



THE ART, PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE OF FOOTBALL IN SOUTH AFRICA **OVERVIEW**

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OVERVIEW

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All photographs by Peter McKenzie

Dedicated to the late Thomas Madigage,
Assistant Coach to the South African national
football team, Bafana Bafana.



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FOREWORD

The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) pursues research on strategic issues facing South Africa, inspired by the national objective to improve the quality of life of all. Its areas of research include history and philosophy, political economy and the utility of natural sciences.

What does football have to do with all this?

Everything, because the sport reaches millions in our country and billions across the globe. Football has developed into an economic activity in its own right. It affects national identity and social cohesion. It utilises modern sciences in relation to the understanding of the human body, management of large and small organisations, financial acumen and human relations.

And so, motivated by this reality, MISTRA set out to interrogate the perennial question: why does South African football evince so much promise, and yet in relation to many of our peers in Africa and further afield, at both club and national level, we flatter to deceive?

After eighteen months of literature reviews, interrogation of the science that underpins the sport, fieldwork and workshops, the Project Team on *The Art, Philosophy and Science of Football in South Africa* has 'completed' its work. The study confirms what is otherwise common knowledge: South Africa needs systematic youth football development. This is as pivotal to football as it is to any other sport; and plodding industry rather than immediate gratification should be the guide.

Around this pivot should revolve all the other tasks that are critical to a new dawn for South African football: be it administration and management, training and deployment of professional youth coaches, resourcing of youth development programmes, physiological and psychological development of young players, talent identification and retention, or the elimination of gender discrimination.

The National Sports Plan of government and the Technical Master Plan of the South African Football Association do identify some of the systemic interventions required. But as with all strategies and as demonstrated in the brief case studies contained in this report, leadership, change-management capabilities, accountability and appropriate deployment of resources are critical.

Central in all of this is co-operation between the national association as the supreme regulator and administrator, the professional football clubs as the practitioners, and the mass of football enthusiasts across the length and breadth of the country. Such a partnership should transcend the theatres of day-to-day football activities to embrace our institutions of higher learning and other centres of sports science. Thus we can be confident that all the brainpower pertinent to the development of football is being utilised in a systemically inclusive process.

One of the conclusions of this study is that South Africa suffers from a dearth of comprehensive research into football. More theorisation of the sport is required. And the field work summarised in this report can be expanded to gain an even better understanding of the areas of success and the many weaknesses that afflict the game. In other words, the Project Team has not 'completed' its work.

In thanking the lead researchers and all the partners who worked with them, we can only hope that this work, including the academic research papers awaiting publication, will add value to both discourse and praxis on the 'beautiful game' on our shores and further afield.

Our thanks also go to the funders who continue generously to contribute to MISTRA's research work.

Joel Netshitenzhe
MISTRA Executive Director



OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

Background

In his majestic work, *The Ball is Round*, David Goldblatt opens with these words:

Is there any cultural practice more global than football? Rites of birth, death and marriage are universal, but infinite in their diversity. Football is played by the same rules everywhere. No single religion can match its geographical scope...Around half the planet watched the 2006 World Cup Final – three billion humans have never done anything simultaneously (Goldblatt, 2007).

Such is the currency, reach and popularity of what is affectionately known as the 'beautiful game', the game of football. Furthermore, the intrigue and emotion that football evokes is aptly defined by Sepp Heberger: 'The ball is round. The game lasts ninety minutes. This much is fact. Everything else is theory' (cited in Goldblatt, 2007).

In South Africa, like in most societies, the experience of football is etched in the hearts and minds of her people across all social divides. Football grew over time to become one of the prominent national cultures since the second half of the nineteenth century when the first games were reportedly played. Today football continues to evolve and still exudes its distinctive character as a truly national sport.

Inspiration

In the fall of 2010, the year of the first African FIFA World Cup, the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) began a research study into football in South Africa; a study that would last twenty-six months. The research project was inspired mainly by four things:

- The fact that South African football enjoys remarkable resources, abundant talent and the passionate support of the majority of South Africans and yet it is unable to

achieve satisfactory levels of success and competitiveness, locally and internationally.

- That available research on football is limited in South Africa and consequently and invariably, the long-term development of the game is stunted. This is both a concern and a finding.
- The sheer value of football on social cohesion and formation of national culture and identity.
- The opportunity to build on the momentum of the FIFA 2010 World Cup.

Methods and Scope

The aim of the project was to determine the factors that contribute to success in football and develop a long-term strategy to place South African football on a trajectory to become a successful international competitor.

The research is cross-sectional and it used mixed methods to gather data from the field and from existing literature. The focus was on youth football development with emphasis on players. Data was also gathered from managers and coaches. The data gathered is largely descriptive in nature. As a result, a detailed picture of the state of youth football development is projected. Importantly, the study makes a clear link between youth football development and elite professional football.

The scope of the study deals with important football themes which are presented as chapters. All of these themes are interconnected and interdependent, and they include:

- Sociological influence of football in South Africa (oral and written);
- administration and management in football;
- motor and skills development from ages 6 to 12;
- talent identification, retention and training;
- football coaching; and
- physical, fitness and psychological factors for high performance in football players.

Key Findings

At the centre of the findings of this study is the confirmation of the central challenge of poor football development in South Africa, which in turn has a deleterious effect on elite performance and the country's long-term international success and competitiveness.

Overarching Findings

The study finds:

- That there are management, administration, financial and sport science support gaps in the development of young football players in structured youth football programmes.
- That there are poor levels of investment in youth football development leading to a lack of a clear and regulated system.
- That football is still showing a strong gender bias towards men.
- That soft skills such as cognitive ability, thinking and mental toughness are necessary skills for optimal player performance and excellence.
- That youth football requires specialised skills specific to training young players.
- That visual capabilities and skills cannot be assumed as natural attributes but must be tested and subjected to training according to need.
- That the socio-economic conditions of a player can impact on their performance and success in the field of play. However, it is also true that conditions such as poverty, push the youth towards the sport of football.
- That football facilitates social inclusion for especially female youth and benefits such as education (life skills, improved academic performance), scholarship, and social relationships are derived.

Specific Findings

The study finds:

- That there is no lack of talent; rather, there is lack of sufficient talent identification, development and management.
- That youth football development programmes emphasise winning, which results in coaches overtraining young players, which impacts on their development and long-term participation.
- That although the focus of Youth Football

Development Programmes (YFDP) was on youth development, resource constraints result in the perverse incentive to quickly sell talented players in order to keep the YFDP functional and sustainable.

- That although all the YFDPs had a vision and mission statement with objectives, not all had a long term strategy.
- That a large percentage of youth players in the selected structured youth football programmes in Gauteng did not want to play football in South Africa; but to 'graduate' to professional football leagues overseas.
- That the percentage of injuries sustained in South African studies are higher than those reported in similar age groups from English research with the injury incidence 23.2 per 1,000 game hours.
- That in general, sampled players performed significantly poorer on both hardware and software visual skills if compared to other athletes.
- That among the coaches interviewed, only one was a qualified youth coach.
- That the sampled players have only developed high mental skills ability in two skills, which are achievement motivation and goal directness.
- That only 30% of the sampled players have seen a doctor (general practitioner).
- That the dangers attached to conditioning young players to specialise (grooming players for positions) earlier in their lives is unknown.
- That, more often than not, the youth coach is expected to play multiple roles: parent, counsellor, trainer, team manager, etc.
- That none of the interviewed coaches had a monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place.

That 76% of the sampled players indicated that they did not receive any food after competitive games or immediately after training.

- The study highlights the fact that success and competitiveness can only be achieved through a combination of enabling capabilities that condition a player, ranging from fields such as psychology, sociology, science (medical, medical technology, biokinetics, and technology), optometry, human movement, and so on. The more the player becomes professional and enters the elite level, the more conditioning from these enablers is required.

Recommendations

Overall, the research depicts a worrying picture of the state of football in South Africa. The report suggests that in the medium to long-term (beyond the horizon of the South African Football Association (SAFA) Technical Master Plan - 2022), the football fraternity should focus on two priority areas: building strategic and technical capacity.

Policy

The National Sports Plan of the Department of Sports and Recreation South Africa and the SAFA Technical Master Plan emphasise the importance of youth development as one of the key priorities to achieve success and competitiveness.

There are many complementarities between the findings and recommendations of this research and SAFA's Technical Master Plan (hereafter referred to as the Technical Plan) in terms of priority themes for the future of football in SA. Beyond these issues, however, are the critical questions of leadership and practise.

The common priority themes are: vision; football philosophy; the application of sports science; an emphasis on youth development (talent ID and development); strengthening coaching, and a review of the competitions framework.

In our opinion, football urgently requires the following to succeed:

- Development and/or improvement of strategic leadership across the board (including the formulation of a South African football philosophy).
- Development and/or improvement of capabilities to manage change and transitions in football.
- Greater accountability in the broadest sense of the word, at all levels.
- That there is costing and resource mobilisation in order to achieve efficiency, sustenance and competitiveness.

How realistic the Technical Plan is will depend on commitment, infrastructure and investment, the extent to which this is prioritised, implemented and managed, as well as the resources allocated.

Further, the success of the Plan hinges on the ability to calculate the balance between what is desirable and possible in the short-, medium- and long-term. For instance, if there is no appreciation of player profiles, region profiles and infrastructure needs, the Technical Plan will not succeed.

Secondly, if the element of integration, coordination and alignment is ignored, the Technical Plan and the long-term vision will be compromised. Therefore, there must be a careful application of general principles and requirements, taking into account objective reality on the ground. This will require technical analytical ability on the part of management and leadership.

Further recommendations include the following:

- Evaluating whether football development will be better served with an academy structure, or structures, attached to teams at certain levels such as the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and National First Division (NFD), or a hybrid system.
- A special focus on improving the relationship between the Leagues and SAFA, with emphasis on technical and leadership cooperation.
- The inclusion of life skills in player development, which is doable and affordable in the short-term.
- The need to focus on success stories of countries in Africa and Latin America with whom we share similar characteristics.
- Guidelines/framework to manage player migration into and out of South Africa, with emphasis on young players, both to improve migration management, its positives and negatives.
- Reviving school sport.

Technical Strategy

As a general principle, the report embraces the Long Term Athlete Development model as a workable model for player development. This implies that there should be a tracking system specific to tracing the development of players in a manner that accounts for every player in the system – from entry to exit!

Given international and own experience, it is important for South Africa to adopt a football philosophy.

- The U13, U15, U17 and U19 structures for youth and youth elite development and competition framework is preferred.
- The application of science and technology in player development is essential at all levels. However, given inadequate resources, minimum scientific support (including medical) requirements must be put in place. And where possible, partnerships must be sought with institutions of higher learning and communities.
- Tailor-made training methods for youth should include regular assessment of player profile (including socio-economic profile) in order to assess player needs.
- A uniform youth football development model/structure should be developed and aligned with the competitions framework, Technical Plan and other relevant initiatives.
- There is no plausible reason why the Women's Football League (SASOL League) is defined as amateur. This needs to change.
- More youth development coaching specialists are needed.
- The report endorses the idea emerging from Technical Plan to reduce the number of cup competitions at adult and youth level so that we avoid spreading our resources thinner in the transition to 2022 and beyond.
- Consideration should be given to a requirement that every PSL and NFD team should have a youth development programme as part of licensing.
- A uniform system of youth football development should be developed by SAFA in line with the national football plan on youth football development. Corporate governance principles should be prioritised.
- Youth football coach specialisation should be implemented through specific youth football coaching education in line with international trends.
- Proper football-specific facilities should be established to enhance youth football development. Specific criteria with regard to the establishment of youth football academies or centres of excellence should be devised and regulated by the SAFA.
- The implementation of school football leagues, as well as inter-district and inter-regional school tournaments is imperative for the development of talent. This will enhance talent identification at a grassroots level.
- Professional clubs should play a more active and supportive role in their YFDPs instead of focusing on buying mature talent from neighbouring countries.
- On-going research into youth football development is important to keep up with international standards.
- Nutritional intervention should be addressed at an early age in the development programmes, but also included in the support given to elite players.
- Youth football coach specialisation should be implemented through specific youth football coaching education in line with international trends.
- Minimum scientific support as a basic requirement for the hosting of a YDFP should include health screening that encompasses, among other things, visual skills, muscle strength and endurance, and ball handling integrated with speed and agility testing.
- Consultations with tertiary institutions could afford the youth development structures selected services for YDFP programmes as well as performance enhancement of elite teams and the national team.
- Strategic research topics should be identified based on the needs of the SAFA in collaboration with tertiary institutions in order to develop the youth for future participation and for optimising performance of elite teams.

Way Forward

The findings of this report can be used to contribute to the development of a comprehensive strategy for football in South Africa, with positive benefits for the national football teams. For the national teams to perform optimally, the following three components are important:

- A large pool of highly-skilled football players should be available for selection, with the youth football development programmes acting as the feeder system.
- The management structures of football should be effective and implemented at all levels of the sport from grass roots development through to the management of the national team.
- Facilities for football and the support structures for the football players should be available and

maintained for optimal use by all involved in football.

Critically, SAFA should develop a specific coaching framework for the training of youth football coaches so that they are properly equipped to impart the appropriate skills at the appropriate age.

The establishment of a South African Football Academy at a national level should be considered, to service national teams at all levels.

Greater responsibility must be placed on professional clubs to develop youth players with specific budgets, human resources, the best coaches and scientific support.

Clubs should include youth development programmes for girls.

Further Research

The studies conducted in this research can be expanded further to include a larger sample covering all parts of the country. This would include, among other things:

- Studying 'coach behaviour' in relation to coaching and player management.
- Examining the improved performance of Banyana Banyana against the backdrop of the utilisation of the High Performance Centre model.
- Investigating *early specialisation* in youth and its impact on player development and performance.
- Studies on a national sample of senior and junior players that include lower limb isokinetic testing.
- A national investigation into the visual skills in development football players.
- Investigating the relationship between training programmes and match demands at a national level.
- Psychological interventions required to impact positively on the mental toughness of youth and elite football players.
- Interrogating the life skills of football players in order to develop interventions to address areas such as coping mechanisms and financial planning.

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