

Applying A Strategic Management Approach for Elite Youth Football Academies: From Department to Personal Development

Lukas Arenas ¹

¹Institute of Sport and Preventive Medicine, Saarland University, Saarbrücken, Germany

High-performance settings | Processes | Outcomes | Employee performance | Key Performance Indicators | Multidisciplinary team

Headline

Elite youth football academies serve as a strategic component within football organizations, focusing primarily on nurturing young talented players for their first team and the generation of revenue through player transfers [1]. Therefore academies implement initiatives known as talent identification (TID) and talent development (TD) programs that are crucial for the sustained growth of homegrown players. Furthermore, professional clubs have placed greater emphasis on youth development within their organizational structure and ethos, driven by legislative mandates that impact player quotas, such as the UEFA "home-grown" rule established in 2006. This has resulted in greater emphasis being placed on the effectiveness and efficiency of talent development processes within football academies (2). Factors influencing the quality of player development include creating an environment conducive to long-term goals and methods, prioritizing talent development over early selection, providing individualized ongoing development, and establishing a strong organizational structure linking the academy with the first team (3), (4), (5). Applying the concept of the Strategic Management Process can provide a structured approach to navigating the complexity of organizational development (6).

Aim

In this expert opinion piece, I have synthesized insights from various sources to present a strategic approach for effectively managing the Performance Department within an elite youth football academy. The application of Strategic Management Process concept can help practitioners and head of departments to develop a clear vision, operational excellence, and a culture conducive to sustainable player development.

Developing an Organizational Culture and Structure for Sustainable Player Development

Analyses of the most successful youth academies in Europe show that they invest up to ten million euros annually in the youth sector (7). This significantly exceeds the estimated budget of 2.3 to 4.9 million pounds for Category-1 academies as per Premier League regulations, providing a benchmark for the level of investment in European youth development centers that focus heavily on player development. Clubs like AFC Ajax and SL Benfica, which play outside the top five European leagues, have excelled through their outstanding development of young players. The focus on youth development at Ajax Amsterdam, for example, is not only deep-rooted as a strategic statement within the club but is also perceived by players through the operational approach and a lived club culture. In-

dividual development is prioritized, with short-term success in youth competitions being of secondary importance (8).

Integrating youth players into senior teams is a critical aspect of holistic team value management. This strategic approach enables clubs to boost their market valuation, achieve sustained success, and cultivate a competitive edge within the football industry. By effectively incorporating young talent, clubs not only enhance their on-field performance but also generate significant financial benefits for the organization (9).

For the management of football academies, it is crucial to develop an organizational culture and structure that ensures sustainable player development. Leadership and management in the context of elite sports represent a complex environment that includes the development of a vision, operational management, personnel leadership, and the creation of a cultural environment. A structured approach can be achieved through the application of a Strategic Management Process concept (6).

The strategic management process can be considered a comprehensive approach to organizational development, encompassing numerous dimensions critical for effectively achieving organizational goals. This process is divided into three main phases: strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation. In these phases, two central aspects are present: performance measurement and performance management. Performance measurement refers to the evaluation of past performance, while performance management focuses on present and future performance. The illustration shows that, in addition to the well-known vertical hierarchy, which follows a top-down approach, there are also horizontal, content-based orders and processes.

In the strategy formulation phase, key elements such as club values, club culture, and long-term goals are considered. The precise definition of these long-term goals is crucial and can be embedded in daily operations through the creation of a mission statement. A mission statement offers a comprehensive and concise explanation of why the organization exists, for whom it operates, how it works, and what goals it pursues (10). A possible mission statement for a youth development center could be as follows:

Our goal is to ensure holistic player development using current scientific knowledge. We are committed to supporting both the adolescent and the football player individually on their developmental journey. To this end, we create an inspiring environment where young talents can reach their full potential. Comprehensive training is provided in the key areas of technical/tactical, psychological, social, and physical development, with an emphasis on health preservation.

The development of a mission statement marks the entry into the complex world of the strategic management process. Interviews with department heads of German and English elite youth academies revealed a lack of clear articulation or definition of a mission statement, highlighting operational deficiencies within the strategic management process (11). This underscores the urgency of developing a mission statement to optimize the efficiency of football academies. A mission statement also provides the opportunity to integrate the club's playing philosophy and principles into the overall context of the club and its long-term direction. The specific playing philosophy and principles of a club significantly influence the player development approach in the areas of technical/tactical, psychology, social skills, and physical development. This creates a methodological framework for the identification and multidisciplinary development of talents as well as the process of strategy implementation. Within each development area, specific goal descriptions are initially determined for the strategy evaluation phase, outlining the overall objectives to be accomplished. It is crucial to note that these goal descrip-

tions do not necessarily need to be quantifiable, but can instead serve as concise guiding principles. For instance, an objective for the physical training of youth players could be: "Optimizing physical capacities."

To operationalize the goal descriptions, key performance indicators (KPIs) are established. KPIs are quantifiable metrics that assess the specific outcomes to be achieved through interventions or programs. KPIs serve to translate the mission statement of the sports organization into tangible objectives and to monitor and analyze progress toward attaining these goals. An interpretation of the individual player development occurs within the performance analysis of the collected performance indicators, placing the achieved results in a broader context. In the subsequent retrospective phase of the strategic management process, performance evaluation takes place. In this final step, the applied strategies and interventions are evaluated to determine their effectiveness on an organizational level. It is assessed whether the strategies contributed to successfully implementing the overarching mission statement and whether changes are necessary to achieve future goals.

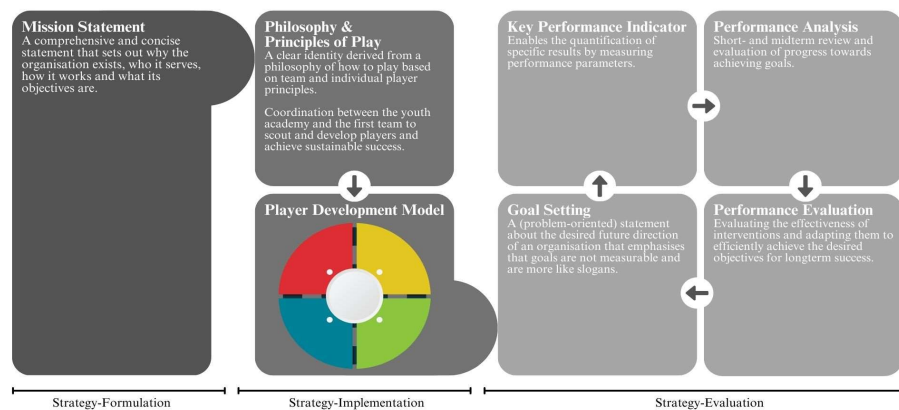


Fig. 1. Illustration of strategic management process integration within the operational club environment.

Individual Development Plans, Not Only For Players

The working environment of elite football academies is characterized by unique dynamics and continuous development, necessitating adaptable strategies and interventions for sustainable progress (12), (13). Consequently, the strategic management process should be viewed as dynamic, requiring at least an annual review to ensure the attainment of objectives and the implementation of necessary adjustments. Regularly evaluating and applying the phases of strategic management can facilitate the ongoing development of operational behaviors within football academies. This process enhances the quality of multidisciplinary work by establishing clear organizational goals, individual responsibilities, and areas of influence, while empowering employees to make autonomous decisions without hierarchical approval. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among staff. Additionally, providing continuous opportunities for learning and development helps sustain employee motivation and engagement (14). Moreover, implementing the strategic management process establishes a foundation for individual development plans for staff members. These plans are designed to support and encourage individuals to develop their skills, improve performance, and increase

job satisfaction. The overarching goal is to achieve superior outcomes for the organization, the team, and the individuals by comprehending and managing performance effectively.

Practical applications:

Applying the Strategic Management Process can help elite youth football academies align their long-term objectives with day-to-day operations, cultivating a cohesive organizational culture centered on player development. This strategic approach involves:

- Formulating a mission statement that clearly articulates the club's values, playing philosophy, and commitment to comprehensive player development, providing a unifying vision and purpose for all stakeholders.
- Employing Key Performance Indicators to quantify and monitor the effectiveness of talent development programs, ensuring alignment with the club's strategic mission and goals.
- Implementing individualized staff development plans to enhance their skills, performance, and job satisfaction, foster

ing a motivated and competent workforce that can drive the club's player development initiatives.

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