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Examining the development environments of elite English football academies: The players' perspective

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## 1 ABSTRACT

2 As a preliminary investigation, we examined elite youth football academy players'  
3 perceptions of the quality of their development environment, at a crucial stage in their  
4 progression to the professional level. With institutional ethics approval, the Talent  
5 Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ) [1] was used to survey 50 elite players  
6 aged 16-18 ( $m$  17.1,  $\pm s$  = 0.6 years) recruited from the academies of Premier League and  
7 Championship clubs in England. Overall, the results suggest that elite player development  
8 environments are perceived to be of a good quality. However, while academies appeared  
9 strong in areas specifically related to coaching, organisation, and sport-related support; areas  
10 pertaining to athlete understanding and links to senior progression were perceived less  
11 favourably. In addition to the importance of establishing well-integrated youth and senior  
12 teams and positive working relationships with parents; the findings underline the necessity  
13 for academies to pay close attention to the psychosocial environments they create for  
14 developing players. Theoretical considerations and applied implications for those involved in  
15 elite player development are discussed.

16  
17 Keywords: elite, environment, development, football, psychosocial

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

2       The development of gifted young football players is paramount on the agenda for those  
3 responsible for governing professional football in England (e.g., The Football Association,  
4 Premier League). While the English Premier League (EPL) has enjoyed exponential growth  
5 over the last two decades, concerns have been raised about the decreasing number of English  
6 players that have been developed during this period. Supporting this notion, recent research  
7 from the Centre International d'Etude du Sport (CIES) Football Observatory revealed that the  
8 playing time of English under-21s in the EPL has fallen to its lowest level [2]. More precisely,  
9 in the 2012/13 season, only 35 English under-21 players made appearances in the EPL; the  
10 lowest figure since 2005. Despite much conjecture and vociferous debate regarding elite  
11 player development within the game, what is clear is that the ever increasing quality of the  
12 EPL, underpinned by the extraordinary financial power of elite clubs, has led to a scenario  
13 where, to 'break through' to the elite level, young players not only have to be one of the  
14 finest in England but also the world. For this reason, the director of youth at the EPL has  
15 noted that, "the focus on youth has probably never been as intense or as urgent since the  
16 inception of the Premier League as it is right now." [3].

17       This notable real world significance is reflected in the increasing amount of research  
18 within the sport sciences that has been dedicated to the topic in recent years [4, 5, 6, 7].  
19 Notwithstanding the different perspectives taken (e.g., sociological, motor control and  
20 learning, stress and coping), this research is ultimately united by a shared focus on the  
21 application of scientific principles to help those involved in elite player development.

22       While the development and eventual success of a gifted young player is considered to  
23 be influenced by an intricate blend of innate, psychological, and behavioural factors [5], few  
24 would dispute that it is also largely shaped by their environmental experience [8]. Indeed,  
25 Williams and Reilly [9] contend that the very term 'talent development' in football infers that

1 young players are provided with an appropriate learning environment to translate their  
2 potential into excellence. Certainly, research (5) suggests that players on the cusp of the elite  
3 senior level must not only possess a range of intrapersonal qualities (e.g., awareness,  
4 resilience, confidence) but, crucially, must be afforded a rich and vibrant development  
5 environment in which to develop these characteristics. In coaching psychology literature, as  
6 well as on the topic of developing talent, what constitutes a vibrant learning environment has  
7 received increased interest [10]. Traditionally, coaching environments have been criticised  
8 for adopting approaches in which young, developing athletes are treated as “sponges”,  
9 thereby reflecting a more passive style to learning. However, coaches are now encouraged to  
10 promote active learning (e.g., questioning methods and problem solving type drills), along  
11 with strategies to help athletes become more aware of their performance and development  
12 (e.g., coach-athlete dialogue). Adding credence to the potential importance of such  
13 environments, Mills et al.’s [5] findings suggested that awareness (i.e., self and others) was a  
14 key catalyst in the successful development of elite academy football players. Over all, this  
15 recognised need to cultivate appropriate developmental climates in which to nurture young  
16 players underlines Gagne’s [11] contention that exceptional natural abilities can remain  
17 solely as gifts if not effectively nurtured via the developmental process into systematically  
18 developed talents. Thus, while outstanding natural abilities are requisite, elite players would  
19 appear to be largely ‘built’ not ‘born’ and, as such, points toward the environment created at a  
20 youth academy as one of the most directly controllable factors in the life of a young player.

21 Despite the importance placed on a players’ development environment, to-date, little is  
22 known about the environments that are created for elite young players. Given that elite youth  
23 football in England is considered to be inherently challenging and largely characterised by a  
24 highly pressurised climate for success [7], the lack of research in this regard is somewhat  
25 surprising. Notwithstanding the contributions of recent investigations [5, 6, 7] that underline

1 the necessity for developing players to be able to cope with the potentially wide-ranging  
2 demands they encounter within academy environments; scant research has specifically  
3 explored the development environments that are established to nurture players into the elite  
4 senior level of the game. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, Mills, Butt, Maynard, and  
5 Harwood [12] examined successful elite academy coaches' perceptions of factors considered  
6 to underpin optimal development environments for players on the verge of the professional  
7 level (i.e., 16-18 years). Key themes identified included: (i) espousing a coherent philosophy  
8 with clearly defined core values, expectations, and behavioural standards; (ii) promoting  
9 whole person development; (iii) empowering key stakeholders (i.e., staff, players, and parents)  
10 to create a sense of ownership and relatedness; (iv) forming positive relationships with key  
11 stakeholders and prioritising player wellbeing; (v) maintaining well-integrated and stable  
12 personnel with strong links to senior team operations (vi); establishing clear and effective  
13 lines of communication; (vii) being adaptable and committed to innovation; and (viii)  
14 constructing an achievement-focused climate with explicit opportunities to progress.  
15 Collectively, the findings emphasised the importance of establishing strong, dynamic  
16 organisational cultures within youth academies.

17 Despite the valuable insights generated from this research, our understanding of elite  
18 player development environments is far from complete and some important questions remain  
19 unanswered. First, obtaining coaches' views of how they shape the environment, while  
20 important, only represents one part of the equation. Given that coaching effectiveness is  
21 largely considered to be a process-product phenomenon, it would also seem important to  
22 elicit the perceptions of developing players to gain their perspectives on the academy  
23 environment. Indeed, generating such player-driven insights would help to provide a more  
24 complete picture of the environments elite young players are nurtured within. Importantly,  
25 insights of this nature would also appear to bridge an evident real-world need. As Green [13,

1 p.10] observed, “despite the time, effort, and huge investment that has gone into England’s  
2 youth development schemes, one thing the clubs, their leagues, and the FA have not been  
3 very good at is finding out what the people who have been through the system felt about it.”

4       Second, despite Williams and Reilly’s [9] recommendation that a key area for research  
5 in elite youth football is to provide guidelines for nurturing players through each stage of  
6 development, few studies, to-date, have specifically focused on key stages along the player  
7 development pathway. One such key stage along this pathway relates to the investment years  
8 [14]. In talent development terms, this represents the specific transition from elite junior to  
9 elite senior where training, competition, and the pursuit of elite level performance become the  
10 major foci of a developing athletes’ life. In elite youth football terms, this represents the stage  
11 where players who show real promise are signed to undertake a two year full-time youth  
12 training programme known as an academy scholarship. This structured programme provides  
13 young players with a finite window of opportunity to realise their ambition of becoming a  
14 professional. Although elite athletes have frequently described this specific transition as the  
15 most difficult stage they encountered [15], presently, little is known about players’  
16 developmental experiences during this critical period in their early career. This point  
17 highlights a gap in the literature that warrants attention. As such, it would seem important for  
18 the continued advancement of the area that research begins to build a clear picture of elite  
19 development environments as seen through the eyes of players at a pivotal, invariably ‘make  
20 or break’, stage in their footballing lives.

21       Third, from a methodological perspective, the greater part of talent development  
22 research has been retrospective in nature. Specifically, high-achieving elite adult athletes  
23 have been asked to reflect on their athletic careers [16]. Notwithstanding these contributions  
24 to the literature, research with athletes *in situ* would seem vital as it may reveal more  
25 information about talent development than examining the recalled perspectives of those

1 already at the elite adult level [14]. Indeed, such research would help to identify the positive  
2 and negative aspects associated with development so they can either be maximised or  
3 minimised in the lives of young athletes [17].

4 In light of both the empirical and real-world need to better understand the environments  
5 in which young players are nurtured, the purpose of the present study was to examine elite  
6 academy players' perceptions regarding the quality of their development environment at a  
7 decisive stage in their progression to the professional level. It is anticipated that such a  
8 detailed, scientific insight will enable a clearer understanding of their current strengths and,  
9 importantly, areas that might need improving. In the interests of bridging the gap between  
10 research and practice, such information would provide those working within elite youth  
11 football with actionable insights that might, in part, help facilitate the development process of  
12 gifted young players.

### 13 METHOD

#### 14 *Participants*

15 50 elite youth football academy players aged 16-18 years ( $m$  17.1,  $\pm s$  = 0.6 years)  
16 participated in the study. Of these, 41 were English and nine were from overseas countries  
17 (i.e., African  $n=3$ , Asian  $n=1$ , Eastern European  $n=2$ , Northern European  $n=3$ ).

18 To capture balanced and geographically diverse perspectives of elite player development  
19 environments, players were recruited from academies that were based in the North ( $n=2$ ) and  
20 South ( $n=1$ ) regions of England. For authenticity of the data, it was also important to recruit a  
21 sample that could justifiably be considered elite. To this end, the inclusion of players was  
22 based on two strict criteria. First, the players were recruited from academies that compete in  
23 the highest tiers of the EPL's U18 Professional Development League (PDL). Representing  
24 the pinnacle of elite youth football in England, academies participating in the PDL must meet  
25 stringent criteria in relation to the quality of their youth development programmes [3].



1 Second, it was a prerequisite that all players were at the scholarship stage of development  
2 (i.e., 16-18 years), and were contracted by the club on a full-time, day-to-day basis. This  
3 ensured that reliable, stage-specific perceptions of the development environment could be  
4 gathered.

#### 5 *Instrumentation : Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ)*

6 The TDEQ was used to capture the players' perceptions. Developed by Martindale et al.  
7 [1], the TDEQ is a 59 item questionnaire designed to measure the extent to which features of  
8 good practice are experienced by athletes in their development environments. Based on key  
9 features emanating from the extant talent development literature, the TDEQ has been  
10 developed as a generic tool that evaluates the environmental features deemed useful for  
11 facilitating development across sports, stage/age, gender, and culture. Specifically, the  
12 instrument comprises seven factors: (i) Long-term development focus; (ii) Quality  
13 preparation; (iii) Communication; (iv) Understanding the athlete; (v) Support network; (vi)  
14 Challenging and supportive environment; and (vii) Long-term development fundamentals.  
15 The internal consistency of the questionnaire shows adequate to excellent reliability and a  
16 recent validation study also demonstrated robust structural properties and sound ecological  
17 validity [1]. In light of its psychometric properties, the TDEQ is considered a tool that can be  
18 used with confidence in applied talent development research settings.

#### 19 *Procedure*

20 Following institutional ethics approval, the academy managers of youth academies that  
21 met the stipulated inclusion criteria were initially contacted by email detailing the purpose  
22 and nature of the study. For those who agreed to participate, convenient times were arranged  
23 to collect the data. Before data collection commenced, informed consent was obtained from  
24 the academy manager and players which confirmed their understanding of the purpose of the  
25 study and their agreement to participate. For those under 18, parental and/or guardian consent

1 was also obtained. Administration of the questionnaires took place at the respective  
2 academy's training facilities in quiet classroom conditions under the supervision of the  
3 researcher and/or the academy manager and Head of Education and Welfare (HoEW). From  
4 the total number of scholars that were invited to participate in the study, 50 completed the  
5 survey, indicating an 85% completion rate. The supervised, on-site, data collection ensured  
6 that all questions (i.e., each of the subscales) on the survey had been answered. At the onset,  
7 players were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers, given assurances about  
8 the confidentiality of their responses, and encouraged to provide honest answers. To further  
9 reduce social desirability, the participants were not asked to provide any identifiable details  
10 and were assured that any information emanating from the questionnaires would only be  
11 displayed as a group average. The questionnaires took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

## 12 *Data analysis*

13 Due to the structure of the questionnaire, previous studies [1] using the TDEQ coded  
14 responses on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). For this  
15 reason, a lower mean indicated a more favourable perception. However, for ease of  
16 interpretation, and in line with Wang and colleagues [18], all items in the present study were  
17 coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This permitted higher scores to relate  
18 to a perception of higher quality experience.<sup>1</sup>

19 To add validity and accuracy to the interpretation of the data, the reliability of the  
20 TDEQ was initially measured using Cronbach's alpha. Specifically, preliminary statistical  
21 analysis was carried out to determine the internal consistency of the instruments factors. In  
22 the present investigation, all but one of the subscale alpha coefficients were found to be  
23 adequate and ranged between .60 and .92 (development focus,  $\alpha = .92$ ; quality preparation,  $\alpha$   
24  $= .60$ ; communication,  $\alpha = .84$ ; understanding of athlete,  $\alpha = .63$ ; support network,  $\alpha = .78$ ;

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<sup>1</sup> Except for negatively phased items where a lower item mean relates to a higher quality perception of that aspect.

1 and development fundamentals,  $\alpha = .76$ ). Congruent with Wang et al. [18], the challenging  
2 and supportive environment factor demonstrated low internal reliability ( $\alpha = .40$ ), and thus  
3 was omitted for interpretation at the subscale level.

4 After establishing reliability, the mean subscale scores were calculated for each of the  
5 remaining six factors. Given Martindale et al.'s [1] recommendation to use item scores in  
6 conjunction with subscale scores when using the TDEQ in applied research, descriptive  
7 statistics were then calculated for all individual item scores within each factor<sup>2</sup>. Following on  
8 from this, all items were subsequently quartile ranked by proportion of agreement. This  
9 process enabled a detailed, quantitative analysis of the key strengths and areas for  
10 improvement as seen through the players' eyes. Items ranked in the top quartile (i.e., top 25<sup>th</sup>  
11 percentile) were greater than 80% proportion of agreement, and as such were classified as  
12 strengths (+) of the development environment. Conversely, items ranked in the bottom  
13 quartile (i.e., bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile) were less than 70% proportion of agreement, and as such  
14 were categorised as areas for improvement (^).

## 15 RESULTS

16 The results are structured in two parts. First, the mean subscale scores of the main  
17 variables are displayed (see Table 1) to show how elite player development environments are  
18 perceived at an overall factor level. Second, to provide a deeper and more meaningful  
19 understanding of the players' perceptions beyond the subscale scores, each factor is presented  
20 in more detail to elucidate trends in the data at an item level. Descriptive statistics for the  
21 items within each factor are summarised in Table 2. In addition, Figure 1 displays the specific  
22 features of the development environment identified as strengths and areas for improvement.  
23 Interpretation of these key areas in light of assumptions derived from the extant talent  
24 development literature will be provided in the discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> Nine of the TDEQ's items are miscellaneous and, as such, are not used in calculating the subscale scores, nor have they been included in the item level analysis.

1 *Overall*

2       At an overall factor level, players reported that their development environment exhibits  
3 a long-term development focus, provides robust support networks, and largely demonstrates  
4 effective communication. However, features of the environment relating to athlete  
5 understanding, long-term development fundamentals, and quality preparation were not  
6 viewed as strong. These six factors are discussed in turn below beginning with the three  
7 strongest factors.

8 *Long-Term development focus*

9       This factor comprises 27 items that relate to the extent to which development  
10 opportunities are specifically designed to facilitate long-term success (e.g., on-going  
11 opportunities, rounded development, and clear expectations). The items in this factor also  
12 relate to the attitudes, psychological skills, and understanding required for long-term  
13 progression (e.g. responsibility, dedication, coping skills). With a mean subscale score of  
14 4.67, this factor emerged as one of the highest performing components of the development  
15 environment and, as such, was viewed largely positively by the players.

16       Within this factor, nearly all players (96%) agreed to some extent that they were  
17 expected to take more responsibility for their own development as they became more  
18 experienced ( $m = 4.83$ ). The players also largely indicated that their training was beneficial  
19 and challenging ( $m = 4.91$ ); and specifically designed to help them develop in the long term  
20 ( $m = 4.85$ ). With specific emphasis on the coach, the majority of players reported that their  
21 coach cared more about them becoming a professional than having a winning team ( $m = 4.81$ );  
22 constantly reminded them that dedication and desire would be key to how good a performer  
23 they would become ( $m = 5.00$ ); was good at making them understand their strengths and  
24 weaknesses ( $m = 4.98$ ); and emphasised the need for constant work on fundamental skills ( $m$   
25 = 4.98). Further, the players mostly agreed that there were people to help them deal with any

1 nerves or worries they experienced ( $m = 4.60$ ); and reported that they were told how they  
2 could help each other develop further in their sport ( $m = 4.85$ ). Despite the largely positive  
3 responses, approximately two-thirds of players (65%) agreed to some extent that developing  
4 performers are often written off before they have had an opportunity to demonstrate their full  
5 potential.

#### 6 *Support network*

7 This factor comprises eight items that relate to the degree to which a coherent,  
8 approachable, and wide-ranging support network is available to help support and develop  
9 players in all areas. With a mean subscale score of 4.68, this factor was one of the highest  
10 performing components of the environment. Within this factor, the players revealed that they  
11 felt they could pop in to see their coach or support staff whenever they needed to ( $m = 5.38$ ),  
12 and that the coaches and support staff were largely approachable ( $m = 4.77$ ). Players also  
13 indicated that they had access to a variety of professional support staff to help their  
14 development ( $m = 4.98$ ). 83% of players reported that all the different aspects of their  
15 development were organised into a realistic schedule; while the majority revealed that their  
16 training programmes were specifically developed to their needs ( $m = 4.51$ ). In addition,  
17 players largely reported that their coach regularly talks with support staff about what they are  
18 trying to achieve ( $m = 4.68$ ); and predominantly considered the coaches and support  
19 personnel to be on the same wavelength with what is best for them ( $m = 4.49$ ). The majority  
20 of players also revealed that their coach makes sure that their college understands about the  
21 demands placed on them with regards training and competition ( $m = 4.51$ ).

#### 22 *Communication*

23 This factor contains seven items that collectively relate to the degree to which the coach  
24 communicates effectively with players in both formal and informal settings. With a mean  
25 subscale score of 4.39, this component of the environment performed adequately. Within this

1 factor, the players largely agreed that their coach explained how their training and  
2 competition programme work in tandem to help them develop ( $m = 4.79$ ). The majority of  
3 players also indicated that they talked with their coach about what current and/or past world-  
4 class performers did to be successful ( $m = 4.40$ ). While 83% of players agreed to some extent  
5 that the feedback they receive almost always relates to their goals; a substantial proportion  
6 (45%) of this agreement was tentative ( $m = 4.21$ ). The players largely reported that they  
7 regularly talk with their coach about the things they need to do to progress to the elite senior  
8 level ( $m = 4.49$ ); and that they regularly set goals that are tailored to their individual needs ( $m$   
9  $=4.49$ ). While the majority of players also indicated that they often discuss the connections  
10 between different aspects of their training ( $m = 4.51$ ); only 44% either agreed or strongly  
11 agreed that they often worked with their coach to identify what their next big test will be ( $m =$   
12 4.15).

### 13 *Quality preparation*

14 This factor, consisting of five items, refers to the extent to which clear guidance and  
15 opportunities are in place to provide and reinforce quality practice through training, recovery,  
16 and competition experiences. With a mean subscale score of 4.16, this factor was viewed as  
17 one of the weaker elements of the development environment. All items within this factor  
18 were negatively phrased. To this end, a lower mean score relates to a perception of higher  
19 quality experiences. Within this factor, the majority of players reported that they get good  
20 quality competition experiences at the level they require ( $m = 2.64$ ); and are taught how to  
21 balance training, competing, and recovery ( $m = 2.55$ ). However, approximately four out of  
22 ten players (39%) revealed that they felt pressure from their peers to do things differently to  
23 what the coach asks ( $m = 3.04$ ); while a similar proportion (41%) indicated that they are  
24 rarely encouraged to plan for how they would deal with things that might go wrong ( $m =$   
25 3.06). In addition, only around a half of all players (45%) reported with certainty (i.e. either

1 agreed or strongly agreed) that the guidelines regarding what they need to do to progress are  
2 clear ( $m = 2.79$ ).

### 3 *Understanding the athlete*

4 This factor comprises four items that collectively relate to the extent to which the coach  
5 understands the player in depth, at a holistic level, and has developed a strong professional  
6 relationship with them. With a mean subscale score of 4.15, this factor was one of the weaker  
7 performing components of the environment. Congruent with the communication factor, all  
8 items within this subscale were negatively phrased and, as such, lower item mean scores  
9 indicate a more favourable perception. Within this factor, the majority of players felt that  
10 their coach took time to talk with other coaches that work with them ( $m = 2.68$ ), and mostly  
11 indicated that they received help to develop their mental toughness ( $m = 2.57$ ). However, a  
12 third of players (34%) revealed that their coach rarely talks to them about their **well-being** ( $m$   
13  $= 3.09$ ); with a similar proportion reporting that their coach seldom takes an interest in their  
14 life outside of sport ( $m = 2.98$ ).

### 15 *Challenging and supportive environment*

16 This factor consists of four items that relate to the degree to which players are  
17 appropriately challenged by, and supported through, their development experiences (e.g.,  
18 links to higher level players, educational support). Due to an unacceptable alpha coefficient,  
19 the mean subscale score was not computed for this factor. At an individual item level, the  
20 majority of players reported that they are regularly told that winning and losing “right now”  
21 will not determine how successful they will be in the future ( $m = 4.38$ ). In addition,  
22 approximately a third (36%) of players indicated that their college does not support them with  
23 their sport when they need it ( $m = 3.02$ ). As well as the largely tentative agreement regarding  
24 the opportunities players had to train with players at a level they aspire to ( $m = 4.02$ ); over

1 half (56%) of all players indicated that they do not often get help from more experienced  
2 performers ( $m = 3.51$ ).

### 3 *Long-Term development fundamentals*

4 This factor consists of seven items that collectively relate to the extent to which key  
5 features for effective development are embedded in the programme (e.g., on-going  
6 opportunities, parental support, and athlete autonomy). With a mean subscale score of 3.95,  
7 this factor was the weakest performing facet of the environment. However, it is important to  
8 note that this score might have been adversely impacted by an item (i.e., “I am encouraged to  
9 participate in other sports”) that is not particularly relevant for the athletes in this study.  
10 Within this factor, approximately 4 out of 10 players felt that they would not be given good  
11 opportunities if they experienced a dip in performance ( $m = 3.91$ ), while 50% of players felt  
12 that their coach did not make time to talk with their parents about what they are trying to  
13 achieve ( $m = 3.43$ ). Moreover, only 47% of players agreed with conviction that they had  
14 opportunities to discuss how more experienced players handled the pressures they face ( $m =$   
15 4.17). Though the greater part of players indicated that they were involved in most decisions  
16 about their development ( $m = 4.34$ ), a fifth (21%) reported that they were not. More  
17 positively, the majority of players felt that they had their progress and performance reviewed  
18 regularly on an individual basis ( $m = 4.47$ ); and largely indicated that the advice their parents  
19 provide fits well with the advice they get from their coaches ( $m = 4.49$ ).

## 20 DISCUSSION

21 The purpose of the present study was to examine elite youth football academy players’  
22 perceptions of the quality of their development environment at a key stage in their  
23 progression to the professional level. To our knowledge, the current investigation is the first  
24 to reveal the perspectives of such athletes within elite high-performance training  
25 environments. As such, the findings offer a step forward in this area, not only within elite



1 youth football, but also elite youth sport in general. The aim of this section is to situate the  
2 identified key strengths and areas for improvement (see Figure 1) in light of assumptions  
3 derived from the extant talent development literature. Following on from this, we present a  
4 number of applied implications and recommendations for those involved in elite player  
5 development.

6       The majority of strengths emerged from the long-term development focus factor and  
7 appear to largely relate to coaching practice (e.g., technical instruction, training plans). In  
8 doing so, this emphasises the high quality of coaching players feel they are receiving within  
9 elite academies. Given the importance placed on high quality coaching in fostering a rich and  
10 vibrant learning environment within football academies [4], this is an encouraging finding.  
11 Additional strengths within this factor related to a focus on improvement rather than winning,  
12 and the promotion of self-responsibility, both of which are considered key features of  
13 effective development environments [12]. The other strong points emerged from the support  
14 network factor. Specifically, access to a variety of different professionals (e.g., sport  
15 scientists), and the availability of coaches and support staff were both identified as high  
16 quality perceptions. Given that well-developed support systems have been shown to be  
17 strongly correlated with performance [19], this is an important aspect of the environment that  
18 academies are largely perceived to do well.

19       Highlighting the significance of these aforementioned factors, in a study examining the  
20 impact of the development environment on young athletes' goal pursuits and life aspirations,  
21 Wang et al. [18] found these factors positively predicted intrinsic goal striving. As such, these  
22 two high-performing factors point toward the presence of conditions that facilitate intrinsic  
23 motivational climates. Given that elite high-performance environments of this nature might  
24 naturally align young players with externally driven goals, this represents a further  
25 encouraging finding.

1           Notwithstanding these positives, the results also revealed a number of lower quality  
2 perceptions. As displayed in figure one, these areas for improvement were more evenly  
3 spread across the factors, and included issues pertaining to peer pressure, goal-setting,  
4 feedback, contingency planning, diminished opportunities due to form, and college/school  
5 support. While not overlooking the significance of these areas, three notable themes emerged  
6 that specially relate to key factors identified in the literature as exerting a significant  
7 influence on player development [12]. As such, we feel these merit particular attention.  
8 Specifically, these central themes concerned athlete understanding, links to senior  
9 progression, and key stakeholder relationships; each of which will be discussed in turn.

10           Although understanding the athlete and their world view is considered central to  
11 appropriate support [1], this factor was not amongst the best performing components of  
12 academy environments. Interestingly, while the aforementioned strengths might be linked to  
13 intrinsic drives, a lack of athlete understanding is suggested to promote extrinsic goal striving  
14 [18]. This suggests that opposing motivational forces might be at play in academy  
15 environments. As previously mentioned, it is conceivable that these extremely competitive,  
16 high-performance settings might influence players and coaches towards developing an  
17 environment that fosters extrinsic goals and rewards (e.g., successful team, securing a  
18 professional contract, getting players through). In such extrinsically motivated climates where  
19 players are incessantly scrutinised, and coaches are often under pressure to ‘produce’; there  
20 exists the potential for coaches to become ego-involved in their work and, in turn, emit  
21 controlling behaviours that ultimately promote a controlling climate [20]. It is important to  
22 note that in these environments it is likely that coaches are focusing on their primary role,  
23 which is to develop players, and ultimately ensure that as many players as possible have the  
24 requisite competencies to make it as a professional. Consequently, coaches may be unaware  
25 that they are developing extrinsically-driven motivated climates, and thus, indicating a

1 potential area for future coaching education not only in academy football but also other youth  
2 sport feeder systems.

3 In addition, while strong support systems are positively linked to performance, a lack of  
4 perceived support can lead to poor coping mechanisms and stress [21]. Although high quality  
5 perceptions of informational and tangible support emerged as key strengths in this study;  
6 perceptions of emotional support were clearly not as strong. Indeed, while players largely  
7 indicated that they had good coach-athlete relationships, it was clear that they did not feel  
8 particularly understood at a holistic level with coaches seldom expressing an interest in their  
9 lives outside of football. Given that young players find themselves immersed in an  
10 environment that is fundamentally concentrated on being successful at football, coupled with  
11 the tough and masculine culture that tends to characterise professional football, it is not  
12 entirely surprising that players' holistic needs might be compromised. To this end, one  
13 wonders if these environments might "sow the seed" for an athletic identity and potential  
14 identity-foreclosure for these adolescents [22]. If a strong athletic identity is developed,  
15 education and the teaching of life skills can often be neglected [23]. To compound matters,  
16 such is the strength of many young players' desire to "make it" it is somewhat understandable,  
17 despite the limited likelihood of success, why these adolescents might be susceptible to  
18 prioritising their football education over their academic and/or general life skill education  
19 [24]. Despite the fundamental importance placed by the FA and EPL on player welfare and  
20 holistic development; the findings suggest that academies might not be doing enough in this  
21 regard. To this end, it would be remiss of academies, both developmentally and ethically, to  
22 'gloss over' the socioemotional needs of these individuals, especially given the demands this  
23 key stage of development is considered to exert on young athletes. Considering the needs of  
24 overseas players provides a cogent example in this regard. Although the present sample was  
25 mainly comprised of English and home nation players, a small proportion of respondents

1 were from overseas. This reflects the increasingly ‘glocal’ nature of modern day elite youth  
2 football [25]. In addition to the demands placed on local players, overseas players must cope  
3 with an often large cultural transition. Indeed, it is highly probable that these players would  
4 encounter a range of cultural and lifestyle related issues (e.g., language barrier, home-  
5 sickness) that extend far beyond those associated with the football environment. It is likely,  
6 therefore, that the demands are heightened for these players in their attempts to adapt to  
7 academy life. From an applied perspective, it would seem important that the  
8 psychosocial environments created for these players are well-established to ensure that issues  
9 linked to acculturation do not have an adverse impact on development.

10 The second noteworthy theme to emerge in the current study relates to continuing  
11 opportunities and links to senior progression. Specifically, players indicated that  
12 opportunities to train with senior performers, receiving help from more experienced players,  
13 and opportunities to talk about how these players handled the challenges they now face were  
14 not readily available. Possibly linked to this, there was a general perception that players are  
15 often written off before showing their real potential. These findings might largely be  
16 explained by the pervasive short-term ‘win at all costs’ culture that exists in professional  
17 football. Indeed, traditionally elite clubs have favoured ready-made, experienced players over  
18 youth with a view to having an immediate impact or return on investment.

19 Nevertheless, from a developmental perspective, opportunities for athletes to  
20 experience the advanced standard and increased pressure of higher levels (e.g., senior adult,  
21 professional) is considered crucial for effective development [5, 26]. Indeed, highlighting the  
22 link between environmental engineering and the development of attributes that fall under the  
23 rubric of mental toughness, Mills et al. [5] revealed that challenging training environments  
24 (e.g., training with senior team) helped promote key intrapersonal attributes associated with  
25 successful progression at this key stage (e.g., resilience, coping with pressure, confidence).

1 As such, it appears crucial that youth and senior team operations are well-integrated. Indeed,  
2 any semblance of dichotomy between the two might have serious repercussions for successful  
3 player development.

4 The third important theme to emerge centred on key stakeholder relationships with  
5 specific emphasis on the coach-parent dyad. While some parents are considered to facilitate  
6 player development, certain parental behaviours (e.g., conflicting coaching advice) are  
7 considered to exert a negative influence [5]. As such, the prevailing view amongst coaches  
8 appears to be one that considers parents as more of a hindrance than a help. In support of this  
9 notion, the players in the present study indicated that their coach did not make sufficient time  
10 to talk with their parents about their development. However, of particular note, players also  
11 revealed that their parents' advice was largely congruent with their coaches. These findings  
12 suggest that academy coaches might be overlooking the important role parent's play in the  
13 development process [16]; even through the investment years where the coach is considered  
14 to exert a greater influence [14]. Indeed, forming positive key stakeholder relationships and  
15 empowering parents to create a sense of ownership and relatedness are considered key factors  
16 underpinning the creation of optimal player development environments and a high-  
17 performance culture [12].

#### 18 *Applied implications*

19  
20 In the interests of bridging the gap between research and practice, the question remains  
21 how academies can be helped to meet the needs of developing players at this decisive stage of  
22 development. In this regard, the findings offer a number of practical implications for those  
23 involved in elite player development. First, the findings underline the importance of building  
24 strong links to the senior team. Although such relationships might ultimately rest upon the  
25 senior team manager championing a pro-youth policy, it is recommended that links to senior  
26 players could be established in the form of a mentoring scheme. Importantly, rather than

1 inviting 1<sup>st</sup> year or early career professionals - who may be reluctant to assist players that  
2 could be viewed as a threat - such a scheme would lend itself to the participation of already  
3 established/late career professionals who may be nearing the end of their careers and looking  
4 to transition into coaching. Indeed, we contend that inviting established professionals to pass  
5 down their knowledge, share their experiences of the development process, and provide  
6 insights into how they met the challenges that young players now face could play a crucially  
7 important function in the development of players at this key transitional stage.

8         Second, it is clear that academies need to pay close attention to the psychosocial  
9 environments they create for developing players. From a developmental standpoint, this is a  
10 serious ethical issue, especially if there is a risk that the nature of these academies might not  
11 prepare these individuals for life outside of football. Consequently, we believe those  
12 responsible for the design and implementation of academy programmes should not only be  
13 mindful of young players' socioemotional needs; but also make a genuine, concerted effort to  
14 prepare players for all eventualities. In this regard, for a truly balanced approach to player  
15 development, coaches at the youth level should be encouraged to ground their practice around  
16 an athlete-centred model where performance excellence co-exists in the same environment as  
17 personal excellence. When applied, this approach to coaching is considered a powerful tool in  
18 empowering young athletes to learn and take more responsibility for their own development,  
19 which ultimately, results in enhanced performance and a thriving, supportive team  
20 environment [27].

21         Notwithstanding the importance of what essentially rests at the heart of the coaches'  
22 role (i.e., technical instruction), in light of the players' perceptions, we feel an athlete-centred  
23 approach would be more developmentally appropriate. We also acknowledge that some  
24 readers may be cynical that such utopia is possible given the culture of the game. Certainly,  
25 the efficacy of such an approach would greatly rest upon the club advocating a holistic policy

1 as part of their vision for player development. However, if the conditions can be created  
2 whereby an academy manager feels secure in the knowledge that producing players is not the  
3 sole outcome measure, we are confident that such a model of development could be  
4 successfully woven into the fabric of an academy's culture.

5 The findings also offer a number of applied implications for sport psychologists  
6 working in youth football settings. Specifically, the nature of these implications would  
7 involve practitioners going beyond the traditional canon of mental skills training, as well as  
8 performance enhancement techniques. For example, to overcome the influence of a largely  
9 externally driven sport culture that is susceptible to the establishment of controlling climates,  
10 sport psychologists could have an important role to play in the promotion of autonomy-  
11 supportive coaching behaviours. Such coaching is considered to make players feel more  
12 competent in their sport, more autonomous in their actions, and better related to significant  
13 others from their environment [28]. Enhanced perceptions of these three basic psychological  
14 needs help foster more intrinsic drives and adaptive goal orientations that are considered  
15 fundamental to optimum functioning and positive self-growth [29].

16 Furthermore, as opposed to ostracising parents as a control measure, it would seem  
17 important that academies strive to build more positive working relationships with parents. To  
18 help accomplish this, sport psychologists would be ideally placed to facilitate parent  
19 workshops geared towards optimising their influential role as a football parent. In light of the  
20 suggestion that the intensive journey of an academy player is mirrored by an equally  
21 demanding journey for their parents [30], these workshops could play a key function in  
22 parental development by also acting as an organised forum for parents to share their  
23 experiences.

24

25

1 *Strengths and limitations*

2       From a real-world perspective, a primary strength of this investigation is that a detailed,  
3 scientific attention to elite players' perceptions regarding the quality of their talent  
4 development environment might assist academies to optimise their programmes. In addition,  
5 as a preliminary attempt to examine elite football academy players' perceptions of the quality  
6 of their development environment at a key stage in their journey to the professional level, the  
7 findings not only advance our limited understanding regarding talent development  
8 environments; but also help to bridge an important gap in the knowledge base regarding key  
9 stages of athletic development. Given the high quality sample, we also feel this investigation  
10 was enhanced by ensuring accurate and reliable perceptions of elite high-performance  
11 environments could be assembled. From a methodological viewpoint, by capturing "in the  
12 moment" views of elite players presently involved in the talent development process on a  
13 day-to-day basis, an additional strength of the study involved overcoming some of the  
14 limitations of previous retrospective designs. Moreover, given the recommendation to  
15 consider individual items as well as overall factor scores when using the TDEQ in applied  
16 research, the present study was enriched by 'drilling down' to an item level which enabled  
17 more meaningful and practical insights.

18       Notwithstanding these strengths, some limitations must also be acknowledged. Firstly,  
19 given the culturally specific focus on the English academy system, the transferability of our  
20 interpretations to player development environments in other countries is **speculative**. As such,  
21 readers should be circumspect in any attempt to relate the findings to other contexts. Second,  
22 while the overall sample size (~ 10% of elite players) was deemed sufficient to provide a  
23 'snapshot' of the development environments of elite young players, a greater sample from a  
24 wider range of clubs would undoubtedly generate more representative and reliable player  
25 insights. Given the findings of the present study, this would certainly appear to represent a



1 noteworthy future research direction.

2 Third, as the TDEQ has been designed as a generic tool, its developers recognise that a  
3 range of context-specific issues may be apparent which might necessitate the development of  
4 sport and/or stage specific versions [1]. Given the complex, idiosyncratic sub-culture of elite  
5 youth football, we concur with this suggestion. Indeed, to fully evaluate the experiences of  
6 developing elite players, a sport-specific diagnostic tool might need to be developed. To  
7 illustrate our point, although cross training or participating in other sports is considered  
8 important for athletes in the sampling years of development, this item would not be  
9 appropriate for those in the investment stage. However, in the TDEQ's current form,  
10 disagreeing with this statement would relate to a low quality perception of the environment,  
11 and as such might influence the reliability of the overall subscale score. Despite this potential  
12 limitation, given the robust questionnaire development process, ensuing level of  
13 psychometric properties, and sound ecological validity, we are confident in the insights  
14 generated by the current instrument.

#### 15 *Concluding remarks*

16  
17 Although academies were generally viewed positively, the findings suggest that these  
18 elite high-performance environments might not be fully meeting young players'  
19 developmental needs. Indeed, given that player welfare, links to senior progression, and  
20 positive key stakeholder relationships are all suggested to be vital for the creation and  
21 regulation of an optimal development environment, it would seem imperative that academies  
22 pay closer attention to these potentially problematic areas. Encouragingly, the academy  
23 environment would appear to be one of the most directly controllable factors in the life of a  
24 young player. In this regard, we have put forward a number of suggestions for how these  
25 areas might, in part, be addressed. From a broader talent development perspective, there  
26 remains a clear need for substantiated, evidence-based practice concerning the creation of

1 optimal talent development environments. With a particular emphasis on football,  
2 establishing such environments would appear crucial if the FA and EPL wish to realise their  
3 aspirations of improving current youth development programmes. While we believe the  
4 present study represents a step forward in achieving that goal, it is imperative for future  
5 research to continue to determine the key processes and mechanisms that underpin effective  
6 player development with a view to bridging the gap between research and practice, and  
7 ultimately helping young players transform their natural gifts into systematically developed  
8 talents.

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Table I. Mean subscale scores for player perceptions of the quality of the development environment

TDEQ Subscales	M	SD
Long-Term Development Focus	4.72	.53
Quality Preparation	4.18	.68
Communication	4.43	.66
Understanding the Athlete	4.17	.77
Support Network	4.73	.57
Long-Term Development Fundamentals	3.98	.71

Table II Means and standard deviations for TDEQ items within each factor

	Mean	SD
<b>Factor 1: Long-Term Development Focus</b>		
My coach is good at helping me to understand my strengths & weaknesses	4.98	0.97
My coach is good at helping me understand what I'm doing & why I'm doing it	4.85	0.88
My coach emphasises the need for constant work on fundamental skills	4.98	0.77
The more experienced I get the more my coach encourages me to take responsibility for my own development	4.83	0.79
My development plan incorporates a variety of physical preparation	5.02	0.71
If I got injured I believe I would continue to receive a good standard of support	5.06	0.99
I am constantly reminded that my personal dedication & desire will be key to how good a performer I become	5.00	0.83
My coach constantly reminds me what he expects of me	4.64	0.92
My coach is a positive supporting influence on me	4.57	1.21
My coaches care more about helping me to become a professional than they do about having a winning team right now	4.81	0.82
My coach plans training to incorporate a wide variety of useful skills & attributes	4.83	0.96
My training is specifically designed to help me develop effectively in the long term	4.85	0.66
My coach emphasises that what I do in training & competition is far more important than winning	4.60	0.83
I am being trained to be ready for almost anything that is thrown at me in sport & life	4.70	0.86
I spend most of my time developing skills & attributes that my coach tells me I will need to compete at the pro level	4.85	0.62
My training sessions are normally beneficial & challenging	4.91	0.78
Me & my sports mates are told how we can help each other develop further in the sport	4.85	0.66
My coach allows me to learn through making my own mistakes	4.70	0.75
I am encouraged to keep perspective by balancing frustrations in one area with thinking about good progress in others	4.36	0.87
Organisation is a high priority to those who develop my training programme	4.66	0.81
There are people who help me/teach me how to deal positively with any nerves or worries that I experience	4.60	0.83
If it didn't work out for me here, there are other good opportunities that would help me to keep progressing	4.64	1.05
Developing performers are often written off before they have had a chance to show their real potential*	3.72	1.35
My coaches and those who support me give me straight answers to my questions	4.68	1.02
<b>Factor 2: Quality Preparation</b>		
I struggle to get good-quality competition experiences at the level I require*	2.64	1.03
I am rarely encouraged to plan for how I would deal with things that might go wrong*	3.06	1.13
The guidelines in my sport regarding what I need to do to progress are not very clear*	2.79	1.14
I am not taught that much about how to balance training, competing, & recovery*	2.55	1.18
I feel pressure from my mates in sport to do things differently from what my coaches are asking of me*	3.04	1.06
<b>Factor 3: Communication</b>		
I regularly set goals with my coach that are specific to my individual development	4.47	1.04
My coach & I regularly talk about things I need to do to progress to the top level	4.49	0.93
My coach often talks to me about the connections/overlap between different aspects of my training	4.51	0.78
My coach & I talk about what current &/or past world-class performers did to be successful	4.40	1.10
My coach and I often try to identify what my next big test will be before it happens	4.15	1.08
My coach explains how my training & competition programme work together to help me develop	4.79	0.72
Feedback I get from my coaches almost always relates directly to my goals	4.21	0.81
<b>Factor 4: Understanding the Athlete</b>		
My coach rarely talks to me about my well-being*	3.09	1.25
My coach doesn't appear to be that interested in my life outside of sport*	2.98	1.13
My coach rarely takes the time to talk to other coaches who work with me*	2.68	1.07
I don't get much help to develop my mental toughness in sport effectively*	2.57	1.06
<b>Factor 5: Support Network</b>		
I have access to a variety of different professionals to help my development	4.98	0.92
I can pop in to see my coach or other support staff whenever I need to	5.34	0.84
My coaches talk regularly to the other people who support me in my sport about what I'm trying to achieve	4.68	0.81
My training programmes are developed specifically to my needs	4.51	1.08
My coaches ensure that my college understands about me & my training/comp	4.51	0.86
Those who help me in my sport seem to be on the same wavelength when it comes to what is best for me	4.49	0.98
My coaches & others who support me in my sport are approachable	4.77	0.98
All the different aspects of my development are organised into a realistic timetable for me	4.55	0.90
<b>Factor 6: Challenging &amp; Supportive Environment</b>		
My school/college doesn't really support me with my sport when I need it*	3.02	1.26
I am regularly told that winning and losing just now does not indicate how successful I will be in the future	4.38	1.05
I have the opportunity to train with performers who are at a level I'm aspiring to	4.02	1.36
I don't often get any help from more experienced performers*	3.51	1.38
<b>Factor 7: Long-Term Development Fundamentals</b>		
I would be given good opportunities even if I experienced a dip in performance	3.91	1.08
I am encouraged to participate in other sports and/or cross train	3.09	1.32
I often have the opportunity to talk about how more experienced performers have handled the challenges I face	4.17	1.05
My coaches make time to talk to my parents about me & what I'm trying to achieve	3.43	1.31
The advice my parents give me fits well with the advice I get from my coaches	4.49	1.00
My progress & performance is reviewed regularly on an individual basis	4.47	0.93
I am involved in most decisions about my sport development	4.34	1.05

\* Refers to negatively phrased item where a lower mean score relates to a better quality perception

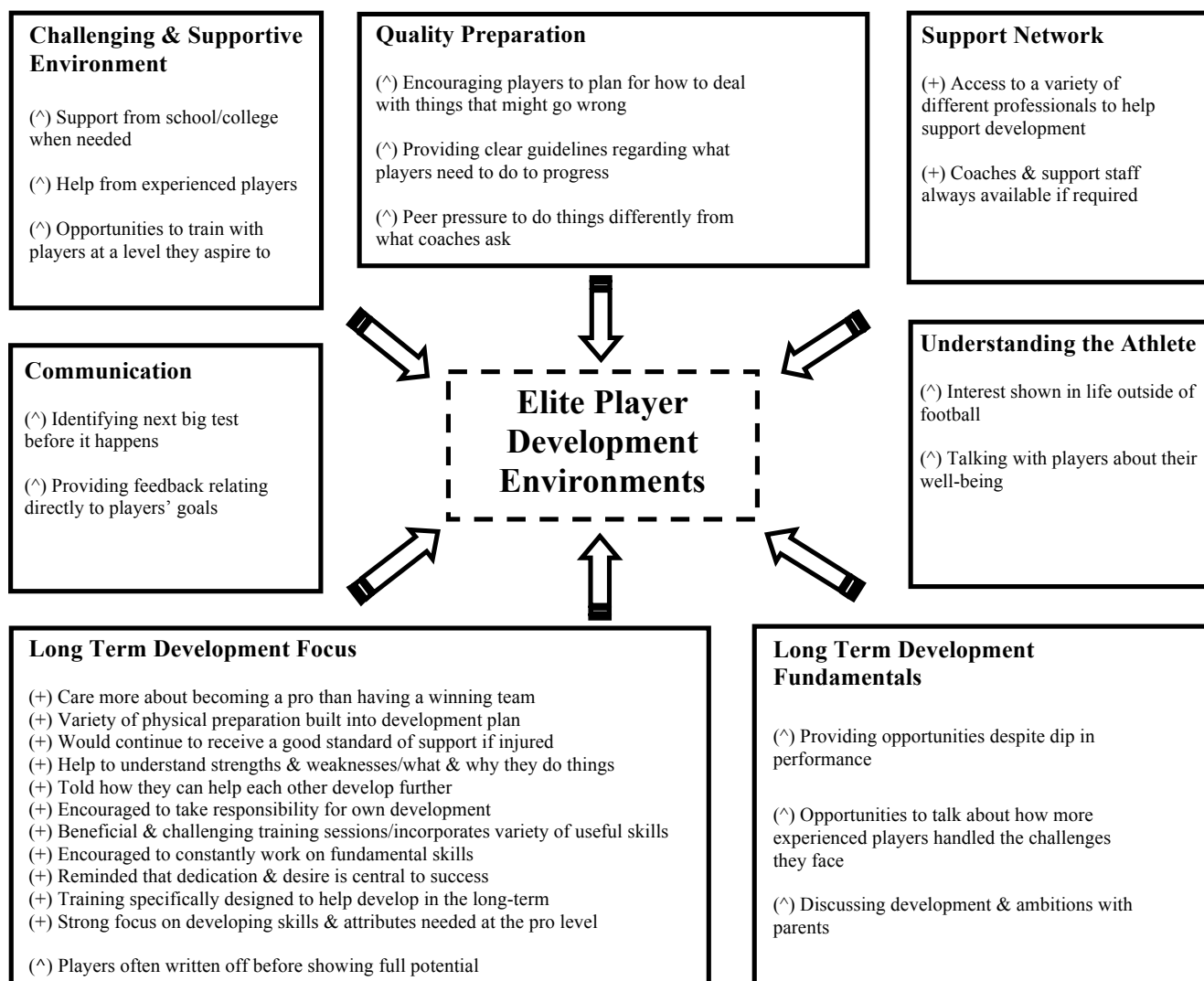


Figure 1. Features of elite player development environments perceived as key strengths (+) and key areas for improvement (^).

Note: For the purposes of calculating sub-scale scores and ranking proportion of agreement, all negatively phrased item raw-scores were reverse coded.