Give us a game : evaluating the opportunities that exist for English footballers to play in the English Premier League

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Give Us a Game: Evaluating the Opportunities that Exist for English Footballers to Play in the English Premier League

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to provide a detailed, large-scale retrospective analysis of the number of English footballers that have been developed to play in the English Premier League (EPL) over twenty seasons. Unlike previous research, we examined appearance data as opposed to percentage of squad data enabling a more accurate representation of English players appearing in the EPL. The findings revealed a steady decline in the number and proportion of appearances made by English players in the EPL throughout the twenty season period. However, the results also indicated that the rate of decline had abated since the inception of UEFA's home-grown rule. The results support the view that opportunities for indigenous players have diminished since the EPL's inception. Given the short-term, results-focused culture that prevails in the EPL, this would appear to present a major challenge for governing bodies, particularly those working in elite player development. Discussion surrounding how these challenges might be met is presented.

Key words: Association Football, Bosman Ruling, English Premier League (EPL), Globalisation, Player Migration, UEFA Home-Grown Rule, Sport Economics

INTRODUCTION

The 2011/12 season of the English Premier League (EPL) marked the twentieth anniversary of the competition following its inception in 1992. The break-up of the old first division and subsequent creation of the EPL as a rebranded competition has been one of the catalysts for significant change to the game. Indeed, since its inaugural season in 1992/93, the EPL has grown into a global phenomenon that is followed by millions of fans around the world. It has recently been described as the "top league in the world" [1]. The success of the EPL has

Reviewers: Bill Gerrard (University of Leeds, UK)
Danny Mielke (Eastern Oregon University, USA)
Stephen Wagg (Leeds Beckett University, UK)

resulted in significant increases in the income generation through TV rights, sponsorship, increased gate receipts and corporate hospitality [2]. Emphasising its global reach, the most recent television rights deal saw a 71% increase in value, to £3bn over three years [3].

Although the EPL has enjoyed commercial success over the last 20 years, concerns have been raised about the decreasing number of English players that have been developed during this period. Indeed, the director of youth at the Premier League recently remarked that, "the focus on youth has probably never been as intense or as urgent since the inception of the Premier League as it is right now" [4]. Despite the estimated £40m elite clubs invest in their academies annually [5], it has been suggested that only 25–30 English players aged 23 years or under enter the EPL each year [6]. Fuelled by increased purchasing power and a short-term "win at all costs" culture that appears to characterise professional football in England, clubs have increasingly favoured ready-made, experienced players over youth with a view to having an immediate impact or return on investment. As a result, players from around the world have been enticed by high wages and a strong competition which has ultimately led to a globalisation of the EPL's playing staff. Relvas et al. [7] suggest that this desire to recruit the "finished article" demonstrates a lack of willingness to promote indigenous youth academy players into the senior team.

Alongside elite clubs' increased spending power and a results-driven climate, two other major factors have impacted the opportunities for English players; first, the Bosman ruling which precludes clubs from withholding a player's registration at the completion of his contract; and, second, the abolition of quota rules which limited the number of overseas players allowed per club in domestic European Union football leagues.

Taken together, these factors have been largely responsible for reshaping the landscape of European football (cf. [8, 9]) with a discernible increase in the number of players migrating to leagues outside their own national association [7]. In doing so, this restructuring effect has led to "migration patterns that appear to be having a negative impact on indigenous player development" [9, p. 1004]. Other research [8, 10, 11] has also underlined this notion. For example, Kuhn [10] suggested that a pronounced increase in the number of overseas players precluded indigenous players from integrating into senior team football. Lending further support for this view, recent research [12] revealed that a lack of opportunities to play at the senior level was a factor perceived by elite academy coaches to negatively influence player development. Ultimately, the globalisation of the EPL has created an intensively competitive scenario where English players, in order to make it into the senior team in the elite league, not only have to be among of the best players in England but also better than the imports from the rest of the world [13].

Concerned about the development of young players within its federations, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) proposed that "from season 2008/09, a minimum of eight home-grown players must be included in the 25-man squad" [14]. The introduction of the home-grown rule was devised with the intention of protecting the amount of opportunities available to indigenous players. Such legislation, it was anticipated, would raise the value of home-grown young players, and thus encourage elite clubs to invest a greater interest and resource into their talent development programmes [9, 15]. Despite the rule being in place for the last four of the twenty EPL seasons to 2011/12, no studies to-date have sought to examine its efficacy. However, it must be pointed out that these home-grown players may not necessarily be English, in which case they would not be of benefit to the national team. This is an area of the home-grown rule which does not necessarily protect opportunities for indigenous players.

Previous research has sought to evaluate the number of opportunities that exist in the EPL,

and the methodological approach has invariably involved assessing the number of players as a percentage of the senior team starting eleven (e.g., [16]); or the number of players in the squad (e.g., [17]). Indeed, the home-grown rule is determined by the number of players in the squad (i.e., 25) as opposed to the number of players in the senior team/match squad (i.e., 11/18). This particular stipulation means that clubs could, in theory, largely circumvent the rule by including home-grown players without the intention of playing them. For this reason, it would seem important to distinguish between the number of players and the number of appearances, in the same way it would be important to distinguish between, for example, the number of visits to a sports facility and the number of different visitors. For example, five English players in a 25-man squad (20%) making one appearance each (i.e., a total of five appearances) is not as strong a position in opportunity terms as two English players in the squad (8%) making 30 appearances each.

To this end, in terms of analysing player development in relation to senior team opportunities, understanding the number of appearances as a proportion of all appearances made would be a more befitting indicator than calculating the number of players as a percentage of the squad. However, at present no studies have examined the efficacy of elite player development in relation to opportunities based on senior team appearances, which represents an important gap in the knowledge base. By analysing data for all players that have played in the EPL from the league's inception through to the 20th season (2011/12), the aims of the study were: 1) to compare the number of appearances made by English, other home-nations (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland), and overseas players; 2) to examine the impact of UEFA's home-grown rule on the number of appearances made by indigenous players since its inception; and 3) to examine the impact that the level of opportunity in the EPL has had on the England national team.

METHOD

SAMPLE

For all of the first twenty EPL seasons, appearance data was collected for each club from their official club website and cross referenced with football statistics databases to verify accuracy and reliability. From the database of players that emerged, additional research was carried out to determine each player's nationality. Data from each team was then aggregated in order to calculate the appearances by different nationalities by club and season. Overall, this generated data for 406 squads and 10,963 players, which collectively represented 204,946 EPL appearances during the 20 year period.

DATA ANALYSIS

Statistics for the club and nationality variables generated aggregates and means by nationality for each of the twenty EPL seasons. Additional secondary data was collected on the population of the England squad (and other nationalities) to inform the analysis on supplying the national team, and for comparative purposes. The data for three groups (i.e. 'English', 'overseas', and 'other home nations') were analysed using appearance data comparing the change season by season and, importantly, the changes since the UEFA home-grown rule. The analysis is designed to show statistical differences within sub-samples using Z scores [18]. The confidence level for the Z score test is set at 95% therefore a Z value of 1.96 or more is considered to be significantly higher in statistical terms whereas a score less than or equal to -1.96 is treated as significantly lower in statistical terms. Any value between these two thresholds is viewed as having no statistical difference.

RESULTS

Table 1. 20 Season's Appearance Data by Nationality

		Previous season		Season				
		p1	n1	p2	n2	Z Score	Abs(Z)	Sig
1992-93	England	-	-	69.4%	11,264	-	-	-
	Overseas	-	-	15.2%	11,264	-	-	-
	Other home nations	-	-	15.4%	11,264	-	-	-
1993-94	England	69.4%	11,264	69.2%	11,215	-0.3	0.3	NO
	Overseas	15.2%	11,264	16.7%	11,215	3.1	3.1	YES
	Other home nations	15.4%	11,264	14.1%	11,215	-2.8	2.8	YES
1994-95	England	69.2%	11,215	67.0%	11,324	-3.6	3.6	YES
	Overseas	16.7%	11,215	19.8%	11,324	5.9	5.9	YES
	Other home nations	14.1%	11,215	13.3%	11,324	-1.8	1.8	NO
1995-96	England	67.0%	11,324	62.6%	9,396	-6.5	6.5	YES
	Overseas	19.8%	11,324	23.5%	9,396	6.5	6.5	YES
	Other home nations	13.3%	11,324	13.9%	9,396	1.3	1.3	NO
1996-97	England	62.6%	9,396	56.7%	9,707	-8.4	8.4	YES
	Overseas	23.5%	9,396	29.0%	9,707	8.6	8.6	YES
	Other home nations	13.9%	9,396	14.4%	9,707	1.0	1.0	NO
1997-98	England	56.7%	9,707	51.8%	9,836	-6.8	6.8	YES
	Overseas	29.0%	9,707	35.8%	9,836	10.2	10.2	YES
	Other home nations	14.4%	9,707	12.4%	9,836	-4.0	4.0	YES
1998-99	England	51.8%	9,836	48.9%	9,913	-4.0	4.0	YES
	Overseas	35.8%	9,836	39.9%	9,913	6.0	6.0	YES
	Other home nations	12.4%	9,836	11.2%	9,913	-2.8	2.8	YES
1999-00	England	48.9%	9,913	46.5%	9,959	-3.4	3.4	YES
	Overseas	39.9%	9,913	42.2%	9,959	3.3	3.3	YES
	Other home nations	11.2%	9,913	11.3%	9,959	0.3	0.3	NO
2000-01	England	46.5%	9,959	46.2%	10,052	-0.4	0.4	NO
	Overseas	42.2%	9,959	43.5%	10,052	1.7	1.7	NO
	Other home nations	11.3%	9,959	10.3%	10,052	-2.1	2.1	YES
2001-02	England	46.2%	10,052	42.5%	10,052	-5.3	5.3	YES
	Overseas	43.5%	10,052	48.1%	10,052	6.6	6.6	YES
	Other home nations	10.3%	10,052	9.5%	10,052	-2.1	2.1	YES
2002-03	England	42.5%	10,052	37.8%	10,131	-6.7	6.7	YES
	Overseas	48.1%	10,052	53.7%	10,131	7.9	7.9	YES
	Other home nations	9.5%	10,052	8.5%	10,131	-2.4	2.4	YES
2003-04	England	37.8%	10,131	37.3%	10,136	-0.8	0.8	NO
	Overseas	53.7%	10,131	54.2%	10,136	0.8	0.8	NO
	Other home nations	8.5%	10,131	8.5%	10,136	0.1	0.1	NO
2004-05	England	37.3%	10,136	38.1%	10,138	1.2	1.2	NO
	Overseas	54.2%	10,136	53.4%	10,138	-1.1	1.1	NO
	Other home nations	8.5%	10,136	8.5%	10,138	-0.1	0.1	NO
2005-06	England	38.1%	10,138	37.7%	10,251	-0.6	0.6	NO
	Overseas	53.4%	10,138	54.1%	10,251	0.9	0.9	NO
	Other home nations	8.5%	10,138	8.2%	10,251	-0.6	0.6	NO
2006-07	England	37.7%	10,251	39.2%	10,221	2.2	2.2	YES
	Overseas	54.1%	10,251	54.7%	10,221	0.9	0.9	NO
	Other home nations	8.2%	10,251	6.1%	10,221	-5.9	5.9	YES
2007-08	England	39.2%	10,221	35.5%	10,256	-5.5	5.5	YES
	Overseas	54.7%	10,221	57.3%	10,256	3.7	3.7	YES
	Other home nations	6.1%	10,221	7.2%	10,256	3.2	3.2	YES

Table 1. *continued*

		Previous season		Season				
		p1	n1	p2	n2	Z Score	Abs(Z)	Sig
2008-09	England	35.5%	10,256	36.5%	10,247	1.6	1.6	NO
	Overseas	57.3%	10,256	58.5%	10,247	1.7	1.7	NO
	Other home nations	7.2%	10,256	5.0%	10,247	-6.6	6.6	YES
2009-10	England	36.5%	10,247	33.7%	10,338	-4.2	4.2	YES
	Overseas	58.5%	10,247	58.0%	10,338	-0.7	0.7	NO
	Other home nations	5.0%	10,247	8.3%	10,338	9.4	9.4	YES
2010-11	England	33.7%	10,338	36.3%	10,334	4.0	4.0	YES
	Overseas	58.0%	10,338	55.6%	10,334	-3.5	3.5	YES
	Other home nations	8.3%	10,338	8.1%	10,334	-0.6	0.6	NO
2011-12	England	36.3%	10,334	37.2%	10,144	1.3	1.3	NO
	Overseas	55.6%	10,334	52.6%	10,144	-4.3	4.3	YES
	Other home nations	8.1%	10,334	10.2%	10,144	5.3	5.3	YES

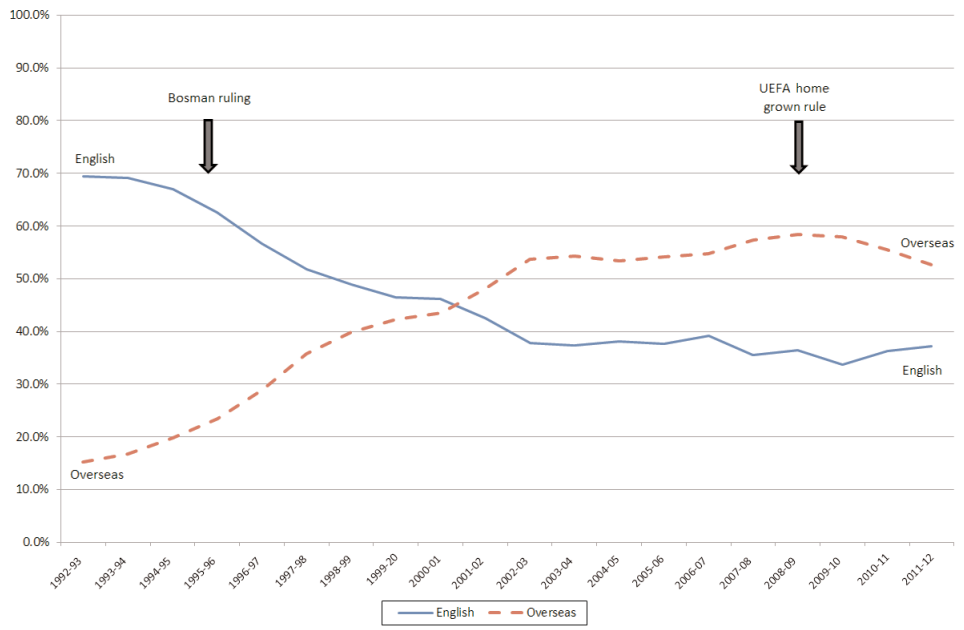

Figure 1. Proportion of Appearances Made by English and Overseas players

As outlined in Table 1 and Figure 1, a consequence of reducing the number of teams from 22 to 20, which occurred at the same time as the Bosman ruling, was a decrease in the proportion of appearances made by English players in the following season (from 67% in 1994/95 to 63% in 1995/96). When compared with appearance data from players representing other home nations and from overseas, appearances reduced, as would be expected with fewer games. However, the decrease in the proportion of appearances in these two groups was minimal in percentage terms when compared to English players. These two changes preceded the start of the greatest increase (seventeen percentage points) in EPL

appearances by overseas players during any three year period (23% in 1995/96 to 40% in 1998/99). In the first ten seasons, the average proportion of all EPL appearances made by overseas players was 31%. In the second ten seasons of the EPL, this figure was 55% with the 2001/02 season being the first where more appearances were made by overseas players than English.

Comparing the 19 year-on-year changes shows that in eight of the first ten seasons, there was a statistically significant decrease in appearances by English players compared to two of the last nine. Interestingly from Figure 1, the slight decrease in appearances by overseas players in the two seasons from 2009/10 has not changed the percentage of appearances by English players. This difference was compensated for by players from other home nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). When analysing the core players (i.e., those that make 20 or more appearances in a season), this trend is repeated and follows the same pattern as the proportion of appearances, including the same drop off post 2009. What is potentially more of an issue for the English game is the increase in the number of overseas players making less than 20 appearances, which has impacted upon the opportunities for new English players (see Table 3).

In terms of the impact of the home-grown rule, by isolating the data for the first season since the UEFA quota rule in 2008/09, and comparing it to the twentieth season in 2011/12, the change in appearance proportions can be demonstrated for each group over four years. The results suggest that there has been a small increase in the proportion of appearances made by English players although it is not statistically significant. There is, however, evidence of a significant decrease in the proportion of appearances made by players from overseas and a significant increase in appearances by players from other home nations, albeit from a small base. The appearance data suggest that the rule changes have had a small impact on what the trends in Figure 1 display as a substantial and increasing gap.

Table 2. Home Grown Rule Impact

	2008/09		2011/12				
England	36.5%	10,247	37.2%	10,144	1.06	1.06	NO
Overseas	58.5%	10,247	52.6%	10,144	-8.47	8.47	YES
Other home nations	5.0%	10,247	10.2%	10,144	13.94	13.94	YES

The average number of appearances per season made by English and overseas players in the EPL also reveals a decline in the number of opportunities for English players. In the first three seasons prior to the Bosman ruling and the reduction of EPL teams, English players averaged approximately twenty games each per season (accounting for more than two-thirds of all appearances in the EPL). When compared with the last three EPL seasons, the number of English players appearing in the first team has almost halved and those that do appear play, on average, less than eighteen games each, and account for less than 40% of all appearances for their club. The average number of games played by overseas players has remained consistent, but overseas players account for a greater proportion of all EPL appearances as the number of players has increased.

When analysing these data for the seven EPL clubs that have competed in all twenty seasons, the trend also shows a reduction in the number and percentage of appearances made. Comparing the change for these seven clubs, the averages for the first four EPL seasons (pre-Bosman) and the last four EPL seasons (post UEFA quota changes), demonstrates this reduction. This is shown in Figure 2, albeit with variations between clubs.

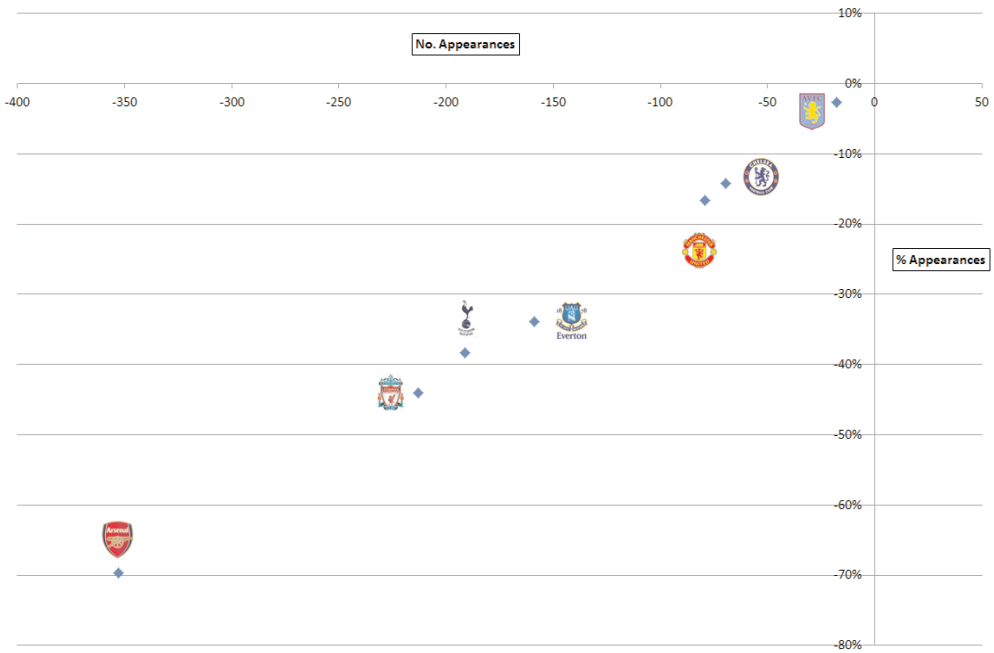

Figure 2. Change in Number and Proportion of Appearances by English players: Ever Present Clubs

All seven ever-present clubs have seen a reduction in both the number and proportion of appearances by English professionals. Arsenal is an outlier, predominantly due to eight instances where the number of English appearances in a season was below 100. This scenario only occurred on 10 occasions at five other clubs (Liverpool (1), Bolton Wanderers (1), Wigan Athletic (2), Blackburn Rovers (3), and Fulham (3)). Furthermore, demonstrating that the issue remains current, three of these 10 occurrences were in the twentieth season (Arsenal, Fulham, and Wigan Athletic).

In order to understand the context of players and appearances in terms of establishing opportunity for youth players, it is important to calculate the number of new English players entering the league each year. This can be ascertained on two levels: i) all English players new to the league including those being promoted, coming back from a long injury and being transferred in; and ii) those players new to the league who have never played in the EPL before. It is this latter group that, arguably, is the best representation of the indigenous players who are successfully being developed through the system (see Table 3).

Table 3 provides a good illustration of the issue facing the English game. As previously shown, average appearances for all English players have remained consistent, despite a slight decline, at 18 appearances. However, the average number of games by new players (including those that may have played before in the EPL) ranges between 9 appearances and 17, with an average of 13. This decrease is further pronounced for those playing in the EPL for the first time, ranging between 5 and 16, with an average of 11 appearances per player. Since the introduction of the home-grown rule, the average is 9 appearances. This further reflects the earlier point about home-grown players not necessarily being English. These results are also consistent with the CIES Football Observatory findings [19] which revealed that only 35 English players eligible for under 21 football played in the EPL in 2012/13.

Table 3. Number of English Players Entering the EPL Each Season

	All English Players	Average No. Apps	"New" English players to EPL	Average No. Apps	New players (not played in EPL before)	Average No. Apps
1992-93	393	19.9	-	-	-	-
1993-94	396	19.7	100	16.5	100	16.5
1994-95	370	20.2	112	16.9	73	13.6
1995-96	312	18.2	77	9.4	52	7.7
1996-97	292	18.2	86	13.9	63	11.8
1997-98	279	18.1	76	13.0	49	12.9
1998-99	274	17.6	81	12.7	51	10.3
1999-00	267	17.3	80	12.5	59	9.6
2000-01	248	18.4	62	15.0	38	11.9
2001-02	225	18.5	59	14.1	28	10.3
2002-03	211	17.8	60	11.2	43	8.9
2003-04	202	18.5	55	12.6	31	7.9
2004-05	204	18.5	65	13.0	41	10.3
2005-06	195	18.8	57	14.9	39	13.2
2006-07	201	19.5	70	15.9	42	15.7
2007-08	188	18.7	50	11.9	28	9.5
2008-09	213	17.6	60	9.3	37	7.7
2009-10	195	17.9	55	11.5	36	8.3
2010-11	211	17.8	67	9.1	43	5.4
2011-12	212	17.8	68	13.7	47	12.6

The impact of the overall increase in overseas players has also had an interesting effect in terms of supplying the national team. The proportion of players in the England squad drawn from among eligible EPL players has almost doubled from under 10% in the first four seasons, as shown in Table 4. It could be argued that fewer English players in the EPL does not necessarily mean that there are fewer English players of international quality competing in the league. The more salient indicator is the size of the "effective" talent pool (i.e. players considered of a sufficient calibre to represent England at the national level). Evidence for this is contradictory; in one instance the number of domestic championship and Champions League winners in the England squad is impressive, playing alongside and against elite players from all over the world. On the other, an effective pool would not result in a series of players being selected from the Championship (e.g., Nugent, Bothroyd), players brought up to the senior squad from the Under 21's due to a limited choice of other senior players, international squads including those that are not necessarily first-choice in their club side (e.g. Lescott, Rodwell, Cleverley, Gibbs, Bertand), and players making their international debut in the latter stages of their career (e.g. Leon Osman and Chris Powell at 31, Kevin Davies at 33).

Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 4, despite the increasing influx of overseas players into the EPL, the number of English players playing overseas (albeit only those involved in international football) has not developed. This suggests that English football in the EPL years is characterised by a culture of higher imports of foreign/overseas players and low exports etc. Notwithstanding this, the steady increase has slightly abated since 2008 and since the introduction of the home-grown rules.

Table 4. England Squad Appearances by Season

Season	No. England games in season	(A) No. players used in national team	(B) No. players at non-EPL club	No. players from EPL clubs (A-B)	% EPL players awarded ENG cap
1992-93	11	36	3	33	8.4%
1993-94	6	28	2	26	6.6%
1994-95	8	36	2	34	9.2%
1995-96[b]	13	31	3	28	9.0%
1996-97	11	35	2	33	11.3%
1997-98[a]	13	30	2	28	10.0%
1998-99	9	39	0	39	14.2%
1999-00[b]	12	32	0	32	12.0%
2000-01	9	41	1	40	16.1%
2001-02[a]	15	42	2	40	17.8%
2002-03	9	39	1	38	18.0%
2003-04[b]	13	38	3	35	17.3%
2004-05	11	38	3	35	17.2%
2005-06[a]	14	34	2	32	16.4%
2006-07	11	39	2	37	18.4%
2007-08	11	42	1	41	21.8%
2008-09	11	34	1	33	15.5%
2009-10[a]	13	36	1	35	17.9%
2010-11	9	36	0	36	17.1%
2011-12[b]	12	35	1	34	16.2%

[a] England competed in a World Cup, [b] England competed in a European Championships

DISCUSSION

Analysing the number of EPL appearances offers an attempt to provide an accurate representation of the number of senior team opportunities that exist for English players in a more robust and accurate way. The general accordance between the findings presented here and the extant literature is noteworthy. In terms of youth development in particular, the findings support previous research (e.g., [9]) by underlining the potential difficulties that young players will experience in attempting to progress from youth to senior competition.

In evaluating the impact of UEFA's home-grown rule, the present study represents an initial attempt to determine the efficacy of the rule since its introduction in 2008/09. Though not statistically significant, when comparing the inaugural season of the rules implementation with 2011/12, the results revealed a small increase in the proportion of appearances made by English players. Interestingly, the results also found a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of appearances made by overseas players; and a significant increase by other home nations players. Taken together, the results suggest that the long-term decrease in the number of appearances made by English players coupled with the increase in appearances made by overseas players is showing signs of plateaux. The findings suggest that the home-grown rule changes have had a small impact on the opportunities available for English players. Indeed, the results of the present investigation offer some positive, albeit tentative, signs of growth in the number of opportunities for English players.

In terms of the impact on the national team, the analysis suggests that there has been a diminishing pool of players playing in the elite English league from which to choose, and a greater proportion of EPL players are representing England. The lack of English players of international quality employed on the continent also limits the supply of players to the national team, as opportunities are limited (largely) to the 20 EPL clubs. In the context of diminishing opportunities for English players, this gives the national manager a narrower range of players to choose from.

The extent to which the decline in opportunity can be directly attributed to UEFA's regulations is unknown. Indeed, other contributory factors stemming from a variety of socio-cultural, structural and financial sources might also be partly responsible. Nevertheless, it is clear that talent must continue to meet opportunity and simply halting the decline is not sufficient. It is evident that continued strategies for increasing playing opportunities for English players must be implemented to not only safeguard the future of developing indigenous players, but also ultimately to protect the interests of the national team. Indeed, the long-term decline in the number of English players breaking through to play in the EPL has been, and continues to be, a major concern for the games governing bodies [13].

Without implying causality, this decline in English players has coincided with a series of perceived under-achievements at the international level, particularly in light of the relative success of EPL teams in European club competitions. Since the inauguration of the EPL, England has made one semi-final appearance in the ten tournaments in which they have participated (Euro 1996, which they hosted). Despite this, the performance record is superior to the previous ten tournaments, with four quarter final appearances during this time compared to two in the previous ten. Although the national team failed to qualify for two tournaments in the EPL years (1994 and 2008), England had failed to qualify for five of the previous ten tournaments, albeit with fewer teams competing. The perceived shortcomings might be due to increased anticipation because the number of international quality players in the English league has heightened expectation; however, results show that a broad pool of international quality players eligible for England has not necessarily followed the leagues success. Furthermore, statistics from the most recent tournament, Euro 2012, highlighted an apparent gap in technical skill between England and the other top nations. For example, England, on average, had 39% of the possession in their four games, which represented their lowest figure at a tournament since the European Championships in 1980 [20]. Spain, the winners, had an average of 59% [21].

Tackling the decline in opportunities must be a top priority for the long term sustainability of player development in England, particularly the production of English players. It is clear that both structural and cultural changes in the game are required in order to fully reap the benefits of the supply line; via the academy system. However, there is a potential dichotomy in priorities between the games administrators. The EPL, largely, has a remit to protect and maximise the commercial aspects of the "product", and player development is, arguably, a lower priority. Notwithstanding this, the EPL is heavily involved in putting policies in place to help develop young players in England, as evidenced by the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), as will be discussed in the succeeding section.

So where does the English game go? The game's governing bodies are acutely aware of the extent of the problem around clubs being reliant on importing, invariably cheaper, ready-made players for their senior teams. In response, a number of initiatives geared towards enhancing the prospects, particularly for elite youth players are being launched.

Firstly, the structure of elite player development in England is undergoing significant change via the introduction of the Premier League's EPPP, which replaces the FA's Charter

for Quality. This modernised system has been designed to increase the sustainability of player development and provide a consistent quality platform which supports the aspirations of youth players [13]. According to the Premier League [13], the EPPP will involve considerable financial strategic investment and is driven by a fundamental aspiration to, "increase the number and quality of home-grown players gaining professional contracts and playing first-team football at the highest level". In order to be effective, a central issue for the EPPP to overcome will rest upon the creation of clear pathways to play at the senior level. The EPPP's introduction of the U21 Premier League in the 2012/13 season might help bridge the gap from youth to senior football to some extent.

However, in the high pressure, high stakes results-focussed world of the EPL, managers may be reticent to include a young player. Thus, when a choice has to be made between a younger and an older player, often the latter will be selected on account of their experience. As suggested by Vaeyens et al. [9], clearly this represents a catch-22 scenario because playing competitive matches is the only way youngsters can develop and gain experience. Ironically, it would seem that there is a correlation between a manager's perception of stability and their willingness to play young players. Indeed, if a manager feels secure in their position and has the full backing of the Chairman, and the board of directors, they might be more likely to take a calculated risk on players that have come through the system as they do not feel under as much pressure.

In addition to the changes in the way young players are developed through the EPPP, the introduction of UEFA's Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules from the 2013/14 season is the next major change which will impact upon the domestic game across Europe [22]. The new rules state that a club's expenditure has to be closely aligned with their income, thus attempting to negate the scenario where new owners undertake a period of bulk transfer spending in a short period of time. This fundamental change to the rules, notwithstanding any possible loopholes which circumvent the financial parameters, has the potential to increase the focus and concentration on cultivating players and within youth academies, as high value player transfers will become more difficult to account for within the new guidelines. This has the potential to increase the proportion of first team squads made up of home-grown players, due to their increased attractiveness via lower wages and absence of any transfer fee. However, it is important to note that these home-grown players might not necessarily be English in origin.

A previous study suggested that "player migration should have increased considerably after the implementation of the Bosman ruling as the restraints to mobility have been abolished" [23, p. 91]. However, the results demonstrate that the flow of non-English players being exported into the EPL is not reciprocated by the exporting countries. Historically, examples of English players plying their trade in Europe are limited. Indeed, England is a nation that traditionally does not export players to other European leagues. The EPL acts a little like a silo for English professionals. Over the 20-year period, the results demonstrate that the maximum number of players involved in the England squad playing overseas at any given juncture was three. In Euro 2012, all 23 players in the England squad played in the EPL, compared to 11 French players in Ligue 1, 18 German players in the Bundesliga, 20 Italian players in Serie A, 19 Spain players in La Liga and seven Dutch players in the Eredivisie. The average across all 16 teams was 12 players appearing in the league of their nationality. It could be argued that due to the financial rewards on offer through wages in the EPL, the best English players are more likely to stay. However, there is little evidence that English players not playing at international level leave the EPL and establish themselves overseas before entering the international team that way. Whereas this is more common for players from overseas, albeit

some coming from arguably weaker leagues. According to the data, Owen Hargreaves (Bayern Munich) is the only player in the first 20 EPL years to debut for England without playing in England's top two divisions first and, with Alan Thompson (Celtic), the only player to debut for England playing outside England's leagues.

The lack of English players migrating overseas might have both financial and cultural origins. Irrespective of its aetiology, in addition to the aforementioned initiatives, one plausible solution to the problem of fewer senior team opportunities might involve bucking the trend of migration patterns and establishing a system to send young players out to European clubs that compete in less high profile European leagues. Although Manchester United has trialled this with Royal Antwerp (Belgium), this relationship has not been commonplace, and drew criticism from UEFA at the time. Though not intended as a means to solve the problem entirely, this represents an opportunity, particularly for young players, to continue their development in preparation for the high standards needed for the EPL. In this way, aspirant players' talent would hopefully be met with opportunity and they would gain the senior team experience that is vital to their continued development. Indeed, it is contented that such an arrangement would help smooth a young players' transition into the senior squad. Moreover, by immersing themselves in another culture, it is felt that their experience would prove valuable in shaping their character and help to develop aspects of their social-emotional development [12]. Allied with the high quality of technical and tactical development these players would receive, it is contended that playing overseas would help players to develop in a holistic sense by enabling them to have cross-cultural experiences. Indeed, research [12] shows that such areas of development are considered crucial if young players are to successfully make the transition to the professional level.

The introduction of the EPPP and FFP are positive steps to ensure that clubs will have an increased focus on elite youth development over the long term. However, there is a fine balance between the need to develop indigenous players and the commercial requirements which generate the income and makes the EPL so popular around the world. These initiatives, though commendable, do not necessarily mean that it is young English players benefitting from the new systems and regulations. In order to safeguard the future of the game, it is evident that EPL clubs must make a concerted and collective effort to adopt and embrace a system which creates good quality opportunities for indigenous players to play in their senior teams.

This is where the culture change will be most difficult to manage, shape, and change as any detrimental effect to the quality of the league may not be well received, particularly by commercial backers who increasingly take the form of foreign owners that have no vested interest in the vitality of the national team. The German Bundesliga has, to some extent, provided a beacon for others to follow. Its decision to address the sustainability of the domestic and national game involved a short-term decrease in performance in elite European competitions. Indeed, the performance of elite German clubs in European competitions diminished between 2002 and 2008; however, since 2008 the national team has seen an influx of young, technically competent players appearing in the national team. This example from Germany highlights that, with a collective approach from clubs and administrators, it is possible to lay the foundations for long-term sustainability, and importantly, success both on and off the field. However, the range of foreign ownership structures in a significant proportion of EPL clubs would, potentially, make this more difficult to achieve in England.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

One of the strengths of the current study was the methodological approach deployed, which has resulted in a more accurate and reliable appraisal of the opportunities that exist for elite young English players. Indeed, the study overcomes some of the methodological shortcomings of previous research as many clubs might potentially look to circumvent the home-grown rule by selecting young players in the squad with no real intention of playing them.

Though not a major limitation, it is important to acknowledge that despite the methodological approach, the "quality" of the opportunities being afforded to English players remains unknown. Indeed, though the steady decline in appearances is showing signs of abating, the study did not take into account the actual amount of time played when making an appearance. As such, it is unknown whether the appearances made were, for example, as part of the starting eleven for 90 minutes or as a substitute in added time. For this reason, it would seem important that future research takes into account the 'quality of the appearance' which would further enhance the validity and reliability of the data.

CONCLUSION

In terms of real-world significance, an investigation of this nature is timely as the emphasis on the development of players in England has never been as relevant or intense as it is at the present time. The current context surrounding the elite game for English players depicts a rapidly changing environment. New rules, new guidelines, and new developmental initiatives all come against a backdrop of supply side issues in terms of the number, but more importantly, the amount of opportunity available. The creation of the EPL has, in many respects, improved English football from the supply side (e.g., better stadia, greater financial rewards, attracting some of the world's best players, etc.) and for the players (e.g., higher wages, increased freedom of movement, greater 'player power').

However, the findings herein lend support to the view that these improvements have largely been to the detriment of the development of elite indigenous players. Though the results are promising with regard to arresting the decline, we feel it is imperative that those charged with governing the game continue to strive to implement initiatives geared toward increasing opportunities for young players, many of which might involve changing the culture of the game. Indeed, despite the significant investment in development programmes (e.g., EPPP) for young players, coupled with other initiatives (e.g., FFP), the view put forward by Vaeyens et al. [9] that football clubs, leagues and national teams will only improve if more playing opportunities are afforded to young players appears to remain true. In light of the steps taken by governing bodies that are geared toward improving the number of opportunities for indigenous players, it would be interesting for future researchers to follow-up on this preliminary study to evaluate their impact once they have had sufficient time to "bed in" per se. Only time will tell if these initiatives will be successful in their objective of safeguarding the game's future sustainability.

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