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Professional soccer players perceptions of the English Football Association 4 corner model in supporting first team transitions

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ABSTRACT

The English Football Association (FA from hereon in) 4 Corner Model is a multidisciplinary framework that aims to enhance player talent identification and development, and is characterised by physical, social, technical/tactical and psychological components. Despite the framework being prominent within English football development pathways, player insights into the effectiveness of the framework in supporting academy to first team transitions are lacking. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore established first team professional footballer's perceptions of the FA 4 Corner Model, in relation to the attributes that they perceived to facilitate the successful transition to a professional first team environment. Twelve current ($n = 8$) and ex ($n = 4$) professional players who had successfully transitioned from a youth academy, and subsequently became an established first team player, were interviewed for the study. Interpretations across the qualitative data set highlighted the importance of players adapting to physical and tactical demands, while also dealing with different psychosocial factors when entering a first team setting. The study highlights that disparities can exist between players, coaches, practitioners, and sport scientists perceived development needs, a situation that could hinder players progression through the player pathway.

Introduction

English football academies play a central role in the development of youth footballers (Bullough & Jordan, 2017), with an estimated 12,500 players between the ages of 8 and 18 being registered to an English football academy at any one time (Calvin, 2017). However, supporting young players development, and facilitating their transition from academies to first team environments, has proven challenging for coaches and academy managers. This is evidenced by poor transition rates, where approximately 180 of the 1.5 million players (0.012%) who participate in England's youth football pathway secure a professional football contract with an English Premier League club (Calvin, 2017; Mallows, 2023). To support the development of aspiring youth football players, the English Football Association (2020) introduced the FA 4 Corner Model, a multidimensional framework that advocates the development of physical, social, technical/tactical, and psychological attributes, which has been adopted by professional academies operating under the Elite Player Performance Plan (Premier League, 2011). The FA 4 Corner Model is the cornerstone of the National Coach Education Curriculum (Football Association, 2016, 2019), and underpins the England DNA for the national player development performance pathway (Football Association, 2014).

The challenge of youth footballers transitioning from an academy to an elite first team environment has stimulated a wealth of multidisciplinary research that closely aligns to characteristics of the FA 4 Corner model. Lundqvist et al. (2022) international study of 29 academy practitioners identified factors that are important to support the transition, such as biological maturity, game understanding, technical skills, coping with training intensity and load, and experiencing different playing styles. Football academy practitioners in Mitchell et al. (2020) study also highlighted that coping with physical factors (e.g., increased training intensity) was important in supporting successful transitions. In addition, Mitchell et al. (2020) and Mills et al. (2012) identified psychosocial factors relating to successful transitions including self-motivation, coping with pressure (e.g., navigating the hierarchy of a first team squad), and social competence. Towlson et al. (2019) identified differences between 70 academy practitioners' perceptions of the attributes required to develop football talent based on development phase and position (e.g., social factors were rated significantly higher by youth development coaches than Foundation Phase coaches). Suggesting academy managers and coaches may not unanimously agree on the practices and characteristics accentuated in the FA 4 Corner Model.

An issue with current literature investigating academy to first team transitions in English football, is that it has tended to give a voice to academy managers, coaches, and sport and exercise scientists rather than draw on players firsthand experiences. Research that has drawn on players lived experiences has not yet investigated the attributes related to the FA 4

Corner Model (e.g., Hickey & Roderick, 2023), or has collected data from players who were still navigating the transition and were not an established first team player, and therefore may not fully appreciate the attributes required to sustain a first team position (e.g., Morris et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). Due to the complex and individualised nature of talent transfer, drawing on players experiential knowledge of successfully navigating the four stages of the transition (preparation, orientation, adaptation, and stabilisation [Stambulova et al., 2017, 2021]) can indicate which characteristics of the FA 4 Corner Model have value in facilitating the transition. These insights could aid the design of more sophisticated talent development experiences that better facilitate player progression along the professional football pathway. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore established first team professional footballer's perceptions of the FA 4 Corner Model in relation to the attributes that they perceived to facilitate their successful transition to a professional first team environment.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of current professional players (*n* = 8) and ex-professional players (*n* = 4), with ages ranging from 23 years to 42 years. The players had experience of competing in the top four professional leagues in England (Premier League, Championship, League One and League Two) and experienced a transition from an academy hopeful to a professional first-team player (Table 1). All players had gone through the stabilisation process, in that they had spent time as an established professional football player prior to data collection taking place. At the time of data collection, all players had made 40 or more professional football appearances.

Study design

Reflexive semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection purposes. The interview guide was developed based on previous research that explored career transitions and focused specifically on the FA 4 Corner Model (e.g., Finn & McKenna, 2010; Røynesdal et al., 2018). The reasons for selecting a reflexive semi-structured interview method were fourfold: 1) the reflexive interview process provides more opportunities to develop rapport and trust; 2) reflexive interviews allow participants an opportunity to understand the

study's aims and specific issues at hand; 3) this method ensures sufficient data is collected and that responses are directly related to the research aim (Ferreira, 2014); and 4) based on previous engagement between the first author and participants, the interview process provided opportunities to discuss and elaborate on interpretations from the initial conversation (Pessoa et al., 2019). This was achieved by the first author speaking to the participants via a telephone conversation prior to the interview taking place.

Procedure

Following ethical approval being granted from (Sheffield Hallam) University sport ethics committee, the first author contacted potential participants via email and telephone calls to invite them to take part in the study. Following the invitations, 12 male professional football players were recruited all of whom provided written consent for the study. After agreeing to take part, written information was sent to all participants to provide detailed information about the study. Follow up calls were then arranged to encourage reflection and critical thinking regarding the interviewee's experiences and perceptions of career transitions. During these conversations the rationale for the study was discussed along with initial thoughts of the first author based on extensive reading of key literature, and it also provided the interviewees the opportunity to reflect and consider their experiences of attributes contributing to their successful transition prior to the interview. This process was essential to developing a deeper understanding of the participants experiences of the transition. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (players' home or club) or online via Zoom, lasting between 27 and 71 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and all participants were anonymised.

Data analysis

Following the interview transcriptions, a deductive thematic analysis was employed. This process was completed by categorising the data in alignment with the FA 4 Corner Model (i.e., physical, social, technical/tactical, and psychological), which provided a "start list of a priori categories" to organise the interview data (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). Transcriptions were read multiple times by the first author who organised the data into clusters according to the four themes, depending on whether data captured meaning based on the research

Table 1. Overview of participants playing experiences and interview times.

Players	Age	Games played	Transition	Position	Interview Time
Participant 1	30	274	League 1 – League 2	Forward	55 minutes
Participant 2	23	54	Premier League – League 1	Midfielder	27 minutes
Participant 3	23	92	Championship	Defender	27 minutes
Participant 4	25	109	League 1	Forward	37 minutes
Participant 5	36	317	League 1	Forward	28 minutes
Participant 6	22	86	Championship	Forward	41 minutes
Participant 7	41	361	Premier League – League 1	Midfield	57 minutes
Participant 8	42	634	Championship	Forward	52 minutes
Participant 9	24	107	Premier League – League 2	Midfielder	34 minutes
Participant 10	24	40	Premier League – League 1	Midfielder	71 minutes
Participant 11	36	755	Premier League – League 2	Defender	50 minutes
Participant 12	40	60	Premier League – League 2	Midfielder	55 minutes

aim. Further analysis was then carried out to generate lower order themes providing detail to each cluster. To provide a critical perspective, the third author (an outsider to the football world) challenged taken-for-granted assumptions and posed naive questions in relation to the data analysis process (e.g., Hydes & Rothwell, 2022). This process was repeated several times to refine data that was assigned to the specific themes.

Results

Physical

Within the higher order theme of "Physical", lower order themes of *physical jump*, *injury*, and *adaptability* were identified. Participants reported experiencing a naivety regarding their preconceptions of the physical requirements which were needed to cope with a transition to first team football. The "jump" in physicality was reported as a "shock to the system" and highlighted the need to emphasise physical development to support transition to first-team football.

> Okay, now this is when I started thinking, "Yeah, I'm not as physical as I thought", because, in a man's game, it's quicker, stronger, and faster. So that's when I realised, I needed to get stronger, maybe do more gym (work) and just be more professional in the way I approach things. (Participant 2)

Injury was also reported as a consequence of not being physically ready due to the increased nature of training and competition. Participant 6 suggested they suffered several injuries due to a lack of preparation:

> In my head, I thought I was ready. I thought that the jump wasn't going to be as big as it was. But looking back now, I probably wasn't ready. Hence why in my first year, I had a good few injuries because I wasn't ready for the load.

While coping with new levels of physicality during competition, players discussed the need to be adaptable to find new ways to be effective in game play.

> I went on loan when I was 18 to [CLUB], a men's team and physically, it was completely different. Things that you can get away with (against) people of your similar age, when you play up against men who are stronger – they kind of read the pictures, and they push you out of the way. It's about having that self-reflection and thinking to yourself I need to do something different here I can't keep doing the same things until I get my man strength. (Participant 1)

Tactical and technical

Within the theme of "Tactical and Technical", the lower order themes of *performance first football, tactical adaptability*, and *information load* were identified. It was evident that moving into the first team presented a different approach to training and competition, and the change required the reproduction of successful outcomes and mistake free football. The emphasis on a *performance first* approach is reflected in Participant 7's comments:

> It was the Premier League club anyway, so tactically and technically, we had to be quite good at the academy team level. I think moving into the adult level, you had to be more considered and more intelligent about your thoughts. We had to produce more successful outcomes. Mistakes weren't taken well.

Changes to playing styles and being tactically adaptable was a particular challenge for the participants. Players found themselves needing to change their style of play in specific systems to maintain a first team place.

> I came short for a ball, and my coach ran out of the dugout pink faced. He said, "If you come short again, I'm f***ing bringing you off". So, I think I've just had 10 years being told to come short and link the play, and now you're saying you're gonna bring me off. I just started running behind, and it was territory football, it was a huge difference. (Participant 5)

Players also reported an increase in the attention to detail and information received during team tactical meetings. Based on this information, players were expected to execute immediate changes to tactical formations.

> A lot of meetings in first-team football, it's like you're in school, literally. You've got so much information to take in and process and then bring it out onto the pitch and show that you know what they've just told you. That's one of the big differences. (Participant 6)

Social

A *lack of connection*, *crossing paths*, and *mentors* were identified as the lower order themes within the higher order theme of "Social". The participants reported social development as an essential element of the 4 Corner Model and that the transition from youth to first team football was a socially demanding experience, but it was perhaps undervalued by coaches and managers. Participants reported that the strong social connections forged with their academy peers were harder to develop in the first team environment due to different personal motivations and agendas.

> So, in my experience, there was a real togetherness (in youth football). We lived together, we ate together, we trained together, we gym together, travelled together, showered together, and everybody was all in one place all the time. So, after a while, you become a really close-knit unit. You really know the people that you're working with a lot. Then you get to the first team, and because people have got their own agendas, their own motivations, their families, and they live all over the place, it was a lot. It was more like little factions rather than one big family. (Participant 10)

Organisational structure was also reported as a barrier to developing social connections, with participants suggesting that daily working practices did not facilitate a "crossing of paths" between newly transitioned players and established professionals and coaching staff.

> If we look at it from a structure perspective, academies are not aligned to their first team, both from a coaching and structural working perspective. So, heads of coaching are not working connectively with the first team coach. In some clubs, from a social front, there isn't that crossing of paths. If we go into different academies, vast majority have a separation in terms of academy on this side, first team on this side. (Participant 10)

Participant 10 explained how these structural constraints act as a barrier to forming social connections.

So, it creates a barrier straight away for everyone that's within the training ground. So how do you get those subtle skills of socializing with players and coaches that are above your age group, or the phase that you're in?

Despite participants reporting integration challenges with established club figures, when opportunities were presented to cross paths, senior professional players were considered to play a key role in being socially accepted into the first team. Participants suggested that senior players were considered important mentors to support stabilisation into the first team and created a supportive climate during transition.

Senior pros took me under their wing and showed me the ropes early. They made it easier, although they still treated me like a kid until I was 21. They did make the transition a bit easier. Because yes, they were tough on me, but looking back now, if they weren't talking to me, I probably wouldn't be where I am today. (Participant 6)

The integration of new professionals into the first team environment was something the participants reported as a substantial challenge due to the change in social climate. Dressing room expectations were considered to be vastly different to youth team experiences due to personal agendas, with senior players having different financial motivations as their career progressed. However, some senior players were also reported as being a vital support mechanism in facilitating integration.

Psychological

Confidence and *resilience* were identified as the lower order themes within the higher order theme of "Psychological". Participants highlighted psychological attributes as the most important aspect of the FA 4 Corner Model, suggesting that the "mental game" was the most crucial factor in supporting their transition.

Oh, probably number one, the first because the older I've got, I've realised that physically, you could be the most gifted player in the world; if you're not right psychologically, then you can't perform. (Participant 3)

Participant 9 indicated that psychological factors were critical in supporting transitions, suggesting that psychological resilience was more important than having the "base physical skill set".

It's more important than the physical aspects. Obviously, you've got to have the base physical skill set to be able to compete, but, psychologically, it's a lot more important. There are a lot more lows than there are highs. So, you have to be able to be resilient and take the lows and learn from them.

Aligned to psychological factors, participants also reported a relationship between positive perceptions of confidence and playing well during competitive games. Although insight into how this relationship was created were not discussed, it would seem this relationship was crucial in facilitating successful transitions.

I felt like I couldn't do anything wrong. And once you tell yourself that you're going to play well today, you will play well, I'm telling you that now, that your mind is the strongest weapon that you've got. (Participant 6)

When playing with confidence, Participant 2 also reported performance optimism referring to producing skilled actions "instinctively" and "naturally", while being on "cloud nine".

Like, there's no better feeling than when you play with full confidence! You do things that you wouldn't normally do, I mean it is just like instinctively and just naturally, and you feel like you're on cloud nine all the time.

Participants considered psychological factors as having a critical role in supporting successful transitions into a first team setting. Moreover, resilience and self-confidence were reported as having a positive relationship with high performance.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore current and ex-professional footballer's perceptions of the FA 4 Corner Model in relation to the attributes they perceived to facilitate the successful transition to a professional first team environment. The reflexive semi-structured interviews provided detailed insights into the participants' firsthand experiences of the transition according to physical, tactical/technical, social, and psychological factors.

Consistent with Lundqvist et al. (2022), and Mitchell et al. (2020), studies of academy practitioners, participants' account of physical demands highlighted the need to cope with, and adapt to, increased training and competition intensity when transitioning to a first team. The players' experiences of tactical and technical aspects within a first team setting were concerned with increases in information load during team meetings and adapting to different tactical playing styles. These changes in player experience can be categorised as a change in focus from a development (e.g., individual improvement focus) to performance (e.g., team outcome focused) climate. In these performance-oriented environments players reported the need to produce mistake free football during training and competition, while playing to a specific structure to satisfy game models that were designed to win competitive matches. These findings reflect the sentiments of neo professional players in Swainston et al'.s (2020) study, where coping with pressure to win (primarily through adaptation to different tactical formations and on-field requirements) was reported as a main point of difference in first team professional settings. Despite consistency between player reports of the need to adapt to performance-oriented environments, most academy practitioners in Lundqvist et al. (2022) study did not report the change from development to performance as a barrier to player progression.

Psychosocial factors were deemed to be of critical importance by players in managing their transition to senior football. As one respondent suggested, dealing with psychological challenges is "probably number one" in navigating the transition. In the context of this study, the inter-related nature of psychosocial factors was identified as confidence, resilience, a lack of connections, and the importance of peer mentors (e.g., senior professionals). Confidence and resilience were also positively associated with successful transitions in Drew et al'.s (2019) systematic review of

literature examining the junior-to-senior transition in sport, while social support (e.g., teammates) was identified as an external factor that provided opportunities for healthy holistic support which led to more positive developmental experiences. Moreover, Gledhill et al. (2017) also identified that psychosocial factors are positively associated with academy to first team transitions. Despite the value placed on psychosocial factors in supporting academy to first team transitions, Richardson et al. (2013) have argued that developmental approaches tend to focus primarily on physical, technical, and tactical factors.

The FA 4 Corner Model holds a central position in English youth footballer development, however, the value academy managers and coaches place on the four characteristics in practice is open to subjective interpretations (Kelly & Williams, 2020). While a flexible and fluid approach is needed to support an individualised approach to player development, naturally coaches will focus sessions on developing player attributes that they feel are important (Christensen, 2009). This may create a situation where players development needs do not match the short, medium, or long-term curriculum that has been developed based on an academy's philosophy and coaches' subjective views of what attributes are required to support first team transitions.

Conclusion

Identifying and developing talented youth footballers to perform at the highest level continues to be an important goal for football organisations globally. Designing and implementing appropriate development pathways and strategies is vital if these programmes are to maximise progression rates from academy to senior teams. As this study demonstrated, disparities can exist between the views of players, coaches, practitioners, and sport scientists regarding what development needs best support transitions. We acknowledge that these results are based on the perspective of a small group of players and therefore should be considered with caution, however, the results do indicate a wider issue that may exist in talent development settings more broadly. In that, the athletes themselves should be an integral part of the decision-making process to shape the planning and design of talent development programmes. Through this process key agents could become more sensitive to factors that are not deemed as important, for example, paying more attention to players' psychosocial adjustment to provide more focused support. Including athletes in this way can ensure that an individual's development is continually monitored, and adapted, to maximise their development experiences.

Disclosure statement

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