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PREPARING YOUNG TALENT FOR WORLD CUP SUCCESS

UEFA has been supporting football-related academic research projects through its Research Grant Programme since 2010. To give you a taste of the interesting work undertaken, UEFA•direct is showcasing a selection of research projects funded by the programme. This month, Julian North presents his research into effective player development.

Do the most successful football nations have player development secrets? Or do they just take it seriously?

As the curtain falls on a very successful and entertaining World Cup in Brazil, it is inevitable that the footballing establishment, the media and spectators begin to dissect both the successes and failures of their particular countries (after all, only one team can win). One area which emerges consistently in these discussions is the quality of the players, with attention focused, in particular, on youth player development and player development systems. Barcelona's youth academy, La Masia, and recent system improvements in Belgium and Germany are often hailed as providing the foundations for their respective national teams' performance and successes.

In early 2014 researchers at Leeds Beckett University studied player development systems in seven of Europe's most successful football nations. Interviews were conducted with 41 of Europe's leading national and club player development experts in Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain.

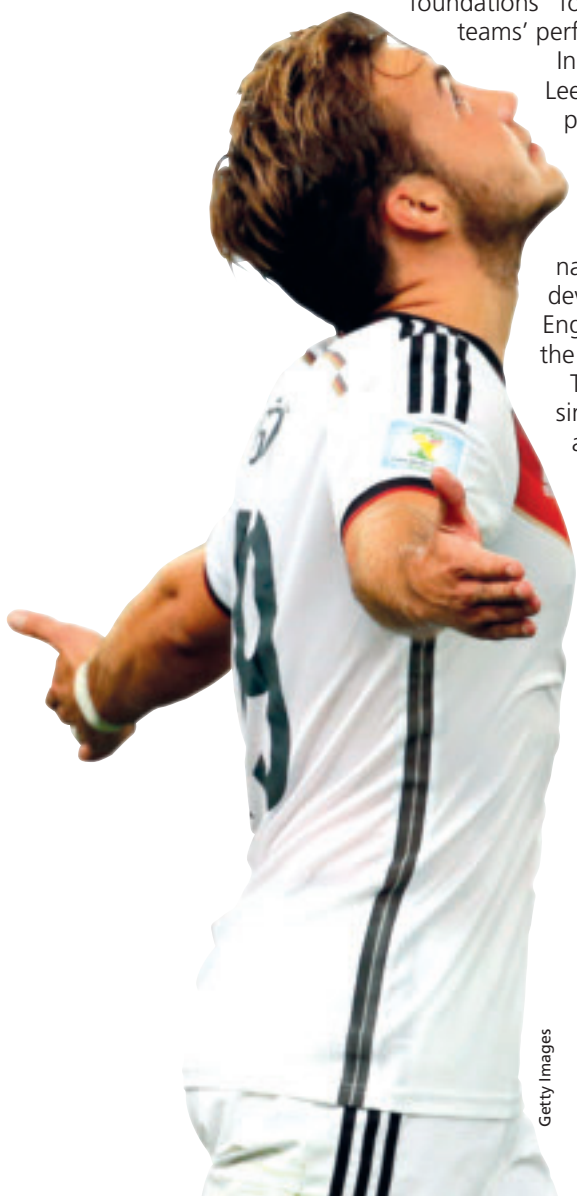
The research highlighted many similarities in the principles and components underpinning effective player development.

The experts noted the importance of having a clear philosophy and plan, for example, concerning

the development of player characteristics that would give them a better chance of eventual success. They adopted a systematic, long-term approach that was patient with players, noting differences between age and stage. They also noted the importance of addressing players' development needs holistically – psychological and social as well as physical, technical and tactical – and recognised the importance of a high-quality and valued coaching and support workforce.

Comprehensive and consistent

The coaches used a wide range of methods in training sessions and competition to build the characteristics and skills that players require to perform. It was the difference between systems that was most interesting, however. The most successful nations in senior and youth competition – Spain, the Netherlands and Germany – appeared to share common characteristics that the others were learning from or did not exhibit. They not only adopted a comprehensive approach to player development, addressing all of the issues highlighted above, but also ensured that their application was consistent. For example, if a country had a clear view of the player characteristics it wanted to produce (e.g. highly technical or physical), training and coaching activities should be geared towards encouraging the development of these characteristics. Successful nations also developed systems which reflected their social, cultural and institutional histories and arrangements. They did not steal 'good practice' ideas from others and apply them uncritically; they thought about how these ideas worked in their systems and contexts. Finally, successful nations ensured that all the important stakeholders understood and bought into the player development system. Federations, clubs, coaches, players and parents knew how the system worked and what was expected of them to make it a success. ●



Getty Images

Mario Götze, world champion at 22, is an excellent example of the youth development work undertaken in Germany

Julian North is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure at Leeds Beckett University, UK. This project was undertaken with LBU colleagues Sergio Lara-Bercial, Gareth Morgan and Fieke Rongen, who share an interest in effective player development and sports coaching across a range of settings and sports. ●

