

EUROPEAN CLUB ASSOCIATION

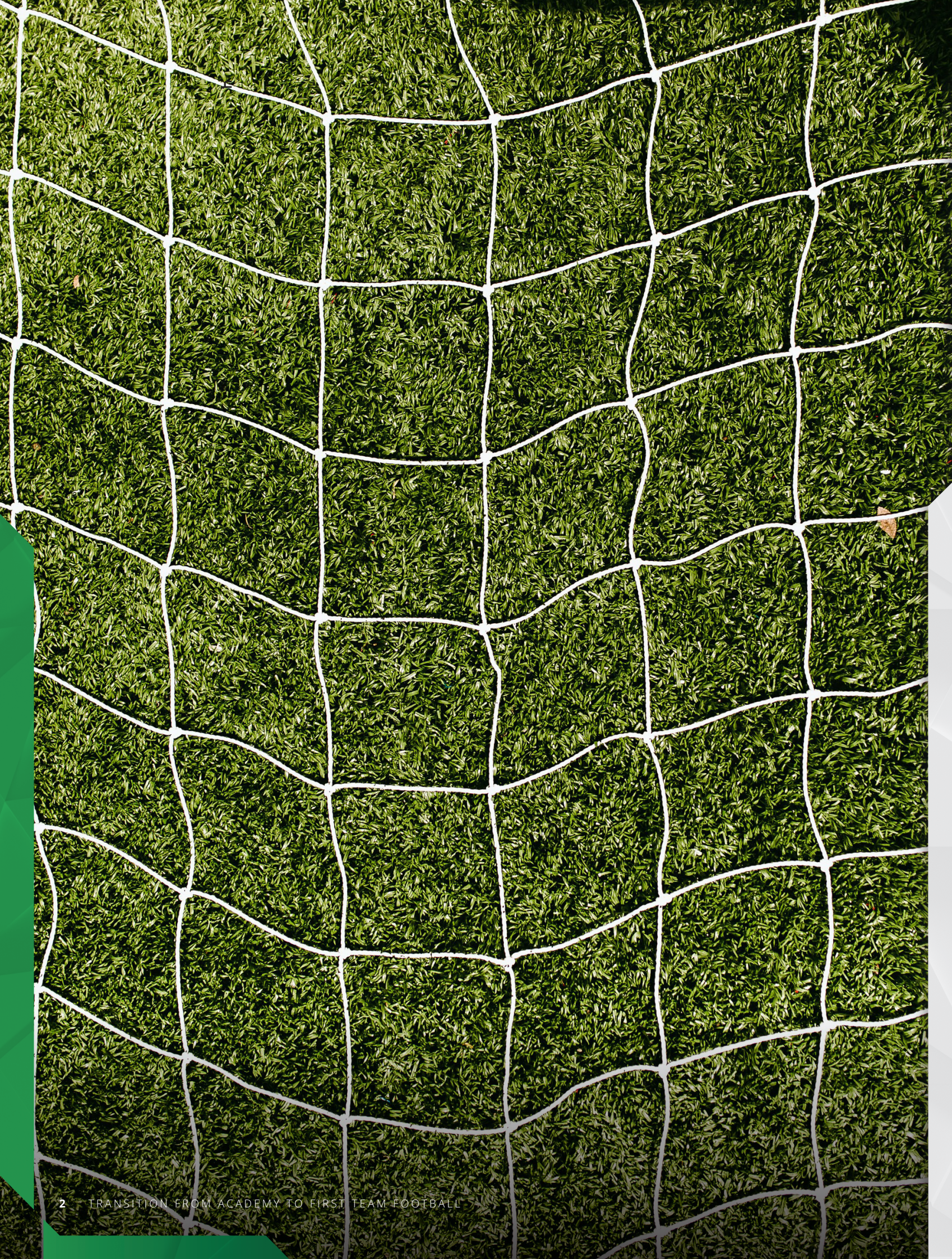
TRANSITION FROM ACADEMY TO FIRST TEAM FOOTBALL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



ECA  **YOUTH
FOOTBALL** 2023-24

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
 **FOOTBALL
BENCHMARK**



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EUROPEAN CLUB ASSOCIATION –
YOUTH FOOTBALL WORKING GROUP
STUDY IN CO-OPERATION WITH



1

PREAMBLE

BY DENNIS TE KLOESE

ECA EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER AND
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PREAMBLE



The topic of young players' transition to first team football has been of considerable interest among ECA Member Clubs over the past couple of years. After a survey confirmed it as one of the most pressing concerns related to youth development, ECA arrived at the hypothesis that there is significant room for improvement, and that this process is currently not sufficiently optimised at many European clubs.

As the next step, ECA commissioned Football Benchmark to prepare a comprehensive study about the topic. **Ultimately, the key objective was to understand the first team transition process in Europe and provide a starting "toolkit" for clubs of all sizes that would like to improve their performance in this crucial area.** Football Benchmark utilised a holistic approach, balancing a mix of primary and secondary data collection methods. As the basis of the primary research, an ECA member survey was prepared, which was then filled in by close to 100 clubs. Moreover, Football Benchmark conducted over 25 interviews with club representatives and other expert stakeholders.

A key aspect of the research was to assess transition trends and performance from a quantitative point of view, which required the creation of a suitable analytical framework, starting with the statistical definition of a successful first team transition.

Throughout the study, a 360-degree view was applied, ensuring that all contextual aspects of the transition were covered. **This was crucial, as the first team transition process – which starts from the players' initial interactions with the first team and concludes when they become established members of the squad – is one of the most complex steps in a player's career.** This complexity derives from the navigation of numerous parallel changes and the fact that several different stakeholders need to collaborate during the process. As part of the study, in order to analyse them separately, these parallel changes were categorised into five transition areas: physical, tactical, mental/psychological, technical and social. Stakeholders were also categorised and investigated in detail to offer a full understanding of the supporting environment and identify best practices for dealing with the challenges.

Additionally, the study also investigated the current state of regulations and competitions in Europe in order to highlight some of the drivers behind markedly different domestic realities.

A statistical analysis was performed to identify continent-wide trends and the best performing leagues and clubs from a transition perspective, as well as highlighting different player pathways towards success. To provide best practices and actionable insights, detailed case studies of 12 clubs were prepared, providing insights into the collective opinion and the state of European clubs when it comes to both the strategic and operational elements of the transition.

How can clubs make the transition to first team football process more successful and efficient? Which clubs perform best in this area in Europe, and what can be learned from them? Do academy staff have enough influence on transition decisions? What is the most suitable domestic competition model to support transition goals? These, and many more questions, are presented and answered as part of the study. Furthermore, topics such as the many facets of player education, the improvement of

communication at all levels, the importance of academy coaches and the recent trend of individual transition coaching are also explored in detail.

Regardless of a club's size, location or strategy, we believe this study provides a valuable resource to improve first team transition rates, build a sustainable talent pipeline in Europe and provide a competitive edge for those who implement best practices and suggestions mentioned over the next pages. While it became clear during the preparation of the report that transition is not a process that can or should be standardised, it was also confirmed that there are many aspects of it that are possible to influence and improve. Some of these require a philosophical shift that can take years to materialise, while others can be implemented in a short amount of time by any club, regardless of available resources.



2

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The development of the study utilised a holistic approach; the objective was to gather inputs from all relevant stakeholder types who have an impact on the transition process, while also building an extensive database of both qualitative and quantitative information. To achieve this, a balanced mix of primary and secondary research methods was utilised, headlined by over 25 expert interviews and a survey that was filled in by almost 100 clubs.

What drove the creation of the study? How did we ensure that the findings are valuable for clubs independent of size or local context?

The starting hypothesis of the research was that the process of transitioning young players from academy to first team football is not sufficiently optimised in Europe. In 2020, an ECA Member Club survey found that most teams deemed this topic to be very important and wanted to find out more about how they could improve in this area.



In this follow-up study, the first goal was to assess the topic from a statistical perspective and analyse all available data to find out which countries and clubs perform best, how, and why. Then, it was equally important to gather insights from the innovators and leaders in the field, develop case studies about the best practices and provide recommendations to clubs on how to optimise their transition processes. To achieve this, a blend of primary and secondary research methods was utilised. The study is a result of the cooperation of ECA and Football Benchmark. A Task Force was set up to provide strategic direction to the research during the development of the study and to ensure that ECA Member Clubs were represented and had a say in the overall direction. The four member clubs of the Task Force were AFC Ajax, SL Benfica, Arsenal FC and AS Monaco FC.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY FRAMEWORK:

1. Data sources

- a. Primary research methods:
 - i. **Interviews:** In-depth interviews with a wide range of club representatives and professionals. First-hand accounts of experiences and processes were crucial to understand the challenges of the transition. In total, 27 interviews were conducted.
 - ii. **Survey:** In July-August 2023, all ECA Member Clubs and several other European clubs were invited to fill in a questionnaire about the first team transition process. Ninety-five different clubs completed the 23-question survey.
- b. Secondary research methods:
 - i. **Statistical analysis:** A comprehensive statistical data collection & analysis was performed, covering European top divisions and a selection of second tier leagues during the period of 2018/19–2022/23. The statistical analysis was based on match data and player career path information, identifying players who made their debuts and/or successfully transitioned to first team football.
 - ii. **Prior studies:** Reports sourced from ECA, FIFA, UEFA, Football Benchmark and other stakeholders about aspects of youth player development and first team transition also supported the preparation of this study.

2. Study outputs

- a. Identification of best practices and recommendations from clubs to clubs.
- b. An understanding of the first team transition process in UEFA countries.
- c. Quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (survey) assessment of the process.

3

OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

We can think of the transition as a “job interview” that evaluates the players’ many years of work against a myriad of other candidates, some of whom are their friends. The toughest part? They don’t know when and how it will happen.

Following extensive discussions with club representatives and subject matter experts, it became apparent that the transition from academy to first team is one of, if not the most difficult period of a player’s career, explaining the need for further research. This chapter describes this challenging nature and puts the transition to first team football in the context of the overall player journey. After a summary of the transition concept and its theoretical background, we break down the different areas that are all part of the process and introduce the complex environmental factors that influence it.

Selection of key insights

- Why should teams consider putting more resources into the improvement of first team transition? It seems there is a major opportunity for clubs determined to create a talent pipeline from within, as success rates are very low overall.
- How much do European academies prioritise transition goals and in what form? The number of academy graduates playing in the first team is one common metric, but there is a surprisingly diverse range of transition-related objectives at clubs.

OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

- Why is the transition to first team football more complex than any other part of a player’s progression? The handling of adolescence is, in itself, challenging; by combining it with five similarly challenging transition areas on the pitch and with the involvement of dozens of different stakeholders, this period becomes even harder to navigate.

A selection of questions addressed

What does the term “first team transition” mean and when does it happen? How long is the list of challenges that players face during this time? Why can’t we standardise a roadmap for everyone?

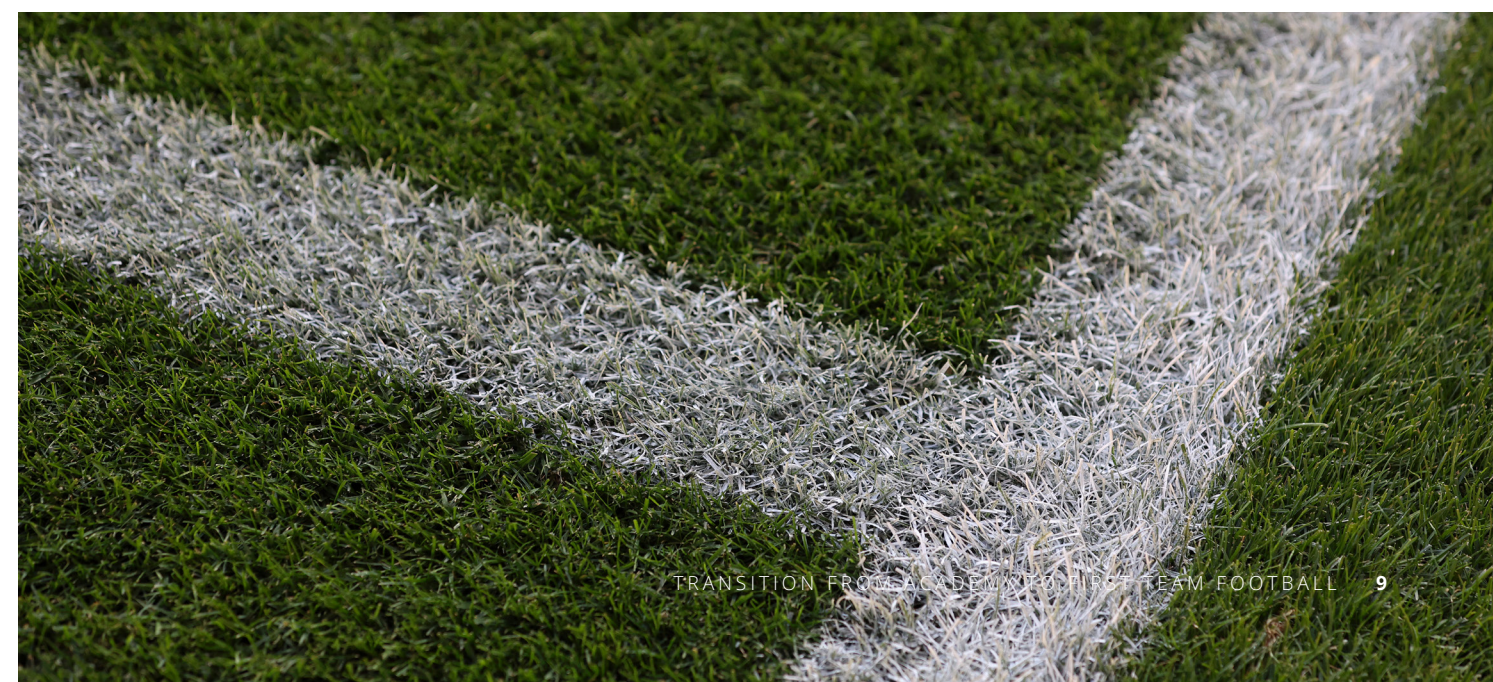
First team transition – the most crucial milestone in a football career?

In a football player’s career, the expression “transition” refers to major changes, with examples including an international transfer or retirement (“transitioning out” of a playing career). In this study, the focus is on one specific, challenging case, the transition from academy to first team (professional) football. Some of the main reasons behind the challenging nature include an undefined timing that is often

outside of the players’ control, a significant overlap between multiple major changes happening both on and off the pitch in parallel and the difficulty of managing a complex environment of stakeholders that all have an influence on the process.

From a club perspective, developing players with the capability to play in the first team is the main objective of academies, together with potentially generating income from player sales later on. Based on a club survey developed for the purposes of this study (please refer to Chapter 07 for more information), four out of five respondent clubs have a goal related to first team transition in their youth academy strategy. Such goals can refer to the number of academy graduates promoted to the first team, or the ratio of players trained by the club being part of the first team squad.

While the definition of first team transition can vary significantly within the industry, this study looks at all aspects of the process from the first interaction with the first team squad until the player becomes an established member of it. Furthermore, suggestions related to the preceding academy development steps are also part of the analysis.



Understanding the career path of players – the key steps towards becoming a professional

Athlete careers can be broken down into different phases. In addition, there are clearly identifiable shifts (or transitions, as introduced in the previous section) between these phases that are just as important.

The career of football players often includes five main stages: the transition to first team football occurs between academy development and the senior playing career. The visual provides a high-level overview of these career steps, while also highlighting the timing of first team transition, which is the focus of our study.

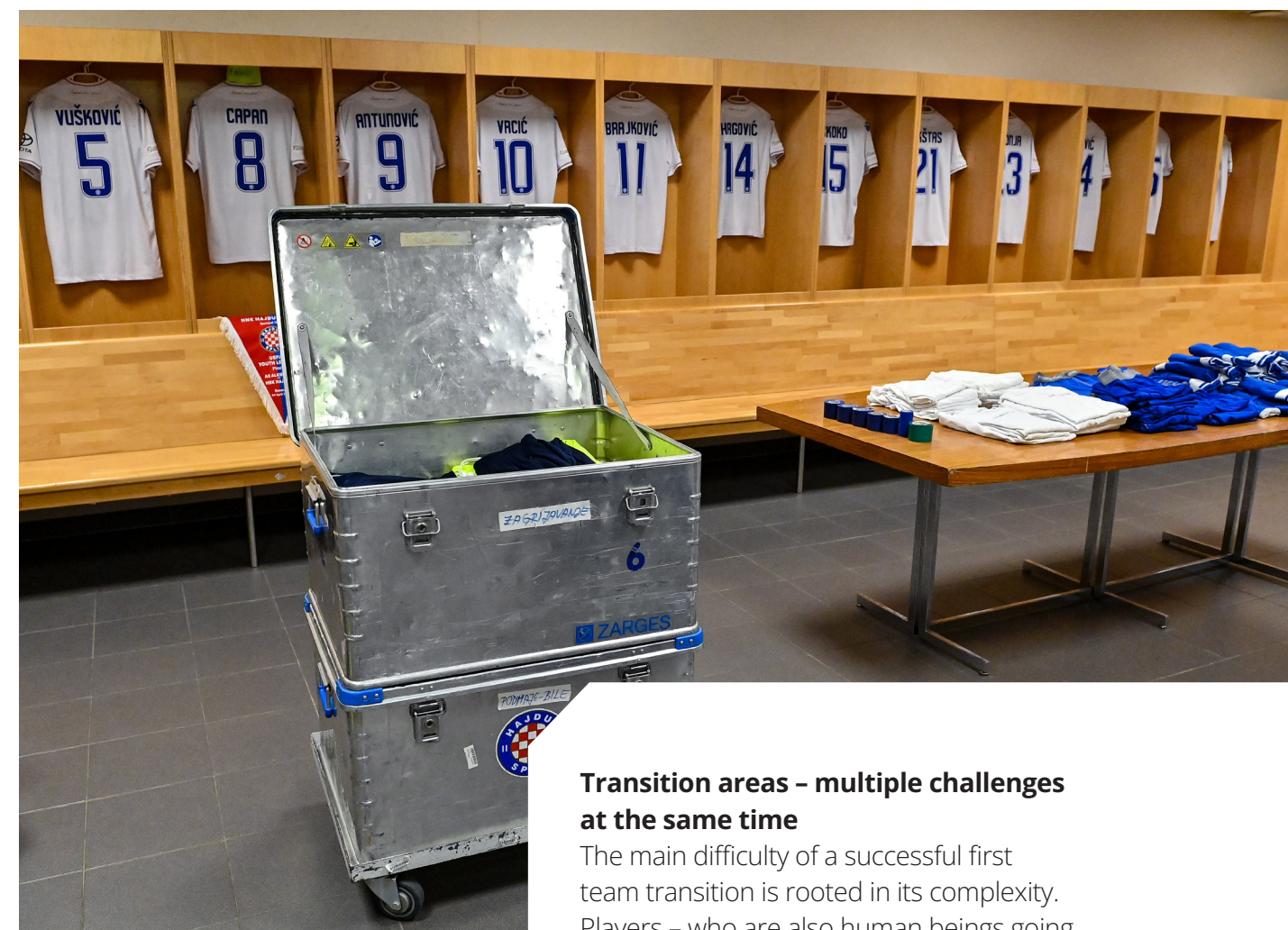


Player career phases (most frequent age range in brackets)

- 1. Foundation** (6-10 years): Introduction to organised football activities and basic movement and coordination skills.
- 2. Academy development:** Educating and training the players in an organised environment.
 - a. Youth development** (11-15 years): Transition to 11 vs 11 play with official rules, although still in an amateur capacity, focusing on general football skills and technical concepts.

- b. Professional development** (16-20 years): Players get acquainted with the necessary level of hard work and dedication to make it as a professional footballer. Increased focus on individual development and specialised skills; signing of first professional contract.

Transition to first team: Although the transition is more of a process to move between phases two and three than a career step in itself, it can be broken down in multiple stages. It starts with the anticipation and understanding that the transition could happen in the near future, followed by the initial experience in the first team squad.



Transition areas – multiple challenges at the same time

The main difficulty of a successful first team transition is rooted in its complexity. Players – who are also human beings going through other life matters, including adolescence – are navigating between parallel changes. Handling just one of them separately would already pose a challenge in itself. This multifaceted change includes psychological, psychosocial, financial, legal, and academic-vocational development areas. Additionally, these impulses are not happening in a vacuum, but are instead interdependent: if something negative happens in one area, it will most likely affect the others, too. This is why none of the transition-related areas can be neglected by the club and the supporting environment of the player.

Based on discussions with clubs, we differentiated five main transition areas in practice: physical, technical, tactical, mental/psychological, and social.

Then come the orientation and adaptation stages when the switch ‘officially’ happens, and players gradually get more comfortable in the first team setting. Finally, players consolidate their place in the squad and start their senior playing career.

- 3. Senior playing career:** On average, an 8-11 year-long period of peak, elite performance.
- 4. Post-playing career:** Transition to post-playing career after retirement from professional football. This is also relevant to those players who fail the first team transition. For them, transitioning out of professional football happens at a much earlier age.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE DIFFERENT TRANSITION AREAS?

TRANSITION AREA	MAIN CHALLENGES
 PHYSICAL Increased physical demands primarily due to playing against biologically more mature (e.g. stronger, faster, more athletic) players.	● Different maturation curves and physiological attributes ● Greater intensity and load during both training and matches, resulting in more frequent tiredness ● Longer and more varied training, physical toll ● Higher injury risk ● Initial physical disadvantage in duels ● Shorter recovery and increasing travelling time between matches
 TECHNICAL Professional football is often differentiated from amateur play based on the observed technical level (e.g. ball skills) and the more serious consequences of technical mistakes.	● Specialised (e.g. by position) and repetitive practice ● Expectations around a minimum level of technical capability ● Higher quality competition, short adaptation period to shift existing tendencies ● No room for error – mistakes are punished quicker and more often
 TACTICAL Contrary to youth football, the sole purpose of professional games is to win, therefore coaches apply a much wider range of tactical concepts during matches.	● A large increase in the number of different tactical setups to be mastered ● Decrease in time to make decisions during the play ● In case of no consistent playing style between the first team and the academy or multiple loans before transition, players could be unaware of the required tactical setup
 MENTAL/ PSYCHOLOGICAL Due to the increased pressure in the professional environment and challenges in the other four areas, players experience a high level of mental strain during the transition.	● Pressure from coaches, fans, and media, resulting in anxiety, depression, loneliness, or loss of confidence ● Dealing with lack of playing time ● Mental implications of performing on par with a lucrative contract ● Patience and perseverance needed during the initial stages of the transition
 SOCIAL Promotion to the first team also brings a need to get to know and communicate with new teammates, as well as a new coaching staff.	● Cultural differences between the academy and the first team dressing room, risk of social isolation ● Players have to earn respect from their senior teammates ● Role in team changes from a leading role to a peripheral one (at least initially) ● Getting accustomed to the management style and the expectations of the first team coaching staff

In addition to these five areas, the academic literature also highlights the importance of other factors, such as the social background of a player (e.g. financial status of the family, access to essential goods), the quality of support received from the player’s family, partner, friends, and wider entourage (e.g. basic knowledge of the football industry, selfish motives behind advice), academic changes (e.g. a switch to a special curriculum), general psychosocial factors during adolescence (e.g. puberty) and potential financial considerations (e.g. responsible management of salaries). **However, from the perspective of football clubs, these external factors are difficult to influence, meaning that focus and resources should rather be spent on the five clearly identified areas. Coordination between multiple stakeholders and subject matter experts is therefore not only required, but rather a crucial consideration during the first team transition process.**



4

THE SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT OF TRANSITION

During the transition, dozens of different people work towards the same goal, albeit with significantly different motivations.

How to develop a common understanding between these important stakeholders of the process without negatively impacting players?

The previous chapter introduced the complex environment and the rationale behind why a wide supporting network is necessary for a successful first team transition, but which stakeholders are involved in it exactly? What is their role and how can clubs improve their processes in relation to them?

This chapter introduces the most important transition stakeholders by grouping them into 'supporting areas' for context. For each supporting area, interview excerpts and club best-practice examples are provided from subject matter experts.



Selection of key insights

- Who are the stakeholders involved in the process and through what transition areas do they impact the players? At least 14 different areas are identified, with over two-thirds of them controlled internally by the clubs.
- How to ensure that a player is fully prepared for all aspects of the transition? Answers differ, but it certainly involves a combination of experts. Who are they and how do they help?
- How can all aspects of the transition be controlled? Some say it's impossible, but there are best practices to follow in all areas.
- What advice can different supporting experts provide about the topic? There are ten interview excerpts in the chapter discussing the challenges in detail.

A selection of questions addressed

How to make sure all bases are covered during the development stage of academy players? What are some practical steps to implement in everyday operations?

Transition as a holistic concept – the importance of various stakeholders

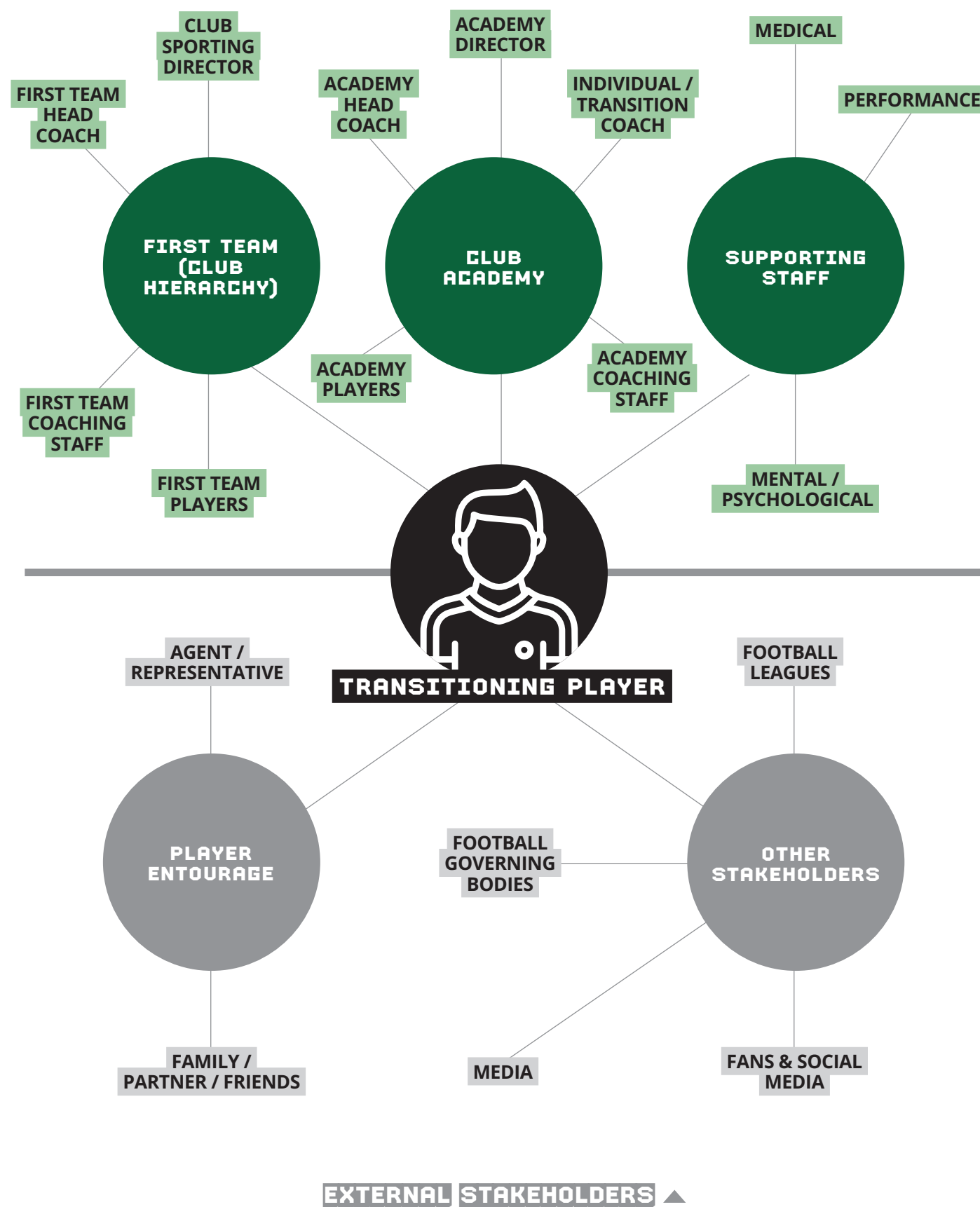
During the planning phase of the study, it was already emphasised by the project team and the Task Force members that one of the main challenges of clubs is the handling of the wider environment, including both internal and external stakeholders. Club experiences collected, as well as recent academic studies, further confirmed this notion.

Transition success is largely dependent on how the entirety of the interconnected environment influences and supports the player. This is confirmed by the low success rates observed in practice: if transition success were only dependent on internal processes, it would be possible to replicate the best methods and produce a constant flow of talent across an extended period of time. However, this is not the case in practice: clubs with similar resources and recruitment markets often have quite different track records.

First team transition stakeholders – the many voices in a transitioning player's ear

During the development of the study, all information collection methods confirmed that a wide range of stakeholders are involved in the transition process. On the chart overleaf the most important are mapped, distinguishing between those that are part of the transitioning player's club (internal/club stakeholders) and those that are not (external stakeholders).

INTERNAL CLUB STAKEHOLDERS ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis

Supporting areas – how do stakeholders impact the transition? An alternative analytical framework

In order to build a comprehensive view of the supporting environment's key elements, an analysis framework had to be created. One way to do it would have been to look into each identified stakeholder's role separately, but instead of that, we identified so-called supporting areas that can potentially support (or hinder) the transition and discussed the stakeholders in that alternative context.

There are ten areas in which clubs have a high level of influence, and four others over which their control is usually limited. While shortcomings in a few supporting areas might be overcome with a high level of support in others, the lack of proper

assistance in too many areas will ultimately cause difficulties and lead to failed transitions. Stakeholders operate in this setting and have an influence over one or more supporting areas with their activity.

All supporting areas are introduced over the following pages, investigating their connection to first team transition and the challenges that can occur if they're mismanaged. Additionally, the study provides takeaways and best practices from both clubs and subject matter experts who deal with specific supporting areas on a day-to-day basis. These are presented in an aggregated manner, combining the knowledge of clubs and experts, as well as the results of a club survey that was conducted as part of the study.



Supporting areas over which clubs have a high level of influence



Supporting areas over which clubs' control is generally limited





CLUB HIERARCHY

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Decoding the ‘winning DNA’: why do the overall club hierarchy and club vision have major roles in the transition process, and how exactly can success be driven on a strategic level? Within clubs, it is generally the overall philosophy and vision that guides youth development and subsequently determines the strategic importance of the transition to first team football process. Therefore, it is the club hierarchy (e.g. sporting director, CEO, ownership) that has a major influence in establishing aspects such as the technical development philosophy, youth academy budget or the primary objectives. This framework then guides aspects like the frequency and quality of playing time afforded to youth prospects, the level of internal services provided to them or the overall club culture in relation to the transition process.

Key takeaways

- Alignment between the strategic and operative leadership of the club and its academy is crucial; preferably this is also driven or strongly endorsed by ownership. Once objectives and strategic priorities are fully aligned, practical decisions influencing the transition become more straightforward.
- During squad planning, clubs must be aware of the pipeline of youth players who are nearing transition, and formulate a strategy with these players in mind. Is it really needed to recruit externally? Or can some squad spaces be filled with promising youth academy graduates?
- Academy players can be scouted by first team scouts similarly to how they scout potential external recruits to make players comparable and the selection decisions easier.
- It is good to express a commitment towards youth development. However, clubs can only show organisational trust towards young players by actually providing them with playing time. Low-pressure match situations provide a logical starting point, but these minutes are rarely useful for evaluation.
- The club philosophy must be clear at all levels: the best way to do it is to provide structured education for staff members about how to apply it in practice.

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

I believe that everything you do as a club is the proof of your philosophy – are we doing what we are saying we’re doing?

Marijn Beuker

Director of Football at AFC Ajax (formerly at Queen’s Park FC)



FIRST TEAM HEAD COACH

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

How can head coaches put the necessary emphasis on the transition process while also having to focus on several different objectives? Out of all stakeholders, it is usually the first team head coaches who have the most influence during the first team transition process. Their decisions include the initial invitation of academy prospects to first team training, allocation of playing time both in terms of quality and quantity, as well as providing feedback and ensuring the right balance within the group on and off the pitch. The pressure that comes with the position often hinders long-term thinking, with frequent coaching changes also impacting the players in transition. However, there are some easy-to-implement practices that can make a large difference.

Key takeaways

- As a starting point, if youth development is at the forefront of the club’s philosophy, the first team head coach must also have the same level of commitment towards the promotion of young talents. Previous academy coaching experience could be an advantage in these situations.
- There must be a well-structured method of knowledge exchange and a strong and effective working relationship between the academy

hierarchy and the first team head coach. Some level of informal contact and an overall personality match are often helpful.

- Frequent and transparent communication with the transitioning players themselves is similarly crucial. The lack of coach-player conversations often creates mistrust and doubt.
- In consideration of the many responsibilities of a head coach, delegating the academy coordination to assistant coaches can be one way to ensure the necessary time and focus is allocated to this area.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

In a lot of situations, coaches need to be brave and make a bet whenever they put a young player on the pitch.

André Villas-Boas

FC Porto President and former first team head coach who also managed Chelsea FC, Tottenham Hotspur FC, and FC Zenit



ACADEMY SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Do the people that impact the years preceding the transition the most have enough say in the decisions related to it? The academy hierarchy and staff are ultimately responsible for the youth development process of players before their transition to first team football. The hierarchy is usually led by the academy director who not only oversees and ensures the quality of this development journey, but also acts as a primary touchpoint with the first team, representing the youth development perspective. On a more immediate level, it is the academy coaches who prepare the players, making sure they receive all necessary tools and instructions required for the path towards the first team. However, based on the results of the club survey, academy directors and coaches do not have a major influence on transition decisions at most clubs.

Key takeaways

- During the in-depth academy scouting process, clubs are advised to build a structured player evaluation framework as the basis for any transition decision. For example, comparison with past academy players can put transition readiness into perspective.
- At academy level, successful clubs often prioritise player development as the main objective instead of winning as a group, even in situations when both can't be fulfilled at the same time.
- In order to incentivise an integrated and long-term coaching approach, it could be effective to build KPIs related to transition objectives of youth coaches. For example, transition success or the length of transition could be a better evaluation metric than performance in youth leagues.
- Academies should create situations when the academy staff can also share opinions, providing the ability to collect their views and make a more informed decision. Meetings that encourage coaches to speak up and share their views are one of the best ways to do it.
- It is advised to give playing time opportunities against more mature opposition to get the players accustomed to adversity.

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

Training players in multiple different positions and systems is an effective way of creating opportunities and demonstrating their ability proactively.

Paco Gallardo

Spain Under-18 head coach, former Leeds United FC Under-21 coach



DEDICATED TRANSITION SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Is individual coaching a tool that can significantly improve the transition process? Potentially, but it mostly depends on the details of implementation. The appointment of a dedicated transition coach, an individual development coach or a post-development manager is becoming more and more popular across Europe; 68% of our club survey respondents stated that they provide individual support during the transition. In these roles, coaches create a personalised development programme for the players and act as someone who players can reach out to if they have questions. They also create connections with the first team at an early stage which can help during the transition.

Key takeaways

- The basis of transition coaching is a well defined and structured individual development framework that can also flexibly accommodate individual player needs. Think about a template that can be modified based on specific goals.
- The individual coaching process should include goal setting, multiple ways of coaching (e.g. demonstration, video analysis, repetition), incentives for success, as well as detailed feedback.

- A practice that can save resources and create synergies is to allocate individual coaching responsibilities by age groups, such as one coach being responsible for multiple teams that are close to each other (e.g. Under-15 to Under-17 teams).
- Clubs that don't have the budget, structure, or intention to employ a dedicated transition coach, should still make sure that every player receives some kind of individual feedback. The distribution of responsibilities and the communication between coaches are key in this case.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

I must be aware of the players who are the most capable of reaching the first team, identify "late bloomers" and get to know the players' personalities.

Arnar Viðarsson

Recently appointed Managing Director of Sport at KAA Gent and former head coach and post-development manager of the youth team



LOAN MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

If the pathway to the first team is blocked, securing a loan elsewhere for the player could provide a temporary solution. How can loans be used for transition while keeping as much control over the players and the process as possible? In certain cases, when there are no opportunities to transition directly via the parent club's first team, clubs must look for alternative playing time opportunities: loans are one of the most popular options. However, during a loan, the parent and the loan club have different objectives, with the former also losing control over the player. Therefore, parent clubs should make an effort to support their players out on loan; this includes the monitoring and evaluation of the loan experience, as well.

Key takeaways

- To find the best match, the loan process should start with a thorough technical assessment of the loan club, including aspects such as playing philosophy, playing style of the head coach and success with past loans.
- Instead of one-off loans, it is usually more fruitful to build long-term, strategic relationships with other clubs. Requests and needs from both sides could slowly be built into recurring processes this way.
- During the loan period, the parent club should still directly communicate with and assist players, preferably through a dedicated staff member coordinating player care activities.
- Structured, face-to-face pre- and post-loan evaluations are essential to learn from the loan experience and understand the player's reflections.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

Players are monitored on a weekly basis, both professionally and personally. Together with the scouting staff, I regularly speak with the players to make sure they are settled in and feel comfortable.

Dario Baccin

Loan Manager and Vice Sporting Director of FC Internazionale Milano



SENIOR (FIRST TEAM) PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Creating a balance between competition and collaboration in the changing room: how can senior players support, rather than becoming a barrier? The cultural gap between the academy and the first team is often mentioned by clubs as one of the biggest challenges of the transition. Players usually leave a caring academy setting that emphasises the needs of an individual and join a hyper-competitive, performance-focused environment that can be overwhelming. From the perspective of some senior players, transitioning academy graduates provide extra competition for squad places. Players spend a large amount of time with their teammates; the dressing room dynamic is a key consideration for social and emotional balance. In an ideal environment, youth players receive crucial feedback and advice from players who have already 'made it'.

Key takeaways

- Building a club culture on equality, inclusivity and openness is essential to create relationships in a natural way between academy and first team players.
- When appointing a new coaching team or member, a key prerequisite should always be an understanding of how to create the desired changing room dynamics within the squad.

This topic should be discussed in detail before a hiring decision is made.

- The establishment of a mentoring system for transitioning prospects with the participation of senior players can be invaluable for youth prospects. An alternative is to involve former club legends or retired players in this programme.
- Knowledge exchange can be stimulated by consciously organising training drills that are suitable for senior players to demonstrate technical knowledge, teaching young players how to replicate these skills.
- Encourage the organisation of events and occasions where players can bond in a more relaxed environment: joint training camps, away days, team meals or training games are a few examples.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

Senior players need to connect with the youngsters and encourage them to be themselves instead of behaving like a player who has already made it and has a different status within the team.

Johan Djourou

Former professional player of Switzerland and multiple clubs including Arsenal FC, Hamburger SV, Antalyaspor and FC Nordsjælland



PERFORMANCE SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Which special areas and disciplines can help in unlocking the best possible performance and how can these be managed collectively? From a sporting perspective, the main goal during the transition is to bring the performance of an academy player on par with the level of the first team. However, performance is not something that can be influenced directly in a uniform way, but rather by a combination of physical, tactical, technical, and cognitive factors. Club experts who contribute to performance development include – among others – assistant coaches, analysts, sports scientists, strength and conditioning staff, nutritionists, physiotherapists, physiologists, mental trainers, and psychologists. Furthermore, more specialised areas can also contribute if used correctly: lifestyle management, neuropsychology, and biological maturity research are just some examples.

Key takeaways

- Multi-positional training is a great way to develop a more versatile overall game for players and increase the chances of first team opportunities by simply being able to cover more positions.
- Clubs should first identify the most crucial physical attributes, ensure the collection of related data points, and then create a way to present conclusions in an easy-to-understand manner to support transition-related decisions in an efficient way.
- Performance aspects include the careful handling of physical and mental load. This is preferably done by a dedicated staff member who can focus on the continuous monitoring of workload levels and intervene when necessary.
- The best way to observe player behaviour patterns and default cognitive reactions is to put them in new, unfamiliar situations when problem-solving skills come to the forefront.
- One way to increase technical and coordination abilities is to organise different physical activities outside of football such as biking or hiking.

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

Club employees tend to work in silos – the coaching staff's focus is only on football, physical trainers are pivoting towards muscles, physiotherapists are busy treating injuries, but somebody needs to put together the whole picture.

Ludo Pollers

Independent Performance Psychologist



MENTAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

How to navigate the unavoidable and uniquely individual mental challenges of the transitions?

The importance of mental factors during transition was strongly emphasised by clubs and other stakeholders alike throughout this study. In the ECA club survey, out of the five main transition areas, mental capabilities were ranked as the most crucial trait to have a successful career at senior level. Main challenges that players face include a different changing room dynamic, false expectations from the player side, mental barriers due to physical demands or outside pressure, as well as a lack of control over the transition process. They must get used to failure and build a mindset of not giving up. The most significant challenge, however, is the individual nature of psychological traits. All players differ in their mental makeup, thus generalised solutions are rarely efficient.

Key takeaways

- The ongoing assessment of cognitive functions and needs is crucial to identify a personalised way of improvement. There is value in exploring methodologies or expert proposals focusing on the detection of specific cognitive abilities.

- Clubs should create an environment that is perceived as safe by players also during struggles, enabling a transparent and honest reflection from the player side. Members of staff who interact with players on a daily basis are the best at monitoring players' feelings, but only if confidentiality is ensured.
- By default, using the help of a dedicated sports psychologist is advised to manage the psychological demands of transition.
- Education about regeneration, relaxation, and eating and sleeping habits are possible tools in a club psychologist's repertoire that can assist when players are experiencing mental overload.
- Players could often be negatively impacted by earning a lot of money at a young age. To balance such extrinsic factors, clubs should aim to promote intrinsic factors such as self-improvement or the love of sport during player development.

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

The integration of our work with other club stakeholders is crucial during the process as transition decisions are made in an interdisciplinary manner.

Club Psychologist of a 'Big Five' league club

regularly participating in the UEFA Champions League.



SOCIAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

Do your transitioning players really feel like they belong in the professional environment? If not, what steps should be taken?

Although sometimes less attention is paid to it, the social transition of players is as important a transition area as technical, tactical, physical, or mental aspects. Outside the support from first team players, there are wider social interactions with other stakeholders, too. Clubs being aware of the social needs of transitioning players is a crucial step towards making them comfortable, which is a key element of success. Good communication skills, self-awareness and a feeling of belonging are all required to integrate into this new community. From the club perspective, social support is inherently connected to the wider club culture, including the areas of values, leadership, and group dynamics within the first team.

Key takeaways

- The development of a player's social skills such as communication, leadership and cultural diversity during the academy development years could be a major asset during the transition. These can't be learned on the spot and instead should be picked up gradually over the years.
- It is beneficial to organise activities with the participation of both first team and academy personnel as these occasions are perfect for building personal connections at an early stage of the transition.
- Strategic focus on supportive squad composition to ensure the integration of youth players by either building a pipeline of academy graduates with existing relationships to young players or by having strong leader figures in the squad.
- A joint training location for the academy and the first team could be a big advantage to build cohesion during everyday interactions.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

A crucial point of struggle is when players have already experienced the first team environment but then must go back and forth between the academy and the first team. At this stage, there is a risk of the players feeling that they do not belong in either of the teams.

Manon Eluère

Group Dynamics Analyst, Consultant and Speaker, Former Head of Research in Diversity, Inclusion and Cohesion, Olympique Lyonnais Feminine



HEALTH AND MEDICAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION & TIES TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

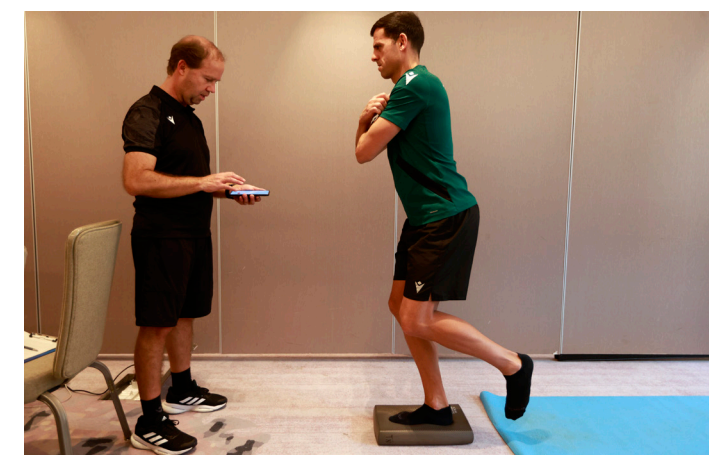
Even if every step is meticulously planned in advance, one injury can ruin the entire transition.

What are the most important health aspects of the process, and how can a few simple steps potentially improve availability rates? Technical, tactical, and physical skills are all key parts of the transition, but availability is also an irreplaceable criterion of success. Therefore, player health and physical condition are key factors. If a player is injured, they cannot play. If they cannot play, they cannot develop themselves during the academy years and might not reach the professional level because of it. In many cases, simply treating the injuries of players who are close to senior football is already too late; the focus should be on prevention instead.

Key takeaways

- The emphasis of health and medical improvement should be put on injury prevention and mitigation, with education playing a key part. Often, it's long-term training routines, rather than one-off actions that succeed.
- Clubs must understand the biological maturation curve of individual players to provide suitable personalised training programmes. Early and late bloomers should be identified properly and handled accordingly.

- A holistic rehabilitation programme should be put in place in case of injury, with the joint collaboration of all stakeholders that play a part in this process. From the very first moment, the milestones towards full recovery should be clear for everyone.
- As a concrete example, education about sleep hygiene patterns could be one way to improve regeneration, recovery, and cognitive development.



EXPERT INTERVIEW QUOTE:

Clubs must make sure that coaches receive the necessary education to develop an intrinsic motivation for injury prevention that becomes a core aspect of their philosophy.

Vincent Goutteborge

Chief Medical Officer at FIFPRO, the worldwide representative organisation of professional footballers



EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

AREAS OVER WHICH CLUBS' CONTROL CAN BE LIMITED



THE WIDER SOCIETY

This diverse stakeholder group includes football-related stakeholders such as the media and fans, as well as the wider local community. While their influence can be supportive, in many cases these external factors are shown in a negative light: the harsh feedback and potential harassment from fans or the immense amount of pressure generated by the media are just a few examples. The supporters and the local community of the club also have a major influence on the culture of the club. The emergence of digital technologies, such as mobile devices and social media, also have a large impact on how developing players spend their free time and interact with fans.

Club control can be exerted by educating players about how to handle interactions with fans and media, as well as through embracing social responsibility by developing not only football players, but valuable members of society. Activities that connect academy players with the local community, such as voluntary work, should all be encouraged during the entirety of the development process.



REGULATORY SUPPORT

There is a supporting area that does not have a direct relationship with the transitioning players but can still influence their path by setting the standards and requirements of how clubs and external stakeholders should handle them. Policymakers can open up more opportunities for young players by implementing stricter or mandatory regulations, such as homegrown player quotas or minimum playing time requirements. At the same time, the safeguarding support of young players is also a notable element of transition regulations.

What must be emphasised is that this support area concerns not only football industry regulators (e.g. UEFA, FIFA), domestic federations, supporting organisations (e.g. FIFPRO, European Leagues) and leagues, but also more general policymakers at the European Union or national levels. At a domestic level, one of the best examples of how a development framework can influence future prospects is the Elite Player Performance Plan in England.



REPRESENTATIVE SUPPORT (AGENTS)

Other than family members, player representatives or agents have the biggest influence on the transition process externally, confirmed both by the club survey and the conducted interviews. Overall, their advice has a significant impact on the perception and decisions of players, influencing the entire career path. Improper support can possibly cause massive setbacks. For example, players and many families don't have any experience in contract negotiations before signing their first professional agreement, therefore the guidance of agents is often the only way to evaluate club proposals.

Best practices for dealing with agents from the club side include established and transparent communication, as well as a willingness to work together towards the same objectives. Agents are more likely to cooperate if the club outlines their envisioned path for the player and then proactively follows up, especially in case of major milestones or when there is doubt on the player's side. At the same time, agents are encouraged to take a long-term approach when dealing with academy players, as it can benefit all parties.



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Players have life challenges that might not be directly related to football but which can influence their focus and mental health both on and off the pitch. For instance, increased stress, loneliness and depression often result in sleep deprivation, loss of focus and a suboptimal physical performance. When it comes to coping with personal struggles, players mostly reach out to their family, partner, and friends, so these stakeholders are the ones who are relied upon the most for emotional support, providing only limited options for clubs to be involved. In order to understand the character and motivations of a player, clubs must be aware of their personal situation and challenges. By investing time in the relationship with family members or significant others, the club can also increase the commitment of a player.

When it comes to parents and partners, involvement in informal events and invitations to relevant, proactive education sessions about areas such as nutrition, social media or financial management are the best available tools from a club perspective. The only area that should be protected from external access is related to professional development – many clubs restrict visits to training sessions to protect the players from receiving on-pitch feedback from outside. Additionally, this is another area where transparency, openness and the creation of a safe atmosphere go a long way.

5

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The management of the five transition areas, as well as the supporting environment can be standardised regardless of club context; however, there are further external factors that must be acknowledged. How is talent development encouraged in different countries and which are the most preferred competitions preceding the transition?

To understand the full picture of the transition process, it is also important to investigate the practical context that shapes the European football landscape. **The regulatory environment and competition structures are the two most crucial external aspects that define what clubs can and cannot do when they give opportunity to youth.** From a regulatory perspective, the study introduces the most popular regulatory tools that are in use both on the domestic and international level, with the focus on squad size limits, homegrown player quotas and foreign player rules. On the competition side, readers are guided through the type of playing time opportunities before turning professional, followed by an analysis of European trends in domestic competition models, touching upon reserve leagues, reserve teams and youth competitions.

Key insights

- Which regulatory tools influence the success rate of the first team transition? There is an overall lack of direct tools, as regulations currently in place are aimed more towards youth development in general instead of first team transition specifically.
- Which are the most common regulatory frameworks in Europe? After its introduction in UEFA club competitions, homegrown player quotas also became preferred domestically, with the exact same format now in effect in ten different countries. In most markets, these are used in combination with player nationality limitations, predominantly restricting non-EU residents.
- Is there a need for more playing opportunities? There is a lack of international youth club competitions with only the UEFA Youth League currently sanctioned by the international governing body. An alternative that can partially fill the gap is for clubs to individually organise custom game programmes on a friendly basis.

A selection of questions addressed

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the most common regulations? Which countries are the most and least flexible when it comes to youth-related regulations?

Regulatory environment of the transition – tools that boost transition success

While youth development – and especially first team transition – happens at a club level, international and national governing bodies have a crucial responsibility to oversee the youth ecosystem.

The high level of competition throughout the continent and especially among clubs at the very top of the pyramid increasingly result in strategies that focus on short-term goals, risking long-term sustainability. International and domestic regulations that incentivise investment into youth football are crucial to support the work of academies and help young talent get opportunities at the professional level.

REGULATORY ANALYSIS

REGULATORY TOOLS – WHICH HAVE THE MOST IMPACT ON TRANSITION?

The study identified tools and mechanisms that most support the flow of young talent to senior football, including their advantages, disadvantages and practical examples already in place. The five mechanisms identified are:

- 1 Mandatory minimum playing time for youth players
- 2 Player registration rules/limits and homegrown player quotas
- 3 Limitations on player nationalities
- 4 Financial incentives
- 5 Mandatory youth academies

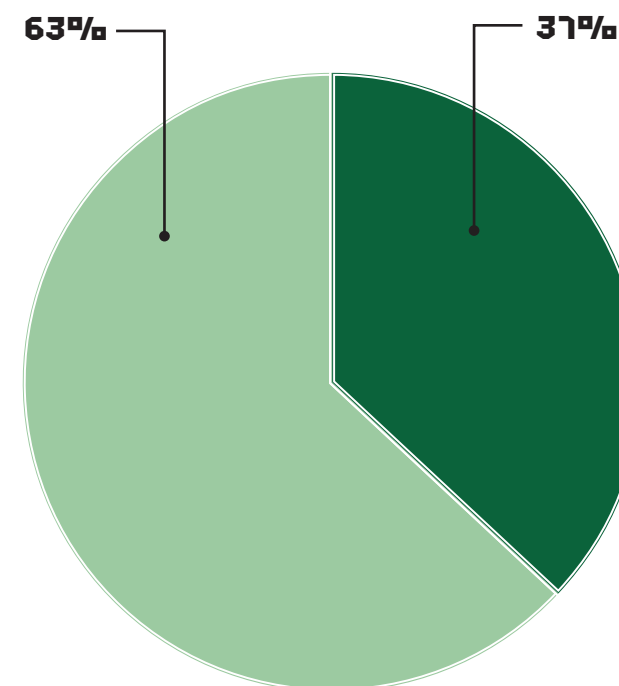
COUNTRY-LEVEL VIEW – HOW DIFFERENT IS THE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES?

This section provides an analysis around the popularity of the following three specific tools at domestic level:

- Squad size limits
- Homegrown player rules
- Player nationality rules

Out of the 54 analysed UEFA first divisions, only nine apply all three of these tools. Twenty-three countries apply two out of the three, while 18 countries apply just one. Four countries (Netherlands, Scotland, Austria, and Wales) don't use any of these tools in their highest division leagues.

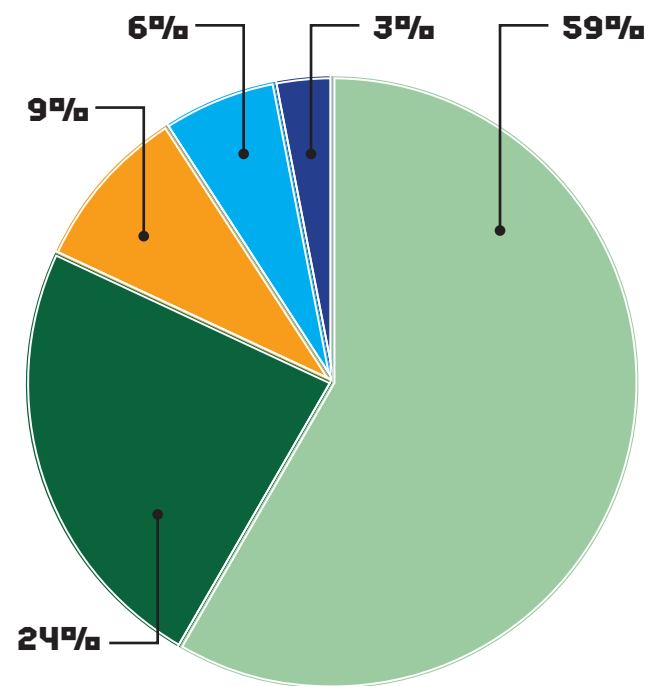
IS THERE A MAXIMUM SQUAD SIZE LIMIT IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▼



KEY ● Yes ● No

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

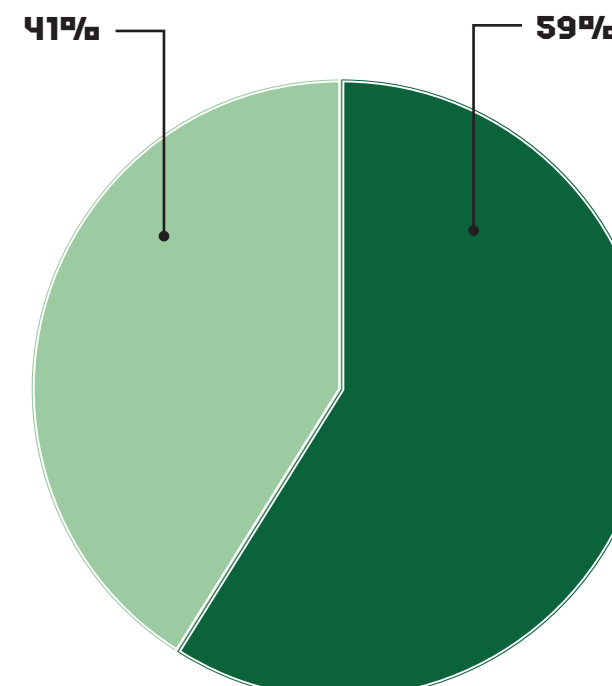
WHAT IS THE MAXIMUM SIZE OF THE SQUAD? ▼



KEY ● 20 or less ● 21-25 ● 26-30 ● 31+ ● n/a

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

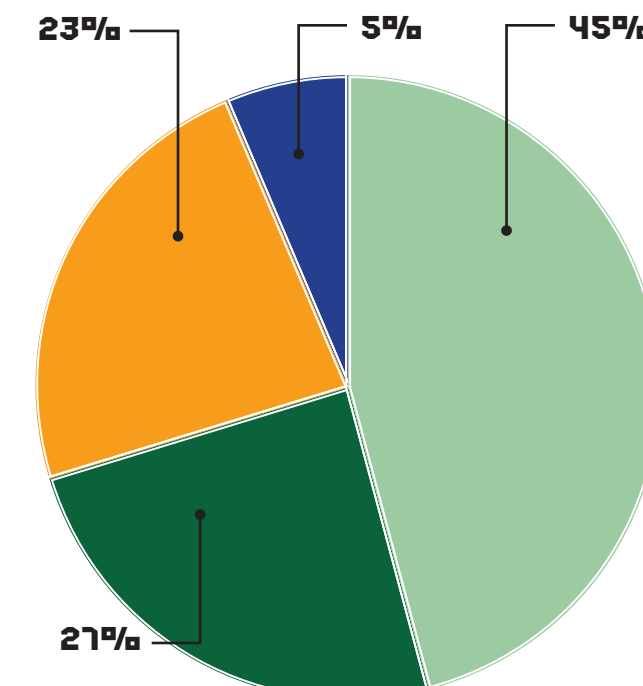
IS THERE A HOMETGROWN PLAYER RULE IN EFFECT IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▼



KEY ● Yes ● No

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

WHAT IS THE MINIMUM NUMBER OF HOMETGROWN PLAYERS? ▼



KEY ● 7 or less ● 8 (UEFA min.) ● 9 or more ● n/a

Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

SQUAD SIZE LIMITS

25-player squads are the most common

Firstly, we analysed the presence of squad size limits and the maximum thresholds. In total, 34 UEFA top-flight leagues (63% of total) have a maximum squad size limit. After excluding countries with no or unknown squad size limits, most leagues have a limit between 21 and 30 players, with 25 being the most common threshold.

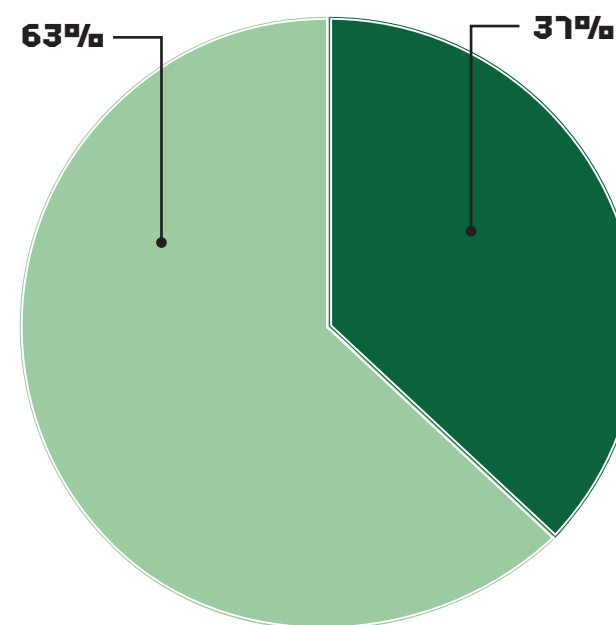
HOMETGROWN PLAYER RULES

The influence of the UEFA framework is significant

After the 2005 introduction of the UEFA homegrown rule, this type of regulation became more common at the country level, too. Some countries simply implemented UEFA's framework, while others created their own specific versions. Still, to this day, only 41% of top-flight leagues (22 in total) have a homegrown rule in place. Ten countries (around half of the countries with a homegrown player rule) put the minimum threshold at the same level as UEFA, requiring eight homegrown players in the squad, highlighting the impact of UEFA's guidance also on the domestic level.

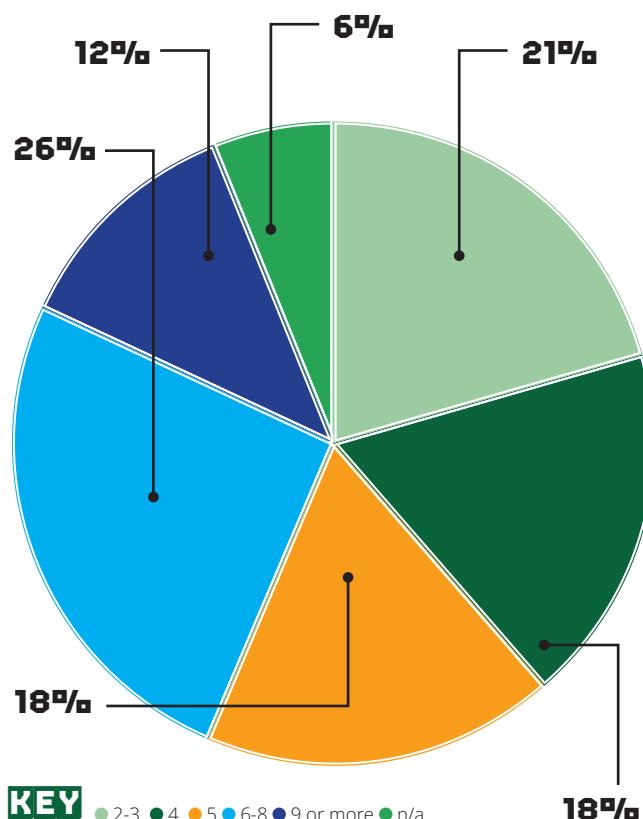


ARE THERE RULES IN PLACE RELATED TO PLAYER NATIONALITIES IN THE FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE OF THE COUNTRY? ▾



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

WHAT IS THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF FOREIGN PLAYERS ▾



Source: Football Benchmark analysis Note: data refers to the 2023/24 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 54 countries

KEY ● Yes ● No

KEY ● 2-3 ● 4 ● 5 ● 6-8 ● 9 or more ● n/a

PLAYER NATIONALITY RULES

A common tool with different parameters by country

Restrictions on the nationality of players within the squad are also common, with most countries and regulators applying a limit on the number of foreign players. In total, two-thirds of the analysed countries have some rules related to the nationality of players. There are also different approaches on who exactly should be considered 'foreign', with at least ten countries (Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Cyprus, Czechia, Romania, Slovakia, Finland and Iceland) counting all players from the European Union countries as 'domestic'.

INTERNATIONAL VIEW

FIFA has several youth regulations in place with a twofold purpose – on one hand, due to the protection of the best interests of minors (Under-18s) from a human rights perspective, while on the other, making sure that clubs are properly incentivised to train and educate young players. The main regulation areas are the following:

- Registration of players
- Transfer of players
- Player representation
- Player development compensation
- Loan regulations

FIFA

COMPETITION ANALYSIS

Youth competition structures in Europe – is the supply of playing opportunities enough to meet the needs of everyone?

Providing an adequate amount of playing time is one of the most important factors to prepare young talent for senior football. Not only the volume of matches, but also the general quality and diversity of the available options has a major effect on the success of transitions. **Eighty-six percent of club survey respondents said that exposing players to senior football at a young age, even in a lower league tier or in a reserve team, is the most preferred development option.**

Nowadays, clubs have a wide range of match programmes to choose from when planning the last steps in the player pathway before making the step up to the first team. The emergence of international cooperations and club networks makes it easier than ever to find an option that can benefit the player in transition. The most common competition types are the following:

- Dedicated domestic youth competitions
- Reserve leagues
- Lower-division leagues
- Friendly games

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH COMPETITIONS – A LACK OF OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED TOURNAMENTS

While there are national team competitions organised by both FIFA and UEFA, there is only one high-profile youth club competition in Europe, the UEFA Youth League. It is organised in conjunction with the UEFA Champions League and domestic champions. There are some further examples of cross-border tournaments that are not sanctioned by UEFA, such as the Premier League International Cup or the Baltic Youth Football League. These competitions provide a great solution to mitigate domestic match programme deficiencies and prepare players for the atmosphere of international club competitions.

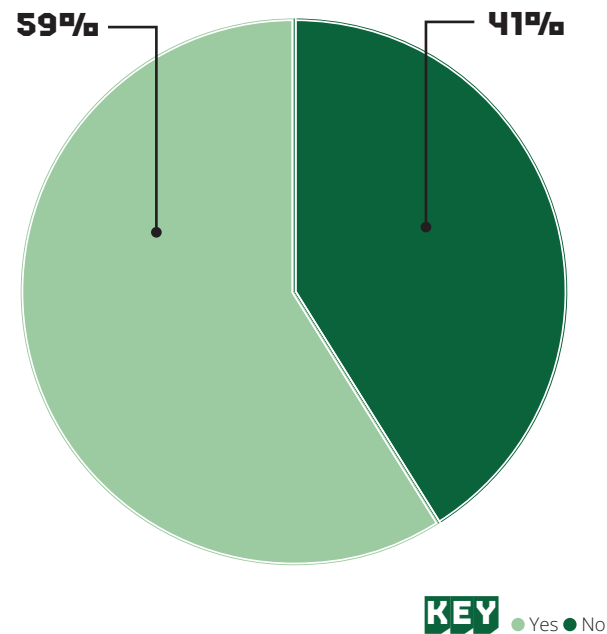
However, it can be argued that the one UEFA-sanctioned tournament (that is not completely merit-based) does not provide enough competition opportunities for the best youth clubs in the current ecosystem. It would be advised to rethink and expand the current system in order to expose young talent to international club clashes at a slightly earlier age more often.

OVERVIEW OF DOMESTIC COMPETITIONS BY COUNTRY

It becomes clear that domestic competitions provide the backbone of playing time opportunities for academy players on the cusp of first team transition. This section takes stock of the current state of domestic league competitions that provide the most relevant playing time opportunity to those who are close to becoming first team players.

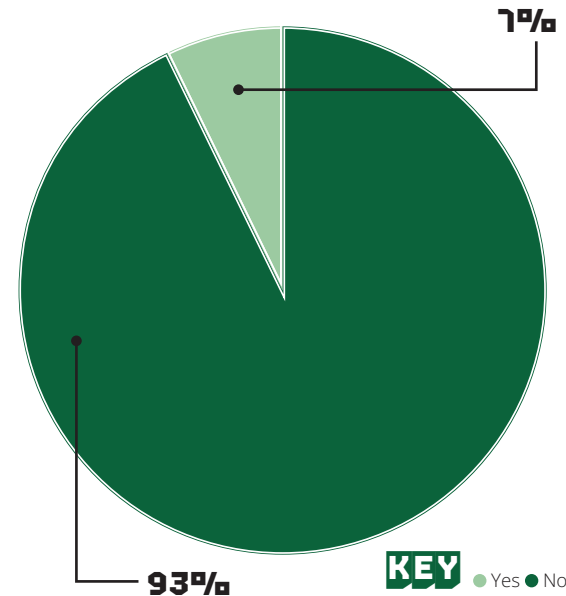


CAN THE RESERVE TEAM OF CLUBS PLAY IN THE LOWER DIVISIONS OF THE LEAGUE PYRAMID? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis
Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons.
Sample size: 54 countries

IS THERE A DEDICATED RESERVE LEAGUE IN THE COUNTRY'S FOOTBALL COMPETITION SYSTEM? ▼



Source: Football Benchmark analysis
Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons.
Sample size: 54 countries

LOWER DIVISIONS (WITH RESERVE TEAMS) AND RESERVE LEAGUES

Only one of the two has a prominent role in youth development

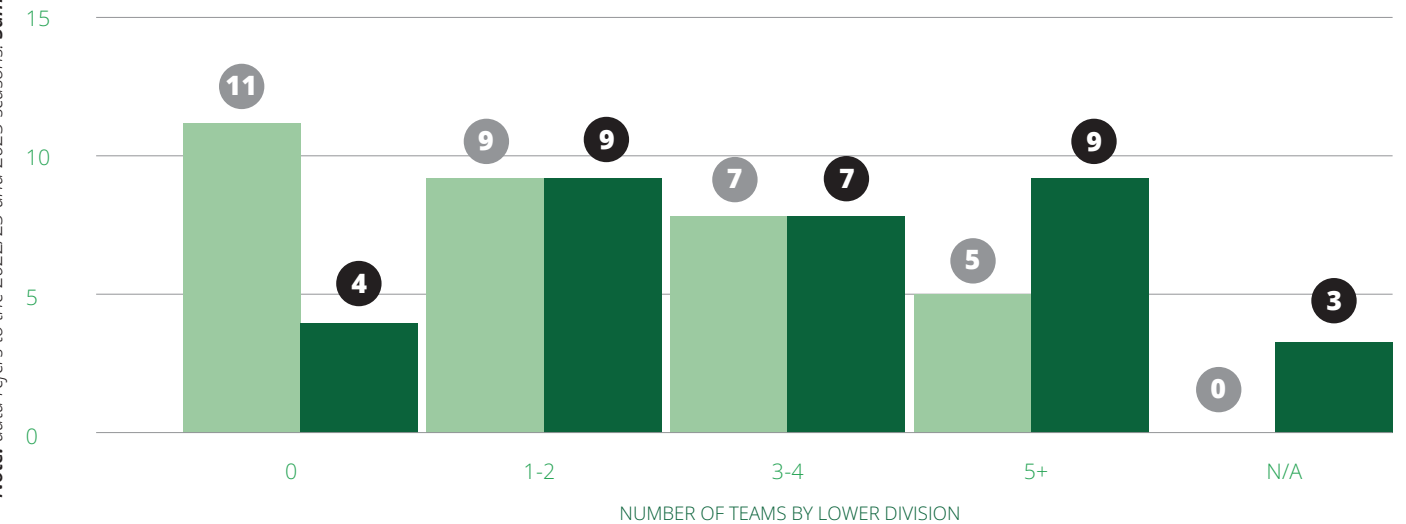
In total, 32 out of the 54 analysed countries allow reserve teams to play in the lower divisions of the football pyramid (59%). There are only five countries where five or more reserve teams play in the second highest division; it is more common that only one or two clubs can keep their place at this level with an academy team against squads full of senior players. The distribution of reserve teams in lower tiers implies that there are several clubs in Europe whose academies are strong enough to support reserve teams with quality players who can compete against second or third highest division professional clubs.

Reserve leagues were common in the past, however current numbers show that this competition type has somewhat lost its appeal in Europe. Based on the available information, only four UEFA countries organised a dedicated reserve league in the 2022/23 season; in practice, a couple of them essentially function as Under-23 or similar competition even if there are no age restrictions in place.

HOW MANY RESERVE TEAMS ARE PLAYING IN THE SECOND AND THIRD DIVISIONS? ▼

KEY ● Second Division ● Third Division

Source: Football Benchmark analysis
Note: data refers to the 2022/23 and 2023 seasons. Sample size: 32 countries



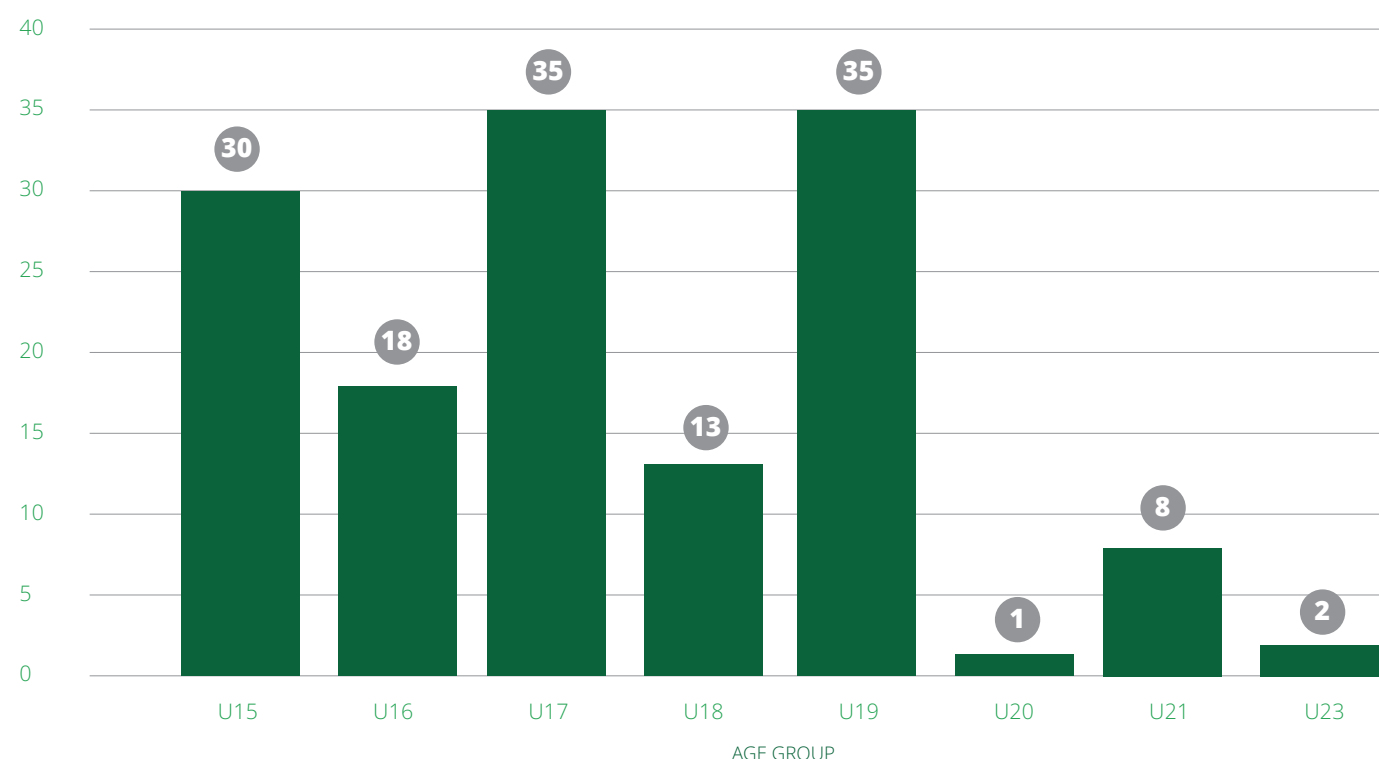
YOUTH LEAGUES

A variety of competition structures in place across Europe

By looking at the landscape of youth leagues, it is observed that there is no standardised pathway in use. However, there is a clear preference towards the 'odd' age groups, with the frequency of youth leagues at Under-15, Under-17, Under-19, and Under-21 levels higher than their 'even' counterparts.

This also outlines the 'average' path of a youth player through the ranks. There are 20 countries that have competitions in Under-15, Under-17, and Under-19 age groups alike, while 27 countries operate leagues at both Under-17 and Under-19 level. The latter equates to around half of all UEFA countries.

NUMBER OF LEAGUES PER AGE GROUP AMONG UEFA MEMBER COUNTRIES ▼



Diminishing importance of dedicated competitions for older age groups

The average age of players who have successfully transitioned in recent years is 19.83 years based on our data analysis. This shows us that if a transition happens, it is likely to take place before the player turns 20, which makes the role of dedicated youth leagues in the Under-20 to Under-23 age increasingly obsolete. The diminishing importance of such competitions provides further proof that the industry views senior playing time as a better way to gain experience.

COMPETITION MODEL CASE STUDIES

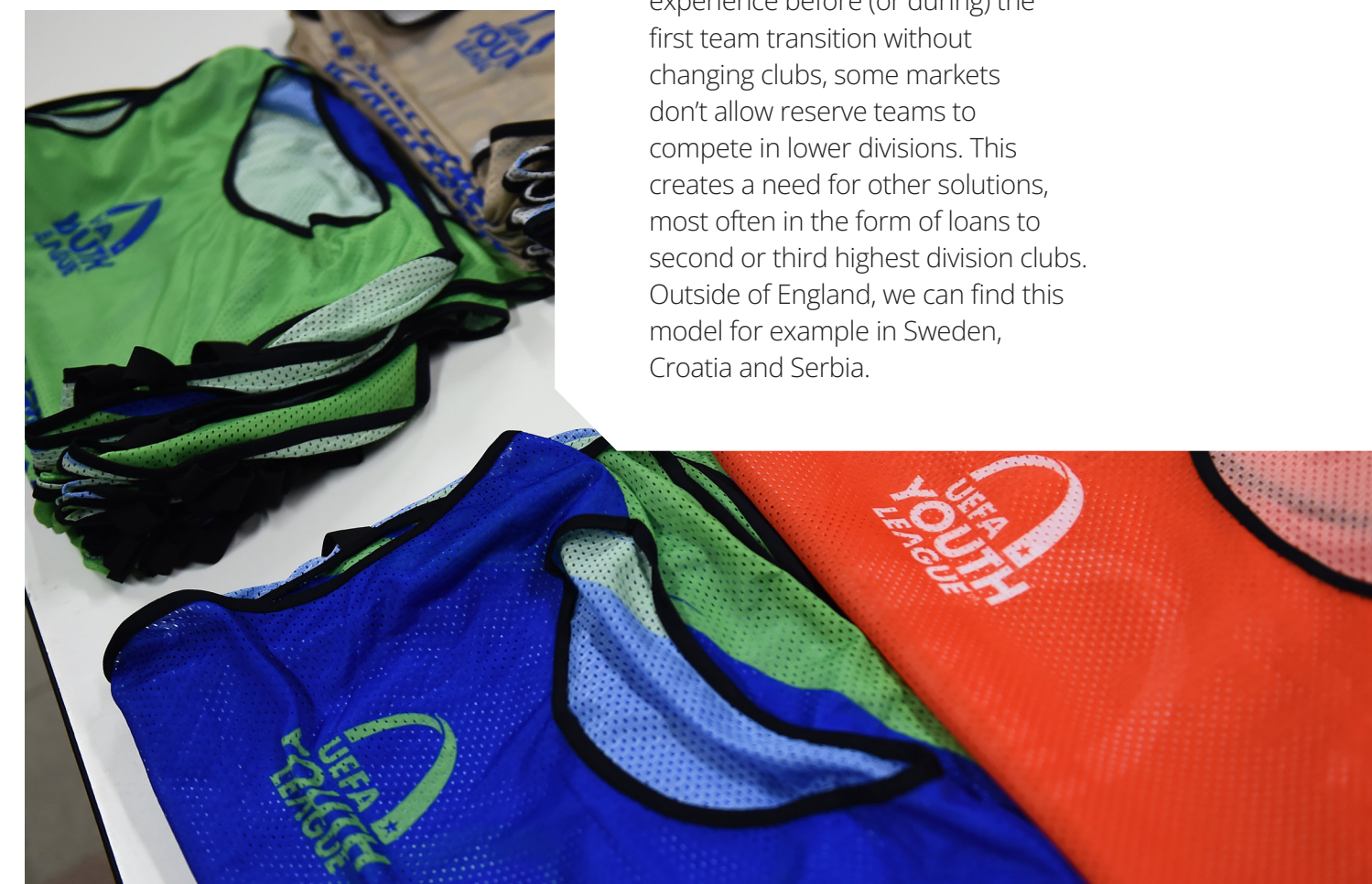
After the overview of the different competition paths that youth players can go through before the transition, three distinct competition models were identified for a more specific outlook.

1 Abundant variety of options:

Clubs can choose from a wide variety of competitions both at youth level and professionally, providing a solution for all kinds of individual player development needs. A prime example of this model is Portugal: alongside reserve teams playing in lower divisions, there are youth competitions until Under-23 level. Other successful development markets such as the Netherlands and Belgium also follow similar systems.

2 Clear choices by age: The most common model in Europe is the combination of youth leagues until the age group of Under-18 or Under-19, followed by the possibility of playing time in lower divisions as part of reserve teams. Compared to the previous model, players only go through specific youth leagues (e.g. U17 and U19 league) without much of a choice, before getting playing time in lower divisions. Many countries follow this model, with some prime examples being France, Spain, Germany or Italy.

3 Lack of reserve teams resulting in limited options: While the previous two models both include the possibility to get senior playing experience before (or during) the first team transition without changing clubs, some markets don't allow reserve teams to compete in lower divisions. This creates a need for other solutions, most often in the form of loans to second or third highest division clubs. Outside of England, we can find this model for example in Sweden, Croatia and Serbia.



STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSITION TO FIRST TEAM IN EUROPE

After understanding the process and the factors that influence players' transition to first team football, it is important to have a snapshot of the current state. The most comprehensive way is via a statistical analysis, identifying industry trends and best performers, as well as successful practical cases. This analysis is the first of its kind, focusing specifically on transition performance.

There are various pathways young footballers can follow as they become professional first team players. Which ones are the most common? What are the latest trends? Which countries or clubs are relatively more successful in nurturing talents than others? In this chapter, an extensive statistical analysis aims to answer these questions and more. The multi-level analysis starts with a European-level overview, followed by a comparison of league clusters to also showcase the transition reality in different financial and economic circumstances in Europe. League- and club-level KPIs are also presented in detail, including the identification of the best performers. The chapter concludes with a deep dive into player transition examples, showcasing different paths towards success. The identified underlying patterns provide further context about the state of first team transitions in European football.

Selection of key insights

- How many players make their professional debut and then complete their transition to first team football in Europe every year? On average at least two players per club made their debut and one player transitioned successfully in each season in the five-season sample of our analysis. The best performers were able to facilitate the debut of six to eight players and the full transition of five to seven players per year.
- What are the main transition trends to be aware of?
 - Before, during and after the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, many clubs experienced financial difficulties and were forced to promote from within and play their own young players instead of signing others. This had a visibly positive impact on debut and transition statistics.
 - The average age of first team debutants decreased noticeably between 2019 and 2023. However, this was also followed by an increase in the average transition length over the same period, indicating that clubs don't transition players earlier, they just have a longer transition after an early debut.
 - There are individual success stories regardless of the chosen path or the length of the transition, highlighting the personalised, flexible nature of the process.

A selection of questions addressed

How to define successful transitions? Do factors such as competition and regulation formats have a significant effect on transition? Who are the best performers at league and club level?

The scope of the analysis is summarised by the graphic below.

FIRST DIVISIONS OF
 UEFA ASSOCIATIONS
 & 'BIG FIVE'
 SECOND DIVISIONS ▶



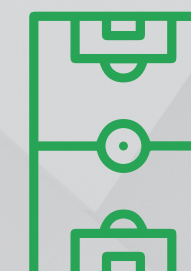
FIVE SEASONS:
 2018/19 - 2022/23
 2018 - 2022 ▶



PLAYERS WHO HAVE
 PLAYED AT LEAST
 ONE MINUTE ▶



ONLY
 COMPETITIVE
 MATCHES ▶



OVERALL ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY – HOW DO WE DEFINE A PLAYER IN TRANSITION?

Based on club interviews and the results of the club survey (see Chapter 07), once a player reaches 450 cumulative minutes in competitive first team football matches, they're then considered to be a 'first team player' for the purpose of this analysis and study. Importantly, the 450 minutes do not need to be accumulated within the same football season; a transition can start in one and end in another. Following this approach, we can divide each player's career into three phases:

Phase 1 – Academy Player

Generally, players who have not played any first team football but have spent a minimum of three full seasons or 36 months at the same club between the ages of 15 and 21.

Phase 2 – Transition Player

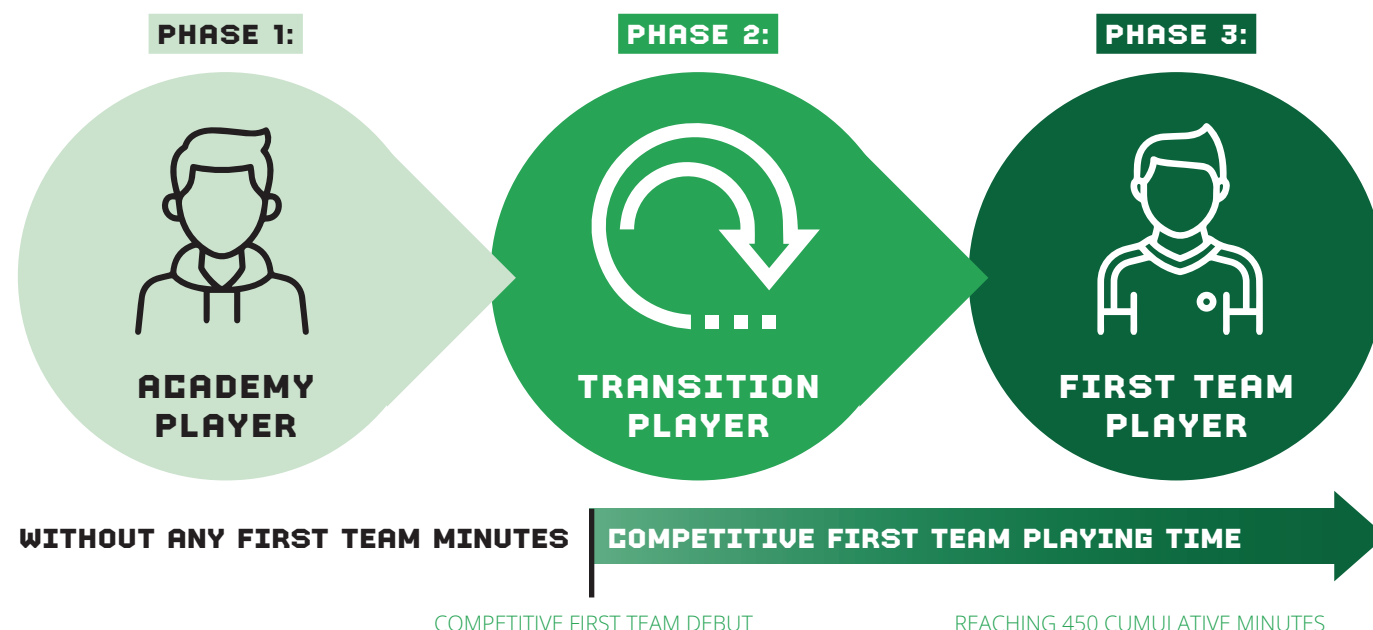
Players who have accumulated between 1 and 450 competitive minutes of first team football. These are the players who have already made their debuts in the first team environment.

Phase 3 – First team Player

Players who have played at least 450 competitive minutes of first team football.

Direct and indirect transitions

In our statistical analysis, there is a significant emphasis on distinguishing between various types of transitions and debuts to better understand the pathways of young talents. The term 'direct' in this context refers to an academy player who makes their debut or transition at the same club to which they belonged as an academy player. This type in many cases includes the players who seamlessly transition to first team football where they started their careers. In contrast, an 'indirect' scenario refers to the selected academy player making their debut or completing the transition in a senior team other than the one they originally belonged to.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS – FINDINGS ON MULTIPLE LEVELS

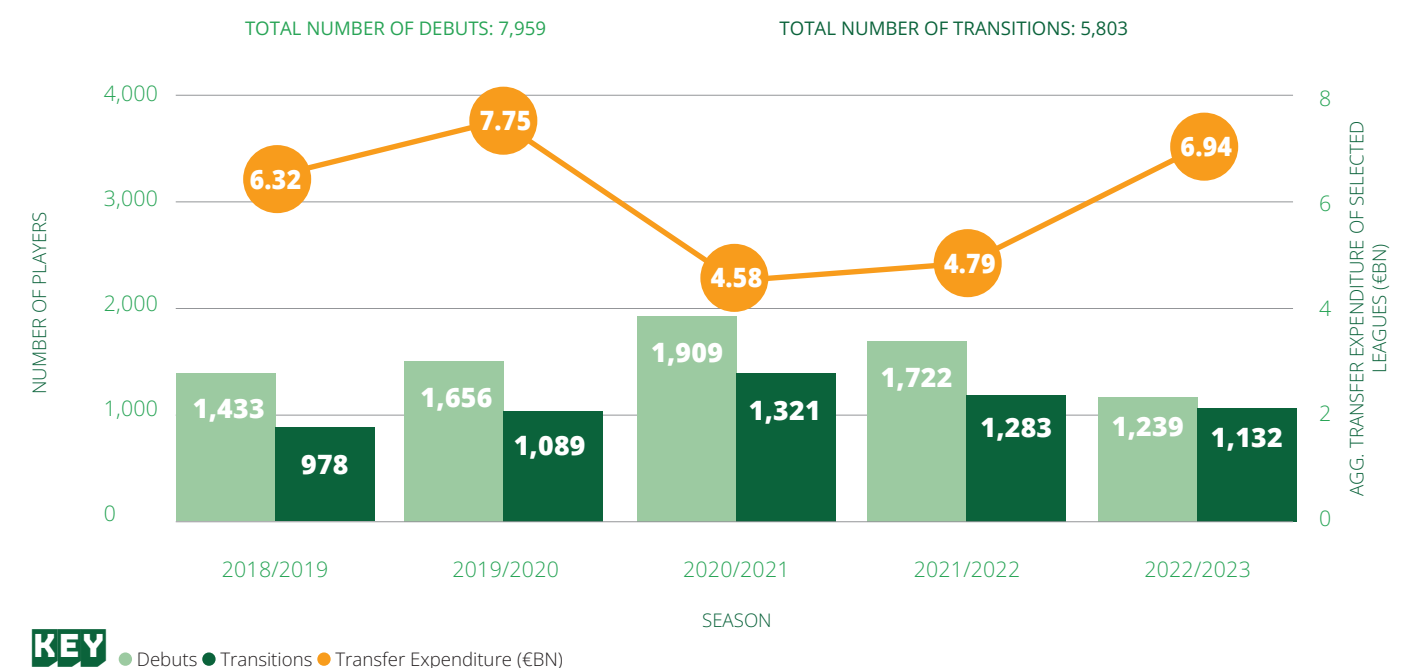
EUROPEAN LEVEL A SHIFTING TRANSITION LANDSCAPE WITH NEW TRENDS

As a starting point, it is essential to understand the transformative nature of the analysed period in football and its impact on the playing time and opportunities for young players. Factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase of the number of substitutions allowed by IFAB, the recently implemented loan regulations from FIFA, the introduction of new continental club competitions by UEFA, and the new interpretation of stoppage time are all factors that impact the transition landscape.

On average, 1,600 players made their debut and almost 1,200 players transitioned successfully to first team football every season across all analysed leagues since 2018-19. This equates to at least two players making their debut and one player successfully transitioning per club.

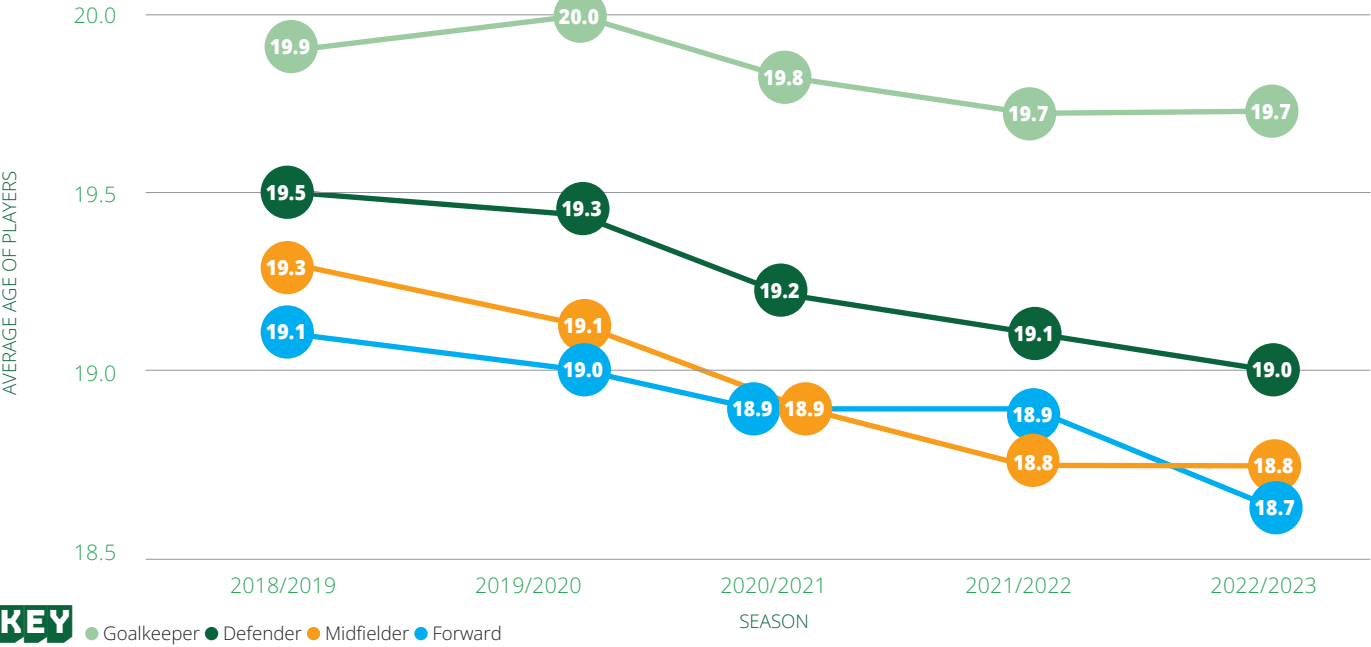
Debuts and transitions show significant fluctuations in recent seasons with a notable peak in Covid-impacted years, underscoring the impact of transfer market activities.

EVOLUTION OF TOTAL DEBUTS AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS AT A EUROPEAN LEVEL AND AGGREGATE TRANSFER EXPENDITURE BY SEASON



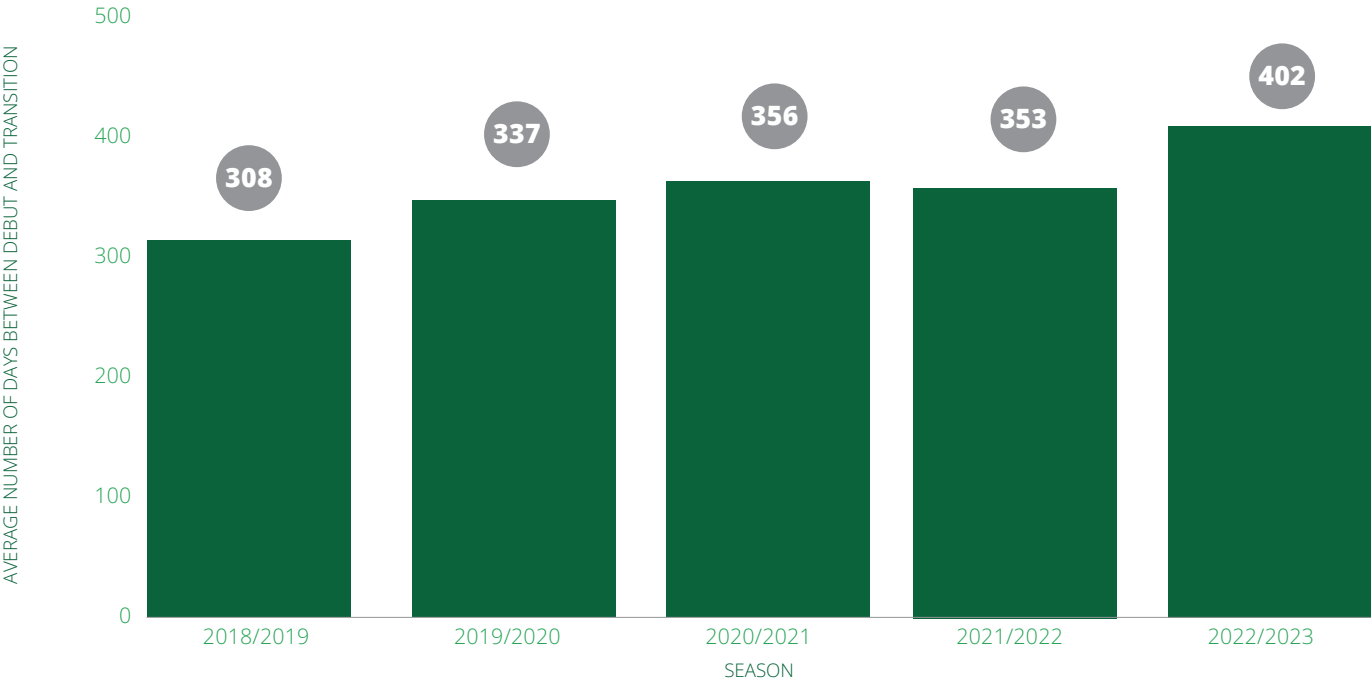
There is a decreasing trend in the average age of debutants in European football, highlighting the shift towards promoting younger talents.

FIVE-YEAR EVOLUTION OF AVERAGE AGE OF DEBUT BY POSITION GROUP AND BY SEASON



In contrast, the average duration between debut and transition is gradually increasing, implying that clubs are increasingly willing to entrust young talents with first team minutes at an earlier stage of their careers. However, these talents may face a longer and more gradual transition.

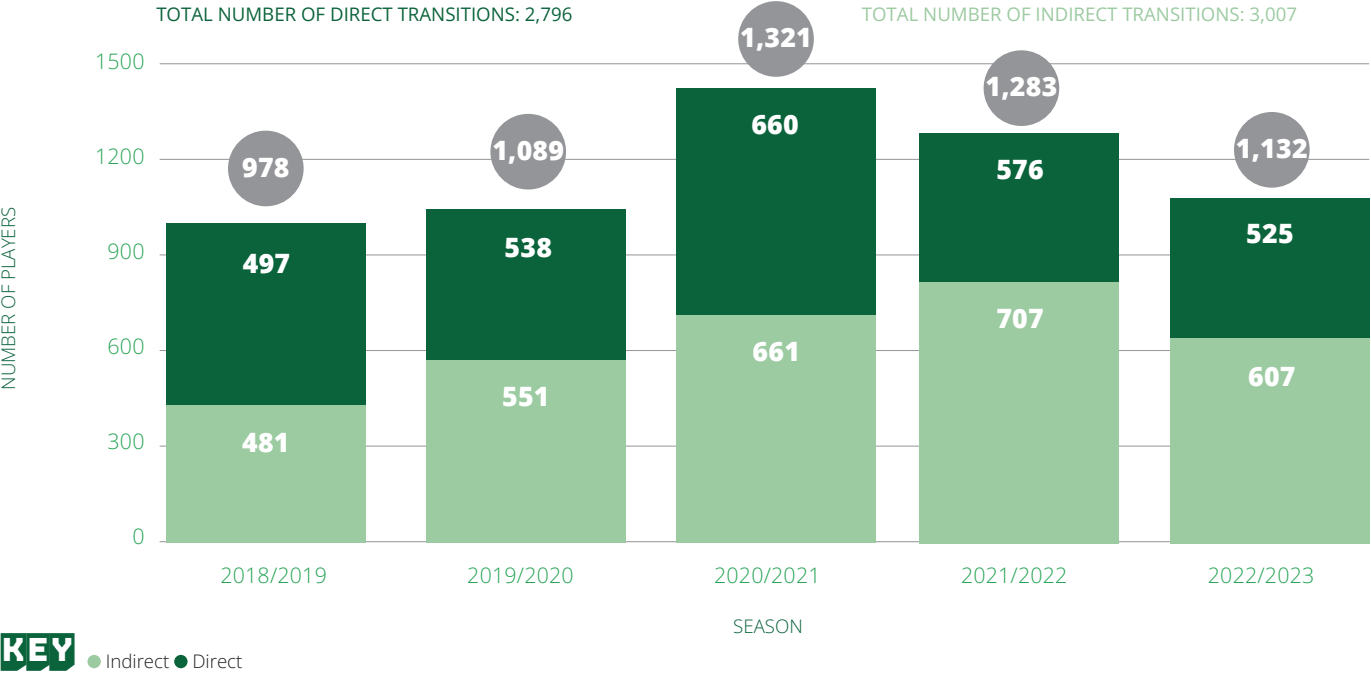
EVOLUTION OF THE AVERAGE DURATION IN DAYS BETWEEN THE DEBUT DATE AND TRANSITION DATE AMONG TRANSITIONED PLAYERS



STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSITION TO FIRST TEAM IN EUROPE

The distribution between direct and indirect transitions remained relatively stable within the timeframe of the analysis.

NUMBER OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS BY TYPE AND BY SEASON



LEAGUE LEVEL WHICH ARE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL LEAGUES?

- **Total number of debuts*:** England leads the five-year combined ranking: aided by the higher number of teams, the Premier League and EFL Championship secured the top two positions, registering 381 and 353 debutants, respectively. Considering a country's population and its influence on the available talent pool, smaller countries such as Serbia, Denmark, Croatia, and Norway are notable inclusions at the top of the ranking.
- **Debuts per club*:** Compared to the total metric, there are some minor differences in the adjusted ranking. While the English Premier League is still in the lead, the Croatian HNL claimed second spot, just ahead of the Italian top tier. In this ranking, countries with a lower number of teams tend to perform better. Croatia, alongside Estonia and Switzerland 'benefit' from the fact that they had the fewest number of teams in their respective leagues.
- **Total number of transitions*:** The ranking of player transitions closely mirrors those of player debuts. Countries such as England, Italy, Spain, and France consistently lead in both categories. In contrast to the ranking by debuts, the leagues of Poland, Scotland, and Sweden are significantly higher placed when it comes to player transitions.
- **Transitions per club (see chart on the right):** In terms of the per club metric, the English Premier League is still on top, followed closely by the Italian top division. Compared to the ranking by total number of players transitioned, there are five new entrants: Estonia, Switzerland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria.

* The full referenced ranking tables can be found in the full study.



LEAGUE RANKING BY NUMBER OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS (2018/19 - 2022/23, COMBINED) ▼

RANK	COUNTRY	COMPETITION	TOTAL NO. OF TRANSITIONS
1	ENGLAND	PREMIER LEAGUE	332
2	ITALY	SERIE A	318
3	ENGLAND	CHAMPIONSHIP	302
4	SPAIN	LA LIGA	210
5	FRANCE	LIGUE 1	199
6	POLAND	EKSTRALASA	169
6	ITALY	SERIE B	166
8	SERBIA	SUPER LIGA	163
9	CZECHIA	FIRST LEAGUE	151
10	FRANCE	LIGUE 2	156
11	DENMARK	SUPERLIGA	149
12	NETHERLANDS	EREDIVISIE	143
=	RUSSIA	PREMIER LEAGUE	143
14	GERMANY	BUNDESLIGA	141
15	SCOTLAND	PREMIERSHIP	134
16	SWEDEN	ALLSVENSKAN	131
17	CROATIA	1. HNL	128
=	NORWAY	ELITESERIEN	128
19	UKRAINE	PREMIER LEAGUE	124
20	PORTUGAL	PRIMEIRA LIGA	123

Source: Football Benchmark research and analysis.

CLUB LEVEL

WHICH ARE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CLUBS?

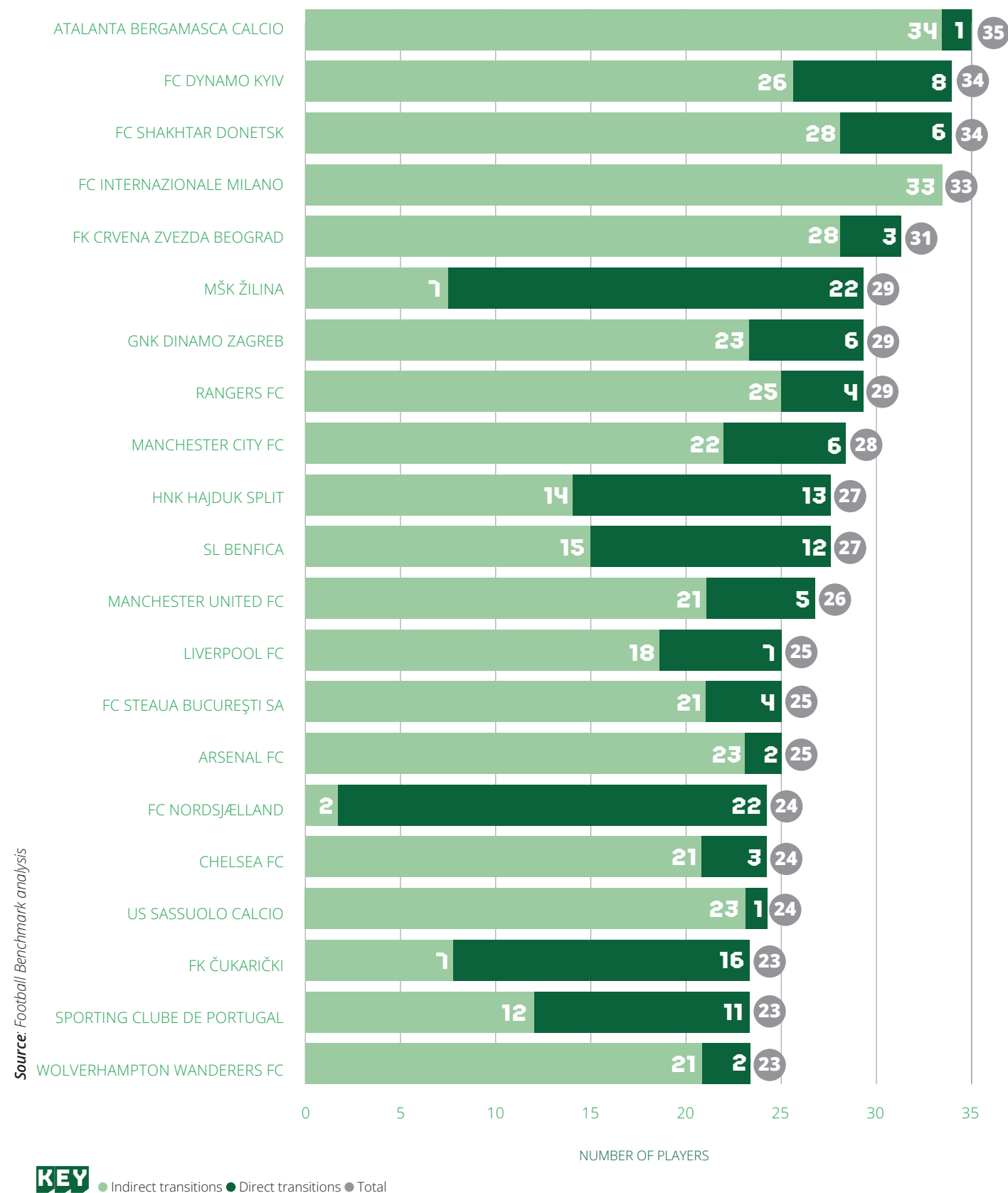
- **Total debuts:** The ranking of the best clubs by total debuts is composed of mainly highly ranked clubs in the UEFA coefficient ranking as of June 2023. Atalanta BC clearly stands on top of the total number of debutants during the in-scope seasons, translating to at least eight players debuted per season on average. However, almost all of these players transitioned indirectly. Clubs from Eastern European countries such as Ukraine, Croatia, Serbia, and Russia feature prominently in the list. This potentially highlights the significance of this region in developing and promoting young footballers, possibly due to effective youth academies and scouting networks.

The debut rankings can be found in the full study.

- **Total transitions (see chart on the right):** The list of top 20 clubs by total number of successful transitions to first team football is dominated by English clubs, as six of them are included in this ranking. In terms of direct and indirect transitions, the majority of the clubs clearly favour one or the other approach. Italy is the only other nation represented from the "Big Five" leagues with three clubs. When it comes to direct transitions, clubs such as MŠK Žilina, FC Nordsjælland and FK Čukarički are among the most prominent.



TOP CLUBS BY TOTAL NUMBER OF TRANSITIONS (INCLUDING DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE) ▼



PLAYER LEVEL
PLAYING TIME AFTER THE
COMPLETION OF THE TRANSITION

TOP PLAYERS BY MINUTES PLAYED AFTER TRANSITION

RANK	PLAYER	POSITION	ACADEMY	TOTAL MINUTES PLAYED 365 DAYS POST TRANSITION	"FOOTBALL BENCHMARK VALUE (JULY 2023, € M)"	TRANSITION TYPE	MONTH OF TRANSITION
1	JOSH GRIFFITHS	GOALKEEPER	WEST BROMWICH ALBION FC	5,214	1.28	INDIRECT	10
2	BRENNAN JOHNSON	FORWARD	NOTTINGHAM FOREST FC	4,993	30.75	INDIRECT	10
3	CONNOR TAYLOR	DEFENDER	STOKE CITY FC	4,492	1.72	INDIRECT	9
4	FRAN GARCÍA	DEFENDER	REAL MADRID CLUB DE FÚTBOL	4,471	16.62	INDIRECT	10
5	RAPHAEL ONYEDIKA	MIDFIELDER	FC MIDTJYLLAND	4,446	11.32	DIRECT	8
6	JORDAN TEZE	DEFENDER	PSV EINDHOVEN	4,428	9.75	DIRECT	9
7	TRAI HUME	DEFENDER	LINFIELD FC	4,420	2.26	INDIRECT	11
8	JAYDEN BOGLE	DEFENDER	DERBY COUNTY FC	4,383	3.33	DIRECT	9
9	FERRO	DEFENDER	SL BENFICA	4,319	2.27	DIRECT	3
10	JURRIËN TIMBER	DEFENDER	AFC AJAX	4,215	53.81	DIRECT	1
11	MAX AARONS	DEFENDER	NORWICH CITY FC	4,072	13.25	DIRECT	9
12	JONATHAN DAVID	FORWARD	KAA GENT	3,994	51.39	DIRECT	11
13	MADS HERMANSEN	GOALKEEPER	BRØNDBY IF	3,992	3.58	DIRECT	8
14	DANIEL BALLARD	DEFENDER	ARSENAL FC	3,931	3.11	INDIRECT	10
15	ÁLVARO TEJERO	DEFENDER	REAL MADRID CLUB DE FÚTBOL	3,919	1.08	INDIRECT	8
16	ARNAU MARTÍNEZ	DEFENDER	GIRONA FC	3,905	14.9	DIRECT	4
17	REECE JAMES	DEFENDER	CHELSEA FC	3,889	72.3	INDIRECT	8
18	ANDY DIOUF	MIDFIELDER	STADE RENNAIS FC	3,886	3.01	INDIRECT	8
19	CONOR GALLAGHER	MIDFIELDER	CHELSEA FC	3,886	36.06	INDIRECT	8
20	CALVIN STENGs	FORWARD	AZ ALKMAAR	3,883	8.27	DIRECT	11

Achieving the transition to first team football is one thing; whether a player can then keep their place in the squad is another. Considering all players who transitioned to first team football in the analysed leagues since 2018-19, the average playing time was close to 1,300 minutes in the 365 days following their transition. This equates to between 13 and 14 full matches.

- By featuring 24 teams, the English Championship dominates the ranking.
- Looking at playing time by transition age, there is not much difference between different age groups. The only exceptions are players who successfully transitioned to first team football before turning 17, as they played slightly less in the 12 months following the transition than those who did it at a later age.
- In terms of positions, goalkeepers tend to play the most on average in the 365 days following a successful transition to first team football. Midfielders and forwards tend to have slightly fewer opportunities compared to other positions.
- Post-transition playing time was almost identical for players who played for their parent club's reserve team in a lower professional division and for those who did not. Prior experience in reserve teams seemingly did not make players more likely to sustain their place in their club's first team after a transition.

The study also explored how some selected young players reached the pinnacle of first team football, showcasing the player journey in more detail. Jude Bellingham transitioned directly at a very early age, while Gonçalo Ramos's path went through a reserve team. Rayan Cherki had multiple setbacks after an early transition, Jamal Musiala chose an international path, while Mason Mount went through multiple loans before solidifying his place in professional football. **These case studies show that the road to success is as diverse as the individuals who travel it.**

Source: Football Benchmark research & analysis

7

CLUB SURVEY

What is the opinion of almost 100 European clubs surveyed about the current transition landscape? This chapter outlines strategies, current challenges, and improvement opportunities collected from club decision makers.

With a topic as diverse and extensive as the transition to first team football, it is important to understand the views of as many stakeholders as possible. To achieve this, a survey was prepared and circulated among European professional football clubs focusing on three topics: 1) strategy and goal setting, 2) internal club processes and 3) transition models and areas.

In total, 95 respondents filled in the questionnaire, representing 45 different UEFA countries. The key results of the survey and the identified overarching trends are discussed in this chapter. Some of the main insights include the level of focus on transition goals, the role and influence of the academy and specific stakeholders in the process, the quality of internal support that players receive, as well as the relative importance of the five transition areas compared to each other.



Key insights

- What is the importance of first team transition as a strategic aspect of the club? Confirming the preliminary notions, most clubs deem it crucial to regularly evaluate their academy: 80% of clubs that have a written youth development strategy have at least one strategic goal related to first team transition.
- In a complex process with many different factors in play, which aspects are the most crucial? The quality of coaching, the relationships between the first team and the academy management, and the wide range of playing opportunities were identified as the most important.
- While the inputs of academy coaches and the relationship between the first team and the academy are key factors behind transition success, the findings of the survey showed that academy representatives were rarely involved in transition decisions in practice. Considering their significant impact on player development, perhaps their involvement in the transition process should be increased.

Survey methodology & breakdown of respondents

The purpose of the survey was to collect a wide scale of primary inputs concerning the most relevant dimensions of the transition process as seen by those who are the closest to the topic: academy directors, sporting directors and transition coaches at professional clubs across Europe.

QUESTIONS WERE GROUPED INTO THREE MAIN TOPICS: ▼



STRATEGY & GOAL SETTING



INTERNAL CLUB PROCESSES



TRANSITION MODELS AND AREAS

After the preparation of the questions, an online survey of 23 questions was created in several languages. Answers were collected between June and August 2023. In total, 95 respondents filled in the questionnaire.

CLUB SURVEY

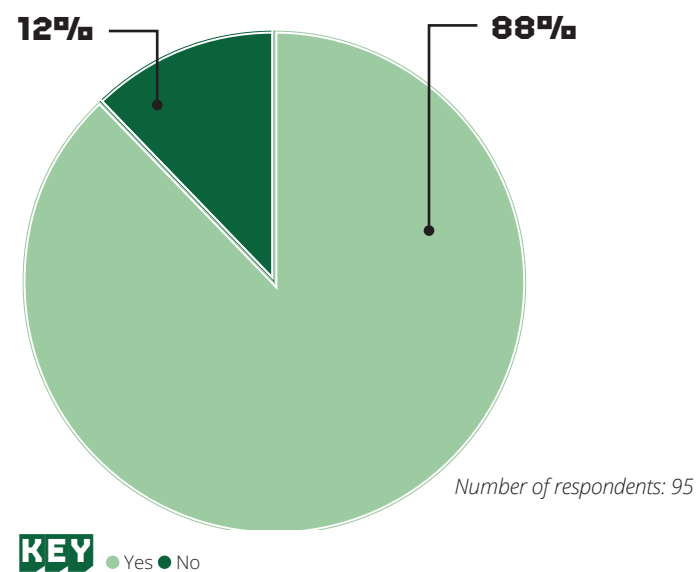
MAIN SURVEY FINDINGS

STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

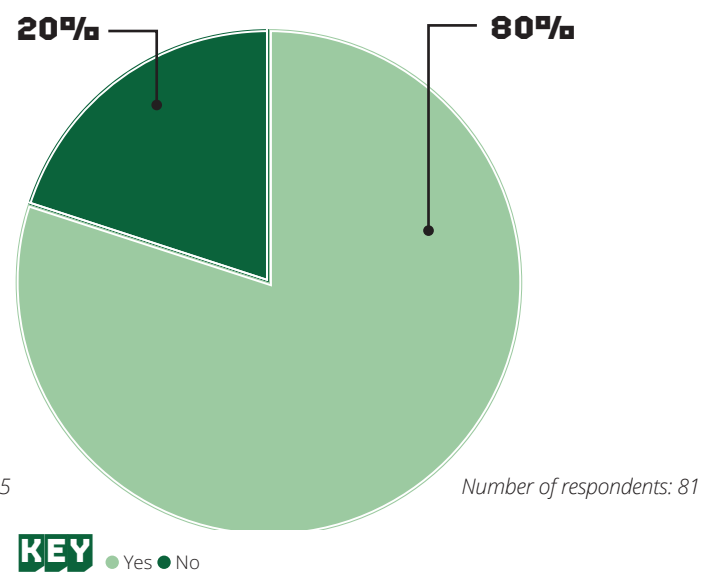
Does your club have a written youth development/youth academy strategy?
In this youth development strategy, do you have any specific goals related to first team transition?



AVAILABILITY OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



AVAILABILITY OF SPECIFIC GOALS RELATED TO FIRST TEAM TRANSITION

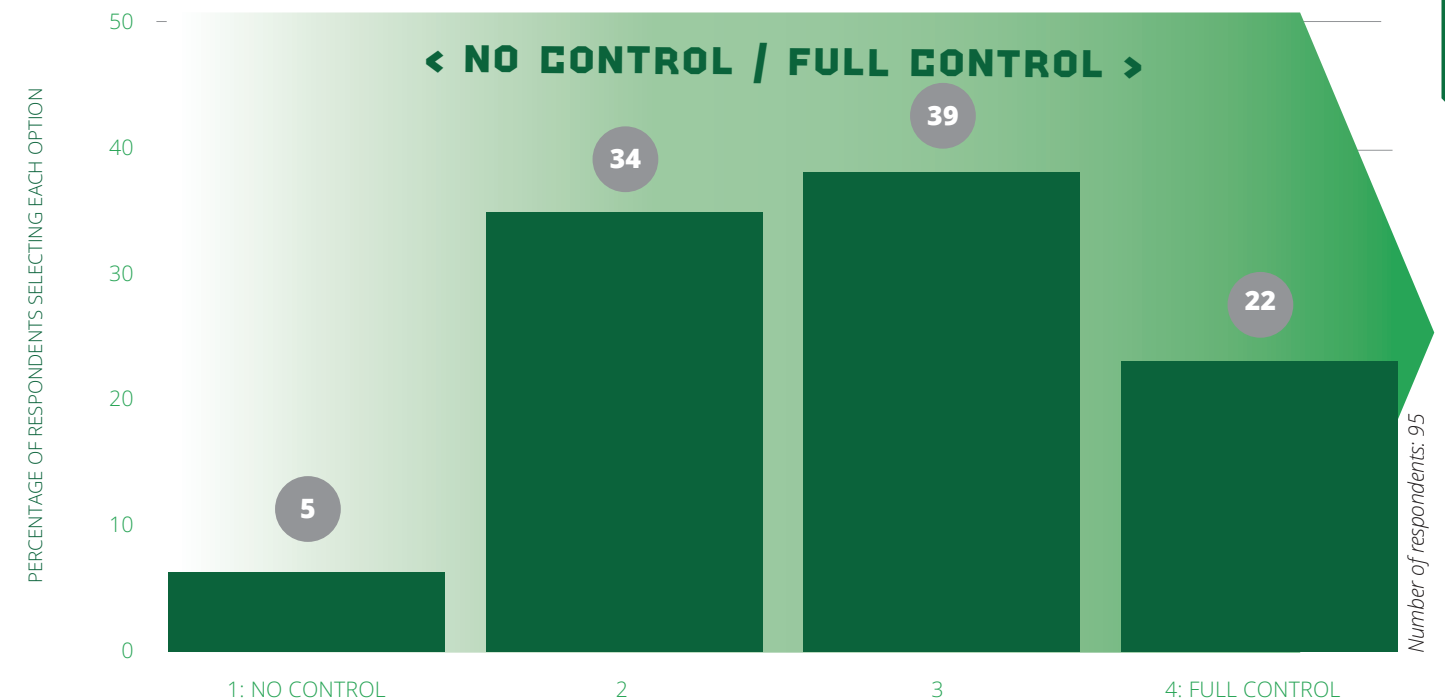


Approximately nine out of ten respondents have a written youth development strategy, defining specific goals related to this area. Transition is a key element of youth development activities, with 80% of respondent clubs having a specific goal related to first team transition in their youth strategy. The exact goals vary by club, including examples such as the number of transitions by year, the number of minutes played by academy graduates or the percentage of the current first team squad coming from the academy.



STRATEGY AND GOAL SETTING

On a scale of 1 (no control) to 4 (full control), how much can the academy leadership influence whether first team transitions are successful?
Columns show the percentage of respondents selecting each option.



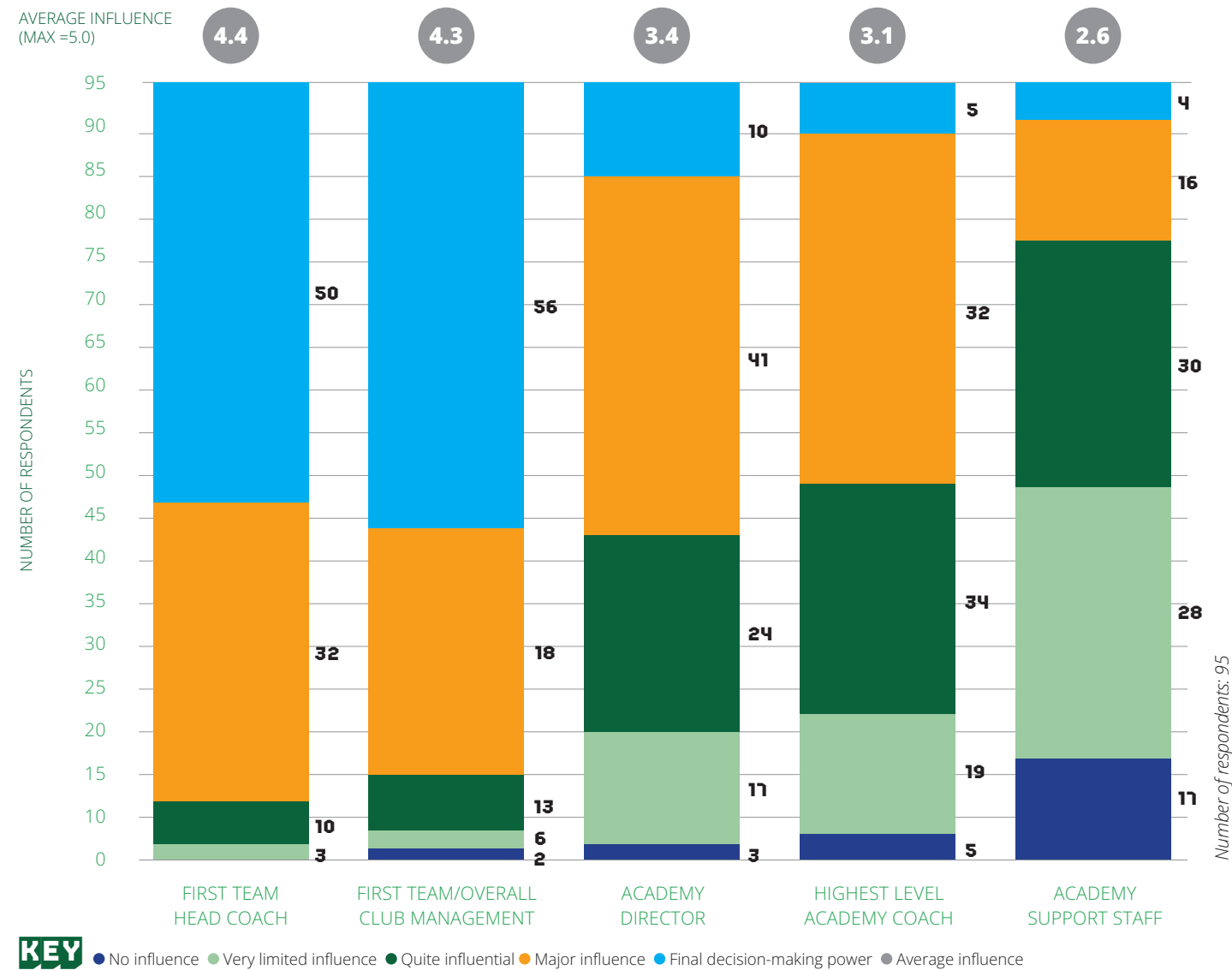
In parallel to the importance of the transition process, it is also worth looking at how much academies can actually influence and control the outcome of the set goals. Considering the complex nature of the process and the club-wide cooperation that needs to be in place, opinions differ on this matter. On one hand, 39% of clubs are of the opinion that there is only a limited amount or no control at all when it comes to success rates.

On the other hand, around one in five clubs believe that academy leadership has full control over the transition process, with a strong belief that hard work brings better results. It should be noted that of clubs with the best track record (at least 20 completed transitions in total since 2018), almost all answered that their academy leadership has a large influence on the success rate.

But what about the influence of the different stakeholders? Who has final decision-making power and how collaborative are club processes?

INTERNAL PROCESSES

On a scale of 1 (no influence) to 5 (final decision-making power), how would you rate the influence of the following stakeholders (in terms of decision-making power) on first team transition decisions?



Survey results show that the first team hierarchy has the final say in most cases, but there is no consensus about who exactly should make those decisions. The first team head coach and the primary decision maker in management (usually the sporting director) were both frequently named by respondents as the one responsible for this role. Interestingly, the role of academy directors is less prevalent in this regard – more than 20% of clubs evaluated their influence as either very

limited or practically zero despite them overseeing the academy development of the players.

In any case, before first team transition decisions are made, a long and complex academy process awaits: the club needs to balance the work of many stakeholders, consider the impact of several factors, and oversee the individual development of each player in addition to the management of academy teams as a whole.



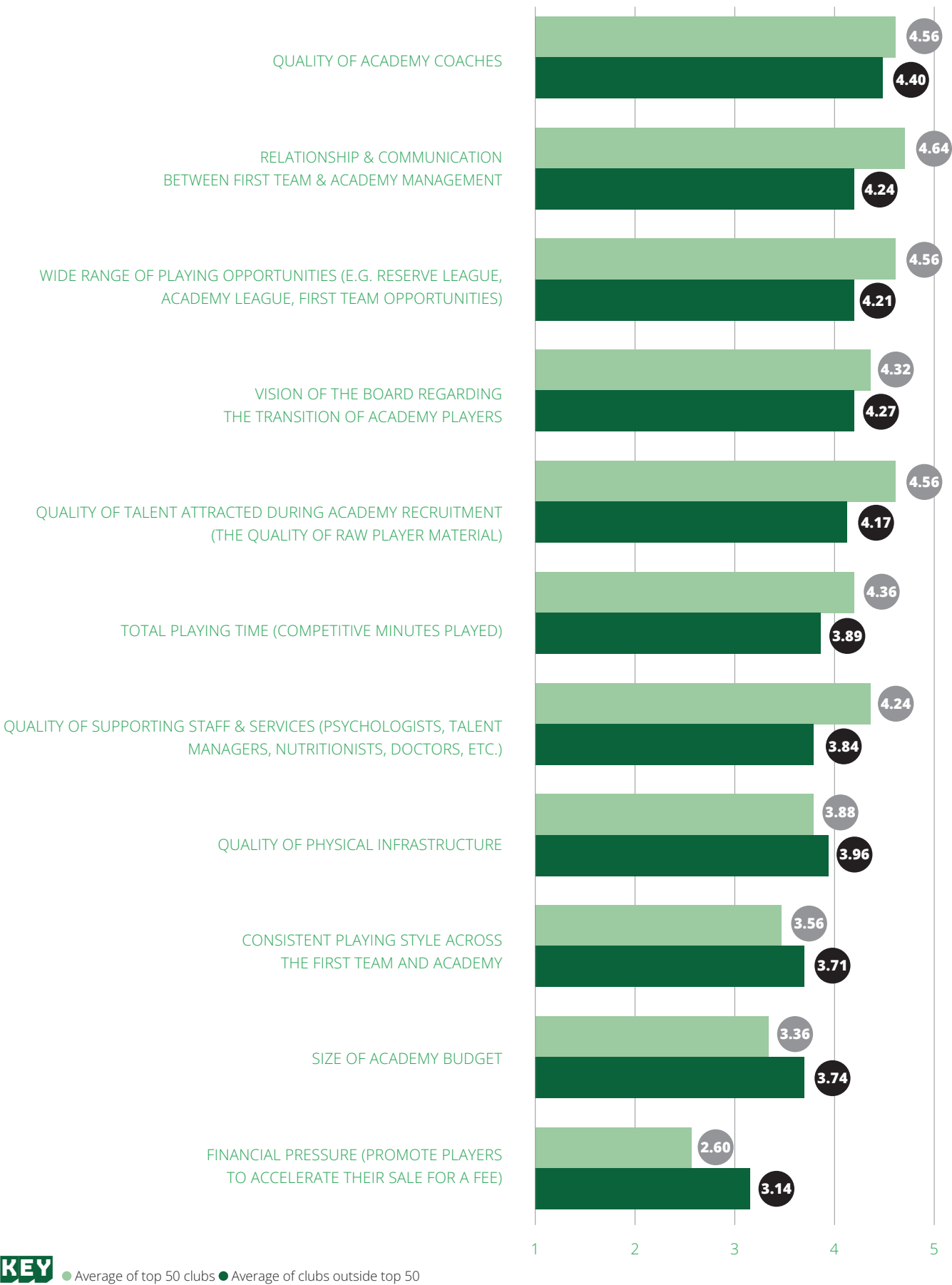
INTERNAL PROCESSES

On a scale of 1 (marginal significance) to 5 (crucial importance), evaluate the importance of each listed internal factor based on how much they impact the success rate of first team transition.

The complex nature of the transition is echoed by the survey results as highlighted by the importance of different internal factors: eight of the listed 11 factors were deemed to have a large importance, scoring at least an average of 3.88 on a scale of 1-5 according to both Top 50 clubs by UEFA coefficient and the others. The most crucial aspects according to the respondents are the quality of coaches, the relationship between the academy and the first team, and providing a wide range of playing time opportunities for players. Interestingly, financial considerations such as the size of the academy budget and the overall financial pressure from the club management are considered the least important factors.

There is a contradiction within the responses of the previous question. Even though the level of academy coaches is considered as the most crucial factor behind a successful transition, they have a very limited say when it comes to the actual transition decisions. **This presents a dilemma for clubs: should coaches – whose primary responsibility is to educate – get more involved in transition decisions as they are also well-positioned to evaluate readiness?** If yes, what could be the best way to make their opinion count?

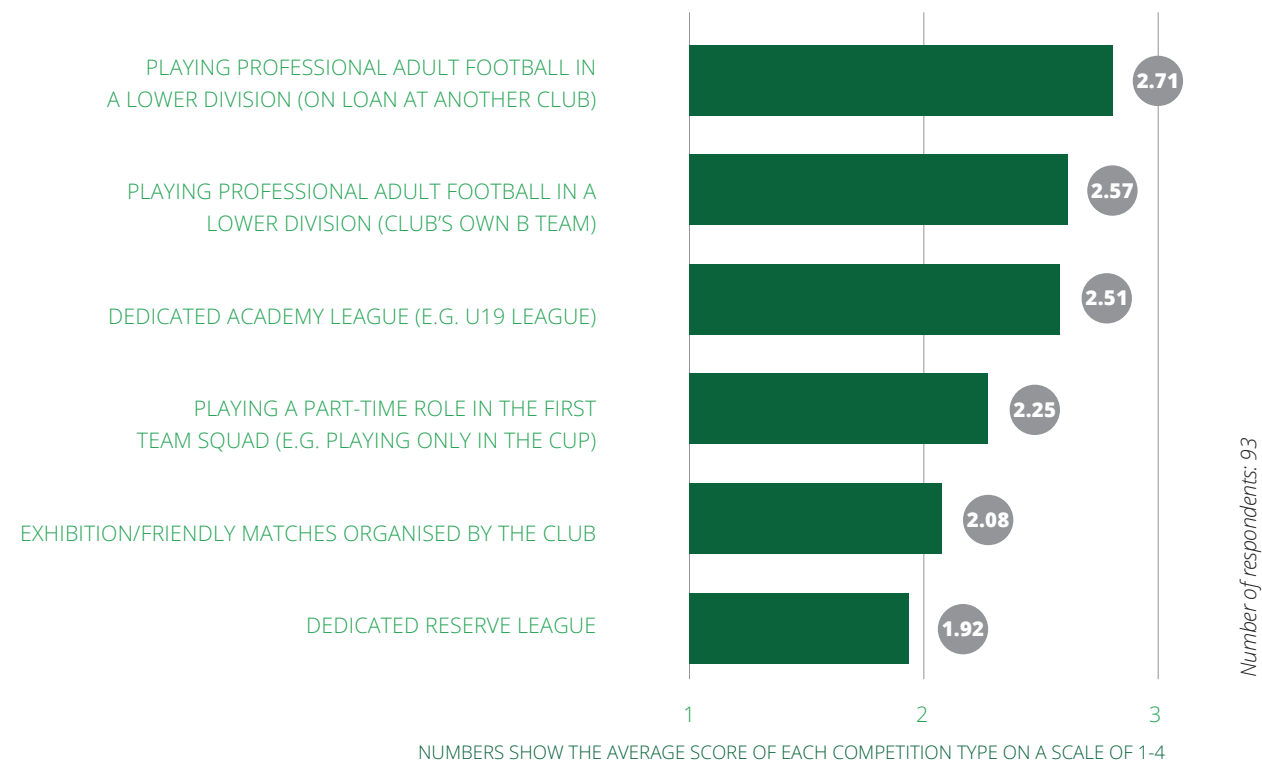
While the answer could vary based on the structure and culture of the club, one possible solution is to hold meetings with both the decision-makers and the coaches (and potentially other supporting staff) where everyone can share their opinion about the players in question, stimulating a constructive conversation. Ultimately, this could only benefit the career progression of the player.



KEY ● Average of top 50 clubs ● Average of clubs outside top 50

TRANSITION MODELS/AREAS

In terms of playing time, which competition types do you usually prefer when preparing a player for first team transition? Answer options range from 1 (not preferred) to 4 (preferred).



Zooming into one of the most important factors, the analysis shows that the preference of clubs is that young talents should get experience in competitive and senior games instead of playing in youth leagues, reserve competitions or friendly matches. Specifically, the most preferred competition types are lower-level senior leagues. In this regard, it does not seem to matter if it is for the club's own reserve team or at another club on loan. Reserve leagues and friendly matches are the least preferred options for player development prior to transition to the first team.

The survey also asked clubs about the importance of the different transition areas from two perspectives: how much these contribute to the success of a transition and how shortcomings in them can lead to a failed transition? Psychological/mental factors were deemed the most important – a player showing strong traits in this aspect not only has a bigger chance of success, but also a lower rate of failure. It should be highlighted that while the players' non-sporting environment is not deemed to be a crucial success factor, issues and challenges in this regard can derail the entire process. According to clubs, failed transitions are often the product of shortcomings in the social environment of the player.



8

CLUB CASE STUDIES

This chapter introduces the transition strategies and best practices of 12 major European clubs, with information sourced directly from the leaders or key staff members of their academies. What is the blueprint behind the success of well-known ‘talent factories’ and what steps should be taken if a club wants to improve their transition process?

The detailed club case studies, including a description of club best practices can be found in the full version of the report

The collective opinion of 95 European clubs analysed in the previous chapter was a good starting point for the evaluation of our hypothesis: the transition process is not sufficiently optimised in many European clubs. However, to identify improvement opportunities, a more qualitative analysis method was needed. **In order to assess different transition strategies, processes and best practices, in-depth interviews were conducted with club representatives who are either responsible for or are deeply involved with the transition process.**

A selection of questions addressed:

How do the selected clubs structure their youth team setups? What is one key consideration behind the success/progress of each academy? From an operational perspective, which practices could be implemented at other clubs?



Clubs were selected on the basis of the following parameters:

- Above average transition success in recent years or historically (see Chapter 06 for more details)
- Diverse geographical coverage
- Coverage of different-sized clubs based on revenues and UEFA coefficient
- Unique or innovative transition tools in place



AFC AJAX

"Players need to come up with their own plan and take initiative about how they want to play and make optimal use of their specialties."

Edmond Claus

(Interim Head of the Youth Academy)

Capitalising on the Jong Ajax team that plays in the Dutch second highest division, the club follows a two-step transition approach. First, before joining the first team, players get a taste of professional football in a controlled environment. Additionally, strong relationships between the academy and first team setting, as well as with the players and their entourage, are at the forefront of the transition strategy. Player empowerment and reliance on veteran leaders are also crucial for Ajax to create the desired atmosphere within the team. Additionally, the full first team coaching staff has responsibilities related to the scouting and management of academy talent to distribute workload and to ensure that all players are evaluated and integrated properly.



ARSENAL FC

"Our loan team will watch every second of a loan spell and then review it accordingly."

Per Mertesacker

(Academy Manager)

At Arsenal, clear guidance from the top of the hierarchy is supported by specialised staff, such as the team responsible for loans. Decisions are made collaboratively, with the participation of both the academy and the first team leadership. Key principles include a strong club culture, communication, clarity, and honesty. In combination with athletic metrics and coaching input, human interactions and player behaviour are also key parameters for player evaluation. Considering the competition model in England, loans provide the best opportunity for Arsenal to evaluate a young player's mentality and "coping skills". As such, there is a detailed process in place to manage loan experiences, with three staff members dedicated to overseeing it.



AS MONACO FC

"One of our primary goals is to optimise the time that young players spend around the first team environment."

Pascal de Maesschalck

(Youth Development Director)

AS Monaco FC have recently rebuilt their transition strategy, focusing on optimising time young players spend around the first team, be it with match experiences or training sessions. This is driven by an interconnected structure and a customised games programme, mixing a variety of different opponents. A recent strategic change refocused the club on their strong youth development traditions, also supported by the strong domestic talent base and football culture of France. The club also prioritises frequent and transparent communication between the academy and the first team and believes that stakeholders such as agents and parents should also be closely involved in the development process.



EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

"Our job is to show them how big the jump is, so we have to challenge them as hard as possible to strengthen their resilience and constancy."

Ralph Gunesch

(Head of Transition & Individual Training)

The case of Eintracht Frankfurt is interesting for all clubs that would like to take the first steps in implementing a club-wide strategy for individual player development. The club made a philosophy shift in 2021 to focus more on talent development. Employing a dedicated transition coach was a crucial step in this process, together with the development of an individual player development framework. Even with challenges and a lack of existing transition structure, their example shows that it is possible to improve this area in the short term.



GNK DINAMO

“Being ready for first team football is like a puzzle – you are collecting the pieces and when everything is connected together, the player can get the chance.”

Andelko Ivanjko

(Assistant Academy Director)

GNK Dinamo are among the best-performing clubs in Central and Eastern Europe when it comes to youth development and first team transition. By creating a strong, competitive, and professional environment, the club is working towards not only finding the best Croatian talent, but also equipping players with the fundamentals to build a long career in football. During the development stage, an emphasis is put on to positional versatility and the encouragement of individual creativity, making sure that all talents get the necessary individual support. First team readiness is evaluated as a combination of age, on-pitch performance, physical and mental profile, as well as qualitative inputs from the coaches.



KKS LECH POZNAN

“The aim is to have 50% of the first team comprised of club-trained players.”

Marcin Wróbel

(Academy Director)

Standing at the heart of the overall club strategy, Lech Poznan’s academy has produced many successful transitions over recent seasons. The reasons behind the success include a clearly defined strategy, quantifiable objectives and ongoing monitoring. There are well-defined and ambitious transition goals that are widely known to all within the club, and are supported by a detailed action plan. This approach enables the smooth transition of young talents.



OMONIOIA FC

“It is crucial for us to have a first team head coach who believes in our academy players and promotes them to the first team.”

Andreas Miliotis

(Academy Director)

Omonoia FC is a club with a limited talent pool due to the demography of their country. They are aware of this challenge and are committed to the early promotion of youth players to the first team. Recognising each player’s unique journey, the club’s academy offers diverse transition pathways including early integration to the first team, being loaned out to lower division teams or getting more experience at Under-19 level. A similar focus is put on the development of coaches: international knowledge exchange experiences and academy visits are encouraged to ensure a high level of support in this regard.



RANGERS FC

“Some of our new initiatives, such as player exchange with other elite academies and implementing individual live coaching have not really been seen before.”

Zeb Jacobs

(Academy Director, now at Feyenoord)

Rangers FC appointed a new academy director in 2023 who brought a new transition vision to the club. The driver of the philosophy is to tap into out-of-the-box methods to gain a competitive advantage and build an exciting learning environment in sports. There is a strong focus on individualisation in the form of a framework called ‘high potential player programme’. This includes short international trips, live coaching sessions with headsets, a bespoke games programme and individual player evaluation methods. In addition, the academy maintains a strong cooperation with stakeholders, such as the first team coaching staff, player agents and parents.



RSC ANDERLECHT

“There are more ways of transitioning – it depends on factors such as talent, maturity, club situation, and competition.”

Jean Kindermans

(Technical Director Youth, now at Royal Antwerp) and

Frédéric Delooz

(Youth Football Academy Director, now at Royal Antwerp)

After developing and transitioning elite players such as Romelu Lukaku, Vincent Kompany, Youri Tielemans, Dries Mertens or Jérémy Doku, Anderlecht's youth academy is often considered among the best. Built on a strong long-term vision, the club embraces its local social and cultural context. Instead of generalising the transition process, efforts are focused on identifying unique opportunities in a sustainable manner. Their example shows that it's important to be aware of the club's “stepping stone” role in the ecosystem. They believe it's possible to navigate an unpredictable transition environment with the help of internal factors such as stability and a strong connection between players and staff.



SC BRAGA

“The players can only become ready for the first team when they are actually there.”

António Pereira

(Youth Technical Director)

Braga's academy has gone through a significant evolution over the past decade, producing results that are admired and closely watched by many European clubs. The club has built a business model driven by the club president's own vision and close involvement; it is geared towards player development and sales, while keeping family values at the core of the strategy. The club embraces a “learning by doing” philosophy which is made possible by the diverse range of playing opportunities they can provide to young players. This includes the reserve team, and a separate Under-23 team, as well.



SL BENFICA

“The Head Coach of our first team is always the best, most important client of the academy.”

Pedro Mil-Homens

(Academy Director of Benfica Campus)

The academy of Benfica is consistently ranked among the best talent centres in the world, while also generating significant returns from player sales. The club adapts academy players to new environments by keeping them one level above their age group, while offering a realistic and highly motivating path to achieve their dreams. By experiencing the feeling of playing against more mature opposition, players become more accustomed to transition challenges. During the development phase, the club constantly evaluates future potential, cognitive skills, and the environment of players, which are all crucial aspects of transition success. Even though the club has the ability to offer world-class support services, they also realise the importance of challenging players and getting them out of their comfort zone.



VALENCIA CF

“If every year, we have at least one player ready to become a first team player, that's a great objective to achieve.”

Luis Martínez

(Academy Director)

The Valencia academy is a great example of adapting to the wider club context: they embrace the importance of club values throughout the development and transition journey. They are also a great example for flexibly adapting to the first team context. During a period of recent difficulty for the club, the academy focused on the opportunity that there are more places in the first team than usual, for example by being proactive in squad planning discussions. A detailed evaluation framework is in place at the club to measure the progression and readiness of players, covering six areas: fitness and health, club values and psychoeducation, player identity, elite player characteristics, talent development and long-term player development.

9

CONCLUSIONS

- 1  **A CRUCIAL CAREER MILESTONE**
First team transition is one of, if not the most challenging step during a player's entire career.
- 2  **BOARD VISION AND CLUB PHILOSOPHY ARE THE MAIN STRATEGIC PREREQUISITES**
The foundation behind any successful, long-term transition strategy is a consistent, stable vision from the club hierarchy.
- 3  **FIRST TEAM TRANSITION AMONG THE PRIMARY ACADEMY OBJECTIVES**
Eighty percent of our club survey respondents indicated that there are some objectives and KPIs related to first team transition success in their academy strategy.
- 4  **EXTERNAL CLUB CONTEXT DEFINES THE BOUNDARIES**
Clubs across Europe have different (involuntary) roles in the youth development 'pyramid' of the industry. Together with transfer market dynamics, this club context already defines the type of transition models that clubs can pursue.
- 5  **A CHALLENGE THAT LIES IN ITS COMPLEXITY**
What makes the transition even more challenging than other major career changes is the fact that multiple major shifts happen at the same time, both professionally and personally. Dealing with all of these can be an overwhelming experience.
- 6  **MENTAL CHALLENGES ARE THE MOST DIFFICULT TO COPE WITH**
Mental factors are the most usual causes behind both successful and failed transitions.
- 7  **THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PLAYERS – MOTIVATION, COMMITMENT, AND REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**
Without players taking ownership of their own transition, even the best, most advanced supporting environment will fail.
- 8  **SUCCESS REQUIRES A HOLISTIC APPROACH**
First team transition success is largely dependent on how the entirety of an interconnected environment impacts the player that is going through the first team transition.

CONCLUSIONS

- 9  **GRADUAL PROMOTION AS THE DEFAULT TRANSITION METHOD**
The results of the statistical analysis indicate that a longer transition period is becoming more preferable in Europe.
- 10  **IMPOSSIBLE TO SUBSTITUTE SENIOR PLAYING TIME**
Even if squad spaces are not available for direct first team transition, clubs must find alternative senior playing opportunities.
- 11  **CONTRADICTION BETWEEN ACADEMY INVOLVEMENT AND POWER**
The influence of the academy hierarchy on transition decisions is generally low compared to their level of involvement in the decision-making process. Should they be more involved?
- 12  **HONEST AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION AT ALL LEVELS**
The importance of communication and collaboration between both the transitioning player and the club, as well as between the academy and first team hierarchy simply can't be overstated.
- 13  **HOLISTIC, PLAYER-CENTRIC EDUCATION FROM A YOUNG AGE**
Instead of solving transition problems, clubs can also choose to prevent the occurrence of these issues by timely and strong education programmes.
- 14  **QUALITY COACHES CREATE QUALITY PLAYERS**
Knowledge and passion originates from the coaches who develop the players. Having and nurturing talent is thus not only a success criteria when it comes to the players, but also when it comes to the coaches.
- 15  **THE EMERGENCE OF INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION COACHING**
Having a dedicated person to oversee the integration of the different transition areas in an individualised manner provides a high value for clubs.
- 16  **DATA AND EXPERIENCE-BASED MAPPING OF PLAYER POTENTIAL TO BOOST TRANSITION SUCCESS**
Clubs can make more informed decisions by collecting and regularly evaluating players' physical tools and cognitive problems.
- 17  **DEVELOPMENT ABOVE, BUT NOT INSTEAD OF WINNING**
From a transition objective perspective, the individual development of players is more important than winning as a collective at the academy level.
- 18  **THERE IS DESIRE AND SPACE FOR MORE COMPETITIVE YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES**
Multiple clubs indicated that they are not fully content with the available youth playing time opportunities and started to organise their own, customised match programmes.

**19 THE VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF
TRANSITION EFFORTS**

By committing resources, time and energy into the transition process, not only short-term results are boosted; long-term expectations are also impacted positively.

**20 ACCEPT THAT YOU CANNOT
CONTROL EVERYTHING**

Due to the complex nature of the transition process, it is simply not possible to be on top of everything. Uncontrollable elements such as major injuries or external stakeholders can put an end to a well-managed transition.

**21 IS THERE VALUE IN YOUTH
LEAGUES BEYOND THE
AGE OF 20?**

The findings of this study conclude that the vast majority of transitions happen before the age of 20, indicating that there is not a major need for youth playing time beyond that age group.

**22 SEPARATION FROM EXTERNAL
STAKEHOLDERS INVITES
INCREASED RISKS**

Instead of running away from the challenge of interacting with external player stakeholders, it might be better to involve them proactively in the transition processes.

**23 COLLABORATIVE, BUT PRIMARILY
PLAYER-CENTRIC REGULATORY
ATTITUDE IS NEEDED**

From a regulatory perspective, policies should primarily follow the interests of players instead of clubs or other stakeholders.



YOUTH FOOTBALL 2023-24

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