

Evaluating performance reviews in elite youth football: Perspectives of players, parents, and coaches

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Abstract:

The current study evaluated the effectiveness of Performance Reviews (PRs) within an elite UK-based youth football academy, exploring the perspectives of players, parents, and coaches. Despite significant investment in academy infrastructures, professional transition rates remain below 1%, making the PR process a key mechanism for talent development. Adopting a qualitative approach, data was collected via focus groups with 18 players (U9–U15) and 19 parents, alongside semi-structured interviews with six academy coaches. Inductive thematic analysis revealed that while PRs are theoretically valued for goal setting and tracking development, their practical implementation is hindered by a lack of objective evaluative criteria. This absence of structure leads to coach subjectivity, player confusion, and parental anxiety regarding the fairness and transparency of selection decisions. Furthermore, communication tensions were identified; parental involvement often dominated review meetings, inadvertently marginalising the players' voice and autonomy. The findings suggest that the current PR model may not achieve its developmental intent due to inconsistent feedback and perceived informational injustice. The study concludes that academies should adopt shared evaluative benchmarks and enhance coach feedback literacy to foster a more transparent, autonomy-supportive environment that promotes the well-being and progression of young athletes.

Key Words: youth football, performance reviews, talent development, elite level, feedback

Introduction

Football academies play a central role in the identification and development of young athletes with the potential to progress into the professional game. Football clubs invest substantial resources to create cutting edge facilities, expert personnel and the additional support required to facilitate the development of talented athletes (Horrocks et al., 2016; Mills et al., 2014; Reilly et al., 2003). Despite those investments the success rates of those managing to become professionals remain very low. In the UK, fewer than 1% of players who enter academy systems at the U9 level eventually gain a professional contract (Wilson, 2015; Magowan, 2015b). Nevertheless, children from very young ages are enrolled or recruited into high-performance environments, with the hope of a professional career in the future.

Research findings have demonstrated that results and performance at the youth level is not a predictor of later success in sport (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Gullich, 2014). The complex and multifaceted nature of talent with variability in physical, psychological, and maturational development makes predictions for future success very challenging (Deprez et al., 2015; Güllich & Emrich, 2012; Vaeyens et al., 2009). While traditional talent identification models have favoured early specialisation and deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ford et al., 2012), growing evidence suggests that these approaches may not reliably lead to elite performance outcomes (Bridge & Toms, 2013; Gulbin et al., 2013). Indeed, many professional footballers were not products of structured academy pathways, outlining that current processes within talent development may not be fair or effective at youth level (Güllich, 2014; Anderson & Miller, 2011).

In this context, Performance Reviews (PRs) are being increasingly used as a mechanism to track the development of players and inform the selection process. Within organisational psychology, performance reviews are structured, periodic evaluations in which an individual's behaviour and achievements are assessed against predefined performance criteria (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Baker, 2013). Effective PRs aim not only to support decision-making (e.g., promotion, training needs, or termination), but also to facilitate feedback, motivation, and developmental planning (Goler et al., 2017; Fawcett, 2015).

Applying this model to youth sport, and particularly football academies, remains a relatively underexplored area. There are frameworks in place such as the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) that have introduced requirements for regular reviews and the documentation of development targets. The EPPP was introduced as a long-term strategy aimed at increasing the number and quality of home-grown players by mandating coherent development programmes, standardised coaching contact time, and systematic monitoring

across academy age phases from Under-9s to senior level (Premier League, 2011). Central to the EPPP is an academy categorisation system and structural requirements (e.g., games programmes, education provision, coach development, and performance benchmarking) intended to promote consistency and quality assurance across clubs (Roe & Parker, 2016). However, their implementation varies, and their effectiveness has been questioned (Ryan, 2016). Recent research also highlights that even within formally structured frameworks like the EPPP, academy practitioners report wide variation in how psychosocial skills and characteristics are identified and developed, and how review processes are interpreted in practice (Barracough, Grecic & Harper, 2024). Football tends to rely on subjective criteria and judgements relating to player selection and progression. More specifically, coaches often rely on tacit knowledge built from experience and intuition which, can be susceptible to cognitive bias, confirmation error, and inconsistency (Jokuschies et al., 2017; Nash & Collins, 2006). These issues are particularly problematic when reviews have high-stakes consequences, such as the selection or retention of a player. At the same time, qualitative evidence from academy settings illustrates that subjective evaluations of psychosocial attributes are deeply context-dependent and highly variable across practitioners, adding further complexity to the reliability and consistency of review outcomes (Barracough, Grecic & Harper, 2024). On the other hand, concerns have also been raised regarding the reliability, consistency, and validity of subjective evaluations in team sports with context-specific demands (Louzada et al., 2016; Wiseman et al., 2014).

From a sport psychology perspective, PR processes can significantly impact athlete motivation, self-perception, and well-being. The clarity of goals, perceived fairness of the evaluation process, and the delivery of feedback may influence the experience of an athlete and their response to the PR (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Ikramullah et al., 2016). PRs that can lack structure, clarity, and objectivity can hinder development and contribute to psychological distress, particularly among adolescents navigating high-performance pathways. Despite the widespread use of PRs within football academies, there remains a notable lack of empirical research examining how these processes are experienced by key stakeholders (Sweeney et al., 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the PR process within a UK based youth football academy. Specifically, it explored how player development is assessed, monitored, and communicated.

Material & methods

Participants

Eighteen male youth footballers aged between eight and fifteen years participated in the study. Players were sampled from three age bands U9 (N=6), U11 (N=7) and U15 (N=5) to capture a breadth of experiences across the developmental spectrum. Three focus groups were conducted, lasting between 16m 58s and 42m 17s (total duration = 78m 39s).

Nineteen parents (13 male, 6 female) of academy players from three age bands; U9 (N=7), U11 (N=5) and U13 (N=6) took part. Three focus groups were conducted with parents of players in different age groups (U9, U11, U13), each lasting between 48m 57s and 72m 08s (total duration = 173m 34s). Six male academy coaches participated in individual semi-structured interviews. All were current academy staff members, and five had themselves participated in professional youth systems as players. Collectively the coaches possessed a range of experience spanning seven individual age bands between U6 to U18 within the academy. Professional qualifications ranged from Scottish FA Level 1 (U6 coach) to UEFA A Licence (U18 Head Coach). Interviews ranged from 18m 59s to 39m 29s (total duration = 166m 32s). Informed consent (and parental consent for minors) was obtained prior to participation. Ethical approval was granted by the host institution's research ethics committee.

Data Collection

Focus groups were employed to collect data from players and parents, while one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches. The use of focus groups enabled the collection of rich, interactive data within the logistical constraints of the academy environment. Sessions were scheduled during regular training periods to maximise accessibility and minimise disruption. Players' focus groups were conducted in familiar settings to encourage comfort and openness, while parental focus groups took place concurrently with training sessions.

Focus groups were deemed particularly appropriate for younger participants, as the group dynamic can foster a relaxed and supportive environment conducive to sharing opinions (Kellmerit, 2015; Tadjewski, 2016). The interactive format also encouraged participants to build upon, agree with, or challenge one another's contributions, generating a depth of insight not always accessible through individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The researcher adopted a facilitative role, guiding discussion around key prompts relating to the structure, clarity, and perceived purpose of the performance review process. Care was taken to adapt communication style and language for younger participants to account for cognitive and developmental differences (Gibson, 2012). Individual semi-structured interviews with coaches were used to enable a more in-depth exploration of their personal perceptions and practices within the academy. This one-to-one format provided confidentiality and allowed participants to speak freely about potentially sensitive organisational issues. All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This interpretive approach was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The six steps of the inductive thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) includes 1) familiarisation; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes 6) producing the report. To enhance trustworthiness, data analysis was discussed iteratively among the research team to ensure reflexivity and to minimise individual bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation across the three stakeholder groups (players, parents, coaches) further strengthened credibility.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the researcher's background in football coaching, reflexivity was an integral part of the research process. Field notes and reflective memos were maintained to acknowledge potential biases and assumptions related to the researcher's familiarity with performance review processes in football academies. This reflexive approach helped maintain critical distance while preserving interpretive depth.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed repeated themes across the three stakeholder groups relating to the structure, purpose, and perceived effectiveness of PRs. Common concerns of the participants focused on the subjectivity of assessments, the absence of clear evaluative criteria, and the communication challenges. More specifically, analysis identified three main themes reflecting how players, parents, and coaches experienced and understood the PR process: Clarity and Consistency in Developmental Feedback; Perceived Fairness and Transparency of Evaluation, and Communication and Relational Tensions Among Stakeholders. These themes highlight the ambiguities in how PRs were implemented and perceived within the football academy.

Clarity and Consistency in Developmental Feedback

Across all participant groups, PRs were recognised as potentially valuable developmental tools, particularly for goal setting, reflection, and future planning. Players viewed reviews as opportunities to understand progress and receive feedback.

"The coach can set you a goal and you can also set yourself a goal... You could try to achieve it before your next review."

(Player 3U13)

"...it's actually through reviews where we get our parents and the coach to tell us what we need to work on and what we've done well."

(Player 1U11)

These reflections align with literature emphasising the developmental function of PRs in promoting reflection, goal setting, and growth (Ikramullah et al., 2016). However, while players appreciated having tangible goals, they also reported uncertainty about how progress was assessed or what constituted achievement. The lack of explicit, objective criteria meant that goals were perceived as unclear and difficult to interpret, depending largely on coach interpretation. Coaches emphasised this uncertainty acknowledging the absence of structured evaluative criteria.

"...there is no actual method... we're not measured against anything... it is really just your experience."

(Coach 4)

"I've never seen any assessment criteria before."

(Coach 1)

The absence of consistent criteria led coaches to rely heavily on objectivity with the potential to affect the reliability and comparability between players. Such an approach raises questions about PR processes, reinforcing critiques from organisational research that unstructured assessments often lack reliability and fairness (Goler et al., 2017). As a result, players had difficulties interpreting their feedback. In particular, they described that they felt confused about what "doing well" actually meant. Similarly, parents observed that inconsistent communication and shifting goals limited their ability to support their children's development.

"You get a piece of paper with a lot more structure... I don't know how to explain that to my son because I don't understand some of the things there myself."

(Parent 3A)

These findings suggest that while the intentions of PRs are to facilitate development, the lack of consistent structure undermines clarity, usability of feedback, and player self-regulation. As highlighted in the literature, coherency of messages, and alignment between feedback and goals are critical for effective talent development (Martindale et al., 2007).

Perceived Fairness and Transparency of Evaluation

Parents and players frequently questioned the fairness and transparency of evaluations, particularly in relation to selection decisions and progression opportunities. Parents described the emotional strain of uncertainty, suggesting that the review process often did not manage to provide reassurance to them or the young players.

“It puts pressure on parents, puts pressure on kids... I mean, we might say there’s no pressure on kids... but sometimes I worry.”

(Parent 1A)

“The club needs to... appreciate a little bit more that they’ve given their young adolescent life to this.”

(Parent 3B)

Parents viewed the six-week reviews as their only structured opportunity to engage with coaches, yet felt these meetings offered limited insight into how judgments were reached. The infrequency of communication fostered feelings of exclusion and anxiety, as parents lacked clarity on what was valued by the academy.

“I would want to know it’s fair, but I don’t if it’s fair because I don’t know the processes of it.”

(Parent FG2)

“They don’t share that with you... if your child is asking you what to do, you don’t know the answer.”

(Parent FG1)

These concerns reflect broader issues of procedural and informational fairness, central constructs in organisational justice theory (Colquitt et al., 2001). Perceptions of fairness are strongly linked to trust, motivation, and engagement; when transparency is lacking, both parents and players may disengage or lose confidence in the system. Coaches also recognised that their evaluations were shaped by subjective interpretation.

“There’s not a real accurate way of looking at a football player and saying, ‘Your ability is graded ninety-one out of a hundred.’”

(Coach 5)

“How do you then measure aggression? It’s seeing it in games without us having to say, ‘Come on, be more aggressive.’”

(Coach 6)

This reliance on experiential knowledge and subjective interpretation reinforces previous findings suggesting that coach judgments can be influenced by bias and context (Louzada et al., 2016; Wiseman et al., 2014). The absence of shared criteria or benchmarks risks uneven assessment standards between teams and age groups, potentially affecting player morale and perceptions of equity. Parents often interpreted this inconsistency as evidence of systemic unfairness, reinforcing emotional strain and scepticism toward the process. From a developmental perspective, perceived injustice may undermine intrinsic motivation, particularly during adolescence when athletes are sensitive to issues of recognition and fairness (Abbott & Collins, 2004). A lack of transparency around progression and deselection decisions may therefore undermine players’ sense of control, contributing to anxiety and disengagement. Perceived inequity in PR processes influenced by subjectivity, lack of transparency, and inconsistent communication can diminish stakeholder trust. Addressing fairness concerns requires clear evaluative criteria, transparent communication, and consistent application across staff to align perceptions of value and progress.

Communication and Relational Tensions Among Stakeholders

The PR process served as a formal communication bridge among players, parents, and coaches, yet participants consistently described it as limited and sometimes counterproductive. Parents viewed the six-week reviews as the only point of dialogue with academy staff, which intensified pressure and dependency on these meetings.

“It puts pressure on parents, puts pressure on kids... I mean, we might say there’s no pressure on kids, but sometimes I worry.”

(Parent FG1)

Coaches, meanwhile, expressed discomfort with the dynamic nature of the review meetings, suggesting that parental presence often constrained open dialogue with players.

“The majority of the time it’s the parent that’s doing the speaking and not the kid because it’s an unsure environment.”

(Coach 2)

The dynamic nature of the meetings reveals an interplay between transparency and autonomy. While parental involvement can promote alignment and shared understanding, excessive input may undermine the player’s voice about their own development. From a sport psychology perspective, this imbalance may interfere with autonomy-supportive environments essential for motivation and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Coaches’ efforts to balance open communication with developmental focus were further challenged by operational constraints such as time pressure, documentation demands, and review frequency.

“We should be able to say... there’s his training notes, there’s a review, we spoke to you then... What we could do a bit better is maybe document some of the chats, maybe diarise.”

(Coach 3)

These operational shortcomings highlight a lack of continuity in how feedback is recorded and revisited over time. When feedback is not consistently documented, messages can become fragmented and vary across review cycles. As outlined by Kluger and DeNisi’s (1996) Feedback Intervention Theory, feedback is less effective when it lacks clarity, timeliness, and follow-up. Rather than supporting shared understanding and accountability, PR meetings were therefore often experienced as increasing relational tension. Developing a

more continuous, two-way communication process supported by clear documentation and defined roles may help strengthen relationships and ensure feedback better supports player development.

Conclusions

This study investigated the effectiveness of the Performance Review (PR) process within a UK-based youth football academy, with a focus on how player development was assessed, monitored, and communicated across key stakeholders. Across all three themes, PRs were recognised as valuable in principle but frequently undermined in practice by inconsistencies in structure, fairness, and communication. As a result, PRs often did not achieve their intended developmental purpose within a youth talent development environment.

A key finding related to the absence of shared evaluative criteria underpinning PR processes. While players valued goal setting and feedback, uncertainty regarding how progress was evaluated limited their ability to understand expectations and act upon feedback. From a developmental perspective, this lack of clarity constrained opportunities for reflection, learning, and self-regulation. For coaches, reliance on experience-based judgement increased the potential for inconsistency and bias, reinforcing concerns raised in previous research regarding unstructured evaluation systems in talent development contexts (Goler et al., 2017). These findings suggest that developmental intentions alone are insufficient without clear structures to support consistent implementation. Importantly, however, the presence of an imperfect review structure may still offer greater developmental value than the absence of any formalised process. In the absence of structured review mechanisms, assessment practices are likely to rely solely on implicit, experience-based judgement, which may lack transparency, shared understanding, and rigour. Thus, while refinement is clearly required, the challenge may lie not in questioning the existence of PR processes, but in strengthening their clarity, consistency, and fairness.

Perceptions of fairness and transparency were particularly important for parents and players. When PR processes lacked clear explanations of how decisions were reached, trust in the system was weakened and emotional strain increased. Viewed through an organisational justice lens, these findings highlight the importance of procedural and informational fairness in shaping stakeholder engagement and confidence. In youth sport environments, where progression and deselection decisions carry significant emotional and identity-related implications, unclear evaluation processes may be especially detrimental to motivation and well-being. Communication dynamics further influenced how PRs were experienced. PR meetings were often described as the primary, and sometimes only, formal point of interaction between parents and coaches, intensifying their emotional significance. While parental involvement frequently reflected a desire for alignment and support, excessive parental input sometimes limited players' opportunities to actively engage in discussions about their own development. This finding underscores the importance of balancing transparency with age-appropriate autonomy, ensuring that young athletes remain central participants in conversations about their progress.

These findings point to the need for more coherent, developmentally sensitive PR frameworks within youth football academies. Practical recommendations include the introduction of shared evaluative criteria to support consistency and clarity; coach education focused on feedback literacy and awareness of cognitive bias; structured mechanisms designed to amplify player voice and participation within review meetings; and improved documentation practices to support continuity of feedback across review cycles. By strengthening both the structure and quality of PR processes, academies may be better positioned to support player development, psychological well-being, and sustained engagement over time. Your conclusion is your chance to have the last word on the subject. The conclusion allows you to have the final say on the issues you have raised in your paper, to summarize your thoughts, to demonstrate the importance of your ideas, and to propel your reader to a new view of the subject. It is also your opportunity to make a good final impression and to end on a positive note.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors did not use AI technologies.

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