

The use of Knowledge as an Ex- Professional Soccer player and its Application as an Elite Soccer Scout

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After career | Soccer | Scouting

Headline

The talent identification process is of key interest for soccer clubs, the financial gain in identifying a player and selling in the future can provide stability. Elite soccer clubs may employ ex professional players as scouts. Ex- professional soccer players offer experience and knowledge that is unique to them based on their own career. It is imperative to understand the application of this experience and its involvement within the assessment of future elite athletes.

Aim

The aim of this report is to provide insight towards the experiences of an ex-professional soccer player and their application when scouting elite youth soccer players (Under 12's-21s). It has been suggested that there is a "lack of clarity" in what a scout is looking for within the domains of a player and with recruitment teams varied in size this can become problematic (1). The advanced knowledge of an ex professional soccer player will naturally give insights towards development, playing demands due to personal experiences that they already possess.

Design

A qualitative approach will be undertaken. As part of a case study it is essential that the participant is given the best opportunity to explore and communicate their experiences. The paper adopts a biography approach in order for the participant to control and dictate the information and provide applied practical understanding towards how they observed their experiences within elite soccer. Ethical approval was awarded by the institution and written consent was provided by the participant prior to data collection. Names are eradicated from scripts and pseudonyms will be awarded to names that were outlined in specific quotations.

Participant

The participant is 46 years of age and has over 20 years of competing in professional football playing in the Premier League, Division 1, 2, 3. The participant is referred to as John which is their given pseudonym. The participant has performed opposition analysis for a team in the Conference, League One and League 2 in the English Football League. John has coached within an Academy at an Championship club for 5 years. Previous scouting roles for John include working with players from Under 15's to Under 21's at national and club level. Johns recent qualifications range from UEFA A coaching badge and FA Level 2 in Talent Identification and FA Level 4 in Talent Management, Strategy and Leadership in Football. Johns current role is scouting players around the UK and Europe for a club that has Category One status within the Premier League. John would watch approximately 1 match a day.

Phenomenological Approach

A descriptive phenomenological approach has been taken to gain specific findings of the individuals experience. This approach is recognised in allowing the participant to divulge in their "real life experiences" (2). The purpose in using a phenomenological approach is not specifically used to answer concepts within coaching theories but a tool to understand the experiences that the participant has undertaken through elite soccer (3).

Interviews

2 interviews were completed for approximately 45 minutes each. For the success of a phenomenological approach it was imperative that questions were open and non-leading and not structured to a particular concept (2). Interviews were performed on Microsoft Teams and recorded throughout. Conversations were aimed at the participant discussing their experiences within their career as a professional soccer player and as a scout.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to provide real account stories and insight about the participant experiences throughout out their career. Narrative analysis is best suited when descriptions are illustrated within their original format to give insight in how individuals perceive their accounts (4). Narrative comments were reviewed, scripted and then placed into a theme that become consistent (5). The present themes that were displayed are as stated: *the understanding of potential, influence of education, scout bias, playing experience and club demands.*

Results and Discussion

The understanding of "potential" was a key factor in the mannerism in how players were evaluated. A players potential and physical characteristics are known to alter through maturation and can be helpful in predicting talent within elite athletes (6,7,8). Opinions on playing ability are known to be subjective and dependent on an individual's understanding of what the perfect player could be (9,10).

"You have got to look at potential , the hardest thing about potential is you cant predict what it will be, or what it looks like , you could understand what potential may look like based on experiences. But that's your own experiences and your own understanding and a gut feeling in what you have done"

The influence of education has been a positive factor in the development for John. However courses for ex-professional soccer players can have mixed reviews, this can be affiliated with their own perception of the fundamentals of the game (11).

"It has enhanced my knowledge and insight and clarified a lot of things I already new to actually giving me more tools to help me

make more informative decisions. I went through a tough time at Club A in between 18-20, and I wasn't the biggest. I was probably around 5ft 11 and 11 stone 2 lbs. You learn that people develop at different rates , maturation has a massive part, you talk about biological age, it doesn't mean it's their playing age"

Interestingly the bias of an individual is also a contributing factor in how decisions are made. An individual's bias can be dependent on subjective past experiences. Bias in coaches have been observed in predicting talent based on different levels of maturation (12). Individual playing careers will have varied based on different successes and failures. Having self regulation in ones biases is a good approach especially when reflecting on observed performances.

"Other scouts opinions and bias can impact your judgment at times but the main difficulty is the area of the player. I am always checking and challenging my opinion I have made. My decisions are made when I watch the game but when I write up reports my opinion can change slightly. It is important because when making these types of decisions you need to get them more right than wrong. I may be going to make a decision on a player whether I think we should sign or not. If you get it wrong and allow your bias to affect this, you could miss out on a top talent. If you don't reflect then you will keep making the same mistakes. You have to learn from them or you'll be left behind."

The importance in playing experience is an advantageous factor. Playing experience will bring strong levels of analysis within personal, team or opposition performances.

"I've been scouting all my life from the age of 16- without even realising it, instances such as how am I going to get the better of this player. I feel I have an edge because I have played football and I know what it takes to become a professional footballer. The only difference is that if I had starting scouting as soon as I came out of football at the same time as someone who had never played football, my knowledge and understanding would be far superior which is more beneficial but you can gain knowledge and understanding the longer you are out and about scouting. I think it is easier if you know the level you are scouting for, e.g. know what the level of player is in your building."

Competition from other clubs is another factor in player recruitment (1) Premier league clubs have greater power within the player recruitment market due to the influence of financial gains (7). Education and clarity in player selection maybe needed when identifying players for a particular "standard".

"I do believe I reflect more when I watch players. I might go to a game and say he didn't play well , but then after I'd go actually he's not bad. But it also depends on the club who you are working for, if you are working for the likes of Club A, Club B, Club C, your possibly looking for the top 3% in the world of athletes . If I'm at Club D your horizons are widened as your probably looking for the top 10%, so you have more of a pool of players you are looking at. A Club D could look at any player in the world , but they cant compete with a Club A, because of financial gains."

The talent identification process is well structured and gives guidance in the development of athletes. It is clear that factors within scouting players may differ dependent on an individual's bias and level of experiences that are then implemented to predict talent. The use of ex-professional soccer players are important in sharing their knowledge to different disciplines. This shared knowledge can help develop different disciplines (e.g Sports Scientists/Strength and Conditioning Coaches, Head of Recruitment etc) that are working within the elite environment.

Practical Applications

- More courses designed and delivered by ex-professional soccer players could be of value in sharing their experiences. By shar-

ing different past experiences, knowledge can be developed and understood especially within the decision making process.

- More research and greater understanding should be tailored towards a scouts bias and if that relationship is based on previous past experiences.
- Further investigation is needed to understand how the use of ex-professional soccer players knowledge can be used to strengthen the clarity of the player recruitment process.

Limitations

- The study only recruited one participant, this should be treated with caution, ex professional soccer players who are employed as scouts will all have different experiences and perceptions that are unique to their own career. An increase in participants could help to further understand the relationship between playing experience and bias when recruiting players.
- The timing of the interview was during a break in the season and it could be more beneficial to have a longitudinal approach in gathering information across the whole season.

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