



Master's Dissertation in Applied Management (BUS5053W)

**Talent Identification and Development in South African
professional football – a coach perspective**

Prepared for:

Philip Broster

Mary Ann Dove

School of Management Studies, Faculty of Commerce

University of Cape Town

Prepared by:

Pedro Lacerda Nobre (ARJPED001)

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ABSTRACT

The growing complexity and competitiveness of professional sport have underscored the importance of Talent Identification and Development (TID) in football. This study examines the TID frameworks employed by South Africa's top professional male football clubs through the perspectives of coaches and key informants. This research addresses the lack of academic focus on TID practices in the Global South, highlighting the critical role of coaches in bridging theoretical frameworks and practical applications and realities. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 male professionals from seven Premier Soccer League (PSL) clubs across four provinces, including head coaches, youth coaches, and key operational staff. Thematic analysis revealed six core themes and 18 sub-themes, illustrating the interconnected and multifactorial nature of TID. Player characteristics, recruitment processes, and the complementarity between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches to TID emerged as pivotal elements. A significant disparity was identified between youth and senior levels, with youth football hindered by insufficient investment, infrastructure, and structured competitions. Despite the positive contribution of the under twenty-three years old national league, the Diski League, these systemic challenges limit the development of young players in South Africa. The study offers an integrated and holistic perspective on TID, evidence of presence of sophisticated professional practices, and advocates for an ecological approach to TID. It proposes three policy recommendations: improving coach development professionalization; regional youth intensive training camps for talented players; and a structured youth competition framework. These measures aim to unlock South Africa's untapped football potential, paving the way for greater success at both national and international levels.

Keywords: *South African football; Coaches' decision-making; Data-driven TID; Intuition-driven TID; Global South.*



PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

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Student number	ARJPED001
Student name	Pedro Araújo de Lacerda Nobre
Signature of Student	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">Signed by candidate</div>
Date:	23/01/2025

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATDE	Athletic Talent Development Environment
DD	Data-driven approach
DDC	DSTV Diski Challenge or ‘Diski League’
HEA	Holistic Ecological Approach
ID	Intuition-driven approach
KPIs	Key performance indicators
LTDA	Long-term Athlete Development Model
PSL	Premier Soccer League
RAE	Relative Age Effect
SAFA	South African Football Association
TID	Talent Identification and Development
TD	Talent Development
TI	Talent Identification
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations
UCT	University of Cape Town

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research problems

From sport, through art, to education, researchers in all knowledge fields are attempting to find a way to identify the best in their industry. Talent Identification and Development (TID), in whichever area, is crucial. However, finding the most efficient and most effective TID method is a multifactorial task rather than a straightforward or entirely accurate process (Wolstencroft & House, 2002). In general, researching talent in sport combines different dimensions, incorporating the processes of identifying, selecting, developing, managing, career development and the potential-building of the athletes' sport talent and of their working environments (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020). The concept of TID encompasses multiple perspectives, approaches, and methodologies used to identify and develop the most talented players in a specific sport (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020). These include the autonomous and specialised research areas of Talent Identification (TI) (Johnston et al., 2017), and Talent Development (TD) (Reeves & Roberts, 2018), which may be integrated within the overall TID system (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020).

Contextual considerations that help to frame the social uniqueness of South African contemporary football include topics related to TID, education, socioeconomics and sport investment policies. In South African football, there is a general tendency for under-investment in TID, as clubs prefer to hire and buy players from other professional clubs instead of investing and developing sport talent (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2013). Regarding formal basic education policies, in most government schools, physical education is not part of the curriculum. Furthermore, throughout the country, there is limited access to local and public sport facilities that are freely and easily available for youth use (Kooniyaditse, 2010). The under-investment in effective national level sport public policies has detrimental impacts on sport talent (Jacobs et al., 2019). This is particularly disadvantageous for those sport modalities that historically have attracted insufficient private attention and investment.

Within the context of this study, different aspects of sport talent are explored and highlighted as part of a single whole, that is the value chain of identifying, selecting, developing and managing talent. TID is defined as an umbrella term that integrates a unifying perspective, while TI (Johnston et al., 2017) and TD (Reeves & Roberts, 2018) are the terms assigned when it is necessary to zoom into a detailed, descriptive and sequential approach to the flowchart activities involved in the management and life cycle of sport talent. Contemporary sport literature strongly recommends careful use of language and bringing consistency and clarity to talent research (Johnston et al., 2023). Language use is particularly important in sport research because it captures

and reflects the social, political and multidimensional aspects of sport practice (Collyer, 2018). This is true for both Global North and Global South contexts, although these factors may have a greater impact in an emerging Global South economy (Collyer, 2018)

From the athletes' point of view and from the environment they are in, talent is present, whether it is measured and acknowledged or not (Fuhre et al., 2022). This project's working definition of talent involves the objective traits and the development of athletes' potential, together with the environments in which they are immersed (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Considering the sport systems that overemphasise accuracy and precision, it is important that procedures do not act as a barrier and do not bring entropy to the TID system, hindering the players' developmental trajectories (Johnston et al., 2023).

The present-day panorama of professional and Olympic sport is arguably more complex and competitive than ever (Till & Baker, 2020). The significant commercial and financial reward of winning the biggest sporting competitions (for example, the English Football Premier League or an Olympic Gold Medal) means that significant resources are invested in professional sport clubs and national governing bodies to achieve sport success (Till et al., 2019). The focus of these sport institutions is identifying, nurturing and developing early athletic talent and converting it into the sporting superstars of tomorrow. To accomplish this, sport organisations have developed TID systems, which have grown considerably within sport over the last 20 years, reflecting significant financial investment (Till & Baker, 2020). For instance, in England, category 1 football academies invest between £2.3 and £4.9 million pounds per annum (Larkin & Reeves, 2018). Furthermore, to identify and develop sporting talent, United Kingdom Sport, an official government body, reportedly spends approximately £77.4 million per annum (UK Sport, 2022). As has been mentioned, despite this substantial financial investment, TID is not a straightforward process (Till & Baker, 2020). Moreover, the processes of understanding, identifying, nurturing and developing sport talent are even more complex when considering young athletes, given the numerous physiological, psychological, social and geopolitical factors that can have an impact on athletes' development (Till & Baker, 2020).

Interestingly, TID methods vary across different sports, from individual sports like tennis and swimming to team sports such as basketball and football (Fransen & Güllich, 2019). Regarding the different TID practices, some sports rely heavily on physical measurements, and others emphasize technical skills or mental attributes (Höner et al., 2023). While this introduction chapter provides an overview of TID practices, more detailed approaches and models are thoroughly examined in the literature review section.

Sport TID systems have gained in popularity in recent decades. However, there is still a lack of consensus in relation to how sport talent should be defined and identified so there is no uniformly

accepted theoretical framework to guide current practice (Johnston et al., 2017). There is an apparently inconsistent and unreliable nature to the predictors of talent in sport (Johnston et al., 2017). Although there is a wide diversity of approaches to TID processes, in whatever sport modality is being considered, there seems to be no clear, consensual set of variables that are able to consistently predict future success in football (Bergkamp et al., 2019). In other words, there is no theoretical overarching framework and no integrative methodological approach to studying talent in football (Bergkamp et al., 2019). This suggests that TID has not yet been solved, as there is no reliable instrument to consistently predict football talent (Fuhre et al., 2022). This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of TID decision-making processes by professional football coaches in South Africa through the analysis and interpretation of their methods and practices.

The research project focuses on football. Football offers a rich and interesting research environment for the study of TID practices because of its scale, reach, professionalism and diversity. Some authors, namely Bergkamp et al. (2019), highlight that football players' development and progress do not follow a linear and cause-effect sequence. Often these successful trajectories are the result of the interaction of complex intellectual and physical competences that are developed dynamically within a player's performance environment and ecosystem. Taken as a whole, the prediction of the future performance of players is unavoidably a multi-dimensional and multi-factorial process (Bergkamp et al., 2019). Sport organisations, including football clubs and football national federations, use both a mix of more formal or less formal procedures for TID (Côté & Hancock, 2016). The evolution of sport systems directly affecting TID include the federations, associations, professional leagues and tournaments, and also the new and the old media that reproduces and amplifies public and private discourses (Kooniyaditse, 2010). National level institutions that determine and condition sport outcomes in South African football, include the South African Football Association (SAFA), the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and the sport media. Moreover, there is a scarcity of published research that covers these topics in South African football, which this study aims to address.

It is mainly within the structures and settings of professional football clubs and their academies that TID processes take place. These include the procedures, strategies and policies, which are involved in TID as a whole. TID methods in football consist of the prediction of top-level football performance (Bergkamp et al., 2019). Regarding talent in football, and according to Baker et al. (2020), the role and function of the coaches in the process of identifying, selecting, managing, and developing young athletes' talent requires further research, as often the focus is on studying only the players, ignoring the coaches' role. There is a bias in favour of studying exclusively the player population and neglecting the coaches' perspectives and voice (Mills et al., 2012). Considering this void, there is a need to capture how football coaches from high-performance

football clubs identify and develop talent in real life. This involves, crucially, both the coaches' practices and strategies, as well as the clubs' policies, including the coaches' awareness and expectations, and the importance of a nurturing environment for players.

It is important to consider the research inputs that are available from diverse sources, applied to the football context (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). There are examples in the literature that acknowledge the need for alternative and unconventional, yet integrated, approaches to TID. Emergent contemporary research in sport has proposed holistic integrated systemic and ecological epistemic positions (Henriksen et al., 2020). Additionally, Baker et al. (2020), argue for the need to better understand the decisions of coaches regarding talent in sport. These authors refer to the terms “data-driven” and “coach’s intuition” as two contrasting approaches to TID systems (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020) (1st ed., 2012). In the Chapter “Future Research in TID”, in the section “Data-driven vs. Coach’s and Scout’s Intuition”, these authors present the following argument:

“In many of the case studies, it becomes obvious that most talent selection and identification systems rely on coaches or scouts to choose the most talented from the young athletes presented to them. ... We know relatively little about how decisions are made, and we do not really know how good these decisions are. ... As scientists, we have the tendency to believe that an approach focused on accessing as much data as possible should outperform intuition. However, there is currently no evidence supporting one approach over the other. Comparison of these approaches (and others) is a key area for future research.” (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020).

This research project follows the need to take different approaches to TID methods used by the football coaches. The coaches' perceptions and insights used in TID decision-making processes is the focus of this study. There is a wide variety of approaches to TID in football. Different theoretical assumptions support distinct practical processes. Two major general approaches to decision-making in TID can be highlighted, the Data-driven and the Intuition-driven approaches (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020) or, in other words, the physical-focused and “beyond the physical” methods (Doncaster et al., 2020). There is a shortage of academic evidence regarding either of these two approaches. There are also no studies acknowledging and analysing the mix between the two in South Africa. There is currently insufficient evidence on how South African professional football clubs identify and develop their players, representing a research opportunity that this study seeks to address.

The first approach, with a Data-driven focus, is evidence-based, and uses measurable, precise, objective, and quantifiable parameters and variables (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). Examples of Data-driven approaches are, for example: the measuring of football players' muscle strength, agility, acceleration, height, and balance. The second approach, the Intuition-driven, is subjective, non-evidence-based, personal, spontaneous, dynamic, and creative (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020).

Examples of Intuition-driven approaches are the perception of the following: the football players' ball control, decision-making, time and space awareness, vision, determination, and social competencies, which are crucial for teamwork and for a team sport like football. In this study, both terms Data-driven and Intuition-driven will be used as umbrella terms. At a deeper level, these two approaches refer to a linear, cause-effect, reductive, short-term, and simplistic approach versus an integrative, long-term, complex, and holistic approach.

1.1.1 Motivation of the study

Understanding the talent phenomenon in football is the basic motivation for this research project. Not only is this a fascinating, intriguing, and challenging area, but it is also an area that needs to be further understood in academic literature. Indeed, there are not many studies exploring specifically the coach's decision-making methods to TID and the mapping and pairing of these practices (Johnston et al., 2017). The academic studies that are available address mainly the European contexts, whilst the Global South is underrepresented (Darby, 2007). Some authors, namely Baker et al., (2020), highlight: "... the continued need to explore issues related to talent identification, selection, and development in more diverse contexts (e.g., from Africa, Asia, and South America). There is also a clear necessity to focus on under-researched areas using alternative methodologies." (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020).

Considering the economics paradox of value, a glass of water in the desert is valued more than the same glass of water near a fountain, both for use value and exchange value (Gryshova et al., 2019). Regarding the context of this study, the relative lack of TID research in South African football constitutes a challenging opportunity to be explored. The outcomes of this research may open new opportunities and pave the way to more academic studies in the Global South and in other African countries. This may help to set new standards including a potential to increase the professionalism in football on the continent, which positively affects the sport ecosystem and may bring benefits that go beyond the sport itself.

Finally, the argument presented in this research project is twofold. Firstly, in general, there is a scarcity of academic studies and scientific research within emerging and Global South economies, and there is a lack of knowledge within the specific setting of South African football academies regarding TID (Burnett, 2010). Secondly, there is a weakness in the literature related to the need to further understand the role of football coaches in TID, including their practices, methods, and decision-making processes. These are key dimensions to be considered in the research. The coach's voice includes the expression of the coach's intuition, perspectives, positions, and their attention to the "beyond the physical" aspects of the players' performance (Doncaster et al., 2020). These narratives enable the capturing of both the direct objective information practices and the non-evidence-based methods for TID in football.

1.2 Relevance of topic

Talent and the search for ways to improve it, individually and collectively, is universal across human cultures (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 2014). In contemporary societies and in highly competitive global sectors, such as in sport, TID has become a hot topic for research and business alike (Williams et al., 2020). To better know how to identify and develop talent, it is important to know how this process is being currently conducted in practice. This may enhance the understanding of the reality of TID in sport.

Football had amateur origins in the mid nineteenth century, in England, and progressed exponentially to become the number one sport in the world. According to a Nielson report on world football (Sports, 2018), this sport is worth USD 600 billion, it attracts an estimated 3.5 billion of fans and aggregates 250 million players in over 200 countries around the world. Additionally, this sport has the highest global television audience in the world (Sports, 2018). According to some authors, sport talent is the cornerstone of the football industry's success (Williams et al., 2020). We do not, however, fully understand academically how football clubs in the Global South find and develop talent (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). The selection of talent is vital for any sport system because it informs and drives allocation of financial resources (Williams et al., 2020). Resources have to be paid for, and they include facilities, people, and equipment. TID is a management decision. To be more precise, it is a budgeting decision. It involves the choices of whom to spend the money on, when to spend it and how to spend it.

The end benefits of TID go beyond those directly, visibly, and formally involved. Therefore, these positive externalities should be considered (Taylor et al., 2015). National sport systems invest heavily on high performance sport, including the federations and clubs (Bennett et al., 2019). A great part of these investments covers youth development. This complex area crucially constitutes an investment in future society, using sport as a social cohesion and human-development tool and policy (King, 2017). The real or eventual ineffectiveness of sport management systems is a potential loss, affecting all stakeholders. Billions are invested in youth development without incorporating sound and rigorous scientific support (Till & Baker, 2020). The understanding of the often-reduced effectiveness of these investments represents an opportunity that may contribute to improving policymaking practices and, consequently, bring positive gains to society. This research will benefit different groups and interests, contributing to science and, potentially, to better sport policymaking. In local and regional terms, football coaches, players, clubs and academies and the communities involved in the present study may gain a better understanding of their role in the process of TID, contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of these practices.

Considering the Global South reality, two issues have to be highlighted. Firstly, sport research in Europe and in the Global North is readily accessible, and the macro structures and the trans-

national networks are well developed (King, 2017). Secondly, there is a long-term shortage of financial, and other resources, and consequent tight budgets in the Global South, implying that every effort counts; and, most importantly, sport reality in this context is under-researched (Baker, Cogley, et al., 2020). In other words, the social benefits in terms of returns on investment, and the marginal utility of these financial efforts, is much higher in the Global South (Odeh, 2010).

An important argument highlighted in the literature, referring to the international development of football research and scholarship, stresses the need for addressing more varied and diverse contexts and perspectives (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020). This argument reinforces the need for the focus on the Global South reality, due to its scarce scholarship in sport research. According to these authors, referring to TID, the importance of geographical diversity is paramount, and thus, it should cover different continents and cultures, namely Africa, Asia, and South America. The need for more diversity includes also the exploration of alternative research methods applied to under-researched areas (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020). Contemporary research trends in sport have highlighted the importance of holistic and ecological epistemic positions (Henriksen et al., 2020). This research aims to illustrate real-life TID examples from South African football coaches' perspectives. The goal is to better understand South African football coaches' decision-making frameworks in the under-researched context of TID in the Global South.

1.3 Research question

Research Question: What is the Talent Identification and Development framework being used by the top professional South African football clubs?

Sub-Questions:

Q1: What are the specific approaches being used as part of the TID framework?

Q2: How conscious are the coaches of the TID framework?

Q3: What is the balance between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches within the framework?

1.4 Objectives

- 1 Describing the TID framework and specific approaches being used by professional South African football clubs
- 2 Exploring the level of the conscious implementation of TID frameworks
- 3 Understanding the complexity of the balance between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches in TID

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an understanding of the current literature relating to the football TID ecosystem, from the broad general perspectives of sport research scholarship to a more particular focus on professional South African football. The literature review considers the current status of TID in sport, and, specifically, within the context of professional football clubs. The objective of the present section is to address the most relevant research in this field of study that may help to interpret the TID methods and practices adopted by South African professional football clubs and coaches. Contemporary research provides diverse analyses of TID methodologies, advancing the field through innovative approaches. The literature review outlines TID's achievements and shortcomings. The aim is to address a research gap and lack of adequate coverage of South African professional football clubs, as there are few academic studies doing in-depth research in South Africa's professional football reality. More specifically, there is the need and the opportunity to study the coaches' decision-making on talent, and how professional football clubs go on about identifying and developing the talent.

Henriksen (2010), cites Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997), using a social tradition criticism, stating that "talent is simply a social construction, a label of approval which we place on traits and abilities that are found to be of value to the society in which we live" (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997). Indeed, talent is a socially constructed concept and talent meanings are subjective, implying that each person has their own definition or perception of talent (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). If talent, whatever the context, is the result of a process that fits its purpose, then, in sport, sport results depend on talent understood as the combination of factors and efforts performed by the key professionals of the sport ecosystem that allow reaching and even surpassing expectations (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). Sport talent is the combination of innate and developed abilities that enable exceptional performance in a specific sport (Bennett et al., 2019).

There is no consensus on what talent is but different working definitions are available in the literature. An amalgam of relevant definitions has inspired the definition used in this study. For the purpose of this thesis, sport talent includes, one, innate potential – i.e., genetic component (Williams et al., 2020); two, athletic excellence during youth – i.e., developmental process outcome (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023); and three, it encompasses physical, technical, tactical, and psychological attributes, as well as the capacity to adapt and excel in competitive environments (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). This study focuses on football clubs' strategies and coaches' practices to identify, select, develop and manage football talent. It is therefore, important to have a working definition of what sport talent is as a starting point.

2.2 Historical background of TID models in sport

The scientific communities in sport science, sport management and the social sciences have studied TID from diverse approaches – mostly from a mono-disciplinary view and rarely from a multi-disciplinary perspective (Williams et al., 2020). The scientific study of outstanding athletes and the effort to understand the science of human movement can be traced back to the mid-1800s and the work of Francis Galton (Galton, 1891). Wrestlers and rowers were used as samples for his work, making this the first known study of talent in sport (Galton, 1891). Unfortunately, this author is also known for his support of eugenics, so his scientific work has also been seen as problematic due to a lack of human values and wrongdoing (Gillham, 2001).

In the 1980s and 1990s, some of the TID seminal studies started to become widely used and implemented (Johnston et al., 2017). Some examples of contributions to TID in sport that are most relevant to this research include: François Gagné in 1985, through the *Model of Giftedness and Talent* (Gagné, 1985); Jean Côté, at the turn of the millennium, with the *Development Model of Sports Participation* (Côté, 1999; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014); the works of Istvan Balyi with his *Long-term Athlete Development Model (LTDA)* (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004); and the approach of Rhodri Lloyd (Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Relevant inputs to sport management emerged in the early 2000s (De Bosscher et al., 2006) in international comparative studies measuring competitiveness, youth and sport development, benchmarking, and strategic and performance management in sport (De Bosscher et al., 2009). Research in the last few decades continued this search for new perspectives, which is visible in the diverse range of scientific inputs and epistemic exploration. Multifactorial and systemic models have been developed taking different approaches, and in Henriksen's early work (Henriksen, 2010), these concepts were explored. The list of models just mentioned, offers rich insights into TID processes within the vast panorama of sport management and sport science. These sport management studies, which have emerged from the state-of-the-art literature, address talent and development in a self-critical way, that is, each approach addresses different handicaps or grey areas of the complex and dynamic sport ecosystem. These studies are used as contextual foundations and inspiration for this research.

Within the research field of sport talent, the scholarship mentioned above has helped to redefine the networks of influence among the key factors, processes and variables. These networks of knowledge involve complex and interlinked argument and counterargument. Sport management knowledge production offers powerful insights into understanding the research theme of talent within the football ecosystem. Emergent research topics involve the following studies: first, in Gagné's model, the research topics include awareness raising towards the mixture of objective and subjective issues (for example, intrapersonal aspects) and combining the influence of genetics and the environment (Gagné, 1985); second, in Côté's model, early sampling and diversification

of sports, which have been presented as a critique to the habitual practice of early specialisation, are studied (Côté et al., 2007; Côté & Hancock, 2016); third, in Balyi's model, early engagement, physical literacy, excellence pathway, and high-performance competitive training are examined (Balyi et al., 2013); and fourth, Rhodri Lloyd's model and scientific rationale provides guidelines regarding the type of training that young players should do at different ages (Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Additionally, factors related to Gagné's work were later developed and applied to a sport context. Authors such as Mills and his colleagues (2012), further explored key talent factors in sport. These include awareness, resilience, goal-directed attributes, intelligence, sport specific attributes, environmental factors, social competencies and teamwork (Mills et al., 2012).

More recently, more advanced, sophisticated and complex approaches have been developed in sport research, which testify to the importance of epistemic positions that focus on ecological approaches in athlete development (Vaughan et al., 2021). Henriksen and his colleagues focus on the creation of an optimal environment for talent development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017); and the social environment in which high-performance athletes are immersed (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023). Particularly relevant to this study is Henriksen's work offering an integrated and holistic approach to talent development in sport (Henriksen et al., 2020). Epistemologies of the Global South have expanded research horizons and created new alternatives that help understand holistic approaches to reality (Glăveanu & Sierra, 2015). Sport research has benefited from these movements. Historically, throughout the twentieth century, social sciences research and its social tradition have criticised the excessive focus on ultra specialisation and individualistic reductionism, thus opening new ground for alternative and innovative methodologies (Bhattacharjee, 2012). These epistemic positions in contemporary science and sport research are particularly important for a team sport such as football (Vaughan et al., 2021). Given that football is the most popular sport in the world and the focus of this research is on TID practices in South Africa, it is pertinent to consider integrated and academically recognised approaches. The evolution of TID models and frameworks signals the role of talent in today's context. Moreover, the reality of an emerging economy enables and potentiates rich insights into TID practices.

2.3 Talent identification and development foundations

In sport literature, the study of talent has different specialisation approaches, including TID (Baker, Wilson, et al., 2020), TI (Johnston et al., 2017) and TD (Reeves & Roberts, 2018) that are inter-related and mutually influential. These areas constitute autonomous research fields in scientific sport management that have addressed relatively stable and homogeneous institutional sport backgrounds and social settings (Williams et al., 2020). Sport management research has to take into account the multiple factors that are present in an emerging Global South economy,

which reinforces the need for an integrated as opposed to a partial, step-by-step view of sport talent processes (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017).

To bring clarity and consistency to sport talent research, contemporary sport literature strongly recommends the careful use of language (Johnston et al., 2023). This research considers sport management, taken as an overarching term, and the outcomes of the three areas – TID, TI and TD – using their distinctions and differentiating factors as structural and methodological features. In other words, TI and TD are addressed as vehicles of day-to-day practitioners' routines, related to the strategic resources, inputs and techniques, while TID is used as the umbrella term encompassing the holistic ecosystem view of sport talent. Connecting research and practice is crucial for deepening the understanding of TID phenomena (Harper & McCunn, 2017). Clarifying vocabulary and the terminology of theoretical and practical research enables gains in consistency and in the description of the perceptions of the participants (Johnston et al., 2023). The construction of these narratives, verbal and in the written form, help to describe the South African reality of professional football clubs.

2.3.1 Talent identification – short-term recognition and visibility: the role of windows of opportunity

Williams and Reilly (2000) defined talent detection as “the discovery of potential performers not yet involved in the sport”, and talent identification as “the recognition of current participants with the potential to become elite players” (Henriksen, 2010; Williams & Reilly, 2000). TI incorporates on-off phases, periodical evaluations and competitions that include detection and selection of sport talent, representing opportunities for young talented athletes to jump to the next level (Fuhre et al., 2022). Talent identification is the work done by coaches, scouts, recruitment analysts and other staff members to find players with the potential to become the stars of tomorrow (Till et al., 2019). The aim is to find suitable talented players, assess their current abilities and determine how well they are likely to develop (Reeves & Roberts, 2020).

A similar interpretation is that TI in sport is the process of recognising athletes with the potential to excel in a particular sport. It involves assessing an individual's physical, technical and psychological attributes to determine their suitability and potential future success in competitive environments (Bergkamp et al., 2018). This process helps coaches and scouts focus on identifying promising athletes from an early age. These athletes are then developed with the necessary support and training to maximise their abilities and reach elite levels of performance (Williams et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Talent development – long-term impactful policies and practices: a holistic approach

Talent development refers to the process of nurturing selected athletes by optimising a wide range of influences that may impact on acquisition of sporting skills (Baker et al., 2017). The development of talented players is intrinsically related to the environment in which athletes are immersed. These environments can either enable or hinder the development of high-performance athletes. If the environment is conducive to the development of the athlete, the environment is called an enabling environment (Wickett & Selbie, 2015). What may constitute an enabling environment is described in literature as a common space and collective practice that stimulates the best possible performance by all actors involved in the development of young athletes (Martindale et al., 2005). Relevant factors for the creation and sustaining of such settings may include facilities, equipment, routines, practices, procedures, coaching, leadership, technology, communication, community, culture, education, people, legal context, national federations and international competition (Van Tuyl et al., 2024). The optimal combination of these factors constitutes an example of what can be considered an enabling environment.

Regarding contemporary sport literature on athletic talent, Henriksen proposes a shift in research attention from the individual player/athlete focus to the wider developmental environment and context in which they are immersed (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Henriksen also developed a descriptive and visual working model addressing the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) which is presented in Figure 1 (Henriksen, 2010, p. 39). The original work was done on a homogenous, high-income society. This model clarifies the functions and roles of the different relations and competences of the sport environment, which is viewed as a system with structured functions and components. The role of the model is “to help promising young athletes make a successful transition from junior to top-level senior sports” (Henriksen, 2010, p. 39). This exact model has been republished in a recent article by the same author with an enriched discussion on the importance of the social environment on the promotion of talent development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023).

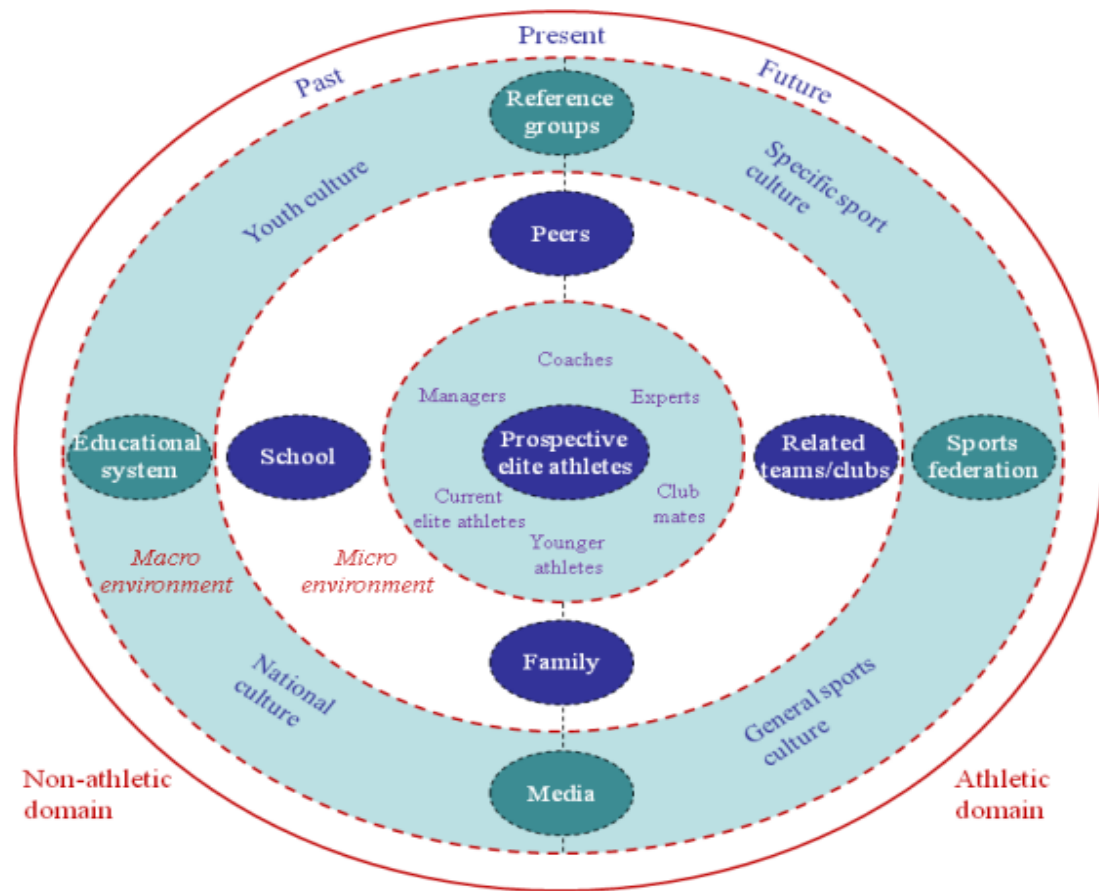


Figure 1: Athletic Talent Development Environment Model: A Descriptive Working Model (Henriksen, 2010, p. 39); and (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023, p. 3)

The focus on Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) in TID research enables strengthening the function of contextual and environmental factors, a research position developed and based on the same foundations of the ATDE working model (Henriksen, 2010). These authors, Henriksen, Larsen and their colleagues, created this model for sport in general, with football being one of their focus sports. They argued that the overall environment surrounding football players plays a crucial role in their development (Larsen et al., 2013). These authors suggest that the football players' environment is centred on the relationship between the coaches (backed by other professionals of the club) and the players. The goal is to help athletes concentrate and invest in healthy and holistic lifestyle; resilience in relation to effort and to hard-working; self-awareness, autonomy and responsibility for their own training; and, finally, to adequately handle dual careers, namely sport and school, that help guarantee an alternative career (Larsen et al., 2013). The characteristics of this environment should include an organisational culture that is strong, cohesive and open, with integrated human values and integral human development perspectives, thus concerning an holistic view (Ryom et al., 2020).

More importantly, the HEA is a powerful model that holds the potential to open opportunities and inspire football practitioners, namely the coaches, to be sensitive and aware of the importance of contextual and environmental factors, and “analyse not only the individual players athletic development but also the overall strategies and organisational settings in the talent development environment” (Larsen et al., 2013). It is key to acknowledge the importance of creating strong relationships between the youth athletes and the professional departments of the club, and of reinforcing the culture of developmental daily practices within the professional football academies, providing the skills required to succeed at a professional level (Larsen et al., 2014).

The role of the environment and the impact of multifactorial support, when successful, has been identified in literature with the term ‘enabling environment’. An enabling environment is a dynamic concept that considers relationships between cause and consequence, and between effective conditions and good results (Vealey & Chase, 2016). There is a generally accepted assumption of a positive relationship between the enabling environment and the success of the talent identification, development and management practices, as a two-way relationship which mutually reinforces one another. The better the TID process, the better the incentives to strengthen the enabling environment, and vice-versa (Lepschy et al., 2018).

Essentially, in previous studies and concrete cases related to sport organisations, which were using traditional management approaches, the focus was on looking for exceptional young athletes. However, what they found were exceptional enabling conditions. The coach and the sport organisation as a whole create the enabling environment for the optimal development of talent (Vealey & Chase, 2016). Usually, the identified talented players are selected and recruited to be part of specialised development programmes within football academies (Fuhre et al., 2022). Talent development programmes typically provide the appropriate tools and conditions to realise the athlete’s potential, including staff, coaching, equipment and facilities (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). The concept of an enabling environment is relevant for this research as it captures a set of diverse elements that directly influences the coaches’ and the players’ relationship with football practice. The enabling environment affects the professional life cycle and, consequently, the sport success of athletes’ careers. Fostering a psychologically safe environment for high-performance sport is key, promoting a feeling of belonging and contributing to the development of the athlete, the team and the organisation, leading to a system that works together towards a common goal (Van Tuyl et al., 2024). The importance of the concept of an enabling environment is of particular interest in the context of South Africa, research wise, as it represents an opportunity to bring new insights that can contribute to better sport practices.

2.4 Practical aspects of TID in football

Talent identification in football is used to identify new players for the team, through trials, which traditionally happen only twice in a season, when the registration of new players is allowed or through observation of players playing for other teams (Lund & Söderström, 2017). TI is also present when conducting the procedures related to detecting and selecting the most talented players within the club, when evaluating and choosing which players stay in the club for the next season, and which players are dismissed from the club and offered suggestions for alternative pathways and career development (Larkin & Reeves, 2018).

Talent development in football refers to the structured process of nurturing and enhancing the skills, knowledge and physical attributes of young football players with sport potential. It involves providing systematic training, coaching and support to help footballers progress through different stages of their career (Vaughan et al., 2021). This development pathway focuses not only on improving technical abilities and tactical understanding but also on fostering mental resilience, teamwork and decision-making. It aims to prepare players for the demands of professional football, ensuring a smooth transition to higher levels of the game (Sarmiento et al., 2018).

2.4.1 *The development of football players – the characteristics football clubs look for*

The interest in research around developing sport expertise, specifically in football, has been expanding in recent decades. Nevertheless, a vision of the whole and integrated perspective is missing (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). The trend has been to focus on partial and isolated factors as being part of the developmental process. How these different factors interact and influence one another to produce prospective elite athletes has been neglected (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012).

The players' profiles and the players' curricula are aligned to define the development model of each club. The profile is identified through the characteristics football clubs are looking for while assessing and evaluating talented athletes, while the players' curricula are the offering of the clubs' structured activities that constitute the players' training (Layton et al., 2023). The demand of an adequate profile and the supply of an appropriate training environment is the secret for a productive alignment of a club's strategy that may bring football clubs closer to potential success (Lepschy et al., 2018).

When evaluating players, football clubs follow a set of characteristics that are relatively stable and that are combined with different emphasis across each club. The differential weighting and importance of these elements is determined by a club's philosophy, objectives and vision (Baker et al., 2017). Key factors include technical, tactical, physical and psychological aspects of the players' profiles (Layton et al., 2023). As an example, for their national teams, the English Football Association uses this strategy by focusing on four main factors: technical/tactical,

physical, psychological and social model (Layton et al., 2023). These strategies implemented by football clubs produce and guide a structured and systematic assessment of players, which is operated through the coaches' feedback (Fuhre et al., 2022). Indeed, the role of football coaches is critical during this measurement and evaluation process (Layton et al., 2023). Most importantly, as these authors argue, "it would appear judicious for academies to take an explicit note of 'what matters most' both collectively and individually, from the point of identification, to ensure they are working on the most valuable aspects for each player." (Layton et al., 2023; p. 1662).

Other authors, such as Mustafovic and his colleagues (2020), suggest a more detailed analysis of the relevant factors in TID, emphasising four dimensions. First, the physiological aspects; second, the criteria for identifying talent; third, the chronological and biological age; and finally, the integrated and multidisciplinary approach to young players' selection. These authors highlight the importance of a broad and transversal approach to TID that encompasses physical and physiological aspects specific to the football context (Mustafovic et al., 2020). Surprisingly, these authors do not mention the social and psychological spheres, although they may be implicit within the multidisciplinary approach.

The ultimate goal of the development process within football clubs is to develop players' capabilities and skills that may enable them to perform at the highest level (Johnston et al., 2017). A coherent development model aligns the needs of the club with the individual expectations of an elite career. That is, there is an integration of bottom-up individual needs and top-down club needs (Layton et al., 2023). The whole process of an integrated development model is shaped by the players' curricula, which is the contents of the players' training, conditioning and preparation (Layton et al., 2023).

2.4.2 Transition phase – from junior team to senior team

In football clubs, the transition of players from the junior to the senior teams is of paramount importance. Research on these transition players, from youth to professional, has been growing substantially (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Some authors have observed that first impressions are key and that it is crucial for players to have a good start when adapting to the senior team challenges. Within each club, the connection between these two groups is carefully designed to guarantee young players' optimal adaption to the demands of senior competition (Swainston et al., 2020).

Each club defines its own youth to professional pathways and strategies, including operational differences, such as defining responsibilities and roles. Moreover, there are different levels of clubs' orientation towards player development. As some authors argue, "professional football clubs are service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment and financial profit" (Relvas et al., 2010, p. 165). In other words, young athletes' development is a potential

source for sporting and financial gain to football clubs. The design of the training practices and the organisational structure that supports young athletes' development is critical for both personal development and financial profit (Lepschy et al., 2018). Most importantly, the end goal of youth development programmes is to focus specifically on developing players for the first team. Flexibility and tailor-made adjustments are included in these programmes, catering for the needs of transition players and their clubs (Røynesdal et al., 2018).

It is also important to understand that the more developed a player is, the higher the financial rewards for the selling club will be (Relvas et al., 2010). This happens within the time span of the first years of the player's professional career (Johnston et al., 2017). However, it is also relevant to notice that at some point throughout their careers, after they have reached their performance peak, a player's value starts to decrease. This implies that the success of the quality of the transition process is key for both players and clubs (Johnston et al., 2017). Some authors, focusing on the role of football coaches, suggest that the "lack of proximity and formal communication between youth and professional environments, regardless of structure, led to staff dissatisfaction and appeared to hinder the coherent progression of young players into the professional environment" (Relvas et al., 2010, p. 165). The sequence of the flow of events that characterises the evolution of a player and of the club, together with the quality of its results, depends on mastering the dynamic inter-relationships between individual and collective development, in which the coaches' decision-making plays a crucial role (Lyle & Muir, 2020). Therefore, these links, with a focus on TID practices, are specifically interesting for this study.

Club philosophy has a major influence on player development in general. This is particularly true when designing player transition trajectories, pathways and opportunities to reach the first team (Silva et al., 2016). This means that some clubs may have a developing and selling philosophy (known as a "selling club"), while other clubs' strategies are to opt for being a "buying club". These strategies are normally dictated by the resources and accumulated knowledge each club has acquired (Silva et al., 2016). Research suggests a tendency for higher resourced clubs to be buying clubs, thus outsourcing and externalising players' development, and for under-resourced clubs to be selling clubs. Nevertheless, exceptional clubs, highly resourced, may break this trend and invest in a qualified development structure themselves, thus strengthening their brand and club culture (Mustafovic et al., 2020).

2.4.3 Relevance of youth leagues – strength vs strength competition

Regarding the development of youth competitions, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) defines several requirements for the optimal development of training programmes for young football players (Nikolaienko et al., 2021). These requirements are based on strategic tasks and goals, and are centred on the development of each player, while the sports results (namely,

winning or losing) are secondary. In other words, “development first, then the result” (Nikolaienko et al., 2021).

General experience demonstrates that several conditions have to be met to promote the integral development of young players covering different competencies and skills. Youth players are from initiation ages until 19 years of age, and senior players from that age onwards. Initiation levels can include children and teenagers, as different programmes are adapted to different needs, interests and availability of resources. A multifactorial approach increases the gradual development of young athletes (Barraclough et al., 2022). The list includes, (i) to start with, it is necessary to focus on the training process itself, with the goal of individual development and training of a creative player, meaning that participation in official and formal competitions can only start after the age of 12 years old; and (ii) training sessions and practice should be conducted in a game format that includes strong support at pedagogical, affect, and emotional levels based on the needs, personality and age of each young athlete – it is through this practice that game intelligence is learnt and individual players have their opportunity to develop their football skills (Nikolaienko et al., 2021).

From 14 years of age upwards, the age at which specialisation in football should start (Balyi et al., 2013), it is crucial to promote a strength vs strength, quality vs quality, best vs best type of competition, peer to peer, in a dual way, within the same team and against opponents from other teams, intra- and inter-competition (Teixeira et al., 2022). This approach allows athletes to push their limits and, consequently, to push their qualities to higher levels (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). It is through this type of competition that the foundations to senior football are laid. It is where the technical and tactical skills are refined and put up to test, determining whether the player will reach the professional level or not (Nikolaienko et al., 2021).

Competitive youth sport, including both training and competition, provide solid grounds for positive youth development. Coaches play a crucial role in this developmental process as they have the possibility to facilitate these types of outcomes (Santos et al., 2019). Moreover, the coaches have to be aware of their interpersonal knowledge, influencing competitive youth sport, and ultimately leading to the development of competence, character, connection and confidence of their players (Santos et al., 2019).

Considering age groups above 16 years of age, the quality and strength of the training environments these young football players are immersed in becomes more relevant (Lepschy et al., 2018). Taking into account the increased competitiveness, new demands emerge on behalf of the players and everyone involved in fostering their performance (Söderström et al., 2019). This may occur because there is a training shift from a development-focus mentality to a winning-focus approach (Røynesdal et al., 2018). The clubs’ sport results and the benchmark of success in

relation to other clubs becomes more important. Higher levels of accountability and responsibility are expected from older age groups, which help determine the direction and future of the club (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Training and competition are dual facets of players' development that TID practices address. Coaches' decision-making involves these crucial aspects and their inter-related influences, which is the focus of this research study.

2.5 Coach development

Training, education, research and professional associations are necessary for creating and maintaining different professions, and coaching in sport is no exception. The quality and level of competition of each sport depends on the quality of the professional development of its coaching professionals (Allison et al., 2016). Professional development involves three main areas: theory and the accumulated body of knowledge; practice and methodological supervision; and applied and fundamental research (Zepeda, 2019). This includes continuous learning and improvement, training and autonomous study, collaboration within communities of practice and peer support, as well as professional orders and associations (Zepeda, 2019).

Research literature has shown a recent interest in exploring high performance coaching in football. Understanding the methods and decision-making processes of football coaches in TID is essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness of talent development programmes (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). Santos and his colleagues (2017) highlight the complexity of the coaching practice, the variety of the players' developmental needs and the relevance of positive coach development in this specific setting (Santos et al., 2017). Moreover, this article was published in the *International Sport Coaching Journal*, with key words that included coach education, high performance coaching and coaching philosophy. This demonstrates the relevance of this dynamic field, which specifically focuses on the coaches themselves.

Coach development in football is crucial, as the coach takes a central position within each football club and within the football system itself. Consequently, coaches have a large degree of influence over everything that happens around them (Selimi et al., 2023). More importantly, the more equipped and educated coaches are, the better they can coach (Tozetto et al., 2019). Synergies, win-win collaboration and stakeholders' interests are aligned in sound coach development design (Eather et al., 2023). It is each country's football federation's job to facilitate, organise and provide courses and licences for football coach development. Professional ethics and deontology, validation and supervision, governance and accountability are ideally included in coach development (Allison et al., 2016). Moreover, coach development in football is of paramount importance due to its pivotal role in TID processes. As highlighted in the literature, football

coaches play a significant role in identifying, selecting, managing and nurturing young athletes' talent within professional football clubs and academies (Baker, 2017).

Football coaches, when they reach their professional maturity, have already acquired an extensive wealth of practical experience and theoretical knowledge. This expertise, when put at the service of the interests of professional clubs, can greatly impact the trajectory of young athletes' careers and their pathways to success (Tozetto et al., 2019). By investing in coach development initiatives, such as training programmes and ongoing education, football organisations can ensure that coaches are equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to identify and develop talent effectively (Tozetto et al., 2019). Moreover, coach development fosters a culture of continuous improvement within football institutions, leading to more informed and holistic approaches to talent identification and development (Allison et al., 2016). Ultimately, prioritising coach development not only enhances the quality of TID practices but also contributes to the long-term success and sustainability of football programmes at all levels (Eather et al., 2023). The argument about the literature and how the existing research relates to the coaches' decision-making helps bring forth the subtleties of TID. These insights are a valuable input to the study of the coaches' decision-making processes and practices, which clearly connect to this research project.

2.6 Contextual sport talent perspectives

In this section, different research inputs regarding sport talent are addressed. Some of these concepts, terminology and general ideas are important for sport talent research. Although these topics will not be the focus of this study and are not directly related to the research question, these concepts help to position current research and contemporary TID practices in football. These include the determinants of sport talent, the role of benchmarking and the optimal age to specialise in football.

2.6.1 General assumptions – talent and its determinants

Sport literature offers a critique of popular science approaches that are reductive and simplistic, creating the expectation that a one-size-fits-all solution is possible. This is particularly true regarding the complex theme of talent. One of the misconceptions about talent, often popularised in books (namely, *Bounce*, *Outliers* and *Talent is Overrated*) is that the only thing that stops someone from becoming elite is enough practice. The 10,000 hour rule became popularised by Ericsson, with studies targeting violinists' players, where he showed that the best violinists had on average 10,000 hours of practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). He went further, saying that such practice can alter our genes (Ericsson et al., 1993). His argument was that deliberate practice can be so effective that it can selectively activate dormant genes that are contained in healthy individuals' DNA (Ericsson et al., 1993), although no scientific evidence supports his claim. A

study suggests, through a meta-analysis, that only 18% of expert skill is attributed to practice (Suppiah et al., 2015). The remaining 82% is related to other factors, and a large part of that is attributed to genetics (Suppiah et al., 2015).

Additionally, looking at the literature, genetics (depending on the type of sport) can play a crucial role. Genetics and nurture both play a role in developing elite sports athletes. For someone to become an elite sportsperson, they need to have the right genetics (Suppiah et al., 2015). Although deliberate practice is important, it is not the single and most determining factor. A more sophisticated perspective was later developed, which considered the enjoyment and playfulness side of sport, that is, to have opportunities to play and experience a specific sport without being under direct coaching and pressure (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). These studies that address genetics, deliberate practice and playful practice, are highly relevant to this research as both the coaches' and the players' own experiences and life circumstances have an impact on their sport trajectories. The coaches' decision-making patterns related to TID are directly and indirectly affected by these factors, including life's memories and biographical accounts.

2.6.2 Best practices, standards, and guidelines – the role of benchmarking

Sport, as a rapidly changing industry, relies on evidence from experience and from applied research to best describe adequate methods and techniques to reach a predefined goal (Williams et al., 2020). Best practices are sets of professional procedures, guidelines, ethics and ideas that capture the most efficient, safest or more prudent course of action for a specific task, situation and context. They are proven to lead to optimal efficiency through benchmarking and continual improvement.

The best scientific methods to successfully identify, select and develop football players remain uncertain, and this justifies the importance of exploring the best practices and experience learning approaches for TID in football (Sarmiento et al., 2018). A focus on best practices contributes to the creation of a framework for TID, fostering holistic and long-term development by continuously linking theory and practice, which is particularly relevant for emerging football countries (Bennett et al., 2019). Enhancing knowledge and understanding of best practices that underpin the TID processes may contribute to the optimal development and performance of present and future generations of players (Williams et al., 2020).

2.6.3 Early sampling and diversification – and the drawbacks of early specialisation

According to literature, one major issue of talent identification in sport is that coaches emphasise and focus on an evaluation of their players when they are still too young and still in their early developmental years of puberty. Coaches tend to mistake early ability in sport for talent, when it is an issue of some people growing up too fast and being precocious for their age (Suppiah et al.,

2015). Early specialisation, which has been a growing trend in the past decades, consists of the intense year-round training in a single sport, to the exclusion of other sports (Smucny et al., 2015). However, research supports late specialisation. Early specialisation practice is not considered to be the ideal option as it can lead to detrimental effects in the young athlete's career (Suppiah et al., 2015). Early specialisation can increase junior performance. There is no evidence, however, that it improves senior or elite performance (Smucny et al., 2015). There is a great difference between early sampling, which means to start the sport early, but without specialising (Vealey & Chase, 2016). Several risks are related to early specialisation. The disadvantages may include high risk of physical injuries and of emotional consequences; suffering from isolation, of being away from their peers; overdependence on others, such as their parents, their coaches and tournaments; and the risk of burn-out (Smucny et al., 2015). Early sampling and diversification of sports, which were introduced by Côté's model, helped to raise awareness around the misconceptions related to what strategies would be effective in the long-run, regarding talent management and development (Côté & Hancock, 2016).

There are many misconceptions around at what age it is possible to identify talent. In general, two types of ages are crucial to be considered, the chronological age and the maturational age. The chronological age refers to number of years passed since the birth of the individual, while the maturational age refers to the degree of physical, emotional and mental maturity. Age-related research has recently gained increasing attention, as it enables understanding the technicalities of sport development related to evaluating performance (Teixeira et al., 2022). The basic notion is that two young academy players playing for a specific club can have the same chronological age but, at the same time, they can be in two completely different phases of their maturational journey (Lehnert et al., 2024).

It is important to highlight that early development is key. Young athletes need to develop the prerequisite motor skills and muscle strength power to be able to achieve elite success later in life (Jakubowski et al., 2015). It is true that some specific sports have a greater need for their participants to specialise early, but this should not be applied to every sport. Balyi created a model based on the categorisation and differentiation between early and late specialisation sports (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004). In sports such as gymnastics, athletes need to specialise early (9–13 years old) because of the body or physical work and technical requirements of those sports. At the other end of the spectrum, other sports are considered as late specialisation sports. In simple terms, the timing of an athlete's specialisation depends on the unique demands of the sport, with less technical sports often allowing for later specialisation, while more technical or early peaking sports may require earlier focus. In the case of football, the ideal strategy is early engagement, where from an early age athletes engage with the sport for feel, balance, visual tracking and decision-making. Specialisation is unnecessary until 14–16 years old (Balyi et al., 2013).

2.6.4 *Chronological vs biological age in TID in football*

In youth football, chronological age is based on a player's birth date, while biological age reflects their physical and developmental maturity, often assessed through growth spurts, skeletal age, or puberty stages (Aixa-Requena et al., 2025). These two can differ greatly, and the gap has a major impact on talent development. More specifically, three different aspects can be highlighted: i) A talent identification bias occurs when biologically older players seem stronger or faster and are mistaken for being more skilled, leading to the Relative Age Effect (RAE) a common bias where players born earlier in the selection year are overrepresented because they tend to be more physically mature (Figueiredo et al., 2021). ii) The training load and injury risk is higher for less mature players who may struggle with physical demands meant for more developed peers (Teixeira et al., 2022). iii) Development pathways are affected, as coaching, competition, and training should ideally match a player's biological rather than chronological age. Late developers often catch up and may even surpass early maturers over time (Aixa-Requena et al., 2025).

Bio-banding addresses this by grouping players based on biological maturity rather than age. It creates fairer matchups, gives late developers more opportunity to shine, and helps coaches assess technical and tactical skills without the physical bias (Arede et al., 2024). It supports more balanced development and helps reduce the long-term effects of RAE. There is a growing interest in this approach, which is particularly relevant for TID (Arede et al., 2024).

In English football, both chronological and biological age are used (Sullivan et al., 2023). Chronological age remains the main method for grouping players in leagues and competitions. However, biological age is increasingly used in elite academies to assess physical maturity, guide training loads, and reduce selection bias (Sullivan et al., 2023). Many clubs use tools such as growth tracking and bio-banding, especially in friendly matches or development settings to support late developers and create fairer and more individualized development pathways (Hill et al., 2023).

2.7 Theoretical underpinning: Data-driven and Intuition-driven synergies in football TID

In football talent identification, the Data-driven approach uses analytics and technology to assess player potential through quantitative metrics such as goals scored, passing accuracy, sprint times, muscle strength and other key performance indicators (Thakkar & Shah, 2021). The Intuition-driven approach relies on coaches' instincts and experience, using subjective judgment to identify talent (Roberts et al., 2021). While these two approaches differ, they are not mutually exclusive and can complement each other although their integration and synergies are not yet fully understood in research (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020).

The TID literature considered in this section is specific to football, unless stated otherwise. Football coaches tend to use different approaches to TID, which can be organised in two main directions, namely, the Data-driven and the Intuition-driven approaches (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). As has been explained above, in the section referring to the research problem, these concepts are used as umbrella terms in a dynamic relationship within the context of the present study. In the literature, both approaches are considered. However, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between the dimensions (Baker, Cobley, et al., 2020). The focus on this dynamic interconnection, of tension, balance and complementarity, is relevant to this research project. Moreover, the limitations and weakness of existent research on Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches constitutes an opportunity for exploration and a gap that this research aims to address.

The rise of data science, including Big Data and machine learning, has transformed various sports by influencing performance, strategy and broader socio-economic aspects (Thakkar & Shah, 2021). The rise of technology in football is increasingly shaping decision-making, with sports science practitioners advocating for Data-driven methods that prioritise objective metrics and reduce subjectivity (Gamble et al., 2020). Data-driven approaches have been growing rapidly, in line with the rapid development and accessibility of technology (Memmert & Raabe, 2018). Sport science and sports computer science are in high demand and the task is “to translate data into a practical context: the challenge is to not only use the technical possibilities to generate Big Data, but also to purposively manage the development of players and teams” (Memmert & Raabe, 2018, p. vii). In modern performance football analysis, regarding the use of data analytics, the authors see conventional and traditional methods as evolving towards “positional” data, and how can it be modelled, collected, interpreted and analysed (Memmert & Raabe, 2018). Insights from this quantitative “evidence-based” approach, included in *Data Analytics in Football* by Memmert and Raabe (2018), address the question: “What are the benefits of a data-driven approach to decision-making in football?” (Memmert & Raabe, 2018, p. 186). The authors consider diverse aspects, such as the difference of “positional data analysis” compared to the “conventional match analysis”; the types of technologies being used; relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) to be considered; and how may these methods evolve in the future (Memmert & Raabe, 2018).

In relation to football clubs, football coaches and scouting departments, the role of data analysis and the study of player statistics is being explored in practice and in research (Ghar et al., 2021). Literature refers to the use of Data-driven approaches through the Big Data and large language models, namely simulated player performance extrapolation (Ghar et al., 2021). These authors highlight that player statistics “can help the scout in making better data-driven decisions” (p. 1160). However, misjudgements occur, as “a player’s career statistics can provide a picture of how the player performs individually, but they fail to predict player chemistry alongside a team” (Ghar et al., 2021, p. 1160). To enhance the effectiveness of judgement processes, the authors

propose data science and machine learning algorithms to simulate real world performances of the player and team (Ghar et al., 2021).

The Intuition-driven approach is not necessarily opposed to the Data-driven focus. Rather literature explores conceptual ambiguities by bringing into the discussion different perspectives and assumptions. In football TID research, the title “To See or Not to See” captures an inspirational catch phrase that is aligned with the research purposes of this study. It addresses the uncertainties of what is referred to as coaches being guided by what feels “right in the heart and stomach” (Lund & Söderström, 2017). The authors argue that these feelings are based on the coaches’ previous talent identification experiences. Moreover, the coaches’ expertise, the coaching culture they are immersed in and the set of interpretations of what high-performance football entails dictate the coaches’ gut feelings. That is, the coaches are influenced by their experience of previous identifications of players (Lund & Söderström, 2017).

In the same line of reasoning, of exploring sophisticated perspectives in relation to coaches’ practices, the fact that recent robust publications use titles that significantly signal the importance of non-evidence-based approaches to TID is important in this research project. The paper with the title “Understanding the ‘gut instinct’ of expert coaches during talent identification”, suggests that “instinctual decisions are the result of years of experience, time spent with the athlete, and the context surrounding the decision” (Roberts et al., 2021, p. 359). More specifically, these authors stress that the selection of players is impacted by the coaches’ perceived ability to improve certain players, and it is not uniquely focused on the ability and characteristics of the players themselves (Roberts et al., 2021). According to the authors, addressing what can be worked with in each specific case, together with seeing players in context, temporal elements and experiential knowledge, are determining factors of the coaches’ intuition (Roberts et al., 2021).

Given the complexity of the coaches’ intuition, other perspectives point in other directions, namely, arguing that the state of the art is not complete and stable (Lath et al., 2021). Lath and his colleagues (2021) refer to the coaches’ central role as decision-makers, both selecting and deselecting players, based on their intuition. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the “coach’s eye”, is crucial during the assessment and selection of players (Lath et al., 2021). Previous research has already identified key characteristics of the coaches’ eye, namely, it being experience-based, subjective, intuitive and holistic (Lath et al., 2021). However, the authors argue that “the underlying mechanisms of the coach’s eye are still unknown and links to theoretical models are missing” (Lath et al., 2021, p. 56).

Recent research has combined different contributions under the argument of the importance of a ‘Shared Mental Model’ within football academies when considering talent (Layton et al., 2023). Ultimately, the different dimensions of development have to be translated into improving the

effectiveness of the club (Layton et al., 2023). The authors highlight the need to operationalise a multifaceted approach with a truly integrated perspective, and with a shift from a multi- to an interdisciplinary orientation focus, which is recommended for high-performance settings (Layton et al., 2023).

2.8 No consistent predictors of future performance and success in football

Three aspects characterise football as a sport: (i) it is the largest sport industry in the world; (ii) it is still growing and spreading at a steady pace; and (iii) it naturally attracts top financial and human resources, as well as academic interest (Pifer et al., 2018). In parallel to the growth of this industry, football research and literature has also been growing steadily over the last five decades (Gagné, 1985; Johnston et al., 2017). However, this growth in interest and popularity has not led to a consensus in theories and methods in football research. TID methods in football – and their research and practice – are a paradigmatic example of this lack of consensus.

More specifically, TID research in football covers the prediction of elite football performance. Different authors in this field have attempted to empirically relate distinct and unique performance characteristics to subsequent football success. Nevertheless, these studies have been criticised as they face several methodological issues (Bergkamp et al., 2019). The authors argue for the need for a more coherent scientific and practical framework for TID, which may improve the methodological quality and robustness of research practices in sport literature (Bergkamp et al., 2019). No uniformly accepted theoretical framework guides current practice (Vaeyens et al., 2008). No clear, consensual set of variables is able to consistently predict future success (Johnston et al., 2017). The contributions from these authors, Bergkamp, Vaeyens, Johnston and their teams, help explore new grounds, methodologically and theoretically. This study addresses the search for insights into coaches' decision-making – innovative and exploratory approaches to TID can be beneficial, offering an opportunity to acknowledge, identify and consider new scientific evidence related to TID reality.

2.9 Global South challenges and their impact on football

The United Nations Trade and Development consider South Africa as part of the Global South both geographically and economically (Taylor & Smith, 2007). This study follows this line of thinking and considers South Africa as an emergent economy of the Global South. Development itself implies it cannot be restricted to specific and limited areas, as it has to be present throughout the whole territory (Lees, 2021).

The perspective of the Global South, of interpreting economic and social reality as polarised and historically influenced, is not only geographically-based in terms of the north-south hemispheres

but, more importantly, it brings a relevant critical perspective of the present state of growing levels of economic inequality worldwide, and also within cities, nations and regions (Darby, 2013). Importantly, South Africa represents an important case within the Global South perspective because of its scale and diversity in terms of geographic, cultural and economic factors (Schokkaert, 2016). Some authors, such as Odeh (2010), suggest a controversial interpretation, as they argue that South Africa, in the southern hemisphere, may be classified as being part of the Global North, due to its level of economic development compared to other African countries (Odeh, 2010).

Although some research related to TID in football in the Global South context has been conducted, this under-researched topic still needs to be addressed. To the researcher's knowledge, at this time, there is no applied research in TID that covers the South African professional football reality. Relevant examples in the literature on other countries in the Global South include: (1) in Brazil – looking at players, mapping talent and trying to understand how demographics, birthdate and maturation can have an impact on TID (Teoldo & Cardoso, 2021); (2) again in Brazil – looking at coaches' perspectives of young football players' development, and addressing current paradoxes between different perceptions and viewpoints (Galatti et al., 2016); (3) in Argentina – focusing on the maturation levels and the impact of the relative age effect in young, male football players (Gonzalez Bertomeu, 2018); and (4) in India – addressing different concepts and strategies of TID in the Indian football market (Hammond, 2001). Despite these studies, there is still a lack of football TID research in these regions of the world, particularly in South Africa (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2013).

To better understand the Global South reality, it is necessary to consider financial topics and their consequences and implications. Behind finance, there is the fan base of football clubs, the scale of its markets and their global networks (Goldman & Mashinini, 2018). According to the publicly available information in *Statista*, analysing the revenue and general level of competition, European football is the leading market in the world, where the UK is the largest contributor (Statista, 2020). Its market size for the 2019–2020 season had an impressive financial worth of USD 25.2 billion (Statista, 2020). In parallel, in 2021, the combined worth of all South African teams competing in the PSL amounted to 128.43 million euros (132.14 million US dollars, at current rates) (Statista, 2021). In 2023, according to Statista, the market value of all the teams in the PSL amounted to 157.48 million euros (163.53 US million dollars) (Statista, 2024). News24 reported in 2018 that the PSL had announced that its market had reached a near billion-rand industry (approximately 58 million US dollars) (News24, 2018).

According to a contemporary analysis related to global sports markets, football revenues equal €20 billion (USD 28 billion) a year, almost as much as the combined €23 billion (USD 32 billion)

in revenues for all U.S. sports (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021). These authors also state that football is a €16 billion (USD 22 billion) business in Europe alone (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021). Additionally, the five biggest leagues account for 50 percent of the market, with the top 20 teams comprising roughly 25 percent of the market (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021).

There is a financial discrepancy between European football clubs and African clubs (Brewer, 2019). The gap is still growing especially in terms of worth and capital investment. This may be explained by the difference in scale when comparing the two markets (King, 2017). The reality is that the fan base of big European clubs has become global, while African clubs still struggle, not only to attract new fans but also to keep the ones they already have. Threatened by the exciting European competitions, such as the Champions League and the English Premier League, African clubs find it hard to compete (Fletcher, 2016). The issue is the attractiveness capacity of the European global markets that are very effective in capturing new fans around the world (King, 2017). This provides access to much bigger resources and to much better financial and commercial deals for European clubs, mainly through international media and television rights (Brewer, 2019).

The exponential growth of European football markets implies that a new cycle is beginning, and that the rest of the world must re-interpret and re-position their priorities accordingly (King, 2017). This affects sport itself but, more importantly, it has an impact that is impossible to predict beforehand, forcing new strategies, tactics and approaches or perspectives to emerge. That is, it creates new value creation opportunities across the whole sport ecosystem. Access to a great wealth of financial resources has a domino effect on the sport labour market, careers, consultancy, new services and a whole sequence of potential trickle-down impacts (Brewer, 2019). In the last decade, several elements have negatively affected sport globally, including the Covid-19 pandemic, a shortage of sports officials, doping scandals and climate changes (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021). There is a causal sequence among new competitive strategies, the attraction of new emerging markets, the expansion of the fan base and the strength of sport institutions and their practices, including TID. More importantly, for the context of this research, the football coaches' vision of TID is affected by these dynamic forces. Some negative contextual factors condition and limit the capacity of the football clubs to succeed; because of constraints in the access to financial resources, the under-resourced clubs cannot hire and support the football coaches adequately or provide ideal infrastructure for the technical team (Pifer et al., 2018).

2.10 South African cultural and socioeconomic considerations and talent development implications

South Africa is the second largest and most developed economy of the African continent, and it is an example of extreme diversity, characterised by rich cultural heritage, favourable climatic conditions and plentiful natural resources (Verboom, 2021). However, alongside these attributes, the nation faces significant economic disparities and a pronounced income inequality (Roux, 2016). Consequently, despite its resource abundance and apparent economic strength, South Africa has a substantial poverty challenge, in line with other African countries. This poverty issue is exacerbated by severe unemployment, inadequate education levels, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and various other contributing factors, mirroring challenges faced by numerous nations across the continent (Simelela et al., 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic was another factor that severely impacted not only the South African economy, but also South African sport organisations (Maralack et al., 2022).

South Africa has a troubled history of colonialism, marked by segregation and racial discrimination – a legacy that has entrenched inequality and poverty within the country (Nattrass, 2014). This colonial history has perpetuated economic disparities and delayed growth for a significant period, with improvements occurring only relatively recently. As a result, South Africa continues to struggle with significant income inequality and disparities in the well-being of its population, and across regions within the country (Nattrass, 2014). The new South African Constitution is widely regarded as one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive systems for protecting socioeconomic rights globally. This can be attributed, in large part, to the recognition that apartheid shockingly violated principles of social and economic justice (Heyns & Brand, 1998).

The football industry in South Africa cannot be understood in isolation from the historical evolution of sports in the country and the role that sports practice has had in defining and shaping the nation's destiny. In the last half a century, there have been positive examples of the power of sport to unite communities, territories and populations at a national level (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2013). Nevertheless, as a negative example, the boycotts by the international community in apartheid times contrasts with the post-apartheid example of the success of the national rugby team, winning the World Cup in 1995, 2007, 2019 and 2023, as a rainbow nation, inclusive and diverse. This last example highlights the powerful connection between sport imagery and the political dream of freedom (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2013). In the current turbulent world context, when it is critical to have collective and large-scale constructive examples of social change, the South African sports flag stands out. Indeed, South African sport represents a positive reference

of the power of sport to influence mentalities and to change society. The characteristics of the South African football ecosystem are explored below.

2.11 The influence of South African football governing bodies and their governance role

Diverse stakeholders and interested groups play a role in either implementing or initiating specifically designed strategies and programmes that cultivate sporting success. The study of the role of the National Sport Organisations (NSO) brings an organisational perspective to the development of players' talent (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). The positive consequences of well planned and executed programmes to develop athlete success include the creation of pathways and increased interest in sport, thus attracting financial resources and improving the public profile of sport (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). Empirical research, through the exploration and mapping of sport development processes, namely in the Australian context, has clarified and illustrated the influence of NSOs in shaping “the attraction, retention/transition and nurturing process of sport development” (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). These insights from international research help situate the analysis of the South African football context, which is the background setting of this research.

Two factors can greatly impact the overall football success of any country. First, the relationship among major national sport institutions (Jacobs, De Bosscher, & Venter, 2021) and second, the importance of a strong domestic league (Rockerbie, 2019). The quality and alignment of purpose within these two factors is crucial to determine the overall success of the football system (Lepschy et al., 2018). On the contrary, the lack of consistency of a common purpose and an eventual challenging relationship among major entities means that there is no leverage of opportunities and the whole system ends up suffering the consequences (Lepschy et al., 2018). In turn, a strong domestic league may bring positive pressure to the national football ecosystem (Rockerbie, 2019). Addressing the specific case of South Africa through these lenses helps acknowledge the importance of the institutional framing of football within the country.

Two football organisational bodies are directly related to this research, namely SAFA and the PSL. SAFA was established in 1991 and it is considered in this study because of its relevance as the national administrative governing body that controls football in the Republic of South Africa and as a member of the Confederation of African Football (Fletcher, 2016). The PSL, formally organised since 1996, is significant to this study because it is the premier men's professional football league, and the highest division in the league system of South Africa (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2013). The Premier Division is the top rank of professional football; it is assumed that at this level of competition, the club's TID framework is the most sophisticated at national level (Schokkaert, 2016). SAFA and PSL professionals hold an umbrella view regarding the South African football

reality that offers a relevant vision and an important contribution to the understanding of the football ecosystem and TID processes.

Literature on sport development has covered both micro-level research (Henriksen et al., 2020), including the function of sport science and the players' nearby environment, and macro-level research (Sherry et al., 2024), as the importance of cultural and economic dimensions, while Sotiriadou (2009) addresses a meso-level approach. The rationale is the depiction of athlete development processes in a more inclusive way, nurturing athletes and fostering their success, thus helping to broaden the definition of athlete development (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009).

Several sport institutions may be considered relevant in shaping TID processes in South African professional football, including the sport media setting, and the national governing bodies and structures, namely SAFA and PSL. These institutions have a direct and indirect impact, intentional or otherwise, in how South African football talent is identified, selected, developed and managed. Comparative sport development research testifies to the importance of regulatory national sport institutions (Hallmann & Petry, 2013). It is also important to acknowledge that "problematic inter-organisational relationships can affect the effectiveness of elite sport policies" (Jacobs, De Bosscher, & Venter, 2021). The conceptualisation and symbolic representation of sport is reflected in the specialised media and in the legal, administrative, territorial and organisational demands of the national and formal sport institutions (i.e., SAFA and PSL). In turn, these representations contain the aspirations and ideals of sport stakeholders (Jacobs, De Bosscher, & Venter, 2021).

Considering the South African reality, these organisational structures and settings are particularly important because of the country's scale, large size and regional diversity (Jacobs et al., 2019). Governance is key, as appropriate cooperation among regions, provinces and main football institutions may create an enabling environment at national level. This may allow the national governing bodies to optimally manage different states resources according to their needs without disrupting the country's overall domestic and international football objectives (Jacobs et al., 2019). Moreover, the relationship between SAFA (with its provincial football associations) and the PSL is crucial for the health of South African football, and its implications go far beyond each institution's desires (Jacobs, De Bosscher, Venter, et al., 2021). These impacts affect football clubs, coaches and players all over the country, all the way from the elite and high-performance levels down to grassroots football. The inter-related connections among the different parts of the system imply that both positive and negative influences spread rapidly, with huge potential gains in investing in good management and rigorous governance. The South African coaches TID practices are both products and producers of this much needed management investment.

The institutional framing of South African football is rich and diverse, enabling and situating football management and TID conceptual frameworks in a concrete and challenge context (Kooniyaditse, 2010). SAFA has an impact on TID through legislation and rulemaking, thus influencing the attractiveness of sport and, most importantly, shaping the pathways to high-performance football (Kooniyaditse, 2010). At a fundamental level, each process in sport requires financial and human inputs from diverse stakeholders (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). These stakeholders create and implement developmental strategies, with distinct outcomes and degrees of success. According to these authors “sport development is more complex and encompassing than previously described” in literature (Sotiriadou et al., 2008) (p. 2017). The encompassing role and potential catalyser effect that SAFA has in South African professional football is addressed throughout this research project as it is relevant to the TID football ecosystem within the country.

The importance of a strong domestic league and its reflections and implications on TID and on coaches’ practices is mutually influential, as the success of one co-determines the success of the other. The domestic league is the pinnacle of elite football within any country (Rockerbie, 2019). Therefore, competition should be fierce and demanding, as the level of competition in this league dictates and influences the level of competition of the following leagues (Røynesdal et al., 2018). The domestic league sets the bar, as a benchmark, of what is considered the best of the best in the country. Moreover, some authors point out that “even in the presence of limiting economic and demographic factors, the road to international football success is through the development of domestic leagues” (Rockerbie, 2019, p. 21). The specific case of the South African domestic league is further addressed in the next section.

2.12 South African professional football unique reality

The last three decades have shown an exponential growth of professional football and South Africa’s reality illustrates unique challenges and opportunities. The PSL is organised in football seasons, starting in August and finishing in May of the following year, with 16 teams competing in it. Each team plays 30 games a season, meeting all the other teams twice for home and away games (SHEZI, 2023). The winner of the PSL takes home R15 million (approximately USD 800 000) while the runner-up collects R7.5 million (approximately USD 400 000) in prize money (SHEZI, 2023). These values and magnitude help situate South African PSL clubs in terms of their financial resources.

The PSL is recognised as one of the few leagues in the African continent with a high involvement of business sponsorship, which helps finance both the league and the clubs (Onwumechili, 2019). The PSL pays generously compared to other football leagues in Africa and is, therefore, able to attract top players from other countries (Onwumechili, 2019). However, considering the different

clubs competing in the PSL, there is a vast disparity among each team's financial resources. This situation is created by the sponsorship deals each club is able to attract, as only the top clubs attract large sponsorships (Onwumechili, 2019). Another factor that contributes to the gap among clubs' resources is fan game attendance at the stadiums. Again, only the most popular clubs in South Africa capitalise on game attendance and are able to earn reasonable funds from the gate. In general, gate revenue is minimal as most games are played in front of small crowds, contributing to almost non-existent gate earnings (Onwumechili, 2019). These factors contribute to the separation of the richer clubs from the struggling ones, impacting regional inequality and discrepancies between rural and urban areas. There are impacts at TID level within these diverse settings, as the concentration of power in the larger cities may confer hegemony through monopolised capture of the truly excellent footballing talents, giving them a sport advantage (Onwumechili, 2019).

Long distance travelling also needs mentioning, as South Africa is a large country. For reference and comparison for context, the long distances that South African PSL clubs have to travel can be much farther than those clubs competing in the European top leagues, where countries are smaller in size (Onwumechili, 2019). These accessibility and mobility issues bring several difficulties in terms of logistics, time and financial needs. To ameliorate the situation, some of the elite leagues on the African continent are divided into regions, thus representing lower costs and shorter travel distances (Onwumechili, 2019). However, this strategy is not adopted by the South African professional league.

The quality and competitiveness of any elite professional league is deeply influenced by the level of its development league (Rockerbie, 2019). This is where the football young stars of tomorrow are developing, maturing, getting prepared and ready for the ultimate test that is the transition to the senior team and its league (Røynesdal et al., 2018). In South African professional football, the developmental league is called the DSTV Diski Challenge (DDC), often referred to as the 'Diski League'. This league was first introduced in August 2014 (Goldman & Mashinini, 2018). It is a requirement for PSL teams to have a younger team, under-23 years old, competing in the Diski League. In 2017, Dr Irvin Khoza, the chair of PSL, celebrated the fact that 23 young football players had progressed from the Diski League to the PSL (Goldman & Mashinini, 2018). The transition from junior to senior football is a cornerstone of any TID framework, therefore the Diski League and the transition players between these two levels of competition are carefully addressed throughout this research project.

2.13 Conclusion

This review has explored the diverse and multifaceted landscape of TID in sport, with particular attention to the evolution of models, practices and policies shaping the field. Football-specific TID systems further illustrate these principles, highlighting the key attributes clubs seek in players and the complex transition from junior to senior levels. Youth leagues, with their competitive frameworks, play a critical role in fostering young talent. Moreover, the development of coaches, alongside varied TID strategies, reinforces the growing emphasis on benchmarks and standards. This revision of the literature also acknowledges the relationship between Data-driven and Intuition-driven methods as a cornerstone of TID decision-making. Additionally, there are no consistent predictors of future success, which highlights the complexities of the TID process and stresses the need for further research on this topic. Importantly, this review emphasises the specific challenges faced by the Global South and the unique cultural and socioeconomic factors within South African football. The role of leagues such as the Diski League provides much needed opportunities for advancing youth talent pathways. The state-of-the-art of TID scholarship highlights gaps and potential avenues for future research to optimise talent pathways in South African and global football contexts. The following chapter addresses the methodological choices for this research, which considers both the literature and the aims of the study.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the choice of methodology, that is, the approach, design, research tool, sample, ethics, data analysis and procedure. The argument is that these choices were the most appropriate to effectively answer the research question and to reach the objectives of the study.

3.1 Research approach

The research approach used in this study is qualitative because it was considered the best fit for the research's focus. This study's goal is to characterise South African professional football by addressing sport talent. The research question focuses on the different Talent Identification and Development (TID) frameworks used by the South African professional football clubs, according to the perspectives of the coaches and other key individuals. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate methodology to capture the insights and reflections of the participants, as it enables a deeper understanding of what coaches consider to be the most relevant TID practices and strategies. More importantly, as TID research has been insufficiently covered in the Global South, and it is almost non-existent in the South African professional football context, a qualitative approach is the best choice for this study. Indeed, qualitative methodologies are particularly relevant when there is scarcity of research evidence in the topic (Skinner et al., 2020). The coaches' own voices, perceptions and detailed accounts of their practices enable a better understanding of TID methods in football. Additionally, contributions from other key individuals help strengthen the interpretation of the results and complement this information. The exploration of the participants' perspectives implies acknowledging their institutional background and context. These involve the specific football clubs' TID frameworks, the integrated set of stakeholders' interests, the benchmarking guidelines and standards, and the sectors' practices.

Qualitative studies help sport management research and practitioners better understand sport organisations, stakeholders, objectives and performance (Skinner et al., 2020). Effective qualitative research enables deeper discussion through a reflective and interrogative processes, highlighting the links between research and sport management practices (Skinner et al., 2020). There has been a growing interest in qualitative research methods in sport management, as contemporary research explores and promotes a dialogue among innovative approaches (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). Producing impactful research implies engaging in current methodological thinking, and qualitative research in sport plays a central role in this advancing field (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Through qualitative research it is possible to conduct prospective analysis, proposing future scenarios, trends, directions and policy recommendations (Harper & McCunn, 2017). Sport qualitative studies address the ultimate goal of combining research and applied practice. When using interviews, the reflections of the participants enable access to their day-to-

day work experiences (Harper & McCunn, 2017). The insights from the interviews have a potential positive impact upon athlete's sporting performance, which influences the improvement of the industry's practices.

The strength of qualitative research is that it is able to grasp the multidimensionality of meanings, perspectives, contexts, explanations and unanticipated phenomena that are found in the world of sport science (Stelter et al., 2003). When considering the different qualitative research alternatives, it is important to be aware of the underlying differences that inform research. That includes research goals, approaches and methodologies, and also ontologies and epistemologies (Smith, 2018). An ontology refers to an interpretation of what is considered to be reality, understood as being real, authentic, genuine and spontaneous, while epistemology refers to the organisation of what is known as established knowledge, and an epistemic position reveals a choice among a spectrum of alternative schools of thought (Smith, 2018).

The interpretivist and constructionist approach are best suited for this research. An interpretivist and constructionist perspective analyses human actions in the context of individual and personal perspectives; it emphasises subjective understanding and the social context within which these actions take place. More importantly, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of coaches' decision-making and the contextual factors affecting their practices. Within the context of this research project, the epistemic and ontic choice of an interpretivist and a constructivist approach was used, as opposed to a positivist or an objectivist stance. The interpretivist and constructivist assumptions were applied by allowing the coaches to construct meaning through open dialogue, embracing subjective understandings, and recognizing that reality is socially constructed through their experiences.

The argument is that this is an exploratory study, as we do not (sufficiently, or not at all) know how South African football clubs go about identifying and developing sport talent. Formal published academic research of this nature is unavailable, as far as the researcher is aware, implying that this study is the first of its kind. Asking for and allowing free responses, in a genuine and spontaneous way, is the best strategy for starting to figure out this unanswered question. Through dialogue, within the interviews, the coaches' interpretation and the construction of meaning emerge. That is, the coaches offer an account of their practices through narratives that enable rich insights regarding the complexity of their work (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Reinforcing the selection of a qualitative approach, there is no survey and no agreement upon a clear set of variables, and there is no universal model to identify and develop sport talent (Bergkamp et al., 2019). A standardised model refers to a universal, systematic approach that could be applied consistently across different clubs and contexts. It is important to highlight that the lack of a standardised model for TID practices directly supports the choice of a qualitative

research as the most effective one. Indeed, a qualitative research methodology is the most appropriate choice for this study, as it enables a deeper understanding of the coaches' decision-making processes on TID, as well as of the influence of other key individuals considered relevant in the football club's TID context.

This research project's methodological choices align with contemporary academic research. According to literature, qualitative and applied studies on TID in football have recently shown an exponential growth in the Global North context, in particular in Northern European countries. Several authors, within the European pool of TID research, have used qualitative methodologies that included semi-structured interviews involving football coaches; namely, (i) a study from Aarhus University, in Denmark, used interviews with eight coaches of different national youth soccer teams (Christensen, 2009); (ii) research addressing the Swedish Football Association used 15 interviews with football coaches (Lund & Söderström, 2017); (iii) a Pan-European perspective study involved semi-structured interviews with 11 heads of academy recruitment from professional football clubs from the big five European football leagues (Reeves & Roberts, 2020); and (iv) research involving the Norwegian Football Federation used semi-structured interviews with six male coaches from professional clubs (Fuhre et al., 2022).

Exploring the coaches' narratives offers insight into how these professionals organise their experiences, and presents a clear view of the practicalities and constraints that shape their coaching methods (Christensen, 2009). This author, from the Danish Aarhus University, based his choice of a qualitative design approach on the sensitivity of the coaches' narratives to their individual preferences, as well as "their manner of *doing* and learning to *do* talent identification" (Christensen, 2009, p. 368). This study helps validate the option for interviewing and analysing the perspectives of South African football coaching professionals. The research questions were derived from gaps identified in the academic literature, particularly Baker et al. (2020) call for more diverse TID research. This is particularly important in Global South contexts, where there is a lack of coach perspective studies in South African football.

3.2 Research design

The research design is qualitative, exploratory and cross-sectional; it also uses in-depth interviews. Again, as previously explained, because there is little or non-existent research into the topic, an exploratory approach is the best choice for this study. In more detail, this research is exploratory as it aims to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the specific phenomenon of talent, within PSL football clubs. This setting corresponds to the highest division in the league system of South African professional football. The study is cross-sectional, as it is not looking at trends over time. It uses semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing freedom for both the

interviewer and the interviewee to explore additional points and change direction, if necessary (Eppich et al., 2019).

The justification for these methodological choices was based on the following assumptions: a) direct access to the coach's own voices, perspectives and narratives enables capturing key insights of TID methods and practices (Harper & McCunn, 2017); b) inputs from the interviews of other influential professionals linked to the same clubs help strengthen and validate the study's discussions and conclusions; and c) finally, the participants' perceptions enhance the integrated perspective of the current TID practices in the South African context, across the geographical and culturally diverse football clubs and regions.

The choice of the research design includes addressing the different stages of football players' careers; that is, starting from youth football, which includes players until 19 years of age, as well as the Diski League, as a transition phase from 19–23 years old. The senior level refers to players from 23 years old onwards.

3.3 Research tool

Semi-structured interviews were used as a research tool for this qualitative research, as they best suited the research question, and the research aims and purposes. The set of questions included in the semi-structured interviews was inspired by multiple sources, including personal, academic and work experience information. Semi-structured interviews are a powerful and flexible tool that registers the voices and the ways people signify and make meaning of their experiences (Maxwell, 2008). The term semi-structured addresses the loosely structured nature of the process itself, as it enables in-depth interviews to develop spontaneously within the flow of the conversation (Eppich et al., 2019). In other words, it gives interviewees more opportunities to fully express themselves, but the structure ensures that all questions are covered during the interview process.

The study focuses on the perspectives of professional football coaches and key individuals that add value to the project and, more importantly, are relevant for triangulation in qualitative research (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). It explores self-reflection, open enquiry and the perceptions of football professionals' insights into TID. This involves studying the links and relationships among key concepts, and mapping and pairing TID main methods, namely, the Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches. Although both approaches are more visible at the identification level, they are also present in the development phase; for development, these two approaches are used to compare the evolution of a player across time and to compare with other players (from the same team or a different club) in benchmarking and crossing references (Hamzah et al., 2025).

Self-reflection is based on the assumption that there are more insights to be explored when critical issues are given the chance to flow to the surface of consciousness in the course of a conversation (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). Open enquiry refers to the interlinked nature of open questions, when one question or comment triggers the next question, enabling dialogue, trust, clarity and meaning making to develop in a dialogical way (Maxwell, 2008). The choice of the set of questions and the elaboration of the interview guide aimed to capture the real-life professional experience of the participants, offering active listening and welcoming emergent issues related to TID in football. The researcher's task was to better understand the reality of South African professional football coaches as seen from their eyes.

The interview guide is organised in the following way. Initially, it includes introductory questions related to the participants' professional background, qualifications and trajectory. The reason to start with demographics and contextual information is to enable the creation of rapport and a conversation flow, and to help build a relationship and trust between the researcher and the participant. Later on, the interview guide addresses questions regarding the participants' perceptions on TID, considering both the identification and the development phases. More detailed questions follow, addressing the clubs' policies, the TID framework they use, the balance between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches, and their understanding of the sector's best practices. Finally, the questions focus on the lessons to be learnt from the context of South African football as an emerging economy, diverse from the reality of European football and of other regions of the world. These topics are covered within the flow of the dialogue with each participant, according to their professional role and their reflective practice. The full set of questions is attached as Appendix 1.

3.3.1 Pilot interviews

Pilot interviews are crucial in the research process as they serve several vital purposes. First, they enable the researcher to refine the interview guide, ensuring that questions are clear, relevant and conducive to prompting meaningful responses from participants (Shakir & ur Rahman, 2022). Through pilot interviews, researchers can identify any ambiguities or misunderstandings in the questions, allowing for adjustments to be made to enhance clarity and effectiveness (Shakir & ur Rahman, 2022). Second, pilot interviews provide an opportunity to assess the feasibility and practicality of the research design and methodology. Researchers can evaluate the logistics of conducting interviews, such as the length of time needed and the appropriateness of the interview setting (Shakir & ur Rahman, 2022). Third, pilot interviews allow researchers to familiarise themselves with the interview process, helping to build rapport with participants and refine their interviewing skills. This familiarity and comfort with the interview process contribute to the smooth and successful execution of subsequent interviews, ultimately improving the quality of

data collected (Brooks et al., 2016). Overall, pilot interviews play a crucial role in optimising the research process, enhancing the quality of the data collection process and, ultimately, contributing to the overall rigor and credibility of the study (Brooks et al., 2016).

Besides what the literature highlights as benefits from the pilot interviews process, the researcher also felt the need to practise and overcome that he was interviewing in a second language. Four pilot online interviews were done, three with non-professional football coaches and one with a professional football coach from a club in the National First Division (NFD), the second tier of South African professional football. After completing the pilot interviews and speaking to the people afterwards to check if they found the questioning clear, the researcher felt confident about the process and about the clarity of the interview guide. Nevertheless, for a more in-depth analysis, the researcher decided to add new questions and change the order of some questions. The new questions (or sub-questions) focused on the South African youth football infrastructure, specifically addressing youth competition at national, provincial and regional levels. A new question relating to each club's financial investment in TID was also introduced. The questions related to the maturation of athletes and to player characteristics that coaches look for while identifying talent were moved to an earlier part of the interview process. Additionally, the questions addressing the Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches were refined, and the researcher developed probing questions related to the topic. In other words, if the previous answers did not cover these two approaches, the researcher could directly address them through a new question to gain further information and insight.

To conclude, the researcher learnt to be flexible, and practised being able to adapt the questions while conducting the online interviews, so that, depending on what the interviewee said, he could adjust the sequence for the interview to run smoothly without getting repetitive. Thus, the interviewing process was improved, enabling the interview guide to be refined. The researcher gained confidence in the process, which made the engagement more personal, enabling in-depth reflection to emerge in the course of the conversation. This allowed the participants to be open and comfortable, which, in turn, allowed the researcher to gain richer information.

3.4 Ethical considerations

This section addresses the ethics approval process, which includes the informed consent procedure and the steps taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the research study. Before starting the research, a project proposal was submitted to and approved by the Commerce Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cape Town. The Project Approval Letter allowed the researcher to proceed with the research project and potential interviewees were contacted.

This research had a low risk, as it was unlikely to cause harm to the participants. The Approval Letter document is attached at the end of the thesis as Appendix 2.

Individual participation in this research project was voluntary. Participants had to provide their informed consent, either written or verbally (included in the transcripts). Eight out of the 14 participants signed the informed consent document, while the other six participants provided verbal consent as part of the records of their interviews. The informed consent document contained detailed information regarding the study's aims and the involvement required from the participants throughout the online interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and the researcher's contact information was offered to the participants, facilitating communication in case they had questions or concerns they would like to be addressed at any point in the research process. The option to withdraw from the project was explicit in the documentation. Furthermore, the interviewees' participation and the data collected could be withdrawn at any point in the research process. That is, it was explained to the participants that they had the right to change their mind and stop participating without any further explanation or clarification. The informed consent document is attached as Appendix 3.

Regarding the steps to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the data collected throughout the research project was handled and stored with absolute care, confidentiality, privacy and a committed effort to ensure the participants' rights were not violated. The researcher has tried to guarantee as best as he could that the participants' identity was not improperly divulged; all the information related to this project was kept private and protected from external and unauthorised parties. Regarding the anonymity of the participants and their data, such as their names, numbers were given to each participant, so that their own identity and that of the clubs to which they were associated were not divulged. For confidentiality reasons, the list of PSL clubs' names included in the study was not identified, nor were the clubs linked to a specific province.

3.5 Participants

This research project addresses the question of what TID practices coaches and key individuals are using. These practices include the frameworks and strategies that the main (historically) and top (ranking) clubs use and that are present in today's South African professional football. This study consisted of a sample of 14 male football professionals, who were selected according to purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020), mixed with snowball (Naderifar et al., 2017), and convenience sampling methods (Gill, 2020). The purposive sampling method is one whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the research, and it refers to intentionally selecting participants based on their characteristics, knowledge and experience (Campbell et al., 2020). The professionals involved in South African professional football TID

processes were critical for this research, implying that purposive sampling enabled the focus on that selection criteria. Snowball sampling was used as a recruitment technique where research participants were asked to assist me in identifying and suggesting other potential interviewees through their own networks (Naderifar et al., 2017). Convenience sampling was also applied as a recruitment strategy, referring to the practicalities of setting up an agenda, and the few cases where the potential participants were willing and available to collaborate on a practical level (Gill, 2020).

All participants interviewed work directly with youth players, in transitional roles between youth and senior levels, or in management positions who oversee the development of youth players. This implies that they are ideally positioned to discuss TID practices. Additionally, this study focused exclusively on male coaches due to the current composition of coaching staff in PSL clubs, where female coaches remain underrepresented.

The research sample was taken from seven South African professional football clubs from four different provinces competing in the PSL for the 2023–2024 season. South Africa has nine provinces and 16 PSL clubs distributed across five different provinces. The research sample addresses the most prominent provinces where the majority of the professional clubs are based, giving a rich, diverse and detailed account of the South African professional football reality.

Two main groups of interviewees were considered within the pool of professionals who are experts in football and who are directly and indirectly involved in TID processes. These included 1) the football coaches from PSL clubs and the coaches involved in SAFA youth national teams; and 2) the key individuals in management positions within the same PSL clubs as the coaches of these organisations. The coaches are the focus of this research as they play a key role in TID systems and their voice has not been sufficiently and adequately considered in the literature, particularly in an emerging Global South economy, leaving an opportunity to be explored.

Triangulation concerns were addressed through the use of multiple data sources and perspectives on a topic (i.e., football coaches and key individuals), bringing robustness and rigour to the study (Santos et al., 2020). Triangulation increases the trustworthiness of the project if both coaches and key individuals say the same thing (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). The idea is to ensure that one can find a way of verifying what is being said. The regional diversity of provinces included in this study also contributes to triangulation purposes at a country level, seeking variety, differences and similarities among provinces.

3.5.1 Number of settings – seven PSL football clubs and SAFA youth national teams

All 16 clubs that were members of the PSL 2023–2024 season were considered as potential participants in this study. Of this population, seven clubs were included in the sample, as

explained in the procedure section. This number enabled geographic diversity, differences in scale and varied brands and cultures related to their identity and fan base. The seven clubs involved in this study are distributed across four different provinces. The PSL clubs of the 2023–2024 season are located in five provinces, which means this study addresses four of five provinces. Additionally, the setting of SAFA youth national teams was also included in the sample, which enables a deeper country level perspective on TID practices.

The researcher has concentrated on the four provinces that are the major football provinces in South Africa, thus offering a realistic interpretation of this sport at national level. The sample of the research is semi-representative, as the researcher interviewed more participants working in provinces with a higher representation of clubs competing in the PSL, compared to other provinces and regions of the country. Figure 2 provides a map and geographical distribution of the 16 clubs currently playing at the PSL division; this study covers seven of them, from four different provinces.

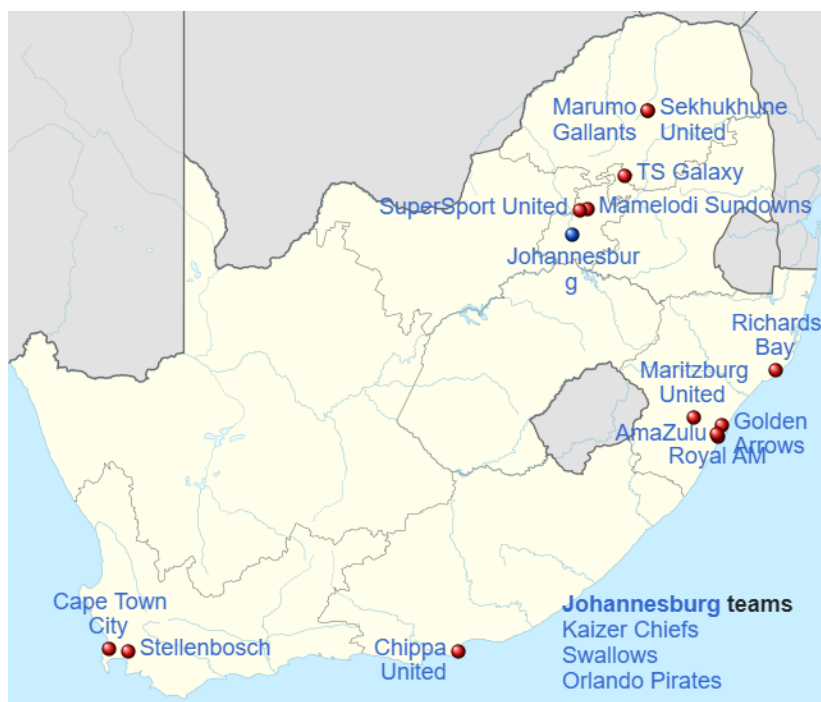


Figure 2: Illustration of the distribution of PSL clubs during the 2023–2024 season
(Source: Wikipedia, 2023)

3.5.2 Number of participants – nine football coaches and five key individuals (14 in total)

Coaches and other key individuals are responsible for TID practices and strategies within their respective football clubs, as this is part of their function and professional role. The coaches from top South African professional football clubs are the core of the research because of their central role and direct impact on and involvement in TID day-to-day practices. The research participants

included the coaches and other key individuals, as it is assumed that the PSL clubs show a high degree and concentration of TID concerns, which are reflected in their work methods, strategies, policies and procedures. This is understood as the clubs' TID framework. Additionally, other professionals in the South African football ecosystem were interviewed as part of the triangulation of the research design. In more detail, the key individuals served as validators of coaches' perspectives, providing triangulation to strengthen the credibility of findings rather than representing a maximum variation strategy.

The sample included two groups of professionals: nine coaches, as the focus of the study, from seven PSL clubs (and from two SAFA youth national teams) and five key individuals (i.e., non-coaches) considered to be influential professionals working within the same PSL clubs. This dual source of participants aims to integrate the coaches' TID practices and the influential professionals' perceptions that have an impact on TID strategies, as these bring insights on the football ecosystem. It is important to stress that all the key individuals considered as influential professionals in TID that were interviewed were working within the same clubs as the coaches. This allowed for richer perspectives on the same realities and, simultaneously, for triangulation for qualitative research purposes.

The list of the 14 male participants consisted of nine football coaches and five key individuals, from seven PSL clubs distributed in four provinces of South Africa. The distribution of clubs per province was three PSL clubs from the first province, two clubs from the second province, one club from the third province and one club from the fourth province. The distribution of participants per club was the following: club 1 – one Diski Head Coach and one U18 Head Coach (dual role of Head of Youth); club 2 – one Diski Head Coach (dual role of Head of Youth), one Head of Recruitment, and one Talent Scout; club 3 – one Academy Director; club 4 – one PSL Head Coach and one Diski Head Coach; club 5 – one Head of Youth; club 6 – one Diski Head Coach; and club 7 – one Diski Head Coach and one Academy Director. The participants with a formal dual role hold two positions and are responsible for two different areas in the club.

Additionally, two of the interviewees were football Head Coaches that have worked in two different SAFA youth national teams, within the last two-year period. These two coaches from the youth South African national teams offered an enhanced insight into the South African football countrywide reality. Table 1 displays the information structured in a schematic way. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes, Table 1 is organised in an order that does not correspond to the numbering order of participants included in the results of the study.

Table 1: Distribution of participants' roles and professional settings

Role		Age group				Professional Position				
Coach	KI	PSL	Diski	U18	SAFA	Head Coach	Head of Youth	Head of Recruitment	Academy Director	Scout
X		X				X				
X			X			X				
X			X			X				
X			X			X				
X			X			X				
X			X			X	X			
X				X		X	X			
X					X	X				
	X						X			
	X									X
	X							X		
	X								X	
	X								X	

The researcher considers the sample size to be satisfactory and it is supported by literature. A local field study on sport talent of Danish football research has used data from six different clubs and conducted interviews with eight football coaches (Agergaard & Sørensen, 2010). The choice of the number of football clubs studied was inspired by the scientific evidence of this Danish football research. The criteria for the number and choice of the football clubs included the following items: the research project feasibility, limited resources, the accessibility of potential participants and, more importantly, that the study reached saturation after interviewing football professionals from seven PSL clubs. Saturation refers to reaching a satisfactory threshold, meaning that one has collected sufficient data to draw the necessary conclusions, and collecting any further data will not produce value-added insights (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). As one interviews more and more participants, one stops finding new opinions, ideas or patterns, and one notices the same themes coming out repeatedly (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

3.6 Data analysis – thematic analysis, codes and themes

The main aim of data analysis is to optimise the research process, turning raw data into meaningful insights, as it helps identify opportunities and enhance the overall performance of the project. It harnesses the power of data and, most importantly, it enables identification of patterns and trends (Mimmert & Raabe, 2018). The goal was to search for new lines of enquiry, instead of looking for a problem-solution, recipe-like answer. It is important to broaden the horizon of possibilities

that may emerge from the coaches' and other professionals' perspectives, as it may lead to new approaches to sport research.

Interpretation of the participants' narratives involved the coding, the searching for relationships, and the identification of patterns in the participants' responses and reflections. This interpretation exercise resulted from a zoom-in and zoom-out analysis that has emerged throughout the interviews, capturing both ready to hand issues and harder to explain reflections. The information was then organised, structured and categorised through thematic analysis. This qualitative research method and tool, thematic analysis, can be used to identify patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset (Braun et al., 2016). It searches for common themes and aims to interpret and to describe their relevance and significance. It is a powerful and robust method for descriptive research, policy analysis and practice-oriented work (Braun et al., 2016). The decision to use thematic analysis was informed by the research question, the aims of the study and the method for data collection. According to Braun et al., (2016), the sample must be large enough to capture key patterns in a meaningful way. These authors suggest a minimum of six interviews for this method to be effective and recommend 15 interviews for the study to have higher research and publishing standards. This research included 14 online interviews.

The transcripts of the interviews were automatically created by the MS Teams software. These transcripts had to be thoroughly revised to check the accuracy of the terminology and technical terms. This was a lengthy and laborious process, as the interview transcripts were considerably long, given that the shortest interview was approximately 50 minutes, while the longest interview lasted more than two hours. For context, to illustrate the manual work involved, the lengthiest interview transcript, which initially had 130 pages, after being checked for accuracy of content, was reduced to 41 pages (20 076 words to 13 586 words) (total time of the interview: 1h.46min.). The second longest transcript went from 93 to 46 pages (20 169 to 16 439 words) (total time of the interview: 2h.06min.).

The transcripts were carefully read several times. After reading the transcripts, the researcher highlighted the most relevant parts of each interview based on information that was directly related to the research questions, and on content that helped create codes and develop the main themes for the data analysis. More specifically, the researcher created an MS Excel spreadsheet document that was developed in two stages, first with the interview highlights and, second, with the codes and themes. This document became the overall map and overview of this research project. The goal was to have a document where patterns could be easily identified in the interviewees' answers, looking for relationships in the dataset.

In the first stage of development of the MS Excel document, the procedure was to aggregate the contents of the highlights of the participants' answers. For this first step, the information that was

highlighted in the edited MS Word transcripts was copied to the Excel document. This document includes one column for each participant, encompassing the most relevant parts of their answers.

After this, for the second step, the researcher decided to include new columns next to each participants' answer, for the codes and themes that had emerged, that is, that the researcher has identified as emerging, from those answers (as illustrated in Figures 3, and 4 below). The final spreadsheet table has 29 columns and 41 lines. The columns correspond to the 14 participants and to the respective codes and themes of their answers (14 plus 14 columns, and one for the category). Regarding the 41 lines of the table, the first six lines are for identification of name, province, club, professional position, date of the interview and confirmation of informed consent. The next 30 lines correspond to the questions and sub-questions of the interview. The last five lines are for relevant generic additional information, which was mentioned in the flow of the interview but was not specific to a singular or particular question.

<p>My position is a dual role. I'm the technical head of youth as well as the head coach for the Diski U21 team. Starting with the role of technical head of Youth, which is to build a unified playing style across the Academy. To build a model on player development once they are with us in the Academy, working closely with the coaches. To develop the coaches, but also the players and their care. To try to find what we would call a golden thread from the youngest team up until the Under 21 team. I work a lot in terms of internal coach development, in terms of player development, and in terms of building and developing the playing style. With regards to coaching the Diski U21 team. There my job is the daily coaching of the team. Individual analysis with the players, team analysis with the team both pre-match and post-match. Scouting and analysing of opposition teams as well as working closely with the PSL team in terms of the players that are transition players. So young players that get a little bit of game time at the first team, but still are also in need of development and game time at under 21 level. So, trying to create a strong link and communication between the first team and the reserve team structure. That's my main responsibilities.</p>	<p>Multiple Roles; Playing style; Development strategies; Player development Model; Coach development; Player development; Golden thread pathway; Individual analysis; Team analysis; Pre-match analysis; Post-match analysis; Opposition analysis; Transition players; Effective communication; Junior/senior strong link</p>	<p>In the academy is more intuition, but collective intuition. It is intuition across many people, not just one person. And about long-term tracking, so not just impulsively bringing someone in because they've had a good Engen tournament for example. But try to make it more long term than that. In an ideal world, it would be more data-driven. In an ideal world we would use providers such as StatsBomb or in the past InStat and others to gather data on the player. The more developed individual positional profiles are the more this can be also supplemented with key data points for various positions. I think this would be the ideal way to do it: Data used as an initial filter. The more accurate your positional profiles are, the better. Across various phases of the game and then yeah, using the video and the committee process and the subject of process to finally make a decision. When necessary, with bringing players on a testing period and in a trial period. Other factors: player might be in demand; dealing with several agents. One might be able to identify almost an ideal player. But whether one can bring the player in to your setup then is another question. Ultimately five parties that need to be happy. Unfortunately, or fortunately, whichever way you look at it, the rights of amateur clubs in this process are very limited. So it is easier at that level, which is also why it's more cost effective to bring in players at a younger age and at an earlier stage, both from a developmental but also a financial point of view.</p>	<p>Importance of Intuition-driven at youth level; Collective intuition; Long term tracking of players; Ideally more data-driven; Video analysis; StatsBomb; InStat; Position-specific characteristics; Player profiles' document; Data as initial filter; External factors; Agents; Family; Former clubs; Recruitment strategies; Development cost efficiency on transfers</p>
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Figure 3: Two examples of highlights from the answers of two different participants (1st column), and corresponding codes and themes that emerged from those narratives (2nd column)

Figure 4: Sample of the MS Excel document – the full spreadsheet is four times the size demonstrated

In summary, codes and themes for all participants' answers were identified. Thematic analysis was used according to Braun and Clarke (2016). The work the researcher has put into the MS Excel spreadsheet was part of the rigorous process of figuring out the codes, themes and sub-themes of the research project. This work contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the

study. Meaningful and significant units of information that were picked from the interview highlights corresponded to hundreds of different codes that were aggregated, organised, condensed and systematised into themes and sub-themes. The researcher finally came up with six main themes and 18 sub-themes, which are discussed in the Results section.

3.7 Procedure

The research procedure started by contacting the 16 South African football clubs competing in the 2023–2024 PSL season via email, expressing the desire for a collaboration and inviting their employees to participate in this study. This first approach used the general contact information mentioned on the PSL website and in each club's official website. Given that the researcher did not get any response to the emails, he decided, as a second approach, to reach out to the coaches and key individuals of PSL clubs directly, via LinkedIn, WhatsApp, through word of mouth, networking and different industry contacts. These contacts, when successful, were formalised via email. The contact gathering process was lengthy and challenging. Moreover, it was not easy to convince people to stop their work and to participate in an academic study. The researcher planned to take 45 minutes per interview, however, in general, the interviews lasted longer than one hour. The coaches and key individuals had a positive reaction to the interviewing process, as they were keen to answer all the questions and were happy to share their thoughts and reflections.

The researcher approached 54 football professionals of South African football, over a 10-month period. Some of these contacts were successful, as they agreed to either participate directly in this study or suggested other potential participants to be reached out. Of the 54 people the researcher contacted, 16 initially agreed to be interviewed, but only 14 ended up participating in the project. Two football coaches first agreed to collaborate but ended up being unresponsive; they were interested and enthusiastic at first about participating, but later seemed to be overworked, with no availability in the calendar.

For networking purposes, during the data collection period, the researcher has attended PSL and Diski League games in Cape Town, as well as the youth Kapstadt tournament. The goal was to meet, face-to-face, professionals that work for these clubs. The number one purpose was to recruit new participants to the study and, ultimately, to achieve a fair representation of the country, in terms of different provinces included in this research. It was also important to have a direct first-hand contact with these professionals and events.

The online interviews were conducted through MS Teams, as it is the software offered to students at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Additionally, this platform was chosen because it creates an automatic transcript of the online meeting. Nevertheless, the researcher later realised that sometimes the transcript is not totally correct, depending on the level of English, speaking style,

accent and whether English is the native first language. The recording of the interviews helped the researcher accurately capture the content of interview transcripts, bringing clarity and rigour to the text, and helping to ensure no misinterpretations on the researcher's side. This lengthy and cumbersome task was relevant to enable capturing further insights as a researcher. It was always clarified to all the participants that they could contact the researcher if they wanted to change something they had said, or if they wanted to revisit or revise their answers.

Member checking is a technique where results are returned to participants to explore accuracy and resonance with their experiences. This technique is used in qualitative research to explore the credibility of the results through participant validation (Candela, 2019). The researcher contacted all participant via email and sent them the transcript of their interviews. In this email, the researcher asked for their confirmation of the contents, and explained that they could change or add any information they would like to the research project. The researcher also mentioned that if they did not reply, it would be assumed that they agreed with the transcript contents.

The data analysis, as detailed and described in the section above, started with MS Teams transcripts. These transcripts were checked to guarantee they accurately captured the interview content. The careful reading of the transcripts was followed by selecting and highlighting the most relevant parts of these same transcripts. An MS Excel spreadsheet was created with a column for each participant. The next step was to copy the highlights from the MS Word transcripts to the MS Excel spreadsheet, to enable a bigger picture and a bird's eye view of the participants' answers. Then the researcher created codes and themes in the MS Excel document based on the highlights of the participants' answers, following the methodology for thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2024).

The Braun & Clarke six steps were followed: i) Familiarization with data; ii) Generating initial codes; iii) Searching for themes; iv) Reviewing themes; v) Defining and naming themes; vi) writing up findings (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The final themes and sub-themes were discussed with the researcher's supervisors. They contributed with valuable and useful insights, such as aggregating terms and proposing new terminology. Their input was a further point of trustworthiness, and it enhanced the credibility of this work. Critical friends are reliable colleagues who systematically provide support to researchers while helping increase the validity and reliability of the research project (Blake & Gibson, 2021). This concept strengthened the methodology by providing external validation of the analysis process. It is important to add that an iterative process was employed, moving fluidly between the data analysis phase as new insights emerged from the interpretation of the participants narratives. This is consistent with Braun and Clarke's non-linear approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The next task was to write the Results section, which was followed by writing the Discussion and, finally, the

Conclusion of this research project. It is important to note that during the whole procedure of this research project some of the steps mentioned here were conducted simultaneously.

3.8 Trustworthiness of the research

Several elements of this research helped ensure that trustworthiness was achieved. A reader can feel confident that the work is credible by verifying that key actions were taken (Skinner et al., 2020). In this project, the following choices contributed to enhancing the credibility of the project: the criteria for the sample of the study; the triangulation design, which is important in qualitative research; the rigorous procedure of creating codes and themes; the member checking and request for revision; and, finally, the supervisors' insights and suggestions.

The sample was carefully constructed to represent the expertise in this knowledge field. A triangulation design was used to verify what was being said by participants, as this is crucial in this type of research, thus bringing robustness to the study. Attention to detail was important when analysing the data collected from the interviews and while creating codes, themes and subthemes, which was a fundamental step to guarantee depth and consistency. These laborious tasks resulted in clearer insights for the discussion of this study. Member checking helped confirm the data collected in the semi-structured interviews. The whole process was supervised by two generous and demanding academic research experts, helping with the research direction and providing valuable and useful suggestions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research findings are presented, organized into six major themes and 18 sub-themes, presented in Table 2. These themes have emerged from the interviews, as the result of the researcher's interpretation of the contributions of the participants.

Table 2: Structuring of six main themes and 18 sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-themes
1 Player characteristics	1. Positional based player-profiles 2. Club's unique playing style and the SA football environment 3. Multifactorial approach
2 Clubs' processes used in player recruitment	4. Collective effort 5. Varying youth level and senior level recruitment strategies 6. Scouts, agents and trials
3 Intuition-driven approach (ID) to TID	7. Coach's eye 8. Past TID experiences inform gut feeling 9. Differences between youth and senior levels
4 Data-driven approach (DD) to TID	10. Tools and techniques 11. Internal club data monitoring 12. Complementarity between Intuition-driven and Data-driven
5 Challenges to South African football player development	13. SA socio-economic context and logistical challenges 14. Inadequate SA youth football infrastructure limits player development 15. The role of SA coaches in player development
6 Enablers of South African football player development	16. Holistic approach and the importance of an enabling environment 17. In-house academies 18. Successful Diski League

The main goal of this research was to address TID practices from the perspectives of the coaches and key individuals within the setting of male professional football clubs in South Africa, an emerging Global South economy. The presentation of these results addresses and helps answer the research questions of this research project. In general, both coaches and key individuals were aligned in terms of their main contributions and perspectives. As explained in the methodology, the rationale for interviewing key individuals to TID (i.e., non-coaches) was to confirm and complement the main perspectives of the football coaches. The alignment between the contributions of these two groups of professionals was clear, and the distinction between them will not be addressed throughout the description of the different themes and sub-themes. Furthermore, the main themes themselves, are sets of broad concepts related to different areas of

TID in football. It was fundamental to recognise the intimately interlinked ideas from the participants and to then organise and separate them into different main themes and sub-themes.

4.2 Player characteristics

It was clear throughout the interviews that *player characteristics* are something that critically informs the participants' choices on football talent and, consequently, their TID practices and decision-making. Overall, *player characteristics* had a great importance to the study's participants. Each participant has described his own ideal set of *player characteristics*, which he would use throughout the whole process of identifying, selecting, managing and developing a talented football player at his club. Moreover, participants directly explained that *player characteristics* were key elements of the coaches' practices related to TID, in both youth and senior levels. From the participants' narratives, when they described their daily work, what emerged as *player characteristics* corresponded to the different parameters and qualities that serve as criteria for evaluating the performance and behavioural traits of players. In their opinion, this enables them to say that a player has great potential or otherwise.

Some of the participants may have slightly different views and perspectives, in terms of their preferred *player characteristics* regarding what type of parameters they value and look for, which are then reflected in the participants' working style. In other words, the cocktail or recipe that participants described in their selection of key aspects may vary, but the raw ingredients used seemed stable across the study sample. The main characteristics addressed are organised in three sub-themes. First, the *positional based player-profiles*, which depend on the in-field position of the players. Second, the club's *playing style*, as this directly affects the *player characteristics* that clubs look for, merged with the contextual setting of the South African football environment playing style, with its unique set of traits. Finally, the *multifactorial approach* the clubs use while recruiting and developing players, which may include different aspects, such as the importance participants gave to the resilience of a player for him to succeed because even the most talented player needs strong behavioural skills to succeed.

4.2.1 Positional based player-profiles

The *positional based player-profiles* are defined according to the position each player plays in. The relevance of this topic was unanimously evident throughout the interviews, as all participants addressed this theme. The *player-profiles*, and consequent desirable characteristics that clubs look for, differ greatly, depending on the in-field position the player being considered plays in. Specific positions require certain type of characteristics or attributes. In simpler terms, attacking positions require attacking characteristics, while defending positions require defending characteristics.

To give an example, attacking players require stronger shooting skills, dribbling, fast movements, and creativity to penetrate the opposition defence, while defensive players require better positional and tactical knowledge, alertness and focus, good tackling and higher levels of aggression to prevent the other team from scoring. Moreover, at a deeper level, some of the positions require a higher degree of character and personality features, while others require a higher degree of physical and athletic parameters. Considering the different attributes participants value the most depending on the players' position, participant 14, calmly stated: "*It's quite positional based*". He then explained that he wants his centre-backs with strong leadership qualities, in his words: "*loud and vocal*"; and the full-backs with good running capacity: "*the full-backs, with pace and ability to run up and down the field*". Interestingly, participant 5, also used the centre-back position to exemplify what characteristics he looks for. He considers height and physical strength as fundamental attributes for centre-backs, centre-forwards and goalkeepers. He shared: "*When you are getting centre-backs, for example, there is certain height that we need to be looking at when we are recruiting these players. We also want more athletic players for other positions.*"

Some participants confirmed that their clubs have a formal strategic document, which outlines the *player-profiles* required for every position on the field, as well as the club's *playing style*. These documents describe the physical, tactical and technical profile of potential recruits, as well as the mental aspects, attitude and personality traits. These participants consider this document and approach as a guide to the overall TID process. Moreover, five out of the seven football clubs that participated in this study, have this document written down and shared among their professionals, which include the coaches and whoever else is involved in the TID decision-making process, namely Head of Youth, Academy Director, scout, etc. Illustrative examples, from the participants' narratives, make evident the strategic role of *positional based player-profiles*, formalised in the club's documents. As participant 3 explained, in simple terms: "*We have a framework of what we look for in each position*". While participant 13 described in more detail and with greater conviction: "*We have a club playing style document, which also outlines the player profiles required for various positions, going from goalkeeper to full back, to centre back, all the way through various positions. This is a very key thing.*"

4.2.2 Club's unique playing style and the South African football environment

Several participants mentioned, as a recurrent topic, the need to match the choice of the right player with the club's *playing style*. In other words, the type of players the football clubs want to recruit and develop must align with their *playing style*. If a club likes to play in a certain way, that same club must attract and develop players in a way that allows them to play with that specific type of strategy. Participant 6 explained that the *playing style* of his club dictates the type of

players they want to recruit, in his words: *“Our recruitment has to be done according to the playing style of our club.”* He then added passionately: *“The first thing we look at, and because we are a team that likes to play dominating football, is their ball-mastery, their ball-handling.”* As mentioned by a few participants, this alignment (or lack of it), often dictates how successful players and teams will be, individually and collectively. Participant 2 stated that he had been in contact with several people within the football industry. He explained: *“The more successful ones are the ones where they follow the club’s lead and recruit according to what the club’s objectives are at the end of the day.”* In terms of the details that go into the club’s playing style, practical examples might be to play a very direct, counterattack fast-paced type of football; or, instead, to build from the back, patiently, until finding a good opportunity to break through. On this topic, participant 10 shared: *“We have a game model that, as a club, we have decided to adopt. With that game model we then prescribe the attributes of the players required to fulfil the necessary technical and tactical expectations. That prescribed model of recruitment speaks to how we look at the game.”*

Regarding the ideal and desirable *player characteristics*, three levels of analysis are important. First, the characteristics are dictated and influenced by the position each player plays in. Second, the characteristics must align with the club’s strategy and *playing style*. Third, it is important to highlight that the *players’ characteristics* must also fit the environment the players are immersed in. That is, the *player characteristics* must be adequate and adapted to the local circumstances of the league. As an umbrella term, the South African football environment *playing style* refers to a common background that all participants and clubs that are part of this study share. This was a salient theme, the general contextual environment that determines decision-making.

The characteristics of South African football, as happens with every national professional sport practice, are different from the characteristics of other regions of the world. Several participants mentioned that the football played in the South African professional leagues is highly based on the athletic condition of the players. Participant 1 reflected on this topic, arguing: *“South African football is highly transitional [several ball turnovers – implying numerous shifts from attacking to defending and vice-versa], the physical component is very important.”* He also pointed out that players who cannot run or do not handle numerous ball turnovers in a short period of time often get lost in the game, justifying his prioritising of the physical component. According to several participants, there is a focus on fast players, as speed counts, and an emphasis on athletic physical resistance, on strength, with special attention to endurance. Participant 14 said vibrantly and quite self-assuredly: *“The style of playing here, I think it’s quite a direct and intense style. There’s a lot of running here in our game. As I always say, in South Africa, the players run faster than the ball. In Europe, the ball moves faster than the players. Very running-based game here.”*

4.2.3 Multifactorial approach

The participants stated that they look for a diverse set and mixture of *player characteristics* when identifying and developing football players, which was present in their narratives and their efforts to capture the adequate terminology. In this *multifactorial approach*, the participants deemed a plethora of different aspects and a broad spectrum of factors to be important. There seemed to be no clear consensus among the participants the researcher spoke to, regarding a unique and universal terminology and set of characteristics. The best approximation is an agreement that many issues are involved when trying to precisely define the ideal characteristics of a player. Furthermore, the participants were unanimous regarding the need for a *multifactorial approach* when addressing the definition of (their) *key player characteristics*. It was evident from the interviews that this is a wide-ranging topic, encompassing many different factors, dimensions and perspectives.

Some of the football clubs involved in this study have a more formal TID framework when looking for specific attributes, according to participants' testimony. Three examples provided by different participants from different clubs were: participant 6 explained that at his club they use the "*TIPS Model*" – Technique, Insight, Personality and Speed; participant 1 shared that his coaching team follows the system of "*Four Major Ticks*" – technical ability, physical potential, tactical awareness, and attitude and character traits; and participant 12 stated that his club uses an "*Integrative Model*" – physical, technical, tactical, mental and social. The use of different models directly affects and influences the type of *player characteristics* that coaches and clubs are looking for, as stated by most participants. It is important to highlight that the participants, across all interviews, were enthusiastic about discussing these topics.

Throughout the participants' narratives and reflections, four main attributes emerged: relationship with the ball, fast players, super-strength and coachability. These attributes were mentioned by different participants repeatedly. Participant 7, said in an affirmative way: "*For me, we first check the technique*". Participant 6 seemed to give more importance to fast players, and he justified it by saying: "*I think if you look at the modern game, then speed is something that is needed across all positions.*" Participant 12 used *super strength*, the same term used by other participants to refer to special attributes that talented players show, and he said vividly: "*We are looking at super strengths, that is, something specific to their position without any glaring weaknesses that you can see.*" Participant 3, shared the opinion of other participants, considering coachability as a fundamental attribute; he said: "*I think you look for coachability; it is when the player is able to take and use the coaching help, and use it as something to develop and become a better player.*"

The majority of participants identified, throughout the interviews, the importance of the players' character and resilience as key influencing factors of talent. Participant 1 used specific

terminology to illustrate this. He said: *“One of the big things that we try to do here: we try to equip the players daily – mentally, physically and nutritionally. Good habits. Behaviour-reliant instead of talent-reliant. Discipline over motivation.”* This is an interesting insight into the determinants of success in football; that is, attitude, strength of character, strong personality, resilience, good habits and personal traits are determining factors in the success of football players, according to the participants’ testimony. Although this participant clearly expressed his reasoning, this same idea was present across all interviews. Participant 11 simply put it: *“It all starts with the behaviour of the player.”* These consensual reflections among the participants suggest that behavioural characteristics play a key role in players’ technical proficiency.

The overall perception, as manifested by the participants’ narratives, was that public opinion, in general, as well as many inexperienced players, do not realise the demanding requirements and hardship, in terms of personal investment, of professional sport. On the contrary, the football coaches and key participants of this study argued that coaches have a more realistic perspective and acknowledge the burdens and challenges of professional sport. Consequently, according to their view, resilience plays a big role, working hard is a necessity, and it does not make sense to recruit a player who is unable to work hard. Participant 5 explained with conviction: *“I, personally, for myself, I have identified resilience as a key component without which a professional career becomes, I don't want to say impossible, but extremely unlikely.”* Moreover, several participants considered players’ resilience and ability to work hard as the most important thing, saying the resilience of a footballer overcoming setbacks and frustrations can define a player’s career, and it can be the difference between a player making it to the top or not. Participant 3 shared on this topic: *“That’s the most important thing. The resilience of a footballer overcoming these things, it’s so important.”*

To summarise, the main theme of *“player characteristics”* is crucial in TID practices, where coaches emphasise specific traits depending on the player’s position, the club’s *playing style*, and the broader South African football environment. *Positional based player-profiles* dictate the desired attributes for each role, while the club’s strategy and the physical demands of South African football shape these preferences further. A *multifactorial approach*, considering technical, physical, mental and social factors, is essential, with resilience and coachability highlighted as key to a player’s success. This theme highlights the complexity and context-specific nature of effective TID practices in football that connect both physical attributes and the mental or behavioural side of *player characteristics*.

4.3 Clubs' processes used in player recruitment

Player recruitment is a vital part of any football club, as the participants agreed. Naturally, clubs want to recruit the best athletes that they can find or the players that they identify as having the highest potential of becoming elite players. To do so, football clubs invest valuable time, money and human resources in recruiting talented players. Each football club has its own set of strategies and practices that are used to identify and select talented players and are part of the TID framework of that club. Even though some of these processes are specific to each club, the clubs use and share three common strategies, presented here as three sub-themes. First, the *collective effort*, which relates to the notion that the recruitment of new players is not a one-person task, and that having more people involved also means having more insights and higher chances of getting the recruitment process right. Second, the role of *local recruitment at youth level*, which is influenced by logistical and regional challenges, as well as the importance of developmental considerations of youth athletes and the *broad recruitment at senior level*, that refers to a wider pool of players and territories, nationally and internationally and third, the influence of *agents* and *scouts* in the talent identification process, and the unanimous importance of *trials* to evaluate new players in the recruitment phase.

4.3.1 Collective effort

It was a widespread opinion among participants that, in each one of their clubs, there is a *collective effort*, meaning several professionals are involved in the recruitment of players and in the overall TID processes. This *collective effort* increases effective teamwork, and it includes the interdisciplinary teams and synergies among different club professionals and departments. These were key topics covered throughout the interviews. Examples given by the participants of positions involved in TID range from CEO, Chair, Sporting Director, Head of Recruitment, Head of Youth, Scout, Head Analyst, Data Analysts, Sport Scientists, Team Managers, Technical Staff, to the Head and Assistant Coaches, who are very active in this process. Participants highlighted the predominant role of coaches in the recruitment process. Participant 6 explained: “*It’s a sort of collective effort by all coaches and staff. Whenever we have assessments of these talents, even at the younger age groups, all the coaches take part in the process.*” He then explained that, collectively, at his club, the analysts and sport scientists also participate in TID decisions. This topic attracted the attention of all participants, yet some were more detailed and precise in their comments. For instance, participant 5 spoke for a long time about this topic, and he argued: “*Recruitment decisions are very collective decisions, where a lot of relevant opinions are taken into account. It’s a collective decision-making process and also playing the devil’s advocate and trying to look at a potential player from both sides.*”

Regarding the transparency, mitigation of bias and written procedures in *player recruitment*, a couple of the participants indicated that it is difficult to avoid entirely a variety of biases and manipulations during TID processes. Participant 8 admitted: *“Sometimes I know that it is because of bias and favouritism, and then other players are not there because they are prejudiced.”* However, the overall perspective in all clubs is that these processes were quite transparent. Moreover, the main strategy adopted by the clubs to avoid biases and bring transparency to these processes is to make recruitment decisions collectively and as a group. As participant 5 explained: *“Making these decisions collectively, hopefully safeguards against certain thinking biases that individuals might have.”*

4.3.2 Varying youth level and senior level recruitment strategies

It is important to highlight that three of the seven clubs, besides recruiting locally in their region, are able to recruit at national level because they have more financial resources, thus enabling covering logistics, transport, accommodation and organisation costs. It is also relevant to mention that one of the strategies most of the clubs use to identify and recruit talented young players is to attend youth national tournaments because of the convenience of a structured environment and access to a wide pool of players.

There was a clear pattern to consider in the participants’ answers regarding the territories where their professional football clubs recruit. All clubs want to promote local talent in the younger age groups. The local recruitment at youth level was explained by several participants mentioning different reasons, the most common of which were cost-saving strategies and the promotion of local communities. Some of the clubs have a clear strategy of community upliftment, which includes brand identification and the creation of a common narrative for the region. Participant 12 spoke about this topic in an enthusiastic way; he explained: *“To promote the local talent is key. I’m a big fan of promoting from within.”* On the same note, participant 4 said that they had been trying to improve their player recruitment, especially within their area, and he shared: *“Trying to find ways to improve our player recruitment, especially within our local region, which is the main emphasis of our club, it is to try and uplift the community that we exist in.”*

The financial restrictions, cost of transportation, cost of reallocation and lack of available residential support were some of the challenges that other participants mentioned in the need for a more local approach to youth recruitment. Participant 13 said: *“It’s really difficult to attract players who don’t live in very close”*, because of logistical challenges, he explained. On the other hand, participant 9, an Academy Director, said: *“We recruit players from all over the country.”* Participant 6, from the same club, stated: *“And because we can accommodate them in our recruitment, we do not have problems to relocate players and make sure that they are housed at our clubhouse.”*

The participants expressed differences when recruiting players for higher competition levels and older age-groups. They mentioned the need to widen and broaden the recruitment database and pool of players, and the territorial coverage of national regions. Participants 4 and 13, from different clubs, made it clear that as from the U21 level onwards, they are able to recruit nationally. This implies that at senior level, the recruitment is more national, all-over South Africa. Participant 12 explained: “*For the first team [professional] it's not even national, it is international. We get guys from all over.*” On the same topic, participant 2 explained: “*Our recruitment goes from local, to more national, to international, as we progress from younger to older age-groups and level of competition.*” He explained that when competing at national and international level, the recruitment also needs to be nationally and internationally based. However, two out of the seven clubs indicated that they do not have resources for that kind of international, or even national level recruitment and their strategy involves developing in-house players. This discrepancy in terms of strategic approaches in *senior player recruitment* reflects the different realities clubs face financially, as participants mentioned.

4.3.3 *Scouts, agents and trials*

As was evident from the interviews, *scouts, agents and trials* play an indispensable role in *player recruitment*. Different participants explained that *scouts* are normally attached to and contracted by a single club and have the specific function of identifying talented players. One of the clubs has club legends (former successful players) working as scouts. From the other six remaining clubs, three have scouts and three clubs do not have people working in this position. Considering his club reality, participant 13 commented, in a disappointed way, that: “*Currently we do not have scouts, we are working on that.*” On the other hand, participant 6 highlighted: “*We invest a lot, our scouts are travelling every weekend,*” then explained that there are costs associated with flying and driving to go to watch players play live.

According to the participants, *agents* work with football players individually, representing their interests. They are the intermediaries and mediators in the negotiation of contracts with the clubs, and they have an active role in promoting their clients. All clubs in this study mentioned that they interact closely and regularly with *agents*. Participant 1 emphasised the importance of agents in the process of recruiting players, and he said: “*We depend on good relationships with the agents. Sometimes we are the ones who go to the agents, and sometimes they are the ones saying: You cannot miss out on this player!*”

Trials are common to the seven clubs and refer to an experimental period where potential new players train and are tested within the clubs' facilities and are evaluated by the club's coaching team and staff. Furthermore, some participants highlighted that their clubs rely heavily on *trials*, as they see this procedure as an important tool to confirm and justify their recruitment choices.

Regarding trials, participant 2 shared: “*If enough talent has been shown, we invite the player on trial. We spend two weeks at most with a player. And in the two-week assessment we try and make sure that there's a game. So, they can play in a competitive match.*” Participant 7 also considers that it is important to bring players in trial so that they can see how the players conduct themselves while they are around the club.

It is also relevant to mention that both formal and informal communication channels are involved in *player recruitment processes*, regardless of the selection mechanism. This was visible in the participants’ responses, in terms of their description of the trust and quality of the relationships that are developed among the set of professionals included in *player recruitment*.

In summary, football clubs prioritise recruiting top talent, with each employing unique strategies within their TID frameworks. Despite varying approaches, common practices were mentioned by the participants, such as the collective decision-making involving multiple staff members, a focus on local recruitment at youth levels due to logistical and financial constraints, and a broader, sometimes international, recruitment strategy for senior players. Additionally, scouts, agents and trials play crucial roles in identifying and assessing potential recruits, with trials serving as a critical step in confirming player selections.

4.4 Intuition-driven TID

The *Intuition-driven approach* can be contrasted with the *Data-driven approach* that will be covered in the subsequent section. *Intuition-driven* was a dominant theme throughout the interviews. It is non-evidenced-based and relies on subjective aspects, such as the coach’s intuition and gut feeling to spot talent. Different participants have given slightly different weights to this approach. Most participants considered it unavoidable and mandatory, while a few take it more lightly, considering it important, but not essential and determining. Three sub-themes emerged, related to this topic. First, the *Coach’s Eye* that refers to the first “*contact*” coaches have when confronted with new and not yet spotted talented players. Second, *past TID experiences inform gut feeling*, which relates to the complex wealth of personal and professional experience that coaches have accumulated that has a significant impact on their decision-making. Third, the *emphasis on the Intuition-driven approach* at junior level, which is key and uncontested when facing the general lack of technological resources within this age-group.

4.4.1 Coach’s Eye

Throughout the interviews, the *Intuition-driven approach* was the expression used by the researcher when questioning the importance and role of non-evidenced-based methods to TID. The *Coach’s Eye* and/or *Eye Test* were part of the terminology that participants used

spontaneously, without having been suggested or made explicit in the semi-structured interview questions. Moreover, both terms were used multiple times and interchangeably, referring to the same process. The *Coach's Eye* is seen as a valid tool by many participants. One of the participants shared that when there are limited resources, clubs tend to place a lot of value on the eye, experience, intuition and qualities of coaches to be able to identify talent. Comments from different participants help describe multiple aspects of the *Coach's Eye*: the use of slang expressions to capture its uniqueness; the importance of the first moment of interaction with a new player and the power of these first impressions; the passion and enthusiasm that is referred to by coaches as a validation of their professionalism; and the pride and sense of satisfaction of acknowledging the high number of successful players at senior level who were identified through this *Eye Test* at a younger age. On this topic, participant 1 stated, full of pride and satisfaction that most of their PSL players had been recruited and signed (at junior or senior level) predominantly using the *Eye Test*, and that makes them feel very proud, he said: "*We work purely on Eye Test.*" and then he concluded: "*I think this is really, really, amazing and that is all Talent Identification. All players were brought through Eye Test.*"

Regarding his club's practices, participant 4 commented: "*At the moment, it's just a sort of coaches' intuition and identification of a player who perhaps stands out from the rest.*" Participant 6, from a different club, explained: "*But most of the time we use intuition, especially at the younger age. Where we scout these young boys, it's difficult to get data. Because you can go and scout these players in a very, very rural area. No one gets any information about them. They just play. So sometimes the first moment you lay your eye on him, you just get caught up and you are afraid of losing him.*" Descriptions of the participants were rich in insight and voiced strong sentiments. Participant 14, who rates his club highly on this topic, shared with confidence: "*Well, it's more intuition, more experience in the club, and the success rate has been there. The one thing I think we have better than a lot of clubs that use data, is that I think we've got a better eye.*" On the same topic, participant 13 stated: "*I can tell you, if I see a player live and if I see things that I like, I will follow that player.*"

4.4.2 Past TID experiences inform gut feeling

Throughout the interviews, intuition and gut feeling were sometimes seen as synonymous terms, while in some cases participants tried to further explore and give meaning to each one of these concepts, using their own experiences throughout these processes as a baseline. Some of the participants have had past professional experience as football players, and they see this as an important asset. Nevertheless, it also important to highlight that part of this process can be considered confirmation bias, which can be problematic as it excludes players who may be

talented but do not fit the coach's perception of what talent is. Participant 3 seemed to be aware of this issue; he shared: *"Yes, there is professional bias, there is confirmation bias."*

Generally, as the interviews have suggested, the non-evidence-based methods are hard to describe or put into words. However, participant 9 spoke passionately about the topic. He was interested in defining what intuition is before giving his answer, he stressed: *"For me, it is a bag of emotions that you have in your brain that relates to your experience."* He then explained, according to his perspective on the subject, that feelings towards new players are based on past experiences with other players: *"When I go to a match today, some players give me immediately a positive emotion or a negative emotion. This is not intuition. Because there's something in my brain which related my experience to that player. How he works, how he runs, how he scores, how he defends, how tall he is, the way he runs."*

Participants' narratives often explored personal reflections based on direct experience and self-observation. Vivid descriptions help grasp the importance of sensations when referring to gut feeling and its influence in decision-making. Participant 3 said about the initial moment when spotting a talented player: *"When it comes to intuition, when you first watch a player, there can be a certain gut feel."* Participant 8 shared: *"Also, due to my experience, and because I have played the game, I understand the game, so I know what we are looking for."*

4.4.3 Differences between youth and senior levels

It was clear throughout the interviews that at a youth level, there is a clear predominance of the *Intuition-driven approach*. Participant 7 commented: *"At youth team players, we definitely rely more on the Eye Test and intuition-based on players."* In the same line of thinking, participant 4 explained: *"At the junior level, it would be mostly around our intuition and our experiences, as coaches and football personnel. We don't have access, in our environment, to a lot of statistics and numbers."* Regarding the emphasis on the *Intuition-driven approach* at junior level, participant 2 shared the same opinion: *"For the youth structure you can only really be subjective when you go out and recruit players. Our league is not even close to being at the level where there's statistics available for youth players."* These two participants, from two different clubs, mentioned that as youth games are not recorded, it is impossible to have consistent data, therefore it is the gut feeling and intuition methods that count.

According to the professionals that were interviewed, the sharp contrast between junior and senior is due to the generalised lack of structures and financial resources at junior level. Moreover, the wide difference between these age-groups and access to technology is related to the poor structure of South African youth football. Some of the participants stated that at older age groups, the *Intuition-driven approach* starts to become less relevant, as it is combined with data and statistics,

while others argued that the greater reliance on technology at older levels should not influence or replace the use of intuition and gut feeling. Participant 1 mentioned that the *Eye Test* analysis goes through mainly from the Youth Academy to the U21 programme, and that statistical analysis goes through the professional ranks. Moreover, this participant commented that people are assigned to check statistics and use more data at the professional level. Participant 3 interestingly explained regarding the different age groups, the following reasoning: “*With youth players. Yeah, you can work up intuition and guts. But especially at a high level, the higher you go, the more footage you need to have, and the less guts gets taken into account. Intuition and guts are always going to play a role, but it does diminish as you go up the levels of recruitment.*”

Throughout the interviews it was clear that at senior level, there is greater use of the *Data-driven approach*. Financial investment, integrated procedures and human resources allocated to the *Data-driven approach* for PSL teams were constant topics raised by the participants. This pattern reflects the trend of the increasing role and power of technology in professional football and in society. As participants stated, evidenced-based-methods are used to identify, select and recruit talented players at senior level. In most of the clubs included in this study, *Data-driven* is the dominant approach for TID decisions in their PSL teams. Most of the participants accept this dominance as a matter of fact, implying that the few exceptions had to be very assertive, with clear and strong arguments. There was often a sense of pride when referring to use of technology. Participant 10 stated that, at his club, with the professional team, they try to use data as much as they can. Participant 6, from a different club also said proudly about his club: “*In the professional setup, we are extremely strong when it comes to the use of data.*” He mentioned that his club has employed data analytics, and that player recruitment is now more driven by data analytics than by physical scouting; his words were: “*I think that at our first team level, there’s definitely a lot of data. We have an analyst and a scout, who works exclusively with Data-driven information to try and recruit players. And a lot of the signings that have been made in this season were recruited through the sciences and their metrics of football.*” Reinforcing the idea that at senior level there is more thorough use of data tools, several participants highlighted the topic of television broadcasts and the possibility of recording games. Participant 12 briefly explained: “*At PSL level, all the games are recorded, so the data analyst can use those formulas to ascertain if a player is someone that we can recruit.*” Participant 3 said assertively: “*The higher you go in age groups, the more important the data analytics becomes.*”

In summary, the *Intuition-driven approach*, dominant in youth football, contrasts with the *Data-driven methods* that are more prevalent at senior level. Coaches often rely on their “*Coach’s Eye*” or gut feeling to spot talent, especially where technological resources are scarce, such as in rural areas or youth leagues. Intuition is shaped by past experience, and it is essential at junior levels due to limited data availability. Some participants consider that intuition becomes less central as

players move to the senior levels, with professional teams increasingly depending on data and analytics to make TID decisions.

4.5 Data-driven TID

The *Data-driven approach* is quantitative, numerical and relies on systems, databases and repositories (Fried & Mumcu, 2016). Although most of the participants considered this approach desirable and a basic requirement for reaching informed decisions, they also admitted that the *Data-driven approach* is not always possible and obtainable, especially at younger age-group levels. Three sub-themes were identified in the interviews. First, *tools and techniques*, which refers to the human and technological resources that are available, including hardware and software, and the respective competencies and expertise to use, develop and adapt these systems to the specific reality of each club. Second, the *internal ongoing data monitoring* for TID decision-making by the club's professionals, including different procedures and routines. Third, the *complementarity between Intuition-driven and Data-driven* refers to the important notion that these two types of approaches, *Intuition-driven* and *Data-driven*, are not opposite and cannot be compared one against the other.

4.5.1 Tools and techniques

Participants mentioned and described multiple *Data-driven* tools and techniques. The importance of having a consistent data set to be able to draw accurate and trustworthy conclusions from the data collected is mandatory, as was unanimously shared across the interviews. Several references to different software and platforms were repeatedly highlighted, such as Wyscout, InStat Sport and StatsBomb, which are global high-tech companies that specialise in strategic sports data and information. The practical use of tools included different functions. Participant 7 emphasised that to be able to consider data and statistics, a consistent data set is mandatory. He also mentioned the use of different tools: “*Wherever possible we use platforms like Wyscout and other platforms that are available.*” He also said: “*For some of our sessions and training, we do video analysis.*” Participant 1, from a different club, also referred to using data software: “*For Data Analysis, we use a programme called StatsBomb and InStat.*” Several participants highlighted that the use of these platforms is only possible closer to the professional level where the access and availability of these tools is within easier reach. Participant 1 mentioned: “*With Diski League you can get footage, as well as from the PSL. You can take it and put it into your StatsBomb, as an example.*”

The potential or eventual advantages of high-tech tools mentioned by the participants included the possibility and/or convenience of hiring new players without the need for tests and assessments as well as the urgency of and pressure to implement these kinds of technologies to keep up with the evolution of the sport. Some of the participants explained this pressure involves,

at a social and communication level and in terms of the impact of technology use, the status, power and professional charisma associated with their own role and function in the club, as professionals. Televised games and broadcasting allow everyone to have access to footage, from which it is possible to draw and create data sets. Participant 9 stated: *“In the professional setup, because games are shown on TV, there’s a lot of information that you can collect.”* Several participants highlighted that the access to technological support has an impact on performance and task organisation, for both the players and the clubs. Participant 11 commented: *“For the Diski and first team there is stats and video analysis.”* Participant 3 also stressed the importance of video analysis, metrics, statistics and data analysis platforms. He said that after he joined the club, he considered it fundamental to implement the use of InStat as soon as possible as this enabled him to do his job a lot better. Participant 6 said that at his club, they use video analysis and footage of players to make recruiting decisions and to invite players on trial. Interestingly, he provided examples of situations where players were signed based only on what the coaches saw through the video analysis and the data analytics, without the player even being invited to train, thus highlighting the role of these tools.

4.5.2 *Internal ongoing data monitoring*

Clubs use data within the settings that they can control, instilling routines and procedures, as was voiced by the participants. In other words, clubs monitor their current players for more informed TID decisions. This strategic benefit is particularly relevant when having to deal with sensitive situations, like having to dismiss a player from the club. Factual evidence-based arguments make it easier for both sides to navigate and negotiate this delicate step. Participant 14 shared: *“I think data gets used more when the player is in the establishment already.”* He said that data is used for cut-off points and gave a hypothetical example, explaining that if a player has been at the club for two years and his success rate of crossing or number of balls into the box is not good enough, that can then be used to justify dismissing the player from the club: *“So, we use Data, definitely, more internally. But more to justify when we have to cut a player from the club.”*

Even though often it is impossible to access data from the players that the clubs want to recruit, it is possible to develop, create and use *data* internally for current players through *internal ongoing data monitoring*. As was stressed during different interviews, several issues contribute to the unavailability of benchmarking information, including the lack of South African youth football infrastructure. The fact that it is impossible, at youth level, to have access to external players’ profiles, metrics and detailed stats, linked to the difficulty of having access to historical information of other clubs, makes it more difficult to bridge internal and external parameters. Participant 2 explained, offering detailed practical comments: *“Looking inward [intraclub] we use numbers and statistics, and data-based [decision-making] on our players,”* giving the

example of running metrics and the Catapult Heart Rate monitor they use at his club. He then complemented his reasoning with: *“But when you’re outward looking [interclub information and statistics] there’s none of that available.”*

4.5.3 Complementarity between Intuition-driven and Data-driven

Considering the balance and tension between both approaches, the *Data-driven* and the *Intuition-driven*, all participants agreed that both need to be considered. Moreover, there was almost consensus on the importance of the complementary relationship between *Data-driven* and *Intuition-driven* approaches. These two approaches, as participant 6 put it: *“They definitely complement each other.”* He then added: *“There is a need to have both available to make more informed decisions.”* Participant 5 went further by saying: *“It is non-negotiable that both are involved, as you go along, and not just either-or.”* Although the majority expressed this certainty regarding the need to consider both approaches, there was one exception, participant 14, who argued contrarily. According to his view and professional understanding, he values the *Eye* and the *Intuition-driven approach* as being far more relevant. He also values data, which he uses and takes into consideration, but it has the value of other technical or operational information. He said: *“No, I think one is more important than the other. Very much. The intuition and the eye, it’s much more important than the data.”*

In a long and detailed comment, participant 14 highlighted the dangers of data. His argument was that the data can sometimes be misleading and misinterpreted, and that it is important to have a rigorous use of statistical information. Interestingly, he said that intuition also plays a part in the understanding of the data. In a thoughtful way, participant 12 explained that at his club, they use both, intuition and data, saying that: *“I think it’s becoming more and more of a blend.”* Participant 5 justified the need to have both available to make more informed decisions, and he thoughtfully shared: *“I don’t think either one exclusively is effective. I think a balance has to be made between both.”* Participant 1, supporting the use of both approaches at his club, explained that one of his colleagues uses statistics and factual data, recruiting on numbers, while his own recruitment is based on the Eye Test. He further explained: *“So, we start adding that on top of what we saw with our eyes, and then we start making decisions on collaborating the eye and the stats.”*

It was interesting that several participants used the same terminology and expressions when explaining how data is used to “back-up” intuition in talent decision-making. It was unanimous that the *data*, when and if available, is a valid and unavoidable tool. Participant 6 explained: *“As a coach you see that the player is talented, but then you need to back it up with stats.”* On the same topic, participant 3 shared: *“So, by watching things we can make some kind of intrinsic or intuitive opinions on players. But then, backing that up with data, is also important.”* Several

participants referred to the safety net and scaffolding role of data that is used to support, strengthen and validate decision-making on sport talent. Participant 2 developed it a bit further and explained: “*Everything needs to be data-backed-decisions and not Data-driven-decisions. It’s important to use it [data]. You can, kind-of, make a claim for something [intuition], and back it up with data.*”

To summarise, the *Data-driven approach* relies on quantitative data and technological tools, which are more accessible at the professional level and facilitate informed decision-making through consistent data sets and video analysis. Due to the lack of infrastructure at youth levels, many clubs cannot utilise these resources. Despite the growing importance of data, participants agreed that intuition and data should complement each other. While data can validate intuitive insights, there remains a nuanced view where intuition still plays a critical role.

4.6 Challenges to South African football player development

Several *challenges to player development in South Africa* were identified throughout the interviews. Three of them stood out and are organised as sub-themes: *South African socio-economic context and logistical challenges; inadequate South African youth football infrastructure limits player development; and the role of coaches in player development*. Other issues covered in this section include insufficient provincial centres, the governing bodies’ responsibilities and the limited youth competition. The overall theme of *challenges to player development in South Africa* emerged strongly from the participants, who actively searched for reflections, challenges and opportunities, and expressed their positions powerfully, having a lot to say on the subject.

4.6.1 South African socioeconomic context and logistical challenges

Most of the participants highlighted that the *South African socioeconomic context* is a challenging reality, mainly because of the degree of economic struggles and the level of poverty that affects a vast segment of the population. Several participants directly addressed these issues. Participant 8 commented: “*The conditions of most of the gifted South African players, their conditions are poverty. So, life for them is a struggle. To get a meal, to get a comfortable place to sleep, etc....*” On the same topic, participant 2 stressed: “*You cannot forget that a lot of these kids come from really, really poor upbringings.*” According to the participants, the country’s cultural diversity was mentioned as a strong characteristic and unique setting that influences the sport context and its player development. Participant 4 highlighted his concerns: “*You’re dealing with different socioeconomic backgrounds, mindsets, physicality of the players, a whole lot of different elements.*” (...) “*We have to deal with a multicultural society, various socioeconomic status.*” On the same topic of social demographics, participant 2 stated: “*In South Africa there are so many*

different social factors that are against you. Kids live in underprivileged areas very far away from training grounds. If clubs don't have sufficient structures, then there is a very little chance of identifying quality players.”

There was unanimous reference to a vast number of talented players who come from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, according to the participants, there are several examples of players who were raised in townships across the country. In their opinion, in some cases, young players have not been provided with enough support and structure for their optimal progression, which affects their sport performance. Participant 3 stressed: *“Also, a lot of the talented kids that we get are from the townships, which are very impoverished areas. And the view of those families is very shortened because of the conditions that they live in.”* Participant 6, who spoke for a long time regarding the South African reality, gave great emphasis to the challenges of the socioeconomic context. He elaborated on several issues that affect player development: *“Some of these boys are coming from impoverished backgrounds. You need to close that gap by providing proper nutrition, education and proper support in terms of home environment.”*

Logistics involves managing information related to the background conditions in which football clubs operate, as some of the participants pointed out. These include physical and organisational dimensions such as travelling distance, cost and availability of transport, location and accessibility, communication channels, allocation of resources and service provision, and hindering bureaucratic regulations and procedures. Moreover, according to most of the participants, the size of the country is itself a challenge to TID. Participant 1, who spoke forcefully on this topic shared: *“More investment needs to go to development structures, into scouting and TID. Makes it a lot harder that the country is so big.”* Moreover, regular national competition, at junior level, is geographically very difficult from a cost and financial point of view. As participant 7 explained: *“There is a geographical challenge, which we have to consider; but, overall, the structure is not conducive for elite development.”* Given that the country is so big, according to multiple participants, a decentralised approach would be a good strategy, as participant 1 said: *“We have to make the country smaller. Creating spaces within each province.”* Creation of provincial high-performance centres was an identified need, which was further detailed and highlighted by several participants.

There is awareness regarding differences across countries and international comparisons. As Participant 9 noted the huge difference when comparing travelling logistics of most European countries versus the South African reality. For instance, European young footballers who compete in national leagues or tournaments may be able to travel back home when games are over, on the same day. In South Africa this may not be possible, even at a provincial scale. He also highlighted: *“The talent is spread much more than other countries. The talent is spread all over.”* Other

interesting reflections have emerged, namely, Participant 6, who offered a detailed analysis of this issue, said: *“So yes, granted that the country is diverse, it is huge, it is big. But I think there’s enough money within the business of football and with the support from FIFA, it should be possible to improve that. Hence, I am saying that at the provincial level we should have done better. Provincial competitions before you are even thinking of national youth competitions.”*

4.6.2 *Inadequate South African youth football infrastructure limits player development*

Twelve out of the 14 participants considered the South African youth football infrastructure to be inadequate to enable young footballers to reach their full potential. Participant 14 explained in his own words his strong opinion: *“The problem in South Africa is young players slip through the cracks. They slip, you don’t find them, they get lost in the system because of the Youth Development [that] is very poor in South Africa. So, they get lost.”* Participant 4, from a different club, also shared the same opinion: *“The talented players that come through, it is sort of by chance or by luck, as opposed to actual formal development processes.”* Only participant 2 thinks the overall situation is improving and he is impressed with what the new technical director of SAFA has been doing recently, specifically with the national youth teams. Participant 7 thinks the structures are adequate, but the leadership is not good. One other participant expressed his opinion saying the infrastructure is *“very, very inadequate, actually, below standard.”* He justified his position by arguing that South Africa has a backlog in terms of infrastructure development, facilities, sporting grounds, fields and competition. The two main problems he identified and summarised were the facilities and the competition framework. Moreover, these two issues were aligned with the position taken by several other participants who identified this as a shared problem across the nation. Participant 9 said: *“The quality of the fields, the natural grass pitches are in very poor conditions, and there is not enough care taken in the fields that they play on. Also, there are no gyms at some clubs.”*

Participant 10 highlighted the international expertise and organising capacity that South Africa offers to hold mega sport events. This evidence is clear from the 2010 Men’s World Cup, the first and only on the African Continent, and several Women’s international tournaments of the same magnitude. In his opinion, this recognition by the global sports industry is itself a showcase and prestige for the country. He stated: *“I think that as a country we have shown and demonstrated that we could host a World Cup, and we are hosting AFCON’s and Women’s World Cups and all sorts of tournaments of big magnitude. I believe that in that we have done well.”* However, he stressed the need to acknowledge the geographical and economic inequality and to respond accordingly, that is to invest in peripheral and remote areas and in bottom-up initiatives. He said: *“Where we need to invest more is in the grassroots and more in the remote areas.”* According to the participants, on the one hand South Africa has the capacity to host football mega events but

on the other hand there are inadequacies at a basic level. In other words, despite the ability to host world class events, the grassroots and basic football infrastructure is lacking.

A prominent topic and general concern throughout the interviews, while discussing the *South African youth football infrastructure*, was the lack of competition structures at the junior age groups. More specifically the limited youth competition, not only at national level but also at provincial and regional levels. Participant 6 stated his concerns and worries in the following way: *“We are behind. We lack proper regional leagues, for example. We don’t have provincial leagues, where the best of the best players are competing at a very, very high level within our provinces.”* In a long reflection, participant 3 shared: *“The same way that the Diski under 21 league is a national league, you should have the same thing for under 17, under 15, and under 13. The same thing should happen because that level of competition would automatically improve the level of the players.”* Additionally, participant 14 called for stricter rules and regulations to promote player development: *“The professional clubs in the PSL don’t have great youth structures. Now for me, you should never have a franchise [team] in the Premier League [PSL] if you don’t have a good youth structure. A good strategy would be to impose that PSL clubs have to have a youth structure.”*

Participants considered the limited national youth competition as a serious issue that undermines *player development* in South Africa. In their words, there are not enough pathways for talented young footballers, so talent is lost in the system. Participant 8 strongly criticised the current state of affairs: *“Young players, boys and girls in these provinces do not have an opportunity to compete at provincial level. (...) That’s why I said that my answer is no [efficiency of youth football infrastructure]. This is the worst way to prepare our youth players.”* As participant 4 explained, the players that do make it to become professional footballers are often a product of luck and chance instead of coming from good developmental structures. Additionally, and according to the participants, even the players who are part of the best clubs are progressing slowly because of the lack of or insufficient level of youth competitions within the country. Participant 9 said: *“The lack of national competitions definitely it is a problem and a weakness. The first national competition is the Diski League. The first-time players play in a national level, they are like 18, 19, 20 years old. What is definitely already too late. That’s a problem.”*

The lack of strength versus strength at youth level is an expression used by different participants to reflect the problematic and systematic issue of how South African youth football competition is structured, which undermines early learning opportunities. The progress, evolution and development of athletes depends on whom they are competing against, as this enables challenging themselves and the whole system to the limit, that is, stretching everyone’s potential to new heights through collective improvement, as was explained during the interviews. One can only

develop and excel by being challenged and tested consistently. Participant 5, who spoke for a long time on this topic, said: *“Nevertheless, even within the regions, getting proper strength versus strength competition, week in and week out, is something that isn't developed, because of the way that South African football is structured.”* (...) *“The biggest challenge is the lack of exposure to elite competition. And thus, I think our structure is not conducive for the ideal talent development.”* On the same topic, participant 6 shared his complaints: *“And of course that means that the progression of talent in terms of competition is slower. Because maybe some of these young talents that need to be tested at the higher level spent too long time playing at levels where they are not tested. I think yeah, the competitions framework is something that we are very poor on.”*

Above and beyond the clubs' responsibility and influence, the role of the governing bodies of South African football was highlighted by the participants, as guiding from the top-down, the whole ecosystem. Multiple participants shared the concern that the deficient relationship among the national football governing bodies has detrimental impacts on the development of players. One participant stated: *“Our football is bad in that sense. No one wants to help. Some of the best players are losing out because of the infights that we have in the country.”* One other participant said: *“I think as a country we have not done enough, and I think SAFA is to be blamed because they're the mother body.”* One testimony from another participant explained: *“I would love to have more cohesion from our national governing body SAFA, working with our professional body PSL. That could create a streamlined network that would guarantee that talent is not lost easily.”* He also added: *“The two biggest organisations that can impact South African football, SAFA and PSL, need to start working together. That is the only way that we can create a sustainable environment. We'll never go anywhere if the people that are running us, they are fighting against each other. The structures are just so bad that they are sabotaging each other to make things not work for the other side.”*

In the participants' view, several factors contribute to this state of affairs. The conflict of interests; the difficulties in communication; the short-term immediate gains, as opposed to the long-term country level benefits; the political divergences and conflict for access to limited resources; and the difficulty of exploring synergic collaborations are all part of the complex setting that undermines the South African football industry as a whole. Participant 4 argued in frustration: *“Sadly, the governing bodies don't really support and fund those processes. And that makes it extremely difficult for all of us involved in the junior football to try and promote talent, which is, ultimately, to serve our country, and to, hopefully, improve our football.”* Additionally, this conflict of interests works as a barrier, blocking opportunities for young athletes and their pathways, in the participants' views. Participant 3 sharply accused the system: *“The problem with*

our federation and coaching structures is that there isn't a lot of development, and that the development of players is solely on the clubs."

4.6.3 The role of coaches in player development

Football coaches take a central position in every club. Their influence and expertise directly impact the TID practices of their clubs. This pivotal position shapes a club's culture, working principles, playing style, performance and sport success, as was shared across the different interviews. However, according to the participants' narratives and testimonies there is a frail side to coaches' role in player development in the South African professional football context. Three key aspects of player development and coaching practices in the challenging context of South African football were identified and emphasised throughout the interviews, including the multiple roles coaches have to take in their clubs, the issue of under-resourced football clubs and finally, the importance of coach professional development throughout coaches' careers.

Multiple roles, a delicate issue, as was explained by several participants, has an impact on the professional football ecosystem. That is, football coaches having to perform multiple roles has an impact on player development because of the stress, responsibility and workload it imposes on a single professional, when comparing with an adequately staffed multidisciplinary team. Participant 3 said: *"My job title is quite a general term because of the fact that I do quite a lot."* It was unanimous throughout the interviews that football coaches within South African professional football clubs must perform multiple roles and have diverse responsibilities, with consequences at an operational and strategic level. Participant 4 complained: *"It's a lot of logistical and administrative tasks and requirements. So just from the basic general weekly planning, organisation, matches, friendlies, training schedules, transport and all of those aspects. And then obviously to try and continue to work at coach development, coach support, talent identification, building up a method of doing those exercises."* Besides the most obvious role of coaching and managing the team, they also take an active part in scouting for and recruiting players, collaborating at strategic and leadership level and generally taking care of operations and their players' well-being and developmental process. Participant 1 stated: *"People have to do a few jobs."* To illustrate this, three of the 14 participants officially have a dual formal role within their club. Examples of this include working as head of youth and coaching one of the club's youth teams. Most of the participants demonstrated pride in their work, providing illustrations of their daily tasks, workload and responsibilities. Participant 1 explained: *"My role is U21 Coach, overseeing the holistic programme, recruiting, coaching, planning, methodologies. I also have a dual role as an assistant coach for the 1st Team. I have to ensure there is progress from the U21's to the PSL Team."*

It was unanimous that South African professional football clubs face financial and human resources constraints that severely impact their TID practices, which in turn puts pressure on the football coaches. According to the participants, examples from different clubs included lack of facilities, such as not having a gym at the club; lack of human resources, such as not having scouts at the club; and insufficient financial resources to cater for players' daily needs, including monthly stipends, meals and supplementation, medical support and transportation and communication expenses. Most of the participants highlighted that their clubs were small and under-resourced. As participant 1 explained: *"Our club runs on a tight budget. To identify players, we have to be very wise with our budget."* This under-resourced small scale, both financial and human, meant for this participant that his club had no access to many needed resources and that this shortage had operational impacts. Another example, from a different club, involved participant 14, who said: *"I mean when you're a club with no budget and cannot buy players. You have to look at different things."* Participant 13, who spoke at length on the subject, powerfully described the complexity of these issues, arguing: *"When you have limitations on resources, I suppose you place a lot of value on the experience and qualities of coaches to be able to identify talent."* He further explained: *"Before we get the player, we need to understand our reality, and our conditions. That's the challenge. Can we provide a small amount of money to each one of them for the transportation? Can we provide food after the session? So those are the things we try to provide, but that comes with a price tag."* Finally, and quite importantly, participant 13 acknowledged the importance of retaining the most talented players.

It is relevant to notice that at the beginning of the interviews, no specific question in the interview guide addressed coaches' professional development; it was then added and further explored. Moreover, during the first couple of interviews, this topic emerged spontaneously several times as an unavoidable issue and a deepfelt self-reflection. Interestingly, this was not a single opinion but, rather, seemed to reveal a collective concern of the participants who formed the sample of this study, who are themselves first-hand witnesses of the South African football industry. According to the participants, coaches' professional development is an important aspect of sport development, including coach education, training and practice. Several participants stated that there are not enough formal sport development structures in the country, including coach development structures. Moreover, there is a lack of highly trained, full-time coaching staff and support staff to help to develop players. The participants shared their thoughts about the importance of coach professional development. Participant 13 said: *"We need to develop coaches. We need to educate the coaches."* He also shared: *"Coach development. 100%. It's fundamental that we care about our professionals. So, we need to develop strategies to support them. To educate them. And to improve their own knowledge. I would say it's mandatory. It's critical for the success."* The participants consistently stressed the need for alignment among different aspects

of sport development, namely, what they want to achieve from their players, what they themselves had learned from experience and the crucial role of improving the education and training coaching curricula. Participant 11 said: “*First of all, we need to change. I think they need to revisit their coaching curriculum. They need to revisit it. Because I mean football is changing.*” One more testimony, quite significant, came from participant 8, who spoke passionately and for a long time about this issue: “*Another point that I wanted to raise of great importance. We need to focus on coach development. We are being given the mandate of developing players when we are not developing ourselves first.*”

In conclusion, the coaches and other participants reported that young South African football players face significant development challenges, including socioeconomic issues, inadequate infrastructure and logistical problems. Many talented players come from impoverished backgrounds, affecting their development due to difficult living conditions and limited support. The country’s size complicates logistics and scouting, while inadequate facilities and limited youth competition frameworks further hinder progress. Additionally, fragmented relationships between governing bodies (SAFA and PSL) impede cohesive development efforts. Improving investment in provincial centres and enhancing coordination among football authorities are seen as crucial steps to better support and develop young talent. Finally, coaches’ professional development was highlighted as an area that needs greater investment, as participants acknowledged the current challenges facing this group of professionals and the potential for further development.

4.7 Enablers of South African football player development

Throughout the interviews, participants made positive and constructive comments regarding player development in South Africa. Three sub themes were identified as relevant facilitators of player development. First, the *holistic approach*, which most of the participating clubs in the study specifically addressed and included: player support, a wide range of professional services, and *the role of an enabling environment*. Second, the *in-house academies*, which refer to accommodation and residential services that football clubs provide for their players. Finally, the *successful Diski League*, which is a developmental league providing opportunities to young players to showcase their abilities and develop their skills before making it into the senior level (PSL).

4.7.1 Holistic approach and the importance of an enabling environment

The term ‘holistic’ was a recurrent term participants used throughout the interviews. This concept was often related to player development and, more specifically, to an integrated perspective of the human being. The whole ecosystem the players are immersed in is considered, as was referred

to by participant 10: “I think we generally have an amazing ecosystem that allows the player to be supported in various aspects and facets of their lives, including financial management, amongst other things.” Throughout the interviews, several other participants highlighted proudly the importance of a holistic approach in their respective clubs. Participant 6 said: “To ensure that the environment and ecosystem that is created [within the club] caters for their holistic development,” and then added, with confidence: “we produce holistic human beings.” On this topic, participant 1 explained: “Our Motto ‘more than football’ is to give these players an opportunity to develop holistically as human beings, and if they do not progress in our programme, they have a future and can have a bigger impact in society.”

Included in this wide-ranging perspective of a *holistic approach* are financial literacy programmes, digital competencies, civic responsibilities, communication skills, personal development and the support of specialised professionals who address and monitor the players’ developmental needs. Participant 10 said, feeling proud of his club: “We have psychologists that help the players. We also have invested in an e-learning centre, that is housed at our stadium, that then allows players to be computer literate. So, I think the club is always looking for ways to improve the general human being.” Participant 9 stressed the importance of financial literacy given that football careers are extremely short, meaning players must acquire basic career management skills to ensure a good and stable standard of living for their life after football. Additionally, this participant, referred to the example of his club hiring a welfare manager who actually stays at their in-house academy with the players. He said: “We created a programme to educate them [players], not only on football but also about the rest. We have a plan to develop them financially. Because they don’t know what is an interest rate. They don’t know what is a credit card. They don’t know what is a bank account. We are much more focused on those issues now. We hired one person called the Welfare Manager who lives with the players. He is taking care about the holistic development and lifestyle of the player.”

The concept of an *enabling environment* was prevalent throughout the interviews and identified as a central part of a holistic approach to TID. This concept of an *enabling environment* refers to the creation of the necessary conditions for the optimal development of players. The participants provided several examples of initiatives their clubs offer to enhance player development practices, including healthcare support, physical tests, diets and home workouts, a tutor once a week, pedagogical and didactical support, help from sport scientists and psychologists, and religious counselling and motivational coaching. Additionally, participants stated that formal education is crucial to the creation of an *enabling environment*. Although all clubs value the role of formal education, different clubs show varying levels of investment and support towards this topic. Moreover, some of the clubs have developed partnerships with universities for scholarships (merit-based) and bursaries (social-based) for their players.

All participants consider the dual career balance as top priority within the broad topic of an *enabling environment*. The dual career refers to the need to reinforce both educational and sport goals simultaneously. However, as participants' narratives have shown, the concrete investment and practical involvement towards this goal is variable and it is a contested and delicate topic. This includes the example of participant 3, who assumed that studying and/or playing football is the players' responsibility. In his words: "*We've attempted to do it [dual career] as best as we possibly can. But, at the end of the day, it's the player's choice.*"

As mentioned above, some clubs are taking bigger steps than others to ensure this dual education and football dream, as participant 4 admitted: "*At the moment, it's not at a level where one would say we are fully promoting both [football and school education].*" On the same topic, participant 1 shared about his club: "*More recently, there's been more of a focus from the club to achieve that dual career balance, between football and school. We host educational seminars, motivational speaking courses and career opportunities. We promote that [dual career], so that if football doesn't quite work out for you here [as a player], there is a different pathway [to be followed].*" Participant 6 put it simply: "*The policy of the club is that education and football, should be married.*" This balance relates to an optimal adjustment and combination of priorities that include football training and formal education. This implies preparing the players to be able to follow other careers outside of football, in case they do not succeed in sport. It also helps players' pathways after they finish their career as professional players.

According to multiple participants, it is important to create partnerships with schools that offer flexible timetables for school classes. In their opinion, a flexible schedule for school education helps achieve the dual career balance. From the other side, on behalf of the clubs, most coaches do not mind allowing players to miss a training session occasionally to attend important classes and they support them during the examination period. These different efforts play an important part in the overall strategy of *player support* and the creation of an *enabling environment*, so that players can excel and explore their full potential.

4.7.2 *In-house academy*

In-house academies, as a sport concept, consists of offering permanent residential facilities to young players. This enables providing round-the-clock support and it may include fitness, meals, medical support, shared accommodation and managing the practicalities of a busy schedule with both studying and training. According to several participants, there are also psychological, and teamwork benefits related to this collective living, which strengthens the players' motivation and creates bonding, group identity and club's brand identification. Participant 1 referred to the allocation of their budget towards youth development and mentioned a monetary monthly allowance for young players' personal expenses, he said: "*Most of our investment in development*

goes to nurturing and developing our young players, by providing them shared accommodation, three meals a day, supplementation, full medical support, and a stipend from R1 500 to R3 000 a month.”

All seven clubs included in this study offer the service of an *in-house academy* for young athletes. Some clubs have a larger age-span than others, that is, the starting age-group differs depending on each club's policy. This provision of an *in-house academy* was highly valued by all participants, who considered it to be a fundamental requisite and condition for the development of young players. The *in-house academies* are for youth athletes and/or Diski athletes, as PSL senior professionals do not need this kind of support and can pay for their own housing. Moreover, some of these clubs' *in-house academies* are only for the Diski level or age-group, meaning transitional players between junior and senior (19–21 years old or 19–23 years old, as there is no fixed standard). Participant 14 mentioned that at his club the starting age is not an early stage: *“We got two houses where we house players. We only really put them there, when they get little bit older like 16, 17 years old.”* On this topic, Participant 12 said: *“From U13, U15, U17 and U19 it is strictly Province B, because we don't house them. There's no accommodation and it is advisable that they finish their matric [matriculation] before they leave home.”* (...) *“And from Diski [team or age-group] because there's a clubhouse, we can then get one or two from other provinces. For now, it's about 11 boys from the Diski, and one or two from the U19 who are about to graduate to the Diski team next season.”* At other clubs, the entrance age-group for their club's house starts from as early as 12 years old.

As explained by several participants, the *in-house academies* allow clubs to recruit young talented players from a wider range of locations and from different geographical areas and provinces. Participant 10 said: *“I think the multitude of players that we have are from different regions and provinces, and that is because we can accommodate them in our recruitment. We do not have problems to relocate players and make sure that they are housed at our clubhouse.”* In this context, players who stay at the club's house, do not need to travel. The need for transportation, which can be a logistical and practical challenge is then resolved, as was stressed by multiple participants. Participant 9 explained: *“Until certain ages [age-groups] is much more difficult to attract players from outside of Province A because of the transport and etc, there's a lot of challenges [for very young players]. It's really difficult to attract players who don't live in very close”.* According to the participants, the most common size for collective accommodation is between 20–30 players, as participant 14 said: *“We accommodate roughly over the two houses it must be 20 to 30 players”.* Regarding the different sizes of the accommodation for the sample of this study, the smallest *in-house academy* houses only 13 players and the largest, around 100 players.

4.7.3 Successful Diski League

The importance of the Diski League was strongly present throughout the interviews, as participants see this league as a successful initiative for developing South African footballers and for the South African football industry in general. Participant 11 explained: *“I see the Diski League as a successful strategy. I think it was a good initiative, because it gives us a platform, not only for players, but even for us, upcoming coaches, young coaches, it gives us a platform [to test ourselves].”* Additionally participant 13 shared: *“I would say yes, the Diski League has been successful, it has provided a lot of good things. So, it's an environment where the players travel, the games are on TV, the organisation is very good.”*

From the 14 participants, only one participant did not acknowledge the developmental process and impact on talent management of South African football, which was possible to achieve through the introduction of this competition and league. Additionally, two other participants agreed upon the benefits of this initiative, although considered it to be misused and wasted for two main reasons. Participant 13, also argued that some of the Diski coaches problematically see this league as an opportunity for self-promotion, wanting to win it at all costs, consequently disregarding their athletes' optimal development. In his words: *“They just want to win the league. They don't promote what the development is.”* Participant 14 suggested that tighter regulations should be imposed in this league, specifically around its age limit allowance, so that it can promote younger players, guaranteeing they have space and a platform to showcase their talent. In his opinion, players that are too old are still competing in this league, taking the opportunity away from younger players. He said: *“You can't have 23-year-olds playing in the Diski league. No, no, no. So, for me, I would rather have it under-18 league.”* Besides these caveats, the other 11 participants referred to this league as something that has completely revolutionised South African football, in terms of TID, in the best possible way. Participant 12 said: *“It has been successful yes, because you see most of the guys who are doing well now in the PSL, they all have played in the Diski league before. I must give credit to PSL or SAFA or the multi choice or the DStv.”*

Regarding the other nationwide competition, PSL, the senior league, some participants highlighted that this competition is, traditionally, a heavily recruitment-driven league, which may be ineffective for talent development in the country. According to the participants' testimonies, clubs have a tendency to recruit and buy players from other professional clubs instead of creating and investing in their own developmental structures. The introduction of the new dynamics of the Diski League in 2014 has changed the South African football reality. This transitional and developmental national league, which mimics the PSL, has allowed more opportunities for young players, thus enabling new management practices. Participant 3 enthusiastically commented: *“I*

think the introduction of the Diski League has allowed for more visibility of young players. So, there have been more promotions, which is great!” The clubs’ reality also stood out, as participants unanimously agreed there were strong relationships between the youth (Diski) players and the professional players at club level, and that this was one of the strengths of their clubs. Participant 5 specifically stressed: *“Having a very strong line of interaction and communication between senior and junior is paramount to making the club work.”* Participant 9 equally emphasised this topic: *“The connection to the first team is vital. This step, the transition [between younger Diski team and older PSL team] is absolutely vital. Absolutely vital”.* Participant 14 shared his experience and commented on his club’s practices: *“The Diski league players train with us [PSL team] most of the time.”*

Countless players who play in the PSL have entered this system through developing in the Diski League first, according to the participants. As they explained, the Diski League allows younger players to break through to the professional ranks. Beforehand, it did not happen as efficiently or as quickly. Moreover, according to their perspective, the Diski League brought innumerable benefits to the young players and South African football, directly and indirectly. Examples included physical infrastructure of the clubs, better standardised fields, improved coaching and players getting exposed to travelling, to national television games and to media interviews. The participants stressed that there has been more development and, consequently, there have been more promotions of youth players to the first teams, which they consider advantageous for South African football. To illustrate this, participant 2 noted: *“I guess the main indicator of success in talent ID, is how many players are you producing for your first team. That is tangible measurable success.”* According to multiple participants, the Diski League helps to put younger players in the public eye. As they explained, thanks to this platform, the media highlights these rising stars’ success and puts pressure on the clubs to promote those young players. Then, if the player does well, it is beneficial for everyone and there is a ripple down effect and a new trend towards developing young players. Participant 1, who spoke for a long time on this topic, said: *“You start developing these players holistically and what do you see? They are breaking to the PSL. That for me, has been the saving grace of TID in the country. It has created a door to enter. It has given hope to our country.”*

In summary, South African football player development is supported by three key enablers: a holistic approach, in-house academies and the Diski League. Some clubs try to emphasise a holistic development strategy that nurtures players both on and off the field, offering financial literacy, personal development and dual career opportunities, though commitment levels vary. In-house academies provide residential facilities, allowing clubs to recruit talent from across provinces by offering essential support like meals, medical care and accommodation. The Diski

League, a developmental competition, has revolutionised South African football by increasing the visibility of young players and facilitating their transition to professional levels.

4.8 Conclusion

The most relevant topics that emerged during the interviews include overlaps and links between the main themes, which shows the complexity of TID. The sub-themes represent different layers within a specific TID topic that constitute different expertise areas. The elements identified as themes and sub-themes mutually influence each other and shape the TID framework used by the top South African football clubs. This directly helps to answer the research question.

The main themes of this study were the following: i) the player characteristics, which include a broad set of parameters, both at technical and contextual levels; ii) the clubs' processes used in player recruitment and the benefits of a collective effort during the identification and selection of talented players; iii) the Intuition-driven and Data-driven approaches, which represent two notably different approaches to TID; and iv) finally, the contrast between the challenges and the enablers of South African players' development and the impacts on the entire football industry. It is also important to highlight the strong discrepancy between junior and youth levels versus senior and professional levels in terms of clubs and national level investment, prestige and visibility. Moreover, several procedures, strategies and TID processes are simply not possible at youth level, given the insufficient infrastructure of South African youth football. The discussion of the results of this research project are presented in the following section.

5. DISCUSSION

This research project considers a broad spectrum of sport management concepts and professional practices targeting TID in the context of South African professional football. It provides an analysis of the South African professional football ecosystem by its top professionals and the main actors in the TID process, i.e., the coaches and other key individuals within each club. This research project offers a detailed account, and an enhanced understanding of the strategies professional football coaches use to identify, develop and manage players. This study's exploration of TID practices within South African professional football not only contributes to understanding regional methods but also enriches the broader Global South discourse by addressing previously under-explored socioeconomic and infrastructural challenges.

Studying the unique setting of South African professional football as a Global South emerging economy has led to innovative contributions at theoretical, methodological and practical level. At a theoretical level, it has deepened the understanding of key concepts and models; methodologically, performing direct interviews with coaches has strengthened the evidence of the TID practices; and at a practical level, by formally uncovering coaches' direct experiences in South African football, it has pioneered an avenue that is worthy to pursue and explore further in future research. This study addresses a research void in literature regarding TID studies within the South African professional football clubs' context. There is no adequate and definitive TID model and there is a shortfall in research evidence, as there is insufficient published research in this area, particularly with respect to the Global South. Importantly, this study uniquely contributes to filling this research gap by studying and analysing TID dynamics and the ecosystem in the context of South African professional football.

Five key interpretations are presented below, which support and structure the discussion related to the results' main themes. The research question seeks to describe the TID frameworks being used by the top professional South African football clubs. The aim of this section is to address the research question and goals by merging the findings with the existing literature and offering an interpretation that captures key insights of TID practices.

5.1 Navigating complexity: a multifactorial approach to TID in South African football

From the results of this research, it was clear that the theme of player characteristics is crucial in TID practices in South Africa. Coaches have emphasised specific traits depending on the player's position, the club's playing style and the broader South African football environment. Positional based player-profiles dictate the desired attributes for each role, while the club's strategy and the

physical demands of South African football shape these preferences further. A multifactorial approach, considering technical, physical, mental and behavioural factors, is essential with resilience and coachability highlighted as key to a player's success. This theme stresses the complexity and context-specific nature of effective TID practices in South African football.

The unpredictability of future career success and its relation to measurable variables shows the complexity of the South African TID landscape. With hindsight, this was already or partly expected and it aligns with the literature. From published research, it is evident that there is no clear and agreed upon model for TID and no universal tool can spot and/or develop talent (Bergkamp et al., 2019). Moreover, no agreed set of variables can predict future football success (Johnston et al., 2017). The results of this study align with the position of these authors. This said, the study participants use a multifactorial approach for their TID decision-making process. They voiced that they do not rely on a single and unique player characteristic. The participants considered a combination of different desirable player characteristics, such as tactical and technical skills, athletic features and behavioural skills. These findings match contemporary thought on TID that acknowledges its plural and multifaceted nature (Williams et al., 2020).

Professional football is highly competitive, and only a tiny percentage of aspiring football players make it to professional level (Mustafovic et al., 2020). Although this study did not measure percentages, it described the participants' perceptions in relation to individual player progression. Resilience was mentioned as a fundamental trait and as one of the common factors within the small group of footballers who become professional players. The study participants emphasised the grit and capacity necessary to overcome setbacks that athletes experience. These results confirm the existing evidence which supports that motivational and behavioural aspects are key in the progression of professional football players (Sarmiento et al., 2018).

Participants stressed that the players' characteristics must suit the environment they play in, meaning not only their own club's playing style but also the characteristics of the league they compete in. Based on the results of this study, it seems there is no clear way to do TID; it depends on the coach, it depends on the club, and it depends on the country, as these elements help shape the identity for each league or competition. This is similar to what happens in other countries, as some authors argue, where a range of parameters is used to determine the most adequate TID practices (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). Some authors argue that each club's optimal recruitment strategy depends on the characteristics of the club's country (Schokkaert, 2016). Although this recruitment can be of national or international players, these footballers must fit the criteria of the recruiting country. So, in the South African TID system, which has its own unique characteristics, the results from this research project are not surprising.

This research project ascertains that the maturity and sophistication of the coaches' processes and structures is what counts for identifying and developing football players. These include a recognition of the coach's role, systematised and accountable TID frameworks (Santos et al., 2017) and an enabling environment from a youth level that caters for the optimal development of players across the population and territory (Van Tuyl et al., 2024). Finally, this study reinforces the position of a multifactorial, integrated ecological and holistic approach to TID, which is also defended in the literature (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2020). This topic is further discussed in section 5.5 regarding the enablers of player development.

5.2 South African football recruitment processes affected by resource problems

According to this study's findings, South African football clubs strongly emphasise securing top talent and utilising distinct strategies within their TID systems. While methods differ, participants highlighted shared practices among clubs and collective efforts within each club. These efforts include collaborative decision-making involving various staff members, prioritising local recruitment for youth players because of financial and logistical challenges and adopting a wider national, occasionally international, recruitment scope for senior players. Additionally, scouts, agents and trials are pivotal in the process of identifying and evaluating prospects, with trials serving as a key stage in finalising player selections. A stark difference between the junior and the senior level affects the whole South African football ecosystem. The difference is clear and it has a significant impact on TID of young football players and beyond. The disorganisation and misalignment between junior and senior settings and two different levels of performance within the same TID ecosystem have consequences, which policymakers neglect and literature surprisingly but insufficiently covers. Given this scenario, lack of resources and under-investment in youth structures, the innovative work by the coaches, combined with their resilience and adaptability, are significant.

The literature indicates that each country has its own structure and unique format of organising its football competitions, from youth sport to professional levels and competitive leagues (Williams et al., 2020). Additionally, the starting age and age range for football regional, provincial and national competitions differs greatly among countries (Teixeira et al., 2020). In South Africa, the sharp contrast between youth and senior football hinders the whole football ecosystem. These two completely different realities, the youth and senior levels, reveal an unsymmetrical investment, where the professional level is the main and sometimes exclusive focus, while the youth level is ignored and not prioritised. This imbalance has a strong detrimental

impact on the overall performance of the players, affecting young athletes' trajectories, often including the most talented and promising ones.

Globally, football institutions aim to manage youth teams in a similar manner to senior teams (Roynesdal et al., 2018). However, the findings of this study present a contrasting perspective. In South Africa, replicating the senior team model for junior age groups appears impractical due to limited resources and institutional challenges, as participants highlighted. This topic is further discussed in section 5.4 on the challenges of player development.

Across the world, football clubs invest significantly in scouts and their recruitment staff to identify the best talent they can get (Larkin, 2018). According to the results of this study, South African top clubs acknowledge the importance of having such a group of professionals, namely scouts and player recruitment staff, within their club. However, this is not always possible because of the shortage of financial resources some of the clubs face. Some of the clubs involved in this study have no scouts. As the results showed, one of the clubs has club legends (former successful players) working as scouts, and from the remaining six clubs, three clubs have scouts and three do not have people working in this position. The South African football clubs tend to opt for a collective effort of the coaches and other professionals involved in TID, where each professional has to perform different tasks throughout the lifecycle of identifying, selecting, developing and managing their athletes. Additionally, clubs use external football agents and long trial periods to try to improve their recruitment processes. These results are revealing of the multitude of TID practices used in top South African professional clubs.

Generally, football clubs across the world tend to recruit locally in the developmental years of football players' careers. Progressively, clubs broaden the scope and the reach of their recruitment processes, as the player age-groups and levels of performance go up (Fuhre et al., 2022). In South Africa, this process happens the same way, although it occurs at a stronger level because of several factors. The most defining reasons, according to the participants, are the country's large territory and the difficulties this brings in terms of logistics, and the scarcity of resources available at clubs to help mobilise and bring talented players (sometimes their families too) from their original province to the province the football club belongs to.

The lack of academic studies focusing on TID strategies and practices in the Global South, including in South Africa, was one of the triggers and motivators of this study. Furthermore, there is an explicit call in literature to explore TID studies in geographical regions and continents such as Africa, Asia and South America, as they are under-researched on this topic (Baker, Cobley et al., 2020).

A few studies are being carried out in the Global South, in South America mostly and in Brazil especially (Galatti et al., 2016). However, this is insufficient considering the size and variety of Global South football. Possible reasons for Brazil offering published work may be because it is the biggest South American country or because its football is considerably developed; the reality, however, is that more talent identification, coach development and player development publications are available in Brazil, as well as documented initiatives, than in the rest of the Global South (Galatti et al., 2024).

The scarcity of applied academic TID research in the Global South, including in South Africa, does not mean TID processes, practices and methodologies are not present within professional football clubs. This research testifies and witnesses the quality of the TID approaches among the participants and clubs that were studied. The participants' narratives show the innovative TID work being done in the Global South. The results of this study confirm the central role of the coaches in TID and the presence of coaches' work innovation, through their resilience and creativity, thus adopting an entrepreneurial strategy. Moreover, this research is itself an illustration of innovation out of necessity, which is characteristic of Global South under-resourced contexts (Goldman & Mashinini, 2018).

The day-to-day practices of the coaches, illustrated by their contributions, exemplifies the need for innovative approaches to reality, as under-resourced clubs, difficult conditions and insufficient infrastructure have led to coaches (proudly) performing multiple roles, optimising their creativity, adaptability and resilience. The results of this study show that a higher or lower degree of formalisation of TID processes coexist within the top South African professional football clubs. It is important to emphasise that the way the football coaches spoke about core issues of this study, in terms of terminology and strategic thinking, shows a high degree of expertise and know-how. This relates to and answers affirmatively to the second sub-question of this study regarding the level of the conscious implementation of TID frameworks. The participants manifested conscious awareness of their practices and offered elaborated answers regarding the TID frameworks used at their clubs.

Last but not the least, the level of sophistication and professionalism is not homogenous across the different clubs, which is partly explained by the different levels of access to financial resources. It is important to acknowledge that effective TID processes require significant financial investment. The disparity in resources between clubs directly affects their ability to implement comprehensive TID strategies, highlighting the financial realities that shape talent development in South African football. These findings are revealing given the lack of research on these topics, as discussed above, and they underscore the limited formalisation of TID processes in the Global

South, aligning with Baker et al. (2020) call for more diverse research across under-represented regions.

5.3 Intuition-driven and Data-driven are complementary approaches to TID in South African football

The insights into the balance between Intuition-driven and Data-driven approaches directly address the third sub-question of this study, revealing the nuanced integration of these approaches at different football levels. From the participants' contributions, it was clear that the Intuition-driven approach, prominent in youth football, contrasts with the Data-driven methods that are commonly used at senior levels. Coaches argued that they often depend on their Coach's Eye or instinct to identify talent, particularly in resource-limited settings such as rural areas or local youth leagues. Grounded in experience, intuition is vital at junior levels due to the lack of available data. Some participants noted that as players progress, professional teams increasingly prioritise data and analytics in TID decisions, while others maintained that intuition remains essential at all levels. Contrary to the Intuition-driven approach, the Data-driven approach uses quantitative metrics and technological tools and is more accessible at the professional and senior level. The Data-driven approach supports informed decision-making through standardised data and video analysis. However, most clubs lack the infrastructure to utilise such tools for youth teams. Participants widely agreed that intuition and data should work together, with data often serving to confirm intuitive judgments, emphasising the complementary and nuanced roles of both approaches.

The findings related to the complementarity between the Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches are revealing of the complexity of the TID practices employed by South African professional football coaches and their decision-making on football talent. This has implications regarding the need to rethink both the internal and external opportunities and challenges of the sector. In more detail, considering this research project and the case of the TID methods used within South African top professional football clubs, there is more Intuition-driven, particularly at the younger ages, and Data-driven becomes more important at senior level, largely because of availability and access to resources. At junior levels, South African clubs do not have the tools and structures to do Data-driven analysis as some other countries do, so it is a function of the system. Simultaneously, the Data-driven approach is implicitly used at senior levels as an indication and a tacit sign of scientific based professionalism. The domain and use of technological tools and knowledge-intensive processes aligns with contemporary worldwide trends and advancements, both in technology and in management strategies, and it represents an important, unavoidable and must-do step for top professional clubs.

According to this study and following the participants narratives, some coaches suggest that there is mostly intuition as a TID method and then, the data almost confirms this, particularly at the senior level, while others defend that in TID decision-making, data has a dominant role within the senior and professional teams. The Intuition-driven approach, specifically the Coach's Eye, seemed to be valid to most of the participants, which aligns with the theory that, for better or worse, this tool is the primary contributor to the whole decision-making process in talent selection (Lath et al., 2021). It is important to stress, as is supported by literature, that if the clubs use too much data at a young age, this could be seen as wrongdoing and controversial because, first the senior benchmark and values cannot be compared to the youth parameters and, second, the characteristics being measured will unavoidably change with the development, maturation and growth of the young players (Gamble et al., 2020). Another point worth raising is that because of South African inequalities, much of the talent being dispersed in rural areas and the contrast between large metropolitan areas and peripheral territories, Data-driven approaches may prejudice against finding talented players in under-privileged rural areas, which correlates with TID findings from emerging football nations (Bennett et al., 2019).

The results of this study strongly revealed that the two approaches to TID are complementary in South African professional clubs and not in opposition to each other. This suggests a new perspective and approach to TID, different from the existing literature in the Global North that tends to focus on either the Intuition-driven approach (Bradbury et al., 2017) or the Data-driven approach (Thakkar & Shah, 2021). This research project suggests that the complementarity between the approaches creates synergies, so the benefit of combining the two approaches is greater than the sum of their individual benefits taken together. Conducting this study in an under-researched Global South setting also helped bring innovative perspectives to contemporary TID research. This study does not claim that this synergistic relationship is unique to the Global South, it only brings new insights into this field of study. It is relevant to highlight that plenty of academic research focuses only on the Intuition-driven approach, analysing the non-evidence-based methods in football coaches' practices (Bradbury et al., 2017). Examples of this include studying the Coach's Eye in an attempt to define it and to create a working model (Lath et al., 2021) and understanding the importance of gut feeling or instinct on TID decisions (Roberts et al., 2021). Additionally, many examples in the literature exclusively target the Data-driven approach in football and the use of quantitative, numerical, evidence-based methods for TID (Thakkar & Shah, 2021). As an illustration of this, numerous authors are exploring data science and data analytics in football (Memmert & Raabe, 2018) and the use of new platforms, such as Wyscout (Ghar et al., 2021), InStat (Stanojevic & Gyarmati, 2016), and Statsbomb (Pulis & Bajada, 2022) is more and more prevalent in professional football clubs.

Despite the abundance of specialised research on each one of the two main approaches, paradoxically, there seems to be scarce literature incorporating, comparing and trying to understand the synergies between the Data-driven and the Intuition-driven methods for TID. Some well recognised and acclaimed authors in the football TID field, such as Baker and his colleagues, call for a comparison between these two approaches (Baker et al., 2020). Importantly, the results of this study showed synergies between the two main TID methods, as voiced by the participants, where both are needed and desirable, and both are valued and used when accessible and available. This study showed that the complementary relationship between the two approaches is complex and multifaceted.

Finally, this research project suggests that the interactions between the two main TID approaches can be seen as the tip of an iceberg, as there is a hidden inner dynamic that is worth exploring. The findings of this research have shown that these two approaches operate in a complex web. This study supports Baker's suggestion for the need to further understand both approaches to TID, although it challenges his position regarding the adequateness of a comparison between the two (Baker et al., 2020). The results of this research propose the inseparability of Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches in TID practices. Comparing the Intuition-driven and Data-driven approaches one against the other is not the most appropriate choice, not because it is irrelevant but because there is more to it than meets the eye, as it potentially reveals a richer and more complex relationship. As suggested by the results of this research, these two approaches do not oppose each other, rather they overlap, so a mere comparison or contrasting of the two is reductive. This study considers an integrated approach to TID, as it is critical to explore the dynamics and synergies between these two complementary approaches. Moreover, this integrated approach is part of a larger whole because it is one of the factors that contributes to a holistic perspective. At theoretical level holistic models capture this complexity as it refers to the whole system. This study illustrates in a practical way how South African professional coaches apply, explain and elaborate on the rationale for using ecological and holistic thinking foundations. This evidence, even though not totally homogeneous among the sample, demonstrates the presence of sophisticated professional practices in South African professional football. In the sections below, additional contributors to the ecology of TID, such as a holistic approach, in-house academies and the importance of an enabling environment for player development are further explored.

5.4 The challenging reality of becoming a South African professional footballer

The results of this research show that many young South African football players encounter numerous developmental obstacles, including socioeconomic hardships, insufficient

infrastructure and logistical challenges. Many promising players come from disadvantaged backgrounds where poor living conditions and limited support negatively impact their growth, as several participants stressed. Some of them highlighted that the vast size of the country poses difficulties for scouting and logistics, while a lack of proper facilities and an underdeveloped youth competition framework further restrict progress. There was a general opinion across the interviews regarding the fragmented coordination between key governing bodies, such as SAFA and PSL, exacerbating some of the issues that hinder player development. Participants emphasised the need for greater investment in provincial centres, coach development professionalisation, and improved collaboration among football authorities to better nurture and develop young talent.

In the interviews, it was highlighted that there is a challenging and unclear relationship between the two main national football governing bodies, which is having a detrimental impact on TID systems and on individual player progression. These findings agree with the literature that resource dependency and problematic inter-organisational relationships can affect the effectiveness of elite sport policies in South Africa (Jacobs et al., 2021). Good organisational policies have a more positive effect on talent development than unclear strategies (Jacobs, 2019).

Strength versus strength youth football competitions at provincial and national level are almost non-existent, as the participants argued. This study identifies this issue as a critical obstacle to player development. These difficulties are present all the way up to the high-performance top-ranking league (PSL), with a few positive exceptions mentioned by the participants, such as the Diski League that is discussed in the next section. The participants of this study were very vocal on the lack of youth competitions, with the majority considering the youth football infrastructure inadequate for the development of young players at regional, provincial and national levels. Around the world, within each country, football institutions try to operate with the youth the same way they operate with the seniors (Lepschy et al., 2018). However, the results of this study contrast and differ from this perspective. In South Africa, to replicate the senior model for the junior age groups seems to be impossible due to resource shortage and institutional problems.

The insufficiency of structured youth leagues and the competition framework was identified by the participants as a core issue hindering player development, as seen above. The results of this study suggest that youth football is not being promoted and supported, the clubs are under-resourced and there are logistical difficulties related to South Africa being such a large country. Travelling long distances is a notable challenge in South Africa due to the country's vast size. For context, the distances covered by South African PSL clubs often surpass those faced by clubs in smaller European nations. These challenges create significant logistical, time-related and financial burdens (Onwumechili, 2019). To address similar issues, some elite African leagues

have adopted a regional division system, which reduces costs and travel distances (Onwumechili, 2019). The findings of this study are in accordance with literature that reveals logistical challenges involving time, cost and accessibility.

As participants emphasised, there is a need for the professionalisation of coach development. Coach development is an essential component of sport management, as a focal point for enhancing the quality of TID systems (Tozetto, 2019). There are currently a few initiatives and efforts within the country to address coach development professionalisation but there is still a large margin for improvement (SAFA, 2023). Examples of these efforts include the SAFA initiative launching the Clive Barker Academy, which offers coaching courses, training materials and guidelines for TID (SAFA, 2023). Coaches have a central role regarding TID practices and are critical to the success of both football players and football organisations (Eather et al., 2023). Coach development initiatives can improve the level of the coaching staff and their TID practices, which in turn is advantageous for identifying and developing football players. Well-developed coaching professionals could contribute to creating innovative opportunities for South African football. There is a huge potential to be explored both at local and at national level, when considering the youth population in the territory.

5.5 Diski League had meaningful impact on TID and on individual player progression

The development of South African football players is driven by several main factors, including, a holistic approach to TID, in-house academies and the Diski League. Some clubs adopt a holistic approach, focusing on both athletic and personal growth, offering programmes like financial literacy, personal development and dual career pathways, though the extent of implementation varies. In-house academies play a crucial role by providing residential facilities that enable clubs to recruit talent from across the country and offer vital support such as meals, medical care and housing. The Diski League has been a game-changer, enhancing the exposure of young players and streamlining their progression to professional football.

The study participants highlighted the effort in their clubs to use a holistic approach to TID. These results are aligned with the abundant academic research regarding the practices of professional football clubs in the Global North. Examples include the work of Henriksen regarding the HEA (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) and the work of Larsen focusing on the characteristics of the environment (Larsen et al., 2013) and offering an intervention programme from an ecological perspective for talent development in football (Larsen et al., 2014), which are important contributions to TID research in Scandinavian football. In Belgium, Ryom studied a successful environment in football (Ryom et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, plenty of academic research

targets TID practices; Reeves and Roberts explore a bioecological approach to TID in junior-elite football in English category one academies from a Pan-European perspective (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). However, the findings from this research challenge the scientific research available on the topic in the Global South, namely in Brazil (Galatti et al., 2016), which shows that the emphasis and top priority is directed to the development of sport-specific skills with relatively little concern given to the athletes' wider education (Galatti et al., 2016). According to the results of this study, even though some of the clubs are unable to offer their players a full supportive holistic programme to the extent they would like to, there is clear acknowledgment that that is the way to go.

Additionally, in-house academies are crucial to for the development of youth footballers. Following a holistic approach is appropriately developed in parallel with the development of an in-house academy, where young players are fully supported and may benefit from an empowering and enabling environment. Research wise, the Global North exemplifies a strong investment and sophistication in these types of settings and facilities (Reeves et al., 2018). Most of the football clubs included in this study have an in-house academy. Nevertheless, there are several differences in their quality, size, number of players they can accommodate, age groups covered and the variety of services offered to their young players. Talent is inherently linked to these early starting experiences (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). Some of the clubs covered in this study are able start with younger age groups while others only have capacity for older age groups.

The importance of the paradigm shift of the Diski League was clear throughout the interviews, as it has unequivocally contributed to the strategic improvement of South African football. These results are in line with the theory that developmental leagues and youth leagues can be a powerful way to aid the development of elite athletes (Rockerbie, 2019). Moreover, as mentioned in the Results section, the Diski League has created a pathway for several talented young players to succeed and reach the senior teams. The Diski League helps prepare young players for higher level competitions. From the literature, it is evident that the transition between youth football and senior level is a fundamental part of a player's career (Swainston et al., 2020). One study that addresses a coach perspective focuses on the need to better understand players' transition from youth to senior professional football environments (Røynesdal et al., 2018).

The Diski League provides players with the necessary tools, competences, skills and football experience before transitioning to the PSL. Some of the highlights of competing in this league include several benefits to the young players. This rich experience involves travelling, including flying, to other parts of the country to play against other teams, getting exposed to different cultural settings, playing styles and televised games, the interactions with the media channels, the pressure and stress of being a high-performance athlete, and the recognition and incentive of

competing at this level. All these factors contribute to player development and are in accordance with the literature (Rockerbie, 2019). Based on the results of this author, this research project recommends the replication of this positive initiative for younger age groups, as the sooner the opportunity, the greater the chance of capturing talented youngsters across the country.

A good strategy to enhance player development, voiced by the participants, would be for the football national governing bodies to make it mandatory for PSL clubs to have youth teams and a youth football structure. This study calls for the urgency of investing, structuring, regulating and re-inventing the youth competitions framework across the nation. This is supported by the literature which shows the importance of domestic youth leagues for developing young footballers and achieving international success (Rockerbie, 2019).

The coverage of a territorial, nation-wide strategic planning of football infrastructure at provincial and regional level is critical. This should include the design and creation of a distributed network of provincial high-performance centres. Ideally, each province would have its own physical self-managed elite sport infrastructure, professional staff, equipment and specially built structure. However, construction of these tangible infrastructures could need massive investment and financial resources. Another possibility, a more feasible one, is the creation of a network of provincial intensive training camps, where the most talented young football players could be supported and monitored.

Finally, when addressing the challenges and enablers of South African football, it is important to understand that the main topics highlighted in this discussion section are inter-related and they affect one another. These include the multifactorial approach of complex TID markers, the recruitment processes clubs use, the stark differences between youth and senior football exacerbated by resource problems, the complementarity between Intuition-driven and Data-driven approaches to TID and the structural issues, and then the constructive enablers of South African football player development. Everything is connected; even though they appear as separate sections within this discussion chapter, they mutually influence each other. Where there is a challenge, there is an opportunity for development, and the opposite way around. An enabler of player development can quickly turn into a challenge and threat, if not carefully managed.

6. CONCLUSION

The final chapter focuses on different aspects that include possibilities for future research, suggestions to impact South African football policy-making that emerged from the researcher's interpretation of the participants' contributions and influenced by the literature, and finally, the key takeaways and concluding words.

6.1 Pioneer breakthroughs and future research

This study represents a potential for broadening the horizons of uncharted research because it directly addresses the TID practices from the perspectives of football coaches, within the setting of an emerging Global South economy. This research is pioneering and innovative as it proposes an integrated and holistic TID framework that critically explores the synergistic relationships between the two main approaches of Intuition-driven and Data-driven, in the South African professional football context and other TID practices. The South African socioeconomic reality and the role of sport organisations that were considered and analysed in this research project represents a first step towards exploring and understanding the ecological perspective. This study helps explore how ecological and holistic ideas can be applied to TID in South African football. While it does not fully achieve an ecological framework, it provides a foundation for future research in this area.

The achievements and eventual drawbacks of this research are interrelated because of the complexity of its results and outcomes, including the reflections it opened up. Although this study did not include direct observation within the professional football clubs involved in the project, this could be an opportunity for future research given the participants' rich and detailed contributions.

A research design that would include shadowing the coaches, attendance at important staff meetings and participatory observation, directly following professional practices, would enable broadening the spectrum of the analysis. Regarding territorial coverage, this study focused on the main football provinces and included seven PSL clubs from four different provinces and reached saturation at scientific level. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity for future work in extending the sample to consider the whole set of 16 PSL clubs that are distributed across five of the nine provinces of South Africa.

This study focused on formal PSL structures. Future research should examine the significant role of NGO's and NPO's in grassroots player development, as these organisations often contribute substantially to TID in South African football.

Although this study focused exclusively on male football, it would be important to consider the rising practice of women's football and to study gender issues and TID practices in women's football in South Africa. Furthermore, the rationale for this research could be applied to other regions of the Global South, particularly on the African continent, to gain critical mass of TID research and scholarship that is continent specific, and, in later stages, it could consider international comparative studies.

6.2 Suggestions to impact South African football policymaking

This research has highlighted some potential areas where South African football organisations could enhance policy to improve TID, such as coach development professionalisation, provincial intensive training camps for youth players and a re-structured youth competitions framework.

Coach development is a fundamental and promising area that should be further explored. The creation of a basic talent selection policy designed and implemented by highly qualified coaches could have positive impacts. It could cover country-wide football practice entry-points that would mean access to a vast pool of talented young players and potential future professionals. At country level, a small investment in teams of highly trained coaching professionals could have a high return in terms of widening the scope of recruitment and development of future stars. The rationale would be to take the existing workforce of coaches and provide top-level career-focused advanced specialisation, enabling greater efficiency and effectiveness of the TID ecosystem. Creating groups of coaches responsible for each specific region and province, guaranteeing adequate access to training pathways for players, could have a significant impact in leading to identify and select the sport talent that is already there.

Launching a network of provincial intensive training camps for youth players, from 14 years old to 18 years old at national level, could prove to be a game changer for the impacts it may produce across the TID ecosystem. This initiative would focus on the organisational, management and governance structure of the network, which would work and function in specific periods of the year. Through protocols, partnerships and consortia, there could be the use of sport physical infrastructure that is already available at provincial level, namely schools and universities. The sport facilities from these institutions could be used during the holiday period and school breaks by a specialised group of football coaches and staff members to train the selected and most talented players from that province. Additionally, the student residences could be used to accommodate these groups of players. The chosen players, a group of 25–28, for example, as this number corresponds to the size of a team and allows for adequate group training (two teams of 11 players), would then be invited to train together during those specific times of the year. These events or gatherings could be formatted as intensive training camps for this group of selected

players during the offseason from the clubs, which would allow for proper evaluation, coaching and continuous learning. This would ensure that the best talents of each province, besides their clubs, are continuously exposed to an enabling environment that caters for their optimal development, and that talent is not lost, but rather it is found and fostered.

This important asset of periodic intensive training camps at provincial centres, together with a more structured youth competition framework and leagues, at regional, provincial and national level, would empower player identification and development. It would help recruit and develop the most talented young players within the country and it would give athletes across the country an opportunity to succeed. There is an urgent need to reinvent the youth football competitions framework, from the under 14 age group all the way to the Diski League level, because existing operations are not conducive to the optimal development of South African football players. A country-wide youth league policy that promotes competition and stimulates player development from an early age could be a game changer. A suggestion would be to split the country in different parts to develop regional leagues. The clubs that finish well in these regional leagues would then qualify for a second phase of provincial competition. From here, only the teams that perform well in this provincial league and win their matches would qualify for a final phase of national competition. This competition framework and structure would guarantee the players are adequately and regularly challenged and tested at junior level. It would imply that best against best or strength versus strength type competition is promoted from an early stage. Consequently, talented players within the country would be better prepared for higher levels of competition and for the transition to senior level. It is important to highlight that these three aspects, coach development professionalisation, provincial training camps and structured youth competitions, are interconnected and mutually beneficial, and could result not only in greater South African international football success but also in provincial and regional territorial development.

6.3 Final words and concluding remarks

The core focus of this research, which the data analysis seeks to answer, is to explore specific realities and to recognise the potential present both in literature and in the real lives of those involved in TID practices in a Global South emerging economy. This study's aim is to contribute to a better understanding of TID methods in South African professional football through the coaches' own voices and self-perception and through the insights of other key individuals in the field. This study delivers a holistic and integrated approach to TID and proposes policymaking suggestions to South African professional football.

The goal of this research project is to provide insights into top level football coaches' decision-making on TID. In that respect, the study contributes to practice-related and experience-based

knowledge of TID practices in a complex sport such as football. This study is innovative, as it addresses the lack of research in TID theory, practice and methodology in the Global South, and the specific context of South African football.

Regarding the research questions, which inspired and directed this research project, the outcomes are the following: this study describes and discusses the specific approaches being used as part of the TID framework, and demonstrates the high degree of awareness and consciousness of the coaches, helping expand the knowledge and understanding of the synergies and complementarity between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches to TID.

The findings suggest two takeaways in TID in South African top-level football, number one related to TID synergies and number two regarding structural and organisational insights. The first takeaway, considering the balance between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches to TID, is a clear trend to use more the Intuition-driven approach at junior level and a prevalence of the Data-driven approach at senior level. This happens as a result of the sharp differences in infrastructure between youth and senior levels, which can be explained through the lack of investment in youth football. The synergistic relationship between both approaches to TID is critical. Even though sometimes one approach dominates over the other, there is usually a combination of both, where the two approaches are valued and complement each other. Additionally, South African coaches use a multifactorial approach to identify and develop their players, instead of focusing on a single characteristic, as they value a wide range of parameters that include technical, tactical, physical and behavioural aspects. The argument of this thesis is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, in a synergistic way, meaning that it is the dynamic relationship between Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches that enables greater benefits in terms of TID results.

Regarding the second takeaway from this research, there is a lack of organisational structures in South African football. More specifically, youth football infrastructure is inadequate to meet the needs of aspiring young talents and enable manifestation of their full potential. There is also a serious issue regarding the lack of youth competitions at national level. Even at provincial and regional levels, there are not enough strength versus strength competitions. This is a huge disadvantage for the development of talented young players aspiring to become professional football players, and it is a critical loss to the whole football ecosystem, affecting its future evolution and growth.

Besides these key takeaways, this research work offers possible suggestions to impact South African football policymaking, including greater investment in coach development professionalisation, the launching of a network of provincial intensive training camps at national level and, finally, the creation of structured youth competition leagues from an early age that are

regional, provincial and national in a progressive way, which could guarantee adequate coverage, access to and development of the best talents in the country.

This research includes the added value of explicitly considering the context of a Global South emerging economy, able to catalyse communities and help mobilise professional football. Methodologically, this study helps to explore qualitative approaches in pioneering and innovative ways applied to sport management. Theoretically, it addresses awareness, self-reflection and consciousness of best practices in a professional context and in an integrative, ecological and holistic way. The findings and suggestions from this study represent contributions that can help coaches to strengthen their TID practices, enable clubs to refine their TID frameworks, and pressure football governing bodies to revisit their policies. This may ensure that player development within South African professional football is optimised and that the potential of young talented football players and aspiring professionals can be maximised. Moreover, South African professional football could reach new heights through the proposal of an integrated, ecological holistic TID framework, as this study suggests. The rationale is the vast and unexplored potential in South African football and the scarce or lacking research in the area, which is not an indication that TID systems are not in place. The main delivery of this study is to demonstrate both the reality of TID practices and its huge potential for further development.

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APPENDIX 1 – Interview Guide – Set of questions

Introductory Questions:

- Professional background – For how long have you been a coach?
- (If not a coach – What is professional position/role at your club?)
- Professional qualifications – What level are you at? In terms of Courses/Licences
- Professional trajectory – How many clubs did you work for? Were any of these clubs at the PSL level?

Core Questions:

- 1 Could you please summarise what your job is? And what areas does it include?
 - 1.1 (If they do not mention TID) – You have not mentioned TID, Talent Identification and Development, is this part of what you do?
 - 1.2 (If they mention TID) – Can you please tell me more about it?
- 2 Could you please give me your own definition of TID? I would like to know what this means to you; how do you interpret it?
- 3 In your experience, do you think that it is possible to accurately identify and develop athlete talent in football? Why? And how?
- 4 a) At what age group does your club start TID?
 - 4 b) Where does your club recruit the players from?
 - 4 c) Does your club consider both chronological age and maturational age of the young players? What about peak height velocity/puberty? And if players are early developers or late developers?
- 5 a) At your club is there any specific framework/method/practice that is used for TID purposes?
 - 5 b) Was this framework developed by you? Or is it part of the club internal policies?
- 6 Are there any other professionals, besides the coach, that are involved in the club's TID? If yes, who and what role do they play?
- 7 How strong is the club's financial investment in TID? Can you please try to quantify this?
- 8 How transparent is the TID process? Does the club have a formal procedure to avoid non-professional bias?

- 9 In your experience, how successful has the club's TID been? What are your reasons for saying this?
- 10 When looking at talented players what type of characteristics and traits do you look for?
- 11 Regarding TID, can you please specify the approaches you use and how do you use them? (Probe about intuition / instinct / gut-feeling, if not mentioned).
- 12 There are different approaches to TID and some look more at numbers and quantifiable information, while others focus more on subjective aspects such as instinct and intuition. Can you please describe how do you go about this? And can you please provide examples? (Address Data-driven and Intuition-driven approaches).
- 13 Is one approach more important than the other? Or should both be considered? (Address Data-driven and Intuition-driven tension / balance, complementing each other).

Group of questions regarding your club's practices and internal atmosphere:

- 14 Does your club prefer to hire and sign players from other (professional) clubs? Or does your club prefer to invest and develop sport talent?
- 15 How important is the club's effort to promote:
 - (a) The dual career balance between sport and school?
 - (b) Strong relationships between the youth athletes and the professional departments?
 - (c) A culture based on cohesion, openness, diversity, and trust?
 - (d) A holistic and healthy lifestyle for the players?
 - (e) Players' resilience and the ability to work hard?
 - (f) Players' self-awareness, autonomy and responsibility for their own training?

Group of questions regarding South African football reality and the international context:

- 16 Could you please comment on the South African youth football infrastructure, and whether you consider this infrastructure to be adequate to enable South African youth footballers to reach their potential?
- 16a) What about the national football governing bodies? (SAFA and PSL). What about the role of structured leagues and proper competition for youth levels? Do they have an impact on TID?
- 16b) What about the Gauteng Development League?

- 16c) With regards to physical education not being mandatory in all public schools across the country, does this have an impact on TID?
- 17 Do you think TID is becoming more valued in South African football? (Past experiences, present perceptions, and expectations of future trends)
- 18 Are you trying to learn from European clubs, or do you think the South African context / reality is too different?
- 19 According to your experience, what are the best practices for TID? In South Africa and in other regions of the world?
- 20 What TID strategies should the South African clubs be benchmarked against, or compared with, regarding other regions of the world?

APPENDIX 2 – Ethics approval letter



RE: Research Ethics Committee Project Approval Letter Dear Pedro Araujo Lacerda Nobre

2023/06/19 COM/00235/2023

Your application for ethics review of your project titled:

South African football coaches' decision-making on talent – contributions to a better understanding of Talent Identification and Development best practices in an emerging economy has been reviewed and evaluated by the Commerce Research Ethics Committee.

You may proceed with your research project titled:

South African football coaches' decision-making on talent – contributions to a better understanding of Talent Identification and Development best practices in an emerging economy

Please note that should:

- (i) any serious or adverse effects to participants occur and/or,
- (ii) aspect(s) of your current project change and/or
- (iii) any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project occur then you should immediately report this to the approving REC. You may be required to submit an amendment to this application, in order to determine whether the changed aspects increase the ethical risks of your project.

Based on the information supplied your application has been successful and is approved. Please note the following additional conditions associated with this approval:

- (i) Approved; but student and supervisor must jointly flesh out the data management plan; how will data be stored and maintained in a manner consistent with ethics requirements.

Regards,

Commerce Research Ethics Committee.

APPENDIX 3 – Informed Consent



South African football coaches' decision-making on talent – contributions to a better understanding of Talent Identification and Development best-practices in an emerging economy

I hereby invite you to participate in an academic and scientific research project as a volunteer. This project is potentially of your interest, and, indeed, mutually beneficial. The present document, this consent form, has been designed to assist you in considering the hypothesis of joining this research project as a volunteer. Your participation consists of being interviewed about your professional experience as a professional football coach, or as a member of the group of knowledgeable professionals who are influential in the field of professional football. This may include technical experts in different areas of sport management, different hierarchical positions within the football ecosystem and belonging to different sport institutions.

This research project aims to explore Talent Identification and Development (TID) practices in the top football clubs of South Africa, addressing the clubs' TID policies, the industry best practices and the role of professional coaches in the TID system. The goal is to better understand how professional South African football coaches make decisions on sport talent.

The clubs to be included in the study are from the South African Premier Division. Professional football clubs from different provinces will be included. For confidentiality reasons the club's names and provinces will not be disclosed.

The data collection method to be used as part of this research is semi-structured interviews, which will take approximately 60 minutes each. The duration of the interviews may vary according to circumstances and to the flow and course of the conversation.

Beforehand, a research proposal, together with an ethics application, has been submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Commerce of the University of Cape Town, which has been subsequently approved.

The recording of the interviews will help the researcher to transcribe its contents more accurately. There will be no copies from the interviews, and all the material and information will be kept and stored securely and safely by the researcher. After the transcriptions the audios of the interviews will be immediately deleted.

All information supplied by the participants of this study will be treated confidentially and will be used solely for this research project. The information that will be published as part of this scientific project will not include identifiable or personal information of the participants.

Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and participants can decide to withdraw from the scientific process at any time, without having to explain why. If you have any doubts or questions, please feel free to contact the researcher:

Pedro Lacerda Nobre [+27 636659052 or +351 917161714] [pedrolnobre95@gmail.com]

Name of Participant: _____

Date and Signature: _____