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England's Premier League homegrown talent problem: why it's time to introduce equivalent of Barcelona B

April 1, 2019 3.00pm BST



England winger Jadon Sancho taking on the Czech Republic. EPA

England's impressive Euro 2020 qualifier victories have confirmed that the country is having a great moment in football. The Lions were unusually confident in both matches, putting five goals past both the Czech Republic and Montenegro. Young English players are also in high demand outside the UK right now: Borussia Dortmund are battling to hang on to Jadon Sancho after an eye-catching first full season in the German Bundesliga, while Bayern Munich are among the European clubs trying to lure his England teammate Callum Hudson-Odoi from Chelsea.

These are signs that England's youth academies are delivering after years of struggling to catch up with continental rivals, while Sancho's success at Dortmund is a reminder that English players don't always have to break into the Premier League to make it to the top. Yet as [this recent report](#) confirms, England still lacks homegrown talent in its top league. This prevents young players from hitting the big time, and it's getting worse.

Players that grew up in the UK contributed just 35% of playing time in this season's Premier League, down from 40% in 2009-10. Their proportion of goals fell from 39% to 31%, while player contributions from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are now barely in single percentage figures. England manager Gareth Southgate has raised concerns about this on numerous occasions since his team finished fourth in the Russia World Cup last summer. He argues that the lack of first-team football for many of the country's brightest prospects is narrowing his selection options.

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In fact, this is not entirely an English problem. There has been a steady increase in expat players across Europe's top divisions, rising from 35% to 40% between 2009 and 2018. Other national coaches, such as Italy's Roberto Mancini, have voiced concerns, too. Of the major leagues, however, the English Premier League is the most expat of all: 59% compared to Italy's 54%, Germany's 49%, Spain's 39% and France's 36%.

The Premier League problem

The Premier League's success since its 1992 inception has certainly made it harder for young homegrown players to transition to first-team football at the highest level. In such a competitive league, where clubs have huge funds, managers and football directors always want the best possible "ready to use" talent from around the world.

English membership of the EU single market – we'll see what happens after Brexit – makes it particularly easy to get players from Europe. And with so many continental managers at Premier League clubs working under enormous pressure, it's only reasonable they sign players they know well.

Southgate for one is not convinced it's a simple quality problem. As he put it:

Nobody can tell me that, if [English] players are good enough, they will come through. That is not true. There are plenty of players who are good enough.

If so, we must ask what else could be done to boost the chances of aspiring Lions. One major difference between England and certain continental countries is there are no "B" teams of major clubs in lower divisions. In Spain, Portugal, Germany and Ukraine, this makes it easier to integrate young players into a club's top team. Italy is now trying this too, with Juventus B launching in the country's third tier, Serie C, this season.



Concerned: Gareth Southgate. EPA



Juventus vs Juventus B, August 2018. EPA

Unlike the reserve teams or under-23 teams common in England, B teams arguably give young players more playing time at a higher competitive level. There are also advantages over England's system of loaning out players to lesser clubs or of using feeder clubs in the way that Liverpool takes players from Genk of Belgium, or Chelsea from Vitesse Arnhem in the Netherlands: being part of the same club structure and training in the same environment arguably allows for enhanced internal mobility and increases the chances for opportunities in the first team.

The potential of B teams also extends to managers: after a difficult start to the season, Benfica replaced Rui Vitoria with B team manager Bruno Lage. Legends like Zinedine Zidane and Pep Guardiola also developed their coaching skills in these secondary set ups, previously managing Real Madrid Castilla and Barcelona B respectively – indeed, Guardiola himself has made the case for B teams in England in the past.

The Portuguese experience

Portugal seems the most visible success story with B teams to date. In 2012, the Primeira Liga clubs were invited to create secondary teams that would be directly entered into the country's second tier, Liga Pro, but wouldn't be eligible for promotion. Porto, Benfica, Sporting, Braga, Vitória SC and Maritimo all took this up.

A recent report by the Portuguese League revealed that nine out of the 23 Portugal players that became European champions at Euro 2016 in France played for their club's B team as part of their transition into first-team football. Even more noticeably, 20 of the 21 Portuguese players that made the quarter finals in the 2017 Under-20 World Cup in South Korea were playing for a B team. It's also having a big effect in club football: for example, Benfica's recent 3-0 Europa League victory against Dinamo Zagreb included five players who were in their B team last season.



Next stop the quarter finals: Benfica overcoming Dinamo Zagreb. EPA

Introducing this system to England is not without risks. Take FIFA's plan to limit the number of players clubs can send out on loan each season to between six and eight: richer clubs may use B teams as an instrument to bypass this new rule. There is a wider danger that other parts of the football ecosystem will suffer if B teams allow major clubs to become even more self-contained.

Critics of this system have also made the point that B teams in Portugal and elsewhere can struggle to compete, but that loses sight of the main goal of helping younger players reach the top. On the whole, the B team system looks like a valuable and growing part of international football that England should think seriously about adopting – especially at a time when Brexit and UEFA's Financial Fair Play restrictions will be making clubs reconsider their future options.

Southgate has said that where so many of the things that used to be wrong with English football have now been put right, the proportion of homegrown players in the Premier League “is just the missing piece”. If the likes of Manchester City B and Liverpool B were taking part in lower-league fixtures week in week out, this puzzle might finally be completed.

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