

## **How an ethos of amateurism can support the integration of an ecological approach to learning and development in football academies**

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## 2

# How an Ethos of Amateurism Can Support the Integration of an Ecological Approach to Learning and Development in Football Academies: Too Much Too Early?

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### Abstract

In this chapter, we suggest that the over, or early, professionalisation of soccer academies is a threat to positive youth development practices. In challenging the professionalisation of children's development, we argue that an *ethos of amateurism* should be the cornerstone of the sports academy, which can have merit in enabling the attainment of outcomes related to both performance preparation and personal development. In professional work settings, the notion of amateurism is oft ridiculed by so-called 'professionals', typically considered as being *experts* and *specialists* who perform to a set of prior established rules in order to achieve clear goals and

targets. An amateur, on the other hand, chooses to take part in a pastime for the sheer love of it, motivated by the simple joy of personal involvement, and is not concerned by goals or targets. Within the context of a professionalised and highly disciplined football academy, we suggest that fostering an environment built on an *ethos of amateurism* can support an ecological approach to learning and development to better support the performance preparation of talented footballers.

## **Introduction**

The pursuit of elite sporting success has been a common objective for governments across the globe and is reflected in much elite sport governance and policy design (Green, 2009).

Uppermost in the policy discourse surrounding elite athlete development are two key principles: firstly, the implementation of a sophisticated and early identification system of sporting talent, and secondly, the institutionalisation of the development of elite sporting talent in highly professionalised specialist training centres (Houlihan, 2005). Accordingly, the notion of the professionalised ‘sports academy’ has become prevalent as the optimal method for developing elite sport performers. Typically, the focus of this approach is to indoctrinate young people into specialised ways of performing, with systematic talent development often commencing in childhood. Indeed, the current sporting landscape is focused towards early specialisation, with competitive structures for youth sport, extended training and playing seasons and funding incentives (among other factors) precluding engagement with healthy and diverse sport experiences (Abernethy, 2008). Consequently, the prevailing narrative for these young people encourages the single-minded pursuit of elite sport success, at the expense of other life aspirations and the health and wellbeing of future generations (Roetert et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we suggest that the over, or early, professionalisation of soccer academies is a threat to positive youth development practices (Vierimaa et al., 2018). In challenging the professionalisation of children's development, we argue that an *ethos of amateurism* should be the cornerstone of the sports academy, which can have merit in enabling the attainment of outcomes related to both performance preparation and personal development (e.g., Rothwell et al., 2022a). In professional work settings, the notion of amateurism is oft ridiculed by so called 'professionals', typically considered as being *experts* and *specialists* who perform to a set of prior established rules in order to achieve clear goals and targets (Woods et al., 2022). An amateur,<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, chooses to take part in a pastime for the sheer love of it, motivated by the simple joy of personal involvement, and is not concerned by goals or targets (Ingold, 2021). Within the context of a professionalised and highly disciplined football academy, we suggest that fostering an environment built on an *ethos of amateurism* can support an ecological approach to learning and development to better support the performance preparation of talented footballers (Renshaw et al., 2022).

Here, we present a theoretical argument that challenges professionalism, situating an *ethos of amateurism* at the forefront of performance preparation. In this sense, learning and development for performance are related to enrichment which concerns the 'perceptual, cognitive, psychological, emotional, and physical subsystems' that support the growth of young children's holistic capacities to strengthen their relationship with performance contexts (Ribeiro et al., 2021, p. 1116/1117). In presenting this argument, we draw on Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of a *form of life* (e.g., behaviours, skills, capacities, attitudes, values, beliefs, practices and customs that shape how we live) and the relationship between learning and development possibilities in a football player's ecological niche (i.e., an academy setting) (Vaughan et al.,

2021). In adopting an ecological approach, we suggest that specific forms of life in football that are entrenched in professionalisation can limit players' capacity to respond to the rich action possibilities available in their ecological niche. Denison et al.'s (2017) interpretation of Foucault's analysis of *disciplinary power* will be central to this argument, helping us make sense of what it means for football players to be normalised and rendered docile under specific regimes. Therefore, the specific aims of this chapter are to (i) explain what the issues are with professionalised approaches aimed at developing highly skilled footballers and (ii) provide a contemporary ecological account of how performance preparation and personal development based on an *ethos of amateurism* can co-exist in football academies to facilitate the development of healthy and skilful footballers.

## **Challenging Professionalism and Disciplined Practices in the Football Academy**

An increasing number of football organisations encourage, adopt, and foster a surveillance culture to acquire or maintain a competitive advantage over their opponents. Fuelled by the pervasiveness of neoliberal governance structures (Silk & Andrews, 2011), the elite sport environment has become replete with disciplined practices that utilise extensive (predominantly quantitative) datasets to measure, monitor and predict performance outcomes (Williams & Manley, 2016). Within the development of young athletes, similar practices have become equally visible, where the measurement of such outcomes plays a key role within many 'academy' structures. However, there have been increasing calls for elite sport organisations to be attentive to their 'duty of care' of young athletes (see Cronin & Armour, 2018), particularly considering several high-profile examples of athletes who have experienced issues of burnout, compromised

well-being and motivation, and mental health concerns. Further, the elite nature of professional sport has often seen promising athletes transitioning out of their sport careers at a relatively early age because of injury or deselection, with some left isolated and on the ‘scrap heap’ (e.g., Rothwell et al., 2018).

While the negative physical and mental well-being effects of overzealous developmental experiences have been well documented (e.g., Sothorn & O’Gorman, 2021), another concern is how disciplined practices influence players’ ability to skilfully respond to opportunities for action in competition. Drawing on a Foucauldian-inspired account of athlete development practices, Denison et al. (2017, p. 774) have suggested that the very nature of these normalised approaches serves as a form of power to make athletes more ‘useful and productive’. Although coaches approach the challenge of developing football players with the best intentions, basing practice on a highly detailed and specific tactical and technical curriculum to create behaviours that align to a club’s playing philosophy is problematic. In the same way that Foucault (1977) suggested that the disciplinary regimes of workplace practices, schools and social institutions marginalised personal development over power and control of individuals, academy programmes support the same systems of control to develop productive footballers. Evident in the wealth of recent academic work that has provided insight into the processes required to attain a competitive advantage in elite sport (e.g., Emery et al., 2005; Jones, 2019).

Another theme typically noted within ‘professional academies’ is the increased utilisation and acceptance of technology as a vital component in the training of (young) athletes (Starkes, 2008). Technology is an irrefutable element of modern football, where coaches provide players with video ‘clips’ of their performance to explore various tenets of their physical, psychological, technical and tactical performance. Whilst technological advancement has enabled coaches and

performance directors to pinpoint where specific sport performance improvements can be made, a growing body of literature has noted how the introduction of technology creates an environment of surveillance (Woods et al., 2021a), where power can be exerted through such technology to discipline, normalise, judge and control athletic development (Manley et al., 2016).

Invoking the scholarship of Foucault (1977), such work has noted how the adoption of disciplined practices and modern technology (and the associated discourse that this technology generates) has shaped a culture of ‘compliant athletes’ (Lang, 2010). Further, such compliance leads to young athletes appearing to voluntarily surrender to the training regimens apparent within academies, whereby this docility may lead to individuals who are ‘subjected, used, transformed, and improved’ (Foucault, 1977, p.136). When used in concert with opportunities for social comparison, deploying normalised practices and technology to exert disciplinary power has the potential to create an environment that is highly regulated and exclusionary and concerned with classification, individualisation, totalisation and normalisation (Lang, 2010). While improving performance is core to football academy operations, the modern academy needs to be mindful of ‘producing’ footballers who fit a specific system or way of playing because as Denison and Avner (2011) have discussed in sport, this systematised development approach can serve to render athletes as compliant ‘docile bodies’. Clearly, those involved in the development of young athletes have a responsibility to consider and understand how the environment that they create is likely to impact on the longer-term development (both performance and personal) of players.

To further unpack Denison’s notion of docile athletes, Rothwell et al. (2022b) explored an alternative perspective on docility producing effects through the theoretical tenets of James

Gibson's (1979) ecological psychology. Gibson's (1979) theory of *affordances* provides a suitable framework to understand an athlete's perception and action in sport. From this perspective, behaviours emerge from the continuous interactions in the athlete–environment system. Here, perception is of affordances, and action is the realisation of an affordance that emerges under the multitude of constraints that are placed on an athlete from moment to moment (Araújo et al., 2019). The contextual nature of affordances means that possibilities for action offered to players are always embedded in the relationship between deeply rooted socio-cultural-historical factors at the centre of a form of life and the specific athlete development practices in an *ec niche*. From a Gibsonian perspective, docile athletes could be considered those who experience disciplined sociocultural practices that are 'manifest in the normative behaviours and customs' (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014, pp. 328, 329) of football academies, leaving them unresponsive to certain affordances. Vaughan et al.'s (2022) ethnography of the Stockholm-based AIK football club also illustrated these ideas – revealing how social and cultural constraints, deep in Stockholm's fabric, influenced the skill development and psychological wellbeing of young football players. More specifically, expressions of self-protection, manifest in aggression and controlling behaviours, were valued and termed 'balls over talent' (Vaughan et al., 2022, p. 13). What this led to is players, and teams, becoming responsive to a narrow range of affordances characterised as exhibiting *unskilled intentionality*. In the example of AIK, this meant that players were unresponsive to a wide landscape of affordances and were simultaneously docile and compliant to those specific to their curated form of life (e.g., being aggressive). It is this intertwined relationship between a form of life captured in an ecological niche which serves as a significant reference point for understanding how these practices can

continually shape an athlete's intentional engagement with opportunities for highly skilled behaviour (Araújo et al., 2019).

## **An Ethos of Amateurism to Support an Ecological Approach to Player Development**

Recently, Woods et al. (2022) presented an interesting perspective on the pitfalls associated with professionalism in the academy. These authors suggested that early career academics are often at risk of falling into strict 'disciplinary boundaries', working toward the establishment of pre-determined benchmarks that specify what it means to be 'productive' within the modern, neoliberal university. In this approach, the professional academic is oft-prevented from exploring the spaces in-between disciplinary boundaries, instead of being lulled into what the authors refer to as 'playing the academic game' – that is, confirming what it means 'to be' a *professional*. To us, this approach is synonymous with the developing academy footballer, who, like the professionalised academic, is trying to tick the necessary boxes to obtain the next contract or promotion. In these settings, the focus largely remains on the acquisition and retention of specific skills, and the reproduction of football knowledge to satisfy personal development plans that aim to produce a first team footballer. Consequently, these knowledge acquisition approaches decontextualise learning, treating skills as commodities that can be bought and sold on.

To alleviate these pressures within the modern university, Woods et al. (2022) proposed that early career academics could be encouraged to preserve their love of inquiry by embracing what they referred to as an *ethos of amateurism*. By this, the authors meant replacing the desire to 'play the academic game' with a genuine joy of inquiry – following their interests, not the conventions that specify what it means 'to be' (Woods et al., 2022, p. 4/5). Here, we follow these

propositions, suggesting that an *ethos of amateurism* can provide an alternative view of how football academies can support young children's motivations to stay involved with sport, while developing the physical and mental capacities to excel at football. Shifting the focus from highly professionalised learning environments that focus on knowledge acquisition can have clear benefits to player development and personal motivation by supporting ongoing participation in contexts that consist of value (opportunities for action) and meaning (information). To help guide the integration of an *ethos of amateurism*, Rothwell et al. (2022a) proposed three characteristics, modified from Masschelein and Simons (2013), that National Football Associations and football academies could situate at their core. Here, we explain how these characteristics combine with an ecological view of learning to support player development.

### ***Characteristic 1: An Amateur's Inquiry Is Not Bound by Disciplined Conventions or Paradigms, But by Their Love of 'It'***

Adopting an *ethos of amateurism* can help coaches and players eschew conforming to pre-determined approaches to player learning and development that promote the idea of football knowledge and skills as something you must acquire to move to the next level (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018). This means that players are not hamstrung to reproduce specific talent development practices or methods but are encouraged to enjoy the experience, explore different skills without fear of criticism and collaborate with peers and coaches to design practice tasks. This approach can also reframe the idea of knowledge as situated, which is therefore an activity to be experienced in contextualised settings grown through interactions within the athlete–environment system (Barab & Duffy, 2000).

## ***Characteristic 2: An Amateur Is Not as Concerned with Conforming to Desired Competencies or Professional Benchmarks***

Research indicates that diversity of sporting experiences (i.e., playing a variety of sports) provides a stronger foundation for performance than specialising in one sport and that ‘play activities’ should be prioritised over more structured practice activities (Coutinho et al., 2016).

This is an approach to engaging in sport that is considered to support intrinsic motivation and skill acquisition (Headrick et al., 2015). In practice, this position might be challenging considering the pressures on young children to specialise in one sport from an early age.

However, if young children do specialise in one sport, coaches can provide practice opportunities that reject the rehearsal of specialised skills by fostering opportunities in which children continuously search and explore dynamic practice settings in their own unique way, through richly varied practice tasks. Through exploration, players can become selectively open to the perception of relevant affordances to guide skilled performance (Fajen, 2009). Thus, in such practice ecologies, players are encouraged to explore beyond conventionally established ways of being and doing in search for novel and highly adaptable solutions to a variety of movement problems.

## ***Characteristic 3: An Amateur Does Not Work to ‘Produce’ and Is Not ‘Demand Driven’***

Designing player development environments that shift the focus from performance outcomes to developmental opportunities that support children’s intrinsic motivation can have long-term performance and well-being benefits. This means that player development practices should focus on what motivates young children to start playing sport in the first place, such as feeling competent, having fun, experiencing enjoyment, learning new skills and social interaction

(Bailey et al., 2013). However, many football academies do not align to or support children's motivations for playing and remaining in sport, rather focusing on repetitive and highly specialised practices that aim to control and regulate behaviour with the aim of satisfying competencies and benchmarks (for an example, see Premier League, 2011). In an ecological view of talent development, alleviating pressures such as accountability and performativity and focusing on individuals' intrinsic motivation can contribute towards strengthening the athlete–environment relationship.

### **Adopting an *Ethos of Amateurism* to Move Players from Docile to Dynamic: A Short Case Exemplar of AIK Football Club**

In this final section, we provide a short case exemplar to highlight how a football academy can adopt an *ethos of amateurism* to support the development of more adaptable, dynamic and skilful footballers. Data are provided from an ethnographic study carried out by the fourth author. First, we describe the form of life that fosters professionalised approaches to the players' development, serving as a form of control across all levels of the football club. Exemplified by academy staff displaying a desire to be perceived as professional (organised and efficient) in the eyes of peers, parents and senior club staff. An emphasis on prestige, status and saving face (looking good in the eyes of others) was evident across the club and broader sociocultural context.

Professionalism led to a fixation with box ticking, conforming to administrative procedures, and ensuring practice looked organised and was mistake-free. The quest for perfect practice conditions normally meant that coaches adopted controlling behaviours; consequently, a lack of player autonomy and a disregard for learning were evident across the academy. Second, we

discuss how an *ethos of amateurism* can facilitate an ecological approach to the development of skilful footballers.

### ***Professionalisation as a Form of Control***

The desire to *control everything* was evident throughout all levels of performance at Allmänna Idrottsklubben (AIK). At the club, different system levels interacted with each other (i.e., first team and junior teams) and served to influence a specific form of life that could be categorised as controlling. A fans perspective profoundly highlights the issue of a controlling form of life, where comments on social media indicated a specific approach to performance:

*The problem is that XXXX apparently tries to control the matches, keeping back the players offensive will...*

*The primary thing about XXXX's football is about control. Not to let the game float away.*

*Not to let our players have their own freedoms. Everything should be rigid and structured.*

*As I see it, it's just the diametrical opposite of what AIK needs, to take the next step in its development...*

Academy coaches also felt that control was a common issue within AIK. At Forum Karlberg (coach education evenings) senior team coaching staff presented to partner clubs and academy coaches to provide insights into what happens in a first team environment. Reflecting on the presentation, a conversation between frustrated coaches went like this:

Coach 1: *We got a lecture in organisation.*

Coach 2: *Is it a professional organisation or a controlling organisation?*

Coach 3: *Controlling.*

Coach 2: *It is the illusion of professionalism through control? That's how I'm experiencing it.*

Control was also evident in practice, with many Forum Karlbergs dedicated to discussing the defensive concept of ‘shape’ – a passive defensive tactic (a block) to prevent your opponent from advancing. Field notes from the third authors’ experiences at Forum Karlberg highlight the focus on shape:

*The forum started with XXX talking the coaches through the 3:5:2 formation and then asking each coach for a brief report on what they are working on... Although I missed a lot of the detail... I remember thinking that the academy teams were imitating the first team. A table was drawn up on the white board, a row for each academy team and one word was repeated at almost every row, ‘shape’.*

As well as employing passive defensive tactics and focusing on ‘shape’, some academy coaches were attempting to adopt the principles of positional play or ‘juego de posición’. In AIK, players were instructed to remain ‘high and wide’ when their team had the ball, a principle of play.

During certain phases of the game, players would be instructed to stand as high and as wide as the pitch geography (side line) and rules of the game (offside) allowed. Coupled to the height of the halfway line and the width of the side line, the players complied to this principle to the point of docility, unresponsive to the dynamic movements of the ball, teammates and opposition, instead remaining steadfastly and safely anchored to the principle of high and wide. However, as the game progressed, coaches would become frustrated with the players’ lack of engagement with the demands of the game, exemplified here by an academy coach, ‘*They don’t move, they just stay there... they don’t get involved in the game*’. Away from game-based practice, it was also noted that other practice conditions did not facilitate perception, action and cognition for skilled behaviour. The third author commented:

*I remember watching players waiting in lines and passing around cones (without opposition), in no way representative of football, this design is very easy for a coach to command, control, and look competent to those watching (field notes).*

In this specific sociocultural context, complying to controlling coach instructions became normalised and allowed players to remain free from the potential stigma of making a mistake and losing face (Vaughan et al., 2022). Exemplifying a football form of life characterised by unskilled intentionality, with docile players complying with decontextualised practice tasks. In this approach, players become decoupled from the rich in game information and responsive to only a narrow field of affordances permitted within the coaches' principles of play.

### ***Moving Towards Dynamic Practice Environments***

To move players from docile to dynamic, the AIK child and youth department has shifted the focus away from game models and principles of play towards skilled intentions that required players to direct their attention towards rich information *in* the game to guide skilled action (e.g., Vaughan et al., 2021, 2022). To facilitate skilled intentionality, the AIK research and development department aimed to embed a dynamic coaching pedagogy into academy coaching structures to support emerging practice designs from the bottom-up (player informed) as much as the top-down (coaching informed) (see O'Sullivan et al., 2021 for details). The aim of the co-design approach was to align player development practices with an *ethos of amateurism* discussed in the previous section. From a skill learning perspective, Woods et al. (2021b) have argued that the concept of 'representative co-design' can invite athletes to use action, perception and cognition, while engaging emotionally with a practice environment. Moreover, the less structured nature of practice that *does not conform to desired competencies* provides

opportunities for individuals to self-organise while exploring the demands of football contexts in their own unique way without fear of criticism. As Vaughan et al. (2021) stated, the self-organisation of collective behaviours in football is optimised by methods that prioritise knowledge *of*, or direct attunement to, the local interactions of environmental properties in football (also see López-Felip et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2019). Therefore, learning is prioritised through the continuous interactions of players, on the pitch and in the game, and not through the imposition of verbal instruction, game models or football concepts. We propose that shaping skilled intentions facilitates self-organisation in a local to global direction, amplifying bottom-up self-organisation and dampening top-down controlling coaching (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Moreover, such an approach situates exploration, love and ongoing participation at its core – features which clearly align to those of an *ethos of amateurism*.

## **Conclusion**

A common thread in sport coaching and talent development settings is the influence of sociocultural factors on attitudes to learning and development approaches. The exposure of sociocultural factors on coaches and player development managers is manifest in issues of disciplinary practices that can render players docile, unable to respond to the many action possibilities available in practice and competition. Challenging and positively influencing these dominant forms of life may appear to be unrealistic due to the persuasive narrative that remains in many football academies. But here, we contended that moving towards an *ethos of amateurism* and focusing on players' motivations for taking part in sport in the first place could start to shift the balance and move away from highly disciplined practices. This conceptualisation needs further attention, and considerations need to be made within the messy, complex and dynamic

context of player development settings. However, reframing player development as embedded in an *ethos of amateurism* can ensure that formal development practices are an extension of players' unstructured playing experiences. This can preserve the conditions that support intrinsic motivation, while strengthening the athlete–environment relationship – which is the basis of highly skilled behaviour when adopting an ecological perspective of football expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> It is of note, that this word derives from the Latin verb *amare* which means ‘to love’. Thus, an amateur is one who takes up with a pastime for the love of it.