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Player scouting and recruitment in English men's professional football: opportunities for research

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Keywords: *scouting, football, recruitment, Talent Identification, analytics.*

Abstract

This paper relates to scouting and recruitment in English men's professional football. The article points to possible gaps in the literature and offers suggestions for subsequent studies. It is recommended that future research might usefully address perceptions of key stakeholders involved in the scouting and recruitment process to advance our understanding of the phenomena and ultimately, to develop guidelines for professional practice. This work examines:

- The history of scouting and the role of the scout,
- The significance of observation,
- Memory and recall fallibility,
- The use of performance analysis and data in the scouting process,
- Heuristics and decision-making,
- Technical scouting and data implementation,
- Selection criteria in football scouting,
- Practical considerations for improving traditional scouting methods,
- Club philosophy, structure and decision-making, and the
- Proliferation of the Sporting Director role.

Introduction

The recruitment of talented personnel is one of the most significant undertakings for professional football clubs. Within this fiercely competitive industry, acquiring the services of players is a fundamental operational aspect of elite football environments. Many clubs adopt standard, established practices in the scouting, identification, recruitment and development of players, but some utilise more intricate, novel, scientific and data-led approaches. Despite the centrality of scouting for recruitment to professional football, there is a relative scarcity of academic literature in this evolving and dynamic topic. Therefore, this article reveals key findings from related literature, including but not limited to academic investigations. Due to the secretive and applied nature of this subject area, popular journalistic investigations, as well as scholarly research are explored to uncover insight from a range of perspectives.

Talent scouting has been an integral component of the collective knowledge of sports organisations for a century (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams and Philippearts, 2008). However, there are few historical records detailing the emergence and evolution of scouting philosophies and practices in sport, notably within the role of scouting and recruitment in English men's professional football. Parker (2000) argues that football environments are traditionally secretive enclaves, often inhabited by personnel who are sceptical of outsiders and reluctant to share openly details of their approaches. More recent work by Reeves, McRobert, Lewis and Roberts (2019) demonstrates that professional football clubs and their academies are often disinclined to engage in collaborative research partnerships and instead, tend to be protective about their recruitment practices.

The lack of academic research in this area may also reflect the failure of investigative approaches of scholars to encourage transparent analysis, and expose modes of practice, their underpinning philosophies and associated impacts. Conversely, the pioneering approach of Fieldsend (2017), whose award-winning work uncovering *The Secrets of European Football Success* has been translated into several languages, offering insight from 18 clubs. Contributors to his book were encouraged to reveal details of their approaches in order to share expertise, raise standards and promote development. The contemporary economic advancement of elite professional football clubs, notably in the English Premier League, which has been driven by commercial contracts, broadcasting revenues, global exposure and international investment, has seen an expansion in the depth and breadth of employment in these organisations. However, there is limited published evidence detailing how staff operate within some of these roles (Butterworth, Turner and Johnstone, 2012).

Providing definitions for key terms can sharpen the conceptual focus of literature reviews (Rookwood and Hughson, 2017). Franssen and Kuipers (2013) view scouting as a decision-making process involving multiple actors and local knowledge, face-to-face interactions and idiosyncratic evaluations of quality conducted by experts. However, the level of expertise of such personnel should not be assumed for all in these positions. Darr and Mears (2017) frame scouting roles in terms of the significance of their impact upon global football trade. Further, the verb 'to scout' dates back to the 14th century, adopting militaristic connotations, as scouting or reconnaissance. Contemporary definitions remain similarly influenced, framed as the exploration of an area to obtain information, such as, about an enemy (Merriam-Webster, nd.). Thus, in football, scouting is often perceived to involve observing, exploring and obtaining information about potential recruits.

In this research we concentrate our efforts on Performance Identification in a first team environment, which can be differentiated from Talent Identification

which has a more developmental, academy/youth context. Baker, Schorer and Wattie (2018) differentiate these constructs, stating that Performance Identification typically addresses objectives in the shorter term, namely the immediacy of winning games and competitions, rather than focusing on the identification of young, talented athletes with consideration for their longer term development. Johansson and Fahlén (2017) contend that there is an extensive literature base investigating Talent Identification, but a relative lack of research on Performance Identification. They emphasise the difference in approaches and highlight the need to better understand Performance Identification in particular. Thus, our interests are to examine current practices contributing to selections to adult, professional teams.

In professional sport, and football in particular, various investigations have analysed the roles of coaches (Cruickshank and Collins, 2015) and performance analysts (Wright, Atkins, Jones and Todd, 2013) for instance, but limited attention has been directed at the role of scouts. Numerous studies have investigated the practice of identifying and developing talented young athletes, including seminal studies in the domains of relative age effect (Cobley, Baker, Wattie and McKenna, 2009), psychological characteristics of developing excellence (MacNamara, 2011) and the non-linear development of young footballers (Button, 2011), yet few have explored scouting and recruitment at a first team level. Some have even rejected traditional football scouting as a flawed concept (Button, 2011), dismissing its value both from practical and theoretical perspectives.

Conversely, Stephenson (2012) views player recruitment as one of the most important operational activities of an elite football club. Ineffective recruitment can result in significant costs in terms of performances and results, as well as salaries and transfer fees, limiting the potential return on investment (ROI) for clubs. Operational and strategic approaches of scouting and recruitment departments can significantly impact club affairs and ultimate success on and off the pitch, emphasising the importance of these roles. The scholarly studies referenced here include work from related fields such as football operations, coaching, Talent Identification and performance analysis. This review reveals key advancements in established, robust, experimental and innovative practice, identifying potential avenues for enhancing the strategic recruitment operations of football clubs.

Even at elite clubs, scouting roles can vary widely, from part-time local positions to those with trans-continental strategic responsibilities. Therefore, formalised appointments and training can also fluctuate considerably. The plethora of expanded Higher Education provision (football related degrees) has focused less on preparing graduates for applied roles in industry positions, including operational management, social media and marketing etc., but more on performance roles, e.g. coaching, performance analysis, psychology, strength and conditioning. Formalised

qualifications, training provision and associated academic courses with their modular components that focus on scouting remain limited by comparison. In attempting to address such gaps in provision, innovative progress has recently been made, with Masters programmes for Sporting Directors (Manchester Metropolitan University, n.d.) and other qualifications for Technical Directors (The FA, n.d.) developing a track record of football industry engagement and employment. Various independent providers are also offering training courses for scouts, however, there is a case for developing evidence-based approaches to scout education in the future, critiquing and building upon existing theory and practice.

In this article we also examine the roles of those who are integral to the scouting process, termed the *Nowhere Men* by Calvin (2013); the often underpaid, undervalued and unknown faces of the football industry who typically travel extensively to watch players and negotiate with clubs, athletes and their agents. The presence of ‘recognisable’ scouts at matches can draw unwanted attention to player profiling, when the secrecy of operations and discussions are facilitated by ‘faceless’ scouts. This review will evaluate the current understanding of such personnel to help ensure their roles are better understood. For those with operational and commercial interests the recruitment of talented players, sometimes framed as ‘strategic resources’, can help clubs obtain and maintain a competitive advantage over rival teams. Raddichi and Mozzachiodi (2016) argue that this understanding has seen various clubs explore alternative, innovative and cost-effective approaches to scouting, with key examples explored in this article.

The centrality of scouting to various sports has been represented in popular culture, notably in American cinema. Films on NFL recruitment such as *Draft Day* and baseball equivalents including *Trouble with the Curve* reveal the intricacies of scouting behaviour. The latter movie emphasised the relevance of multisensory human observation and analysis, however, with such scrutiny lie the potential for flaws, shaped by limitations in human information processing. Consequently, we also consider literature on alternative and concurrent technology and data-driven scouting approaches, similarly showcased in the film *Moneyball* (Briley, 2013). More broadly we explore the environment in which the scout’s role is entrenched, the philosophies of scouting and the knowledge flow between key stakeholders.

The history of football scouting

Few scholars have advanced our understanding of the historical development of football scouting. A more recognisable and recent analytical framework that has received more attention, however, relates to Talent Identification, notably in youth sport. The goal of Talent ID research and practice can include selecting those with athletic prowess and potential, whilst enhancing the probability of selecting future elite players early in their careers (Williams and Franks, 1998). Historically,

scouting has been perceived as a role that requires extensive experience, and some individuals have held their positions for prolonged periods, particularly those who successfully identified talented players on a regular basis. The limited number of total club employees in the last century often resulted in scouts being better known within their clubs and communities, at least by name. Geoff Twentyman for instance, Chief Scout at Liverpool from the 1960s to the 1980s, travelled extensively, watching several matches per week. He compiled reports for future reference, often observing and profiling promising players several times before making recommendations to club management (Hughes, 2009).

The establishment of the Olympic football tournament in 1896 and particularly the FIFA Men's World Cup from 1930, together with the inception of international inter-club competitions, enhanced exposure to different players and markets, eventually serving to augment international player migration and recruitment (Rookwood and Buckley, 2007; Taylor, 2006). Darby and Solberg (2010) contend that globalisation has further advanced player transfers, with migration predominantly arranged through scouts and intermediary agents. Such migratory patterns accelerated following the 1995 Bosman ruling, which removed restrictions on the number of foreign players that European clubs could recruit from other European countries (Schokkaert, 2016). Despite this evolution in scouting practices, significant gaps remain in the historical understanding of scouting overall. However, Fieldsend (2017) points out that processes have evolved considerably, likening the modern-day concept to that of warfare, where scouts from rival clubs bid to identify a talented player (colloquially termed a 'gem') before their opponents do. The importance of some procedures remains evident, namely effective communication, the development of trust between key stakeholders and the involvement of extensive travel. However, the scale, technological support, geographical range and strategic focus of scouting have advanced considerably, particularly for elite clubs. Other advancements include the proliferation of data collection and analysis and profiling methods in accordance with recruitment philosophies and playing strategies, although traditional methods of watching players live, in person, are still commonplace.

Operational scouting practices in the professional market are shaped by advancements in organisational capacity, global transportation and communication networks, and legislative and regulatory developments. Elite clubs now employ more scouts across more geographic regions, facilitated by travel and technology, with enhanced freedom of movement and reduced restrictions of international recruitment. Prior to the BREXIT ruling, English Premier League clubs were equal beneficiaries of the European-centred, lubricated transnational transfer market

(Rookwood and Hughson, 2017), however current and future practices are subject to restrictions, and future research could analyse the as yet unknown impact of this.

The role of the football scout

Literature about football scouting reveals the inherent uncertainty of decision making, i.e. scouts acting hunches about potential (Schumaker, Solieman and Chen, 2012). Also, scouting and Talent Identification share a degree of luck for talents 'being spotted', i.e. a player's opportunity to move on in their career being influenced by chance-timing and resources (Miller, Cronin and Baker, 2015). However, Nash and Collins (2006) argue that scouting is based on a complex interaction of knowledge and memory, honed by extensive experience and reflection. Christensen's (2009) seminal study examined the formation and social construction of the 'eye for talent' that many football scouts are said to possess. Her research suggests a scout's knack for identifying talent can be informed by 'visual experience', influenced by intuition, 'gut feeling' or something seen with 'the mind's eye' and judged by one's 'inner self' (Christensen, 2009: 371).

Many scholars argue that player identification cannot always be reduced to a rational, objective process, with some coaches and scouts relying on 'what feels right in the heart and the stomach' (Lund and Söderström, 2017, p.248). Similarly, Franssen and Kuipers (2013) claim that scouts emphasise the importance of their soft skills for having a 'feel' for talent, with Darr and Mears (2017) regarding football scouting as a 'gut business'. Lund and Söderström (2017) suggest this 'eye for talent' can be governed by previous identifications and personal interpretations of what professional football entails and the culture in which they are immersed. Their study stresses contextual and cultural factors that structure the way in which player qualities are prioritised or overlooked. Tranckle and Cushion (2006: 266) succinctly summarise that 'talent can only be talent and recognised as such where it is valued'. From these interpretations we can view the process as a social and cultural construct, which warrants further scrutiny to identify what determines this eye for talent and what it looks like in practice.

Recent research by Reeves *et al.* (2019) has begun to explore the process of scout observations. They note that effective scouts invariably process large amounts of information, attempting to utilise effective visual search strategies, scanning the whole pitch and filtering contextual information quickly. Similarly, Christensen (2009) found that coaches and scouts use their practical sense and visual experience to read and recognise player movement patterns. Many scouts may possess key competencies to identify talented performers based upon intuition, but more work is required to reveal these competencies fully to understand how they might be developed. Christensen's (2009) study highlights examples in which some experienced scouts would only note a talented player's name, recording

nothing of their qualities, but relying on recall and the ‘feeling and sensual experience’ (p.371) connected to their observations. These intuitive gut feelings directed by implicit, incorporated, practical or tacit knowledge, may stress the art of scouting, more than the rational science of the process, rejecting approaches that rely on declarative knowledge, as described by Abraham and Collins (2011).

Observation, memory and recall fallibility

Football performance operations incorporate systems in which coaches, managers and scouts convert observational data into usable knowledge, to varying degrees of formality in terms of systematisation (Raddicchi and Mozzachiodi, 2016). Scouting has traditionally been informed by preconceived notions of talented players fitting particular profiles. Recent research has emphasised the limitations of subjective approaches. Reeves, Littlewood, McRobert and Roberts (2018: 1123) for instance argue that ‘it is accepted that scouts working in isolation can result in repetitive misjudgements’. Likewise, Tavana, Azizi, Azizi and Behzadian (2013) criticise the imprecision and ambiguity of value judgements and decision-making, whilst Johansson and Fahlén (2017) claim that when used in isolation gut-hunches can prove unreliable. Vilela, Portela and Santos (2018) note that given the volume of potential visual data it is possible to access in even a single football match, the human capacity to process, evaluate and formulate decisions on player recommendations cannot compare with computerised systems.

The inevitable flaws in a practitioner’s reliance on observation, memory, recall and tacit knowledge have been acknowledged in significant studies investigating the fallibility of human observation and recall of sports performance (Franks and Miller, 1986; Laird and Waters, 2008; Mason, Farrow and Hattie, 2021). As with managers and coaches, scouts can often engage in biased and invalid observations (Laird and Waters, 2008). The historical reliance on such processes has now been rejected in favour of prioritising, or at least inclusion of innovative performance analysis methods which can help mitigate many of the shortcomings of traditional football scouting. It is unrealistic to expect impartial objectivity, validity and reliability from live observations, although this does not discount the subjective expertise and tacit knowledge of scouts in identifying suitable target players, a prediction of future talent. However, the research demonstrates the shortcomings in human observation, memory and recall when relied upon in isolation.

Utilising performance analysis and data in football scouting

Various scholars criticise scouting models which rely exclusively on human expertise and observation, notably in light of available technological media resources which can streamline scouting processes (see Raddicchi and Mozzachiodi, 2016; Johansson and Fahlén, 2017). By comparison, traditional decision-making approaches relying solely upon intuition and gut instincts have become largely

outmoded (Schumaker *et al.*, 2012). Many contemporary researchers recommend player analysis informed by sound scientific and technological processes, resulting in a concept of ‘data-mining’. Data mining has become an integral part of decision-making, which extends to scouts using statistical analysis and projection techniques to identify which talents are likely to provide the biggest impact, reducing the effects of biases that permeate human decision processing (Schumaker *et al.*, 2012). Scouts can become blindsided by particular positive player attributes, overlooking their limitations in the process. However, in an argument also applicable to scouting observations, they suggest that ‘by removing the potential of human biases from the decision-making process, coaches and managers have the potential to manage more effectively and make objective decisions that can help the organisation’ (p.3). In practice, it is questionable how realistic it is to remove human bias even with when adopting more scientifically informed approaches, however, reducing biases and prioritising a reliance on data over intuition in decision-making is considered feasible and potentially beneficial.

Gerrard (2017: 427) highlights numerous studies where statistical analysis consistently provides more accurate predictions of future outcomes than the perspectives of experts applying intuition and experience, ‘the overwhelming body of evidence points in one direction, namely, the superiority of algorithms over experts’. However, Miller *et al.* (2015) state that Talent Identification literature has often been disparaged due to its grounding in naturalistic decision-making, and over-reliance on prior experience when identifying talented athletes, arguing that some criticism which frames Talent Identification also fails to acknowledge the experiential nature of observation within performance analysis. These different perspectives can emphasise the value of multifaced approaches, in which human input can be utilised in conjunction with technological methods.

Heuristics and decision-making

Miller *et al.* (2015) argue that scouts and coaches making real-world decisions cannot consider all potentially relevant evidence in a completely neutral manner in all situations. Rather, they suggest they rely in part upon their heuristic reasoning: the process that facilitates our capacity to make decisions. Heuristic techniques are not guaranteed to be optimal, perfect or rational, but can prove sufficient for reaching more immediate, short-term approximations, as a metacognitive shortcut strategy in judgement formation (Miller, Rowe, Cronin and Bampouras, 2012). This involves quick information searches and decision-making processes, under the conditions of limited knowledge, time and cognitive capacity (Raab, 2012). Without such cognitive processes, humans would fall into total judgement paralysis, notably when faced with uncertainty. Heuristic reasoning can yield accurate judgements as well as producing systematic errors, with the potential for

the latter serving as a source of criticism in scouting contexts. Raab (2012) suggests that further study of biases and associated processes can help to develop and improve our understanding of the accuracy of sport performance judgements.

Miller *et al.* (2012) apply the concept of human decision-making and heuristic judgement in sporting domains, conscious of its limitations but supportive of its merits in producing relatively reliable accounts of previous events or performances, such as the frequency or probability of the (re)occurrence of a phenomenon. Applied to the current context, this could include where a scout recognises a facet of perceived talent which has been noticed in another player they have previously scouted. A scout is then likely to make a recommendation based on the limited information available. Miller *et al.* (2012) acknowledge this problem but note that scouts are often called upon to make snap judgements based upon observational assessments. These real-world and time-sensitive judgements may also be rooted within complex contextual and overlapping socio-psychological domains. They consider heuristic reasoning as an adaptive tool, facilitating on-the-spot judgements, given that relatively few practical sporting situations afford opportunities for extended periods deliberating on various potential outcomes across myriad scenarios before choosing a course of action. It is important that suggestions for scouting processes consider the available resources and imposed constraints relevant to the context, thus helping avoid the ‘unhelpful division between research and practice’ where communication between the two realms proves didactic rather than discursive (Miller *et al.*, 2015: 647).

Technical scouting and data implementation

The shortcomings of traditional scouting methods have been outlined, with credence given to the proliferation of technologically-informed processes – to such an extent that Schumaker *et al.* (2012) suggest that data approaches can replace the role of the football scout. However, rather than using analytics to supplant traditional methods completely, scouts and data scientists working in tandem may reflect a more holistic approach to decision-making. Gerrard (2017) argues that effective approaches are often those which combine data and human judgement. Similarly, Vilela *et al.* (2018) suggest that data can enrich and empower football scouting, helping to produce more reliable solutions to Talent Identification by assessing player abilities and future potential in order to enhance a club’s ROI.

Research conducted by Vilela *et al.* (2018) on data mining contends that the technical collection and analysis of data is the first stage of the scouting process, before a recruitment department applies traditional methods to monitor a player’s performance. However, this might depend on how an individual player comes to the attention of a scouting department. If there is an opportunity to watch a recommended player then this may precede data analysis, which emphasises that

real-world scouting scenarios are born from human judgment. Related analysis by Anderson and Sally (2014) found that Premier League clubs typically involve technical scouting and analytics, providing statistical information which can inform recruitment decisions. This demonstrates the growing acceptance of technology to enhance traditional methods. Further research is required to better understand the role and impact of newer methodologies in the scouting process, i.e. how clubs utilise modern technology in conjunction with traditional scouting methods.

Selection criteria in football scouting

The importance of developing and imbedding explicit key performance indicators (KPIs) in performance analysis has long been recognised in academic and practical settings (O'Donoghue, 2008; Wright *et al.* 2013). However, few studies have focused on player identification selection criteria in scouting and recruitment. Johansson and Fahlén (2017) claims that a lack of explicit criteria and structure in selection processes, together with an overreliance on gut feelings, can limit the reliability of player identification. Selecting and recruiting players can prove complex and precarious undertakings, particularly when considerable investment is required to sign a player and ROI is uncertain (Baker *et al.*, 2018; Roberts *et al.* 2019). Performance metrics and objective indicators by which talent can be measured and valued in the labour market can prove to be unreliable (Gerrard, 2017). Williams, Ford and Drust (2020) reviewed nine studies assessing the variables scouts and coaches use to identify players, emphasising that there is limited agreement on attributes associated with playing positions in football. However, there are few other studies that have offered useful insights in this area.

Clubs often develop their own criteria and recruitment strategy influenced by attributes prioritised of key stakeholders within the organisation. However, a lack of transparency and the secretive nature of their approaches can complicate the process of undertaking meaningful analysis. Johansson and Fahlén (2017) suggest that systems of play and game plans can influence player recruitment, with some coaches developing clear criteria based on the skillset required in relation to the demands of different positions. For other clubs, the adopted game plan is more adaptable, shaped around the attributes of recruited players. Miller *et al.* (2015) suggest that in practice, an analytical coach or scout may focus more on the absence than the presence of particular performance markers e.g. psychological components, as deemed evident in prospective signings. Consequently, some players may be discounted from consideration, or deemed too much of a risk.

Practical considerations for improving traditional scouting methods

Football clubs can fall foul of poor information in player labour markets, meaning that the market traders; clubs, do not always use available information effectively to determine valuations of assets they are trading in; the football players

(Hakes and Sauer, 2006). This can be influenced by an overreliance on outdated or erroneous information or overlooking relevant evidence. Gerrard (2017) argues that effective decision-making in these contexts can require harnessing the power of data analysis. Some scholars also suggest that adopting more structured processes can enhance scouting systems. Den Hartigh, Niessen, Frencken and Meijer (2018) state that player recruitment decisions are generally based on the clinical judgment and overall impression of scouts.

These scholars propose an actuarial scoring system to structure a scout's identification of players, whereby relevant skills (relative to established priorities) are rated on a five-point Likert scale, with a total score then based on a pre-defined combination of the composite scores (Den Hartigh *et al.*, 2018). This serves as the application of performance profiling, which is not a particularly pioneering approach to assessing athlete capabilities (critique by Butterworth, O'Donoghue and Cropley, 2013). However, this approach may provide some structure for clubs – notably those who have previously relied solely on scouting observation, memory and recall – where instilling a simple profiling system aligned to the recruitment priorities and required attributes could improve existing practice. As an important consideration for all scouting research, the degree of receptiveness to suggested operational change from recruitment personnel can shape the potential impact.

To effectively imbed actuarial judgment in performance contexts, Kahneman (2011) has provided guidelines:

1. Identify a limited set of relevant variables that are relatively easy to assess.
2. Determine how variables should be combined, considering whether some should carry greater emphasis than others.
3. Establish how these variables will be scored.
4. Combine the scores based on the pre-defined formula.
5. Use the final score to make or at least inform selection decisions.

This application of actuarial judgment does not render the scout redundant or their opinion, observations and gut feeling irrelevant. Conversely, adherents of this system suggest that scouts can provide valuable input to the development and evaluation of actuarial scoring systems, namely the parameters and weightings to be applied (Den Hartigh *et al.*, 2018). Gerrard (2017) advocates the use of these processes and considers the expertise of coaches and scouts as crucial to determine relevant factors for player identification. A comprehensive system can provide a basis for consistent comparisons between players, and when coaches and scouts are more involved in the initial discovery phase, they are often more likely to value and utilise rating systems to assist their decision-making.

Club philosophy, structure and decision-making

It is known that some working practices within professional football clubs can be improved. Some scholars suggest that loose and informal management practices can prove common even within elite environments (Relvas, Littlewood, Gilbourne and Richardson, 2010). Certain aspects of the football industry can exhibit endemic instability, illustrated by high staff turnover and frequent policy and cultural changes, typically influenced by managerial change or other leadership appointments (Bridgewater, 2010; Parnell, Widdop, Groom and Bond, 2018).

The introduction and normalisation of the term ‘project’ to describe the impermanent leadership of a particular football club, is a construct that could be compared to a presidential administration within governmental politics (albeit with less defined timeframes). It is an idea that can be employed to give those in power the authority to deviate from ingrained practices. This can see the conscious erosion of traditional club cultures and systems but can also be utilised to instil a winning mindset into a club that lacks such a legacy. The creation and investment in such projects can shape the recruitment of staff and players, and if implemented effectively this can help reduce the potential for organisational instability.

However, sustained success and stability often prove relatively elusive in the football industry. Gibson and Groom (2019) emphasise the uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity of many football environments. For instance, as of the start of the 2019-20 season, Premier League managerial appointments lasted 789 days on average, a 64 per cent reduction on the 1,301 day average a decade earlier. (As a historical reference, West Ham United only had two managers between 1902 and 1950). Given the growing instability of English football, it is difficult for clubs to devise long-term, shared philosophies congruent with robust recruitment processes that contribute to effective, strategic decision-making. However, Parnell *et al.* (2018) note that due to the commodification and highly competitive nature of professional football, organisational structures and management practices are becoming increasingly professional, partly influenced by the need to achieve competitive advantage in the labour market. Similarly, Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) note that the increased commercialisation and competitiveness of clubs has impacted their organisational approaches, philosophy and practice.

Despite these developments, until relatively recently many English clubs persisted with traditional organisational models, with team managers effectively governing football operations as well as first team affairs (Parnell *et al.*, 2018). This has had philosophical and operational implications at such clubs, shaped by the precarity of managerial roles and the upheaval that new appointments can result in. Scouts typically operated within the confines of financial, philosophical and cultural principles, which are important to examine to understand the constraints

placed upon such roles, bearing in mind that considerable variance can be evident between clubs. Research into scouting and coaching practices show that individuals come to rely on their tacit knowledge and a perceived competence formed through extensive experience, observing and monitoring the performance of highly skilled players. Some emphasise the importance of developing tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to maximise the reliability and validity of player assessments.

In the context of American football, Erhardt, Martin-Rios and Harkins (2014) found that coaches were able to convert their tacit knowledge into more explicit knowledge through three core knowledge flow capabilities: scripting, simplification and individual job directives. Scripting is a process where tacit knowledge is transferred into explicit knowledge by codifying (writing down) the knowledge as detailed instructions. Knowledge flow simplification concerns the reduction of managerial knowledge into simpler cognitive chunks of explicit knowledge, whilst eliminating erroneous information. Individual job directives involve coaches purposefully replacing higher-level tacit knowledge with technical explicit knowledge necessary for an individual to carry out specific tasks, independent from other individuals. The flow of knowledge is essential during decision-making to respond to new challenges, find alternative solutions and ultimately maximise ongoing operations (Erhardt *et al.*, 2014). Whilst their research predominantly focuses on the dissemination of knowledge to athletes, parallels can be drawn with scouting and recruitment. For instance, managers or Sporting Directors may explicitly state their selection criteria to a Head of Recruitment who subsequently communicates this directive to their team of scouts.

Erhardt *et al.*, (2014) also suggest that football (soccer) clubs are not particularly proficient in developing tacit knowledge into explicit, usable content. Knowledge flow can prove a defining feature of successful teams and a necessary precursor for creating competitive cultures. To develop this competitive edge while promoting consistency in scouting and recruitment, some scholars recommend that clubs regularly review their Talent Identification processes to ensure a coherence between philosophy and practice (Reeves, Roberts, McRobert and Littlewood, 2018). These authors provide examples of problematic practice whereby clubs produce written documentation that scouts could recall and communicate, but which failed to inform actual practice as evidenced by analysed datasets.

Disparities between philosophy and practice in high performance cultures are not uncommon and creating processes shaped by philosophy can prove challenging (Cruickshank and Collins, 2012). Referring specifically to scouting contexts, Johansson and Fahlén (2017) highlight the notion of a split philosophy whereby coaches seeking to achieve both long and short-term success through their selection of athletes, both immediate and enduring outcomes were required from their roles.

This presents a challenge for coaches and scouts, with sustained pressure emanating from a variety of sources. Reeves *et al.* (2018) found that individuals responsible for recruitment were undertaking various tasks that appeared relevant at a given point in time yet did not align with the club's overall philosophy or culture. Reeves *et al.* (2018) also suggest that football clubs should be more proactive in seeking to understand the structural issues that affect Talent Identification processes within their own context and improve the education of and support provided for staff responsible for recruitment.

The proliferation of the Sporting Director role

As previously noted, many English clubs have persisted with traditional organisation models until relatively recently, with many team managers effectively governing football operations as well as first team affairs (Parnell *et al.*, 2018). These scholars have driven the research agenda for the alternative practice of employing Sporting Directors to oversee the operational framework of professional football clubs. This is a model adopted from European contexts, notably in Germany and Spain, and is now becoming the rule rather than exception at the elite level in England. At the time of writing 15 of the 20 Premier League clubs had a Sporting Director in post, with many clubs in lower levels of English football following a similar structure (Slemen, 2020). A Sporting Director is the individual responsible for overseeing a football club in terms of organisational leadership, financial planning and the management of human resources, to ensure the club is effective and successful within fast-moving, dynamic and global markets.

Comparatively, the position of General Manager is often championed in American sporting markets, a role that has existed in that name within baseball since 1927. Billy Beane is one of the best-known examples, a former baseball player who was in post at Oakland Athletics from 1998-2015 as General Manager, and subsequently as Executive Vice President of baseball operations. Popularised in the aforementioned film *Moneyball*, Beane helped lead the utilisation of insight from sabermetrics to identify and recruit undervalued players in baseball, achieving an impressive ROI (Gerrard, 2017). Manifestations of the role in football include titles such as Director of Football, Technical Director and Sporting Director, which have involved different approaches and varied levels of acceptance and success.

Parnell *et al.* (2018) state that most English football clubs operate with a senior decision-maker such as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) on the board who is responsible for approving strategic decisions and is therefore often accountable for the success or failure of the organisation. The CEO and Board sit independently from the Manager who occupies the traditional leadership role in football in a performance capacity and is typically responsible for team selection, tactics and overseeing training (Molan, Matthews and Arnold, 2016). Sporting Directors are

usually responsible for developing a positive working relationship with the owners and the board, recruiting players and other staff within a specified budget and developing a club-wide football philosophy to support the sporting strategy (Parnell *et al.*, 2018). Resistance to such roles in English football can originate from incongruence in relation to power structures with some managers perceiving Sporting Directors as a threat, imposing policies such as those relating to player recruitment (Parnell *et al.*, 2018). Research on Sporting Directors is in its infancy, partly because few scholars beyond Parnell and colleagues have been able to access those who hold such positions. Further studies are required to understand the role, including how they influence recruitment and scouting practices.

Some investigations into the organisational and strategic approaches of football clubs have sought to identify the philosophical, practical and operational characteristics evident within and between different clubs. Relvas *et al.* (2010) have examined the structures and practices of elite football clubs and found that even when sharing the same training environment, communication between youth and professional levels is not always efficient or effective. Woodman and Hardy (2001) highlighted the need for precise, clear and direct communication to mitigate organisational ambiguity, and issues with responsibilities and workplace stressors. Two decades later these findings are relevant. they also emphasised the importance of effective communication and working collaboratively towards shared objectives, including those affecting scouting personnel. The appointment of capable Sporting Directors in more clubs across different levels of the English game could help address communication discrepancies, incongruence and ambiguity which can exist within these professional organisations. The importance of this role requires further investigation to build upon the work of Parnell *et al.* (2018).

Conclusion

From the research published to date it is clear that traditional scouting methods whereby scouts attend games, make manual notes and report back to their club is still commonplace, particularly at lower levels of English football. However, in the last two decades, the proliferation of data and additional performance analysis technology has transformed aspects of the scouting process, especially at those clubs who have invested in these technologies. This review reveals some important advances but also highlights gaps in the knowledgebase, such as where the scout's role sits within a club's structure, who they report to, how they make decisions on players and how they report their findings back to the club. Further investigations are required to enhance our appreciation for the scout's role and to assist with the development of practical guidelines.

The organisational structure and culture of English men's professional has and is continuing to change with the proliferation of Sporting Directors. Further

examination of this role and how it shapes scouting and recruitment is warranted. Club selection criteria concerning player identification also requires further scrutiny together with the extent to which club philosophy impacts selection criteria. This could adopt case study approaches for individual clubs, although a meta-analysis is also required to build a broader picture of the approaches adopted across English football. Only Fieldsend's (2017) study examines this important aspect of football operations, and this is from a European perspective. As a lucrative football market, home to the most extensive national network of professional football clubs in the world, a detailed comparative study incorporating qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in the scouting process would enhance our knowledge and understanding of scouting at an academic level, and could help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of scouting and recruitment in professional football in the future.

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Reviewer Comments

This was an interesting read, in which the authors look at player recruitment strategies, alongside a hybrid method of analysing players' attributes through collecting and reporting data. It is interesting that with all the current technologies, scouts still lean on personal observational analysis, and with good reason – clubs rely on it. Football managers and heads of recruitment all want something different from a player or their team, consequently, potential 'investments' (i.e. new players) are still assessed by the eye of the scout. Considering the broad and contrasting opinions within football, this begs the question of what, actually, is talent?

Players have to fit into a system or method of how the head coach wants to play, it is not just identifying talent, it is identifying who fits the criteria, who has the attributes to work in synergy with the other players. As football advances with technology, it is safe to say that data-mining has its place in the game, however, that data can be interpreted in a number of ways, which may not always be helpful for scouting and decision making. For example, looking at GPS statistics, could highlight that one player has covered more ground than another, however, what the data does not consider is the strategic actions associated with certain positions on the field. Such as, for the pivotal midfield player, the expectation is to 'sit' and screen the back four, which would offer contrasting data (distance/speed stats) compared to an attacking wide player, who is expected to consistently drive into forward areas. Equally, data on passing retention from a defensive player who has little pressure in deep attacking areas, would be appear better, statistically, to a forward who should be constantly under pressure to attack; expected to take more risks. Again, backward and sideways passing is less of a risk than forward passing, depending on the player's position. A personal observation analysis would identify this, whereas the tech-driven data report might suggest otherwise, showing that computer data analysis can offer as many problems as it does solutions.

There are different types of scouts, with different interests and roles. For example, there is opposition scouting, where the scout is asked to write a report on upcoming opponents and their key players, set pieces, patterns of play etc. There is opportunist scouting, when clubs select on the recommendation of 'ground scouts' who operate in grassroots football, with the aim of uncovering the next 'gem'. There is player specific scouting, when a manager has identified someone who fits the profile of what he/she requires for the team. National team scouting, where the scout is looking only at players who can be selected for their country. Future research could look at the contrasting roles a scout could have. With all considered, what can be more reliable than an experienced eye?