

# The great balancing act – The art of performance analysis in academy soccer in England

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## Headline

The increasing availability of performance analysis (PA) in soccer has led to players being subjected to more analysis than before (1). With a greater number of analysts being employed across age groups and participation levels (2, 20), PA appears here to stay as a feature of elite player development and the multidisciplinary sport science teams aiding coaches within their roles (3, 4). Yet given the financial gain that an academy player could bring a football club (5) and the complexities of the role of a coach in academy soccer the way in which PA is used is complex and multifaceted. It has been acknowledged that coaches within elite youth soccer lack expert knowledge around the implementation of PA (21), therefore highlighting the importance of analyst employment to support the coaching process.

## Aim of the paper

- Identify the way in which PA is used within elite academy soccer to support match preparation.
- Critically analyse the role of the analyst to aid the development of soccer players.

## Methods

13 full time performance analysts who worked in the youth development (U12-U16) or professional development phase (U17-U23) of an Elite Player Performance Plan (henceforth EPPP) academy tier one (n = 7) or tier two (n = 6) took part in the study. The participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling and were named age group analysts, in paid roles, with a minimum of 12 months at the club they were currently at.

The data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews, this allowed the performance analysts to review their personal experiences and for these to be considered in detail during the interview. As such, semi-structured interviews allowed the examination of PA from the subjective view of the performance analyst, accounting for their specific experiences and opinions to be investigated within a controlled yet flexible way.

A six-stage process of thematic analysis (6) was used to analyse the data gathered through the interviews. This form of analysis was selected to allow latent themes within the interviews to be revealed. The data analysis revealed 3 themes (*Us v Them / Learning to train v Training to win / Winning the match v developing the player*).

Trustworthiness was established through multiple different techniques which included 1) Member checks being carried out by the analyst at the end of the interview and post transcription. 2) Researchers were trained in qualitative research methods. 3) Analysis was carried out autonomously by two members of the research team to confirm theme reliability.

The results indicate analysts working in elite soccer academy environments experience a complex blend of prior-

ities including responsibilities for aiding the development of players and assisting coaches in a desire to win matches.

## Discussion

The complexities of the use of PA in elite sport are well established (12) along with the multifaceted nature of the role of an analyst (14, 15). However, despite increasing investment in analysis (1) and employment of analysts (2) the role of the academy analyst is under researched. This is despite the complications of talent development (7, 8, 9) and the large amounts of money available if a player successfully transitions from an academy environment to become a professional player (10, 11).

This study highlights that within a talent identification programme, such as the EPPP, the use of PA appears problematic and multifaceted. The vague and unclear nature of talent ID can be considered specifically evident where one-dimensional measures of performance (such as general physiological, psychological, and social markers) are used to understand and categorise future athletic talent (16). Consequently, this study highlights that PA can be used as another means to categorise player performance / development. However, this study also proposes that a performance analysts' role may be to aid coaches and players to win matches, emphasising that the development of players and winning matches may not be binary 'either /or' objectives within their roles.

Despite previous research (17) highlighting that a talent development environment should prioritise the age-appropriate development of players in contrast to age group success. It is apparent from the present research that there is a complexity around prioritising player development over winning within a soccer environment particularly with regards to older age groups such as those seen in the in the professional development phase (U17-U23) of EPPP academies. Attempting to develop players and also focusing on the importance of winning may, however, lead to a less successful talent development environment. Previous research (18) has identified that a key factor in creating a successful talent development environment is a focus on development in contrast to a focus on results.

While the role of the coach in talent development environments has been historically accepted as being systematic yet complex and fixated on the development of excellence in individual athletes / players (22). The role of the analyst is in contrast seen as being a 'hired hand' working under the guidance of the coach (19). As such with the desire of coaches working in EPPP academies to develop the knowledge of individual players (23) analysts may also see this as their key objective. Yet, it is reasonable that the role of the analyst, being focused on the preparation for and evaluation of matches, may mean that learning and player development are indirectly facilitated. This could be regardless of the focus of information provided to players in the form of pre-match videos and post-match presentations, as player learning, and development becomes a by-product of PA which is focused on aiding a team to win a match.

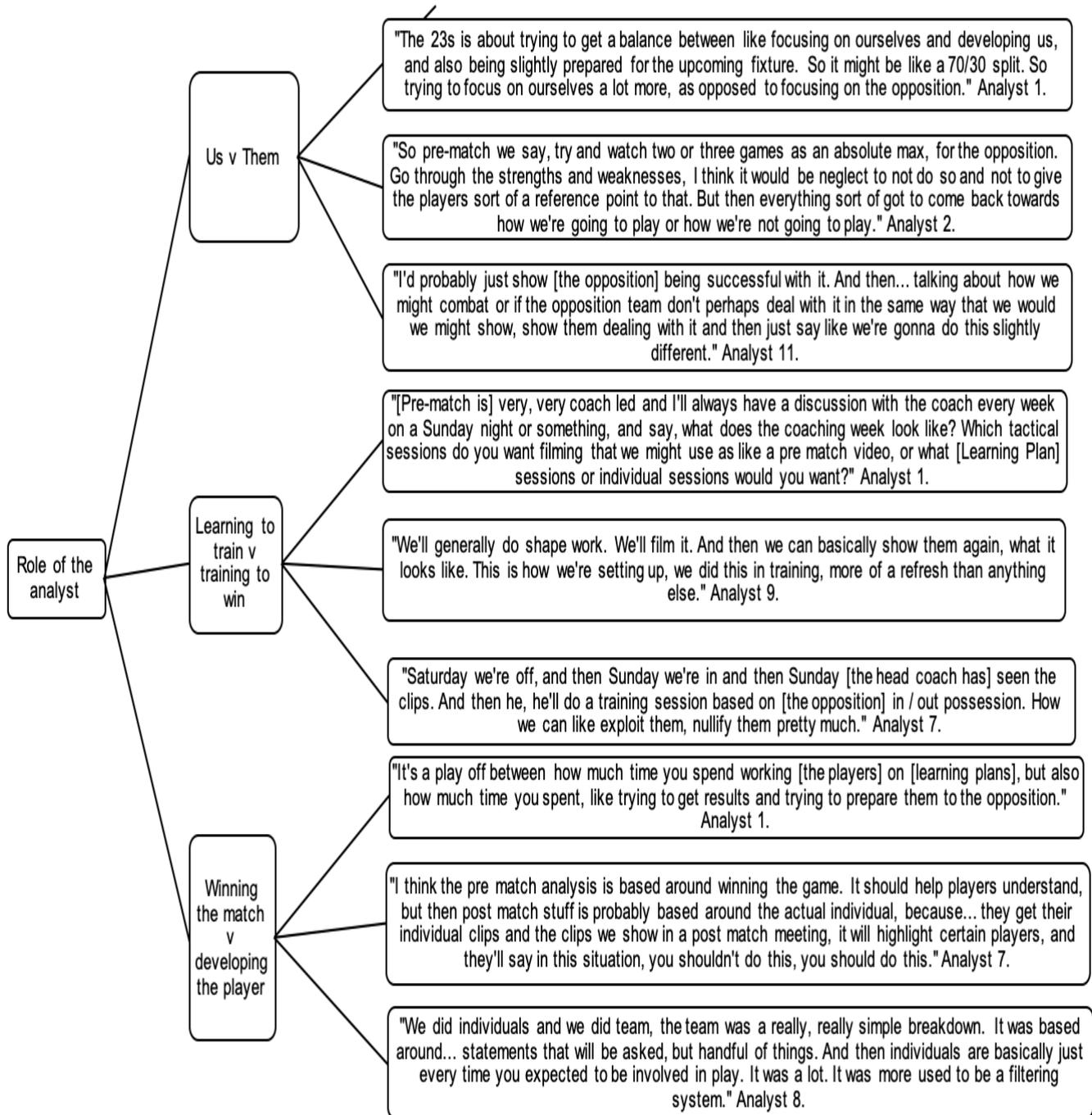


Figure 1 – Sample of quote for analysts to support themes

### Practical applications

- Clarity on the roles and responsibilities of a performance analyst would allow both the analyst, coach, and any other interested parties to understand how and why PA is being used.
- Clear and regular communication between coach and analyst will allow PA to be reviewed and adapted regularly responding to the needs and wants of the coach.

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