighted that the environment and contextual elements within a professional football team may be successful factors in themselves (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004). Along these lines, the field of sport psychology and talent development previously looked into individual factors and not looked at context, cultural aspects and broad societal factors (Stambulova, 2009). However, lately, organisational research in the quest to optimise performance has received considerable attention (Wagstaff, 2017). Previous research in talent development has focused on individuals as well as the path to elite level (Stambulova, 2009), and recently more research has focused on a holistic ecological approach of talent development. This results in shifting the focus towards interactions and culture as essential aspects of successful talent development environments in elite sport. In line with these perspectives, recent literature on football

and psychology (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010; Nesti, 2010; Dosil, 2006; Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, 2011) claims that for practitioners and coaches to be effective in football organisations, they need to understand the culture within which they are operating.

The Holistic Ecological Perspective on talent development in sport

The holistic ecological approach by Henriksen and colleagues (Henriksen, Stambulova, Roessler, 2010a; 2010b; 2011) puts an emphasis on the environment in which prospective elite athletes develop. The athletic talent development environment (ATDE) attributes considerable attention to the organisational context of the environment. Two working models represent the holistic ecological approach (for a more detailed description see Henriksen et al., 2010a). The first model is the athletic talent development environment (ATDE) working model, which is a framework for describing a particular ATDE and for clarifying the roles and functions of the different components and relations within the environment. This model depicts the environment as a series of nested structures with the young prospect athletes at the centre and other components structured into two levels (micro- and macro-) and two domains (athletic and non-athletic). The second model representing the holistic ecological approach is the environment success factors (ESF) working model, which structures factors that provide the environment's success. The model takes into consideration the preconditions in the environment (e.g., human, financial and material resources) and goes on to illustrate how the daily routines or process (e.g., training, camps and competitions) can lead to three outcomes: the athletes' individual development and achievements, team achievements (in team sports) and organisational development and culture.

Organizational culture and leadership

Schein (1990) contends that organisational culture consists of three layers. "Cultural artefacts" are visible manifestations such as stories and myths told in the environment, clothing, buildings, and organisation charts. "Espoused values" are the social principles, norms, goals and standards that the organisation shows to the world (i.e., what the members say they do). "Basic assumptions" are underlying reasons for actions that are no longer questioned but are taken for granted (strongly affecting what the members actually do). Guiding its members in relation to how they should feel, think and act, culture becomes a stabilising force in the group. Culture is constantly re-enacted and created by people's interactions with each other and shaped by people's own behaviour (Schein, 2010 p. 3). Through their interactions, often guided by the coach, the underlying assumptions of the group are taught to new team members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and act in relation to different challenges. For present purposes, Schein's (2010) perspective on cultural leadership in the daily life of the organisation and how leaders (in this case, coaches) often unknowingly (and culturally insensitively) teach the members of the team how to think, feel and act, is relevant. We perceive cultural leadership to be the deliberate use of what Schein refers to as cultural embedding mechanisms. Examples could be what the coach takes an interest in, pays attention to and controls/ oversees on a regular basis, allocates resources to, how the coach rewards, uses role models; promotes, selects or deselects (Henriksen, Storm, & Larsen, 2018).

Case studies in football

Aalberg and Saether (2016) investigated the talent development environment in the U19 group in the Norwegian professional football club Rosenborg BK. One of the features in this club was a culture that seemed to work together to equip players with the resources needed, both on the pitch and in life in general. Their unified work methodology reduced the distance between U16 and U19 groups in the club because of these groups' close relations. Knowledge of 'the next step' is important for a smooth transition (Henriksen, 2010) and improved by the close links between these groups. The fact that these groups also fall under the same streamlined approach provided a good basis for implementation of a common philosophy and goals, which Martindale and colleagues have pointed out as important (2005; 2007). Furthermore, the club highlighted the players' accountability of development as more important than the team's performance. When using video analyses they sought to develop individual players with a comprehensive understanding of the game. Off the field, the club had close relations with the collaborative school, which previous research has highlighted as crucial for holistic development of players (Bourke, 2003; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). As in most professional clubs and in Rosenborg, often there is a missing link between the professional and youth departments. The results in the professional department take first priority and usually "the first team is the 'engine of the club' and everything else appeared to move around it" (Relvas et al., 2010, p. 173). Summarizing the literature on successful ATDEs in Scandinavia, Henriksen and colleagues (Henriksen et al., 2010a; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013) proposed that successful ATDEs share a number of features. These features include: opportunities for inclusion in a supportive training community, role models, support of sporting goals by the wider environment, focus on long-term development rather than short-term success, a coherent organisational culture, and the integration of efforts between sport, school, family and other components of the environment (Henriksen et al., 2010).

The objectives of the study are to (a) provide a holistic ecological description of De Toekomst, the world-famous football talent academy of Ajax Amsterdam, (b) examine factors influencing the environment's success in developing future elite players (i.e., professional players), and (c) analyse if and in what ways the eight features of a successful ATDE are present in the environment. It is our aspiration that insights into the context and culture may suggest new venues for coaches and practitioners aiming to help athletes, clubs and teams to perform and develop.

Method

The study was designed as a case study to holistically capture the complexity of a single-bounded case (Hodge & Sharp, 2017). The present study is seen as instrumental because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the environmental factors impacting talent development, and it is intrinsic (Stake, 2005) because it provides a deep understanding of this particular case which is unique because of the club's impressive history of producing elite senior football players.

Case

Ajax Amsterdam was founded in 1900 and consists of three departments. An amateur department with senior football teams playing in the amateur league, a professional elite department for male and female senior teams and a football

academy for junior teams ranging from under-9 to under-19. The first team plays in the Dutch National League and the reserve team (Jong Ajax) plays in a separate division for reserve teams in Holland. Ajax consists of twelve teams and approximately 200 players at the academy and 40 full-time coaches. The present study focuses on the under-19 team and related staff in the professional department. Ajax Amsterdam is renowned as one of the world's most successful international talent academies (their ability to develop talented players), surpassing Real Madrid and Barcelona (Piani & Sartini, 2005). The name of the academy is 'De Toekomst'. De Toekomst has a history of developing elite senior football players for their own first team, the Dutch National League and for the biggest leagues in Europe. As an example, the percentage of minutes by players who have been in the employer club for at least three seasons between the ages of 15 and 21 was 35,01 for Ajax Amsterdam and 0.87 for Manchester City (Football observatory, 2019). The participants of this study are the U19 squad, consisting of 16 players aged 17-18, two team coaches and their team manager.

Research methods and instruments

Data was collected from three main sources (qualitative interviews, participant observation and analysis of documents) and from multiple perspectives (peers, related teams, coaches and players at the club).

Interview

First, semi-structured interview guides (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) were created based on the predisposed categories from the ATDE and ESF models (Henriksen et al., 2010a). Five interviews were conducted. Three interviews with under-19 players, one with the assistant coach for the U19 squad and one with an academy administrator took place. The interviews were all conducted at the academy and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview guide was inspired by Henriksen (2010) covering questions ranging from micro and macro-environment, relations within the environment, preconditions, process to culture at the club. Examples of questions for athletes could be: Please provide examples of the club's working relations with school, your parents and other clubs and teams. Please describe the daily life in this team: Training – how much do you train? How is training organized? Competitions. What characterizes the culture [team values] in this club?

Participant observation

Second, in order to get a sense of the specific culture at hand and to obtain in situ observations, participant observations were used as a method (Thorpe & Olive, 2017). The observations consisted of a mix between passive observation and moderate observation (Spradley, 1980). At the beginning of the data collection the fourth author functioned as a passive observer during practice at the clubhouse, sitting by himself at a table observing the interactions of the different agents in the environment, interpreting their actions and thus getting a feel for the culture. Gradually the role shifted to a moderate observer alongside building relationships in the club. The observations took place at the clubhouse, the training grounds and at matches. Altogether the observations covered about 120 hours (two separate weeks of observations) across three months and included informal conversations with parents, coaches, administrators, elite players, volunteers and teachers.

Documents

Third, archives and documents were collected as data in the case study. The documents included the club's

homepage, official papers describing the vision, rules and structure of the club, pictures, symbols, and statements about their visions, rules, goals, strategies and values.

Procedure

We contacted the club via the assistant coach of the U19 squad, who was a gatekeeper into the environment. He was contacted through a talent scout working for the club who was contacted personally and given full information on the objectives of the study and ethical issues relevant to participation. The assistant coach granted access to the environment and served as a contact person throughout the study. Preliminary acceptance from the athletes was gained through their coaches. The club and the under-19 coaches agreed that the name of the club could be published, but that the participants should be asked for permission to use their name before publication.

In order to secure the privacy and protection of the data involved in the study, the Danish Data Protection Agency was contacted. The participants were informed that the data collected was intended for specific scientific purposes and would not later be used for other purposes. The participants are anonymized in this paper. However, contextual details might let a few insiders recognise the cases. A few individuals (the head coaches and sport managers) were made aware that it would be possible to identify them too. The vast majority of the participants are not identifiable in the reported material.

Data treatment and analysis

We used thematic analyses to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data. During the fieldwork, initial descriptions and interpretations were written as jottings in a notebook and the observation notes were written out in full text afterwards. All interviews were audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and observation notes were written in full text. The data analysis is reported here through the six steps suggested by Braun, Clarke and Wheate (2016) for qualitative analysis in psychology. The first phase of analysis consisted of transcribing, reading and re-reading the data in order to familiarise ourselves with it. In the second phase, we generated initial codes from the data. In this phase, the codes were a deductive categorisation of the data. The deductive coding was based on a node tree built from the ATDE and ESF models and primarily involved high-order themes. In the third phase, we worked with the deductive codes and identified low-order themes. The fourth phase was an outlining of the environment's preconditions, processes, organisational culture, and outcomes. In this phase, we explored and interpreted the basic assumptions of the environment's organisational culture. We derived these assumptions through interpretation of what we heard and observed in and read about the environment. In phase five, we reviewed and refined the subthemes and final categories, and we developed the empirical models of the case as a summary of the analysis. The sixth step was report writing and presentation of data, which is "an in-depth picture of the case using narratives" (Creswell, 2012 p. 191).

Before going to Ajax, all hypotheses and expectations were noted in an attempt at bracketing and becoming aware of own presuppositions (Nesti, 2004). Codes and interpretations of the findings were discussed in the research group where the team acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018), which is an opportunity for dialogue about the multiple truths and interpretations. Finally, the findings of the study were presented to the participants to elicit their reflections about the case description. This session enabled us to acquire additional insights into their beliefs.

Findings

The findings in this study revolved around the organisational structure and culture of Ajax Amsterdam. The structure of the environment consisted of the macro culture surrounding the environment, the organisational structure and the different systems in the organisation such as management, administration, coaches, experts and players. The organisational culture of Ajax is described through the artefacts, espoused values and basic assumptions, while results illustrating the functionality and management of the culture will also be presented.

The organisational structure of De Toekomst

The results regarding the structure of the environment were used to create an empirical version of the ATDE (figure 1).

The clubhouse community.

The clubhouse community is both the physical and symbolic core of the environment. The complex is called De Toekomst, which means The Future, and is located just across the road from the Amsterdam ArenA. On the ground floor, it contains several locker rooms, supply rooms, offices for the coaches, a treatment room for the physiotherapists, a gym and a rehabilitation whirlpool. On the first floor, the cafeteria with a bar and two serving stations is the place where players, coaches, fans, friends, and agents sit and have a chat and something to drink and eat. Also, there is a pool table and sofa arrangement, some offices and bathrooms. Behind a closed, but not locked door, there is the boardroom, classrooms and offices for management and administration staff.

Management

The academy is run by the technical staff, which consists of the academy leader, administration staff, coaches representing the first team, and coaches representing the academy. The management at Ajax is the board and they make the strategic decisions with input from the directors from the different departments.

Administration

The administration is a mix of paid employees and volunteers. The administration is in charge of all the practical issues surrounding the academy such as education, games, maintenance and the communication between the schools, academy and the academy's teachers. To have time to eat, change, practice and get home to their families, the players older than 12 are picked up from school before their last lessons. Therefore, Ajax has 14 part-time teachers employed at the youth academy. The players get two hours of education three times a week before practice.

Coaches

The Ajax Youth Academy has 25 employed coaches. Thirteen of the coaches were in charge of a team, and 12 coaches were employed solely as specialist coaches working on the improvement of specific skills. All of the coaches had a formal coaching education, most of the coaches played football in one of the top six leagues in the world, and several of them have been brought up or played at Ajax. Besides the coaches, every team had a team manager who is in charge of the practicalities considering the team and who provided support for the players in terms of talking and listening.

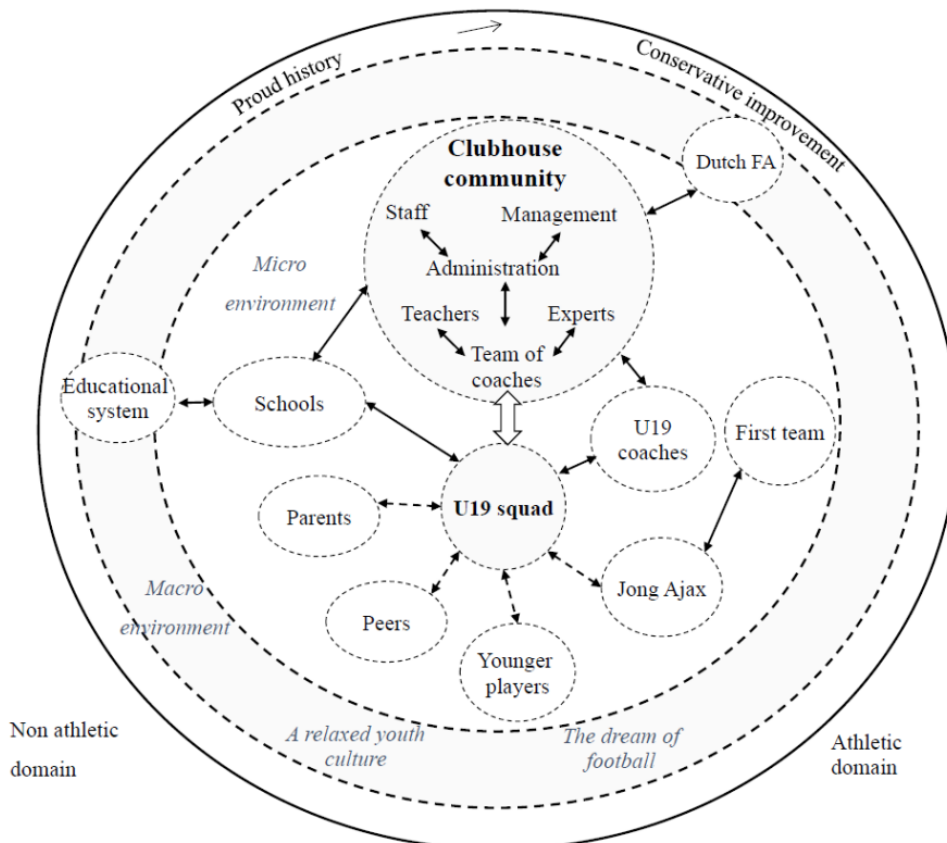


Figure 1. The ATDE empirical model of Ajax Amsterdam.

U19 squad

The U19 squad consisted of 16 players between 17 and 18 years of age. The players had been at the academy between 1 and 11 years. Some of the U19 players occasionally played with the senior reserve team. Occasionally U17 players joined the U19 practice. Every player lived at home with his parents or foster family and either went to school or had finished school and had a professional youth contract at the club. The centre of the environment was the relationship between the young players and the community of people in the clubhouse. The daily interactions were important for development of culture. The players were constantly stimulated, inspired and motivated in their development from many different people, all wanting to help the players: *"There is always someone who can give you good advice and tell you what you could do better. That is very good I think."* (U19 player).

Characteristics of Ajax as a successful talent development environment

The empirical version of the ESF model (see Figure 2) summarises the factors influencing the success of Ajax Amsterdam as an ATDE. Below, we present major factors related to the preconditions, process, and organisational culture of the club followed by their effects on the players' individual development and achievements, as well as the club's effectiveness.

Preconditions

The Academy has the advantage that the entire environment is unified in prioritising the development of the youth players. This meant that people working with the facilities, the coaches, and the teachers all strived to create an environment which took care of every possible need and strived to create the optimal environment for the players at Ajax. The Academy also had the opportunity to recruit a large number of players, because they were located in the most crowded area of the Netherlands, with around 40 clubs cooperating with Ajax and 60 volunteer scouts. The facilities at the complex were of the highest quality and are coherent with the professionalism and focus on details that transcend the rest of the Academy. Every locker room was named after a former Ajax player, brought up at the Academy. This was done to emphasise the story of Ajax as being a place where you can go down in history. The coaches shared offices, where they could coordinate the daily practice or have meetings with the players.

Process

The philosophy on talent development and especially the Ajax football philosophy permeated the way the practice is organised. "Total" football is about fast passing and ball possession which requires a great deal of technical and tactical skill for all of the positions on the pitch and a willingness and physical capacity to be constantly moving in order to make yourself useful for your teammates. The technical skills were trained three times a week in small groups of 1-8 players under the supervision of 1-4 specialised coaches. The skills could be passing, tackling, finishing etc. A couple of hours before the practice, the coaches got together and discussed what the different players needed to improve on. The individual practice was characterised by focus on detail and a lot of individual attention. Some of the younger players practiced alongside the U19 squad in these groups. After 30-45 minutes of skills practice, the teams went separately onto the pitch and spend 10-20 minutes on playing possession games where the goal was to keep the ball in possession and the other team needs to win back the ball. The possession game was

characterised by an emphasis on a low number of touches, fast passing, good communication and movement. The last 15-30 minutes were used for playing a small-side match. The pitch was limited to a half or quarter pitch and there are goals at each end of the pitch. The small-side matches were characterised by an emphasis on fast pace passing and "playing the ball to goal". The practice was almost identical at every age of the youth academy, only with a minor difference in the youngest age groups that spent more time learning the basic skills, while the 13-16 year-olds did not spend much time doing physical training, and the oldest academy players spent more time playing positional play and small-side matches in order to gain tactical understanding. The coaching style was characterised by a deductive approach. That meant that the coaches informed and showed how the drill was done or what they wanted the players to do and then made the players execute while the coaches provided feedback. Every Saturday the U19's played in the national league and they also competed in the NextGen, which is the Champions League for youth teams. The NextGen was very important for the development of the players as the assistant coach explains:

"We want to prepare them for the life as a professional footballer. They need to experience being in a foreign country, being away from home, playing in a different climate and against different players with different supporters".

Every Friday the teams prepared for the matches on Saturdays. This meant that the players from the U19 squad gradually "visited" and practiced with Jong Ajax or the first team practiced before matches. Some of the players also received individual training from some of the coaches if they needed special attention to improve a specific skill. The individual training was provided by specialist coaches and they similarly received individual training programmes from physical trainers and physiotherapists coordinated with the coach. The small-group training, individual training and the fact that they only prepared for the next match the day before were described as a focus on the long-term development of each player. The club did not spend much time on the next win but more time on improving the skills of the players in order for them to keep developing across age groups, as described by one of the coaches:

"It is about development when working with the youth, and not so much about the result, it is about becoming a better player, so it does not matter if you lose 1-0, or win 1-0 with only long passes and physical strength, you don't learn anything that way and then you can't play at Ajax anyway, so it does not mean that much if you win or lose, it is about the development of each player."

Individual development

The highly competitive environment taught the players two important things: work ethics and mental toughness. The players learned that if they want to get a contract as a professional player, it is not enough to score goals or be a good dribbler, you need to work hard every single day and seek advice on what and how to improve yourself as a player and as a person. Mental toughness is developed directly by coping with the demands from coaches and additionally dealing with pressure to perform as described by an U19 player:

"You are learning to win every day. Every day you feel the pressure to be good. You learn how to manage your teammates, you learn to manage your coaches, you learn

how to manage your frustrations, how to manage your feelings and emotions. You really have to be tough psychologically, if not, you are not going to make it”.

The players similarly learned social skills and several players mentioned that they were told to treat others with respect and be polite. The coaches emphasised good table manners and a formal tone of communication towards coaches, staff, teachers and players, as one of the players described:

“When you arrive at Ajax as a young boy, they teach you to shake hands and look people in the eye. The basic respect towards other people and not too much attitude. You have to show respect, or otherwise you are not going to make it. The coaches and staff are the ones who promote you to the first team and if you don’t show respect, they will not help you”.

Team development

The coaches did not directly teach the players about being part of a performance team. They did not spend much time talking about roles or communication, but they emphasised developing the individual player more than the team. There was no explicit focus on team development, so what the players learn is through interactions with other players and the culture, as described by one of the players:

“I have been here so long now that I have learned what it’s like to be in a team just by myself. I think the most important thing is that you just learn by yourself,

because you can’t just do your own thing, because people will comment on what you are doing.”

Not focusing on team development was a conscious choice by staff and coaches at Ajax. However, every player was brought up with “total” football and learned about tactics and roles through this style of play. One of the coaches described the reason for emphasising individual development over team development:

“The advantage is that you learn some skills and become a good individual player. The disadvantage is that you don’t know each other as well as a team and therefore don’t have the same connection and feeling with each other in the games”

The organizational culture of Ajax Amsterdam Artefacts

The artefacts at De Toekomst are a visible history including The Amsterdam ArenA, facilities, trophies, pictures, and the coaches. One of the most important artefacts was the coaches themselves. Most of them have a history at Ajax as a professional and have played at the top of international football. The coaches are therefore the direct embodiment of the road to stardom that can be started at Ajax. The players have respect for the coaches, not only due to their professional competence as coaches, but also because they have experienced first-hand what it takes to become a professional football player.

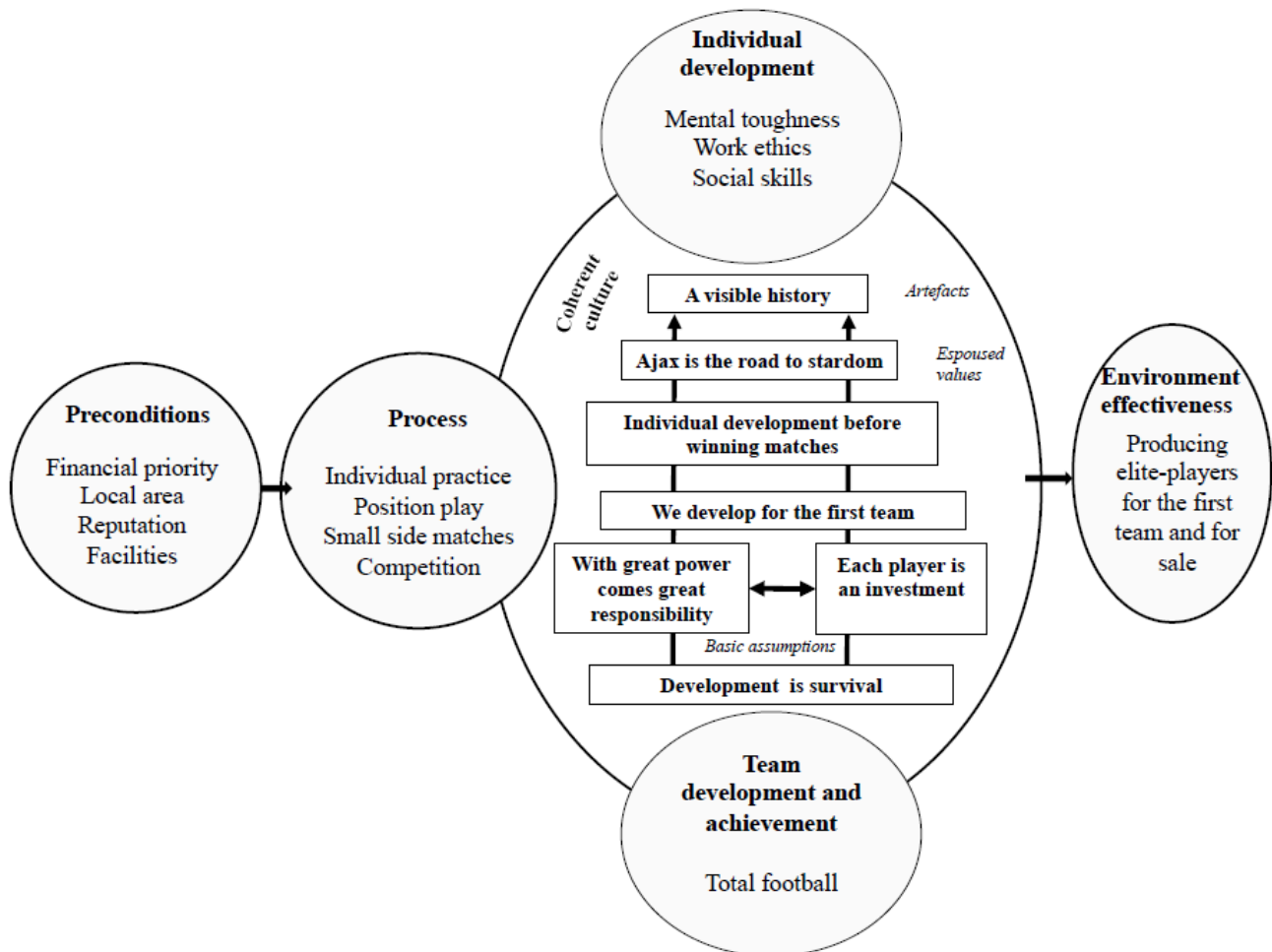


Figure 2. The ESF empirical model of Ajax Amsterdam

Espoused values

The espoused values at De Toekomst are what they value and believe in. The values of Ajax Amsterdam were found in press material and additionally emerged in the interviews with the different stakeholders in the environment. These were 1) Ajax is the road to stardom, 2) We educate players to be professionals, 3) We develop for the first team.

Value 1: Ajax is the road to stardom

One of the espoused values that is told through the artefacts, the daily process and especially through the press material is that "Ajax is the road to stardom". In a presentation video of the Ajax experience, an interactive museum in Amsterdam, showing the history of Ajax, the last sentence was: "When you have played at Ajax you can go anywhere. Your career starts here." This statement underlined the coaches and the management perceived the value of the players, their transition to the senior team and the opportunity of being sold to bigger clubs and leagues in Europe.

Value 2: We educate players to be professionals

This is in line with another espoused value that "We educate players to be professionals". They are trying to learn what the life as a professional football player is about, what is expected of you, how you should behave and what it takes. This value was expressed by one of the coaches: "I wish that they are ready to enter the professional world and know what it is all about" (U19 assistant coach). The education took place through the interaction between the players and the people at the club. Whenever they had the opportunity, they gave advice to the players and talked about how to behave and what they should be focusing on in order to make it to the first team:

"You learn how to win and you learn how to manage with your teammates. You learn how to manage with your trainers. You learn how to manage your frustrations, how to manage your feelings, your emotions, maybe you are someday sad but you have to train and you have to train good, because otherwise you don't play, so it is a good education actually I think." (U19 assistant coach)

Value 3: We develop for the first team

This education was in line with another espoused value; "We develop for the first team". The U19 coach explained what his role is in the environment: "We are supposed to bring them as close as possible to the level that is in the first team" (U19 assistant coach). Every aspect of practice, both individual and team practice, were meant to stimulate the skills that are important if you want to be able to play the style of football that Ajax play. That meant a focus on technique, ball handling, passing and positioning.

Basic assumptions

The basic assumptions are the underlying view on the development of football players that govern the entire environment at Ajax. These were 1) If we want to survive and have success, we need to develop our own players, 2) Each player is an investment, and 3) With great power comes great responsibility.

Assumption 1: Development is survival

The governing basic assumption at Ajax Amsterdam and pivotal for decisions in club was "if we want to survive and have success, we need to develop our own players". They needed to sell the players and make a profit, so they could keep on running the academy and the club. It was

therefore a priority to emphasise the development of players, because otherwise the club could not get the international success they wanted and they would not be able to keep on running the academy as they do. That is why the focus was on development, and the profile Ajax wants to have is a place of development and it permeates the entire environment.

Assumption 2: Each player is an investment

Another very clear and important basic assumption in the environment is that "each player is an investment". Every single player was treated like an important investment and they clearly were. The basic assumption was that you need to look at every detail of their development and treat the players as an investment. It is clear that the players are the core product of Ajax's business. They need them to develop as much as possible, to be able to earn as much money as possible or to make them add as much value as possible to the first team in terms of performance. This was coherent with the core assumption that in order to survive as an environment, they need to develop players who are high quality and therefore a high market value. This basic assumption that every player is an investment can seem like a very cynical and cold view of young people, but it was balanced with another strong basic assumption in the culture.

Assumption 3: With great power comes great responsibility

Ajax Amsterdam is a business and by investing time and money in producing the best players from among children and adolescents, they demand a lot from them, and they know that if they do not live up to the standards, they get cut from the academy. The responsibility for the players served as a safety net. Ajax has set up a strategy for minimising the costs for the players who do not make it either because of an injury or because they are simply not good enough. They keep the players in their own social environment, so they do not lose out on school and friends and can get support from parents, girlfriends and friends. They help them in school, so they can get an education if they do not make it as football players. They talk about manners and social skills, so they can be good citizens in society. In this way, they live up to the responsibility they have, to ensure that all of the players have an opportunity to have a successful future.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to provide a holistic description of Ajax Football Club, to examine factors influencing the environment's success in developing future elite players, and to analyse if and in what ways the eight features of successful environments are present in the club. In that regard, our study is contributing to the literature on ATDEs, organisational culture in sport and career transitions of athletes. This study contributes to the existing literature from a holistic ecological approach. Looking into relationships and culture in an international renowned football club expands the knowledge about successful talent development environments in team sports.

Although each successful ATDE is unique, the present study as compared with previous studies shows that the environments share a number of factors contributing to their success. First, a focus on the athletes' long-term education and development rather than their early success or winning the next match. A second important factor was opportunities for inclusion in a supportive training community. Third, Ajax provided opportunities for individual long-term development rather than short-term

success. Another feature was the integration of efforts between sport, school, family and other components of the environment which previously were also unique features in football ATDEs (Larsen et al., 2013; Aalberg & Saether, 2016). Fourth, an important factor of an ATDE is a strong and coherent organisational culture where visible tokens of the culture such as values and mission statements and what people “said they did” and what they “actually did” corresponded. This feature was strongly related to the use of proximal role models in coaches and the steppingstone of Jong Ajax towards the senior team. Finally, strongly related to research in talent development environments highlighting organisational culture as a pivotal part for the club’s success in developing players for the first team, a governing principle in the culture was a strong focus on developing young talented players for the senior team.

Does a strong organisational culture equal success?

From an organisational standpoint, the management and coaches have a particular responsibility for helping athletes with their transition. Besides teaching performance-related physical, technical, and tactical skills, coaches should moreover give enough opportunities for positive experiences and enjoyment and for building positive self-worth. In the present study the organisational culture of Ajax Amsterdam might provide an opportunity to bridge the gap that often exists between the youth and professional department (Relvas et al., 2010). In the organisational structure and culture of Ajax Amsterdam there is a focus on development of the individual player. Reviewing the literature of successful ATDEs, there is a strong focus on the community, a family feeling, supportive training groups, role models within the environment and a strong organisational culture (Larsen et al., 2013). In this study, the players do not interact or daily practice with senior elite players and thereby could lack role models. However, the club had a strong focus on the development of individual skills. The daily interactions with coaches that young players encounter in “De Toekomst” are all with previous professional players, and this could remedy the lack of interaction with senior elite athletes that is the case in other studies in talent development environments (Henriksen et al., 2011). However, talent development is big business in football and most young players are then also a commodity for sale. Not only the transition into Ajax Amsterdam’s own first team is in target, but the transition to any international football club is the next step for the young players.

In this study, the overall aim of De Toekomst is to develop talented players who, at a later age, will be good enough to make the transition to the professional level. The club aims at marketable products (senior elite players) for internal and external stakeholders (e.g., fans, media, sponsors) for the business of the club to achieve its short and long-term goals. Usually, this “short-termism” of football (i.e., a need to win, avoid relegation and survive at all costs) impacts the organisational position, philosophy and subsequent operating culture of the organisation (Nesti et al., 2012). Football culture is characterised by a ‘short-termism’ in regard to a need to win the next game, avoid relegation and survive at all costs and thereby satisfy the sponsors and fans’ expectations. Similarly, Larsen (2017) recently argued that short-termism was an important cultural context for the practical work with the talented young football players because it had a significant influence on priorities and focus areas amongst the managers of the club, which became clear during the period of “crisis” and adversity. In this study, the club is open about its aims of producing marketable products (i.e., selling and developing talented players) and satisfying internal and external

stakeholders. In contrast to previous studies (Aalberg & Saether, 2016; Larsen et al., 2013), this study shows a coherence between age groups, Jong Ajax and the senior team regarding culture, purpose and philosophy in the club. The present case study is an example of how underlying assumptions of the group are taught to new team members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and act in relation to different challenges. Furthermore, the coaches in De Toekomst knowingly taught the young players how to think, feel and act Total football and how to be an Ajax player. The espoused values of developing and selling players for other clubs were evident at Ajax. In order for the culture to stay coherent, the managers, coaches and other stakeholders need to consistently communicate, reinforce and support this specific trait of the culture. Looking at the specific structure of Ajax, the relationship between the young players and the school, coaches and families was pivotal. The culture was enacted in the relationships and integrated within the players who were constantly stimulated, inspired and motivated in their development from coaches, teachers and others, all wanting to provide the players with some good advice on how the players could do better and develop into the next star or at another point be sold to another club. The entire club was unified in prioritising the development of the youth players. This means that the coaches, staff, and teachers supported and spent the necessary resources in order to create a coordination of efforts for this purpose. The club culture targeted development rather than results. The aim for the players was to become a better player and develop skills for the first team. Summing up the culture of Ajax, a fundamental assumption in the club is that if the club shall survive in the long run then they need to develop their own players and treat each player as an investment.

Considerations for the future research into organisational culture in team sports

In youth sports contexts, the task is different from adult settings because it is not a matter of making teams perform but instead improving the individual’s long-term development. The coach and the management are in key positions to create and maintain the links between different groups with an organisational culture that supports the development of desired attributes in the athletes and align organisational culture, group dynamics, and individual development. However, for such attributes to be developed, it is critical that coaches and managers understand the significance of consistency between the espoused and enacted values defining the culture (Storm, Larsen & Henriksen, 2019). The point is that coaches and managers need to be aware of how their behaviour and actions influence the culture in a club. In other words, coaches and managers are cultural leaders. Cultural leadership is the deliberate use of what Schein refers to as cultural embedding mechanisms (Henriksen et al., 2018). An organisational culture can be more or less functional depending upon the task of the team or club. A group’s underlying assumptions are ‘taught’ to new team members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel and act in relation to different challenges. One powerful mechanism that cultural leaders have is to communicate what they believe in or care about (Schein, 2010). For example, previous research in football demonstrates that a here-and-now performance focus, internal competition and a clear hierarchy characterise clubs. On the contrary, a talent academy is likely to benefit from an organisational culture that values a long-term development focus, sharing knowledge, and room for unstructured play-like activities. From a holistic ecological perspective, a key function is to make the coach aware of how he or she, through cultural

leadership, influences the psychological characteristics of the young athletes or the features in his or her team. To be successful as a cultural leader, the coach is dependent on his or her ability to act in a culturally sensitive manner (McGannon & Johnson, 2009) and willingness to confront "one's own background, biases, and interests in a self-reflexive manner" (Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). Culture is constantly re-enacted and created by people's interactions with each other and shaped by people's own behaviour (Schein, 2010 p. 3). Cultural leadership takes place all the time, but in our experience, coaches are not always aware of their roles as cultural leaders. Thus, when researching talent development environments, the role of the coaches needs further attention. So does the interplay between the group dynamics, key relationships and the organisational culture. Studying group dynamics (Carron & Eys, 2012) such as group cohesion, rivalry, social identities, and emotional regulation, greatly complements the study of organisational culture and vice versa.

Limitations and reflections on case studies

As a case study, the contribution of this study is the empirical insights in themselves as in-depth examinations of a complex functioning unit (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). From this viewpoint, the intention is not to provide objective measures, but, rather, to present a detailed description that provides opportunities for practitioners and researchers to learn from this case as a 'virtual reality' (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hodge & Sharp, 2016). Case studies provide transferability when the readers perceive an overlap with their own situation, and then transfer the

findings to their own contextual actions (Tracey, 2010). Therefore, this study is contributing to a new trend of case studies in sport psychology (Cotterill, Schinke, & Thelwell, 2016; Schinke & Stambulova, 2017) as a way to provide vicarious experiences of professional practice.

This particular case study was based on a limited amount of observation data, which from the perspective of ethnographical work would be considered a limitation, because the observations were not "long-term immersion" in the cultural life worlds of other people in order to grasp how they live (Atkinson, 2016); however, they were short-term observations which provide considerable additional insights that informed the interviews.

Conclusions

This study provided support for recent research findings in the area of talent development in sport as well as for the applicability of the holistic ecological approach in studying and working in and with the environment in football. The present study of Ajax Amsterdam complements previous studies of individual and team sports and provides important insight into the way in which holistic ecological analyses of talent development in a team sport may be carried out. Finally, the present study illustrates how important coaches and management are in developing and aligning different groups with an organisational culture that supports the development of talented footballers.

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