

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### Developing an understanding of the requirements for player selection in UK academy soccer

#### A mixed-method approach

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# **Developing an understanding of the requirements for player selection in UK academy soccer: A mixed-method approach**



**By**

**Richard Kite**

**PhD**

**April 2022**

# **Developing an understanding of the requirements for player selection in UK academy soccer: A mixed-method approach**

**Rich Kite**

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

**April 2022**





## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Richard Kite

Project Title:

A Comparison of Recruitment Criteria for English Academy Football Players

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

02 April 2019

Project Reference Number:

P88539





## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Richard Kite

Project Title:

Comparison of coach perception, non-contextual metric based assessment and  
contextual metric based assessments of academy soccer players

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Applicant: Richard Kite  
Project Title: Coach perceptions of player abilities

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Applicant: Richard Kite  
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## **Abstract**

Soccer academies are challenged with uncovering and developing talented players for the future. Player identification, selection, and the ongoing reselection (typically concluding the season for the Under 10 (U10), Under 12 (U12), Under 14 (U14) & Under 16 (U16) age groups) traditionally entail the utilisation of objective (technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social abilities) and subject (coach intuition) assessments perceived as important for subsequent success. Therefore, this thesis aims to understand the current practice applied in player selection within academy soccer, how perceived essential attributes are identified, the extent to which such attributes are capable in distinguishing player (de)selection, and whether coach beliefs and actions towards player selection align.

The research in this thesis utilised a mixed-method approach, employing methodical triangulation to enhance trustworthiness of the data. The initial study (study 1) employed an ethnographic approach to understand the current processes employed for player selection within soccer. The second study involved a deeper understanding of what coaches perceive as important attributes for selection. The outcomes of study 2 informed the methodical triangulation of studies 3 and 4. In both studies, hypothetical scenarios of selection were applied in order to distinguish (de)selection discriminators through both quantitative (study 3) and qualitative (study 4) designs. This approach allowed for a greater depth and richness of data to be attained.

The prominence of coach intuition was established within the process of monitoring and selecting players. Coaches perceived a need for players requiring a multidisciplinary skillset, placing high importance on psychological skills throughout. However, psychological provisions appear to be lacking within many academy infrastructures, hindering such developments. The findings further acknowledge the concept of interdependent attributes, whereby several attributes govern unique actions. Conversely, the thesis highlights the influence of maturation when interpreting physical abilities.

However, several downfalls were observed within the utility of intuition. Differing levels of agreement between coaches and key stakeholders were evident throughout. Of note, between-coach agreement decreased as group age increased. When investigating the level of agreement in player (de)selection between assistant and lead coaches, Cohens Kappa established almost perfect

agreement ( $\kappa = 1.00$ ,  $P < .001$ ) in the foundation development phase (FDP)(U9-U11), substantial agreement ( $\kappa = 0.63$ ,  $P = .02$ ) in the Early Youth Development Phase (YDP1)(U12-U13) and fair agreement ( $\kappa = 0.23$ ,  $P = .26$ ) in the Late Youth Development Phase (YDP2)(U13-U16). Likewise, a lack of alignment was observed in the coach's beliefs of player requirements and rationales for player selections. Intraclass correlations identified poor to moderate variations in agreement between assistant and lead coaches (FDP = 0.60 to 0.73, YDP1 = 0.50 to 0.76, YDP2 = 0.48 to 0.74) in their perceptions of player abilities across domains (technical/tactical, psychological and physical). Furthermore, various biases were acknowledged, such as the potential for confirmative bias, maturity and age-related bias, and favouritism. Maturity, in particular, demonstrated a significant difference ( $P < 0.05$ ) in percentage of predicted adult height (a surrogate measure for maturity status), between selected players (Mean =  $96.3 \pm 1.4$ ) and deselected players (Mean =  $92.5 \pm 0.5$ ), highlighting a bias towards more mature players. Additionally, coach perceptions of abilities differed from objective assessment measures.

In summary, coach intuition is a highly prominent process used in academy soccer within player selection and development processes. Yet, key findings of this thesis found intuition to be fraught with limitations, challenging the reliability of its utility in isolation. However, intuition offers critical insights into player abilities, outside the capacity of current objective assessments. Therefore, the combined approach of objective and subjective inputs may overcome the stated downfalls and increase the accuracy and sensitivity of player selection. Furthermore, future research should seek to understand the contribution of grouped attributes, and how they govern performance outcomes.

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## Statement of Collaborators Agreement

This agreement, by and among:

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2. Neil Clarke
3. Mark Noon
4. Rhys Morris
5. Peter Mundy

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1. British Soccer Academy personnel perceive psychological and technical/tactical attributes as the most important contributors to development  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42978-021-00127-z>

Hereafter referred to as the "Work", and we mutually agree to include the work within Richard Kite's thesis, titled: Developing an understanding of the requirements for success in academy soccer: A mixed-method approach

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## Abbreviations

CMJ	Countermovement Jump
COD	Change of Direction
COD <sub>def</sub>	Change of Direction Deficit
(De)Selection	Selection/Deselection
EPPP	Elite Player Performance Plan
FDP	Foundation Development Phase
ICC	Intraclass Correlation Coefficient
ISAK	International Society for the Advancement of Kinanthropometry
PHV	Peak Height Velocity
PSIS-SF	Psychological Skills Inventory for Sport – Short Form
Q	Quarter
RAE	Relative Age Effect
RAG	Red, Amber and Green
SQJ	Squat Jump
TACSIS	Tactical Skills Inventory for Sport
TID	Talent Identification
TSAP	Team Sport Assessment Procedure
U	Under
UK	United Kingdom
VAS	Visual Analogue Scale
YDP	Youth Development Phase



# **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Soccer is an open-skilled multifaceted sport <sup>1</sup>, requiring a dynamic set of attributes to overcome the demands of the sport <sup>2,3</sup>. When compared to closed-skill sports, which depend on a marginal range of key attributes for success, soccer requires a breadth of qualities across multidisciplinary abilities (physical, psychological, social, technical/tactical) coined the “4-corners” <sup>4</sup>, that will contribute to a successful performance <sup>2,3,5,6</sup>. Given the wide skill requirements necessary for soccer, highlights the further complexities in measuring soccer performance and further adds to the intricacies of talent identification (TID) in soccer.

The identification of gifted or talented soccer players has become integral for future success within professional soccer. ‘Talent’ has been defined as the mastery of systematically developed competencies within the top ten percent of peers who are active within the same field <sup>7,8</sup>. Therefore, given the comparison among peer groups, the perception of talent may also be dynamic. Moreover, Gagne’s definition aligns with the more common interpretation of talent, which has been applied throughout this thesis. Additionally, the concept of ‘talent’ has been stated to be an innate set of skills or abilities, that can be measured and detected during assessments <sup>7,9,10</sup>. However, contention has been raised around this interpretation of talent and whether talent is truly innate, or whether it is the product of systematic developments and deliberate practice that fosters talent <sup>11–13</sup>. For example, time spent within high-quality coaching environments has been proposed as a determining variable in developing talent <sup>11,13</sup>. Therefore, talent is potentially developed within high-quality coaching environments, yet realised within assessments as outstanding abilities.

The process of Talent Identification (TID) is employed to discover soccer players with a perceived high potential to become talented and provide them with long-term provisions for subsequent success. However, measures of talent typically consider only the current performance of an individual compared against a benchmark or peer group <sup>8,14</sup>. Therefore, perceptions of talent are

likely to differ between coaches depending upon the access to previous data or cohort performance standards. Additionally, It has been demonstrated that the development of excellence is a non-linear process <sup>15,16</sup>. Declines in performance may be necessary and productive for a soccer player's development (such as programmed progressive overload, whereby fatigue is anticipated to impact performance) and can ultimately be misleading in measuring talent. Therefore, it can be postulated that the identification of talent (current performance measure) is also time sensitive and may provide misleading outcomes when isolated testing is applied.

'Potential' appears to be the precursor of 'talent', i.e., the greater the potential, the greater the likeliness of becoming a future talented athlete <sup>11</sup>. With these aligned beliefs in talent and potential, research has looked to consider methods in measuring potential through predictor variables, such as technical <sup>14,17</sup> and physical abilities <sup>18,19</sup>. Whilst various genetic predispositions will contribute to success across specific sports <sup>20,21</sup>, measuring components of fitness has typically provided weak evidence in determining potential <sup>11</sup>. Likewise, genetic factors (e.g. physiological attainment and gene expressions) have failed to report successful discrimination of talent <sup>11,22</sup>. Therefore, the notion of identifying specific attributes and abilities indicative of future success is problematic. Moreover, the identification of potential remains an elusive measurement within sport.

Potential has also been linked with measures of physical maturation. Measuring physical maturation informs practitioners of an athlete's biological age and physical status in relation to critical periods of growth (i.e., the onset of puberty and the growth spurt). Whilst average ages for critical periods of growth are established, it has been widely reported that youths can enter puberty at different ages, with as much as two years difference in maturation between athletes of the same chronological age <sup>23</sup>. Additionally, maturation variation is further exemplified whereby an individual athlete may display a 5-year difference between their biological- and chronological-age (birth date) <sup>24</sup>.

Maturation status has also been found to influence physical performance, whereby athletes exhibiting an early-maturation will outperform their average- and late-maturation peers <sup>25</sup>. However, such advantages are typically short-lived, with reports demonstrating that beyond the growth spurt performance advantage is attenuated, if not reversed <sup>25</sup>. Regardless, maturational bias has been widely reported whereby coaches typically favour early-maturing athletes over their average- and late-maturing counterparts <sup>26,27</sup>. Therefore, given the acknowledgement of maturational variation and its association with physical performance, alongside maturational selection bias, allometric scaling could play an important role within performance and TID to provide fairer comparisons and mitigate bias, yet currently appears to be lacking.

In addition to maturation, birthdate has also been falsely linked to potential. Soccer in particular has demonstrated the phenomenon known as the relative age effect (RAE), whereby a bias is demonstrated towards older chronologically aged players over their younger peers <sup>11,26</sup>. The evolution of RAE extends from a misconception of maturation, whereby older players are assumed to possess an early-maturation status (likewise, younger chronologically aged players displaying a late-maturation status) <sup>26,27</sup>. However, as discussed, maturation varies by individual and is not influenced by birth date. Therefore, it is highly possible for older players to be biologically younger than their chronological age, likewise younger players biologically older than their chronological age. Regardless, this over-representation of relatively older players remains a problem within soccer to date, with ongoing misconceptions of RAE influencing the assessment of potential and selection of soccer players <sup>11,26,27</sup>.

At present, soccer TID models typically determine soccer player performance ability through a combination of methods including objective and subjective assessments <sup>5,6,28</sup>. Whilst objective assessments capture measurable performances aligned to the sporting demands, subjective measures



offer a perceived measure of performance based on personal beliefs, experience and 'gut instinct', termed intuition <sup>29,30</sup>. The use of coach intuition is commonplace in player development and (de)selection processes within soccer <sup>6,30,31</sup>. Research has determined that whilst intuition may be biased towards a personal philosophy based on beliefs and experience <sup>30</sup>, it is still a reliable method that can positively influence selection <sup>31</sup>. The journey into academy soccer for each player starts with a selection process, where players are identified via a series of subjective performance observations. Soccer player observations traditionally take place at grassroots teams within game situations through the observations of scouts. Scouts subjectively measure performance attempting to discover future talents on behalf of their respective academies. Should performance expectations be met, the observed soccer player is invited to undergo a trial period within the respective academy, where further observations are made by the coaching staff within the club. Furthermore, once within the academy programme, soccer players undergo systematic developments to enhance their skills and abilities. At various transitional ages, soccer players will undergo periods of selection or deselection, whereby perceived talented soccer players are retained for further developments, whilst the lesser-talented soccer players will exit the programme. Such decisions are made with the further utility of coach intuition, supplemented with objective multidisciplinary assessments. Coaches provide inputs on their perceptions of performance and potential, and objective data aids to support such beliefs. This contribution of inputs will typically dictate the (de)selection outcome of each soccer player.

Conversely, several issues have been highlighted with the use of coach intuition in isolation. Reports have identified coaches lack the ability to determine performance differences amongst homogenous groups <sup>28</sup> and are susceptible to birthdate (RAE) <sup>22,27,32,33</sup> and maturation related biases <sup>27,32-34</sup>. This challenges the confidence in coach intuition for identifying soccer players for recruitment and selection purposes, in isolation. Therefore, it is of belief that the use of objective assessments could be employed in collaboration with subjective assessments, to overcome such downfalls.

Considering many objective assessments have reported successful performance discriminations performance between selected and non-selected soccer players, such as measuring components of fitness <sup>35,36</sup>, psychological assessments <sup>37</sup> and tactical competency <sup>38</sup>. However, research investigating the combined measures of subjective (coach intuition) and objective assessments is currently lacking and further research is required to understand their combined contributions.

## **1.1 Aims of the Thesis**

This thesis aims to gain a better understanding of the attributes and abilities perceived as essential for future success in soccer and explore the methods currently employed to measure such abilities. This will be accomplished through the use of an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design <sup>39</sup>, which aligns to the pragmatic philosophy (applying the most appropriate methods to solving real-life and relevant problems) employed throughout this thesis. The use of mixed-methods research allows for the greater depth and clarity of responses beyond isolated methods of quantitative or qualitative research, whilst maintaining high levels of rigour <sup>39</sup>. This first entails a quantitative approach, to understanding the nature of the processes used within soccer academy TID. Building on these findings, understanding what coaches perceive as important attributes and skills for soccer, and how these are determined and measured within the selection process. Finally, a qualitative process will be applied to determine what the beliefs of coaches are within selection and whether they action such beliefs. The integration of findings will provide a rich and more complete meaning of the results that will both confirm and reinforce the findings (via the use of methodical triangulation) and understand the potential gaps in each respective research approach (quantitative and qualitative). A thesis map has been produced to guide the reader through this process (chapter 3.3, figure 3.1).

### ***Study 1***

Study 1 looks at the current practice used within a single soccer academy for selecting/deselecting soccer players. The aims of the study are:

1. To quantify and explore the utility of academy soccer coaches' subjective ratings of player performance, and quarterly ratings of player potential across a full domestic season.
2. To quantify the physical abilities (i.e., speed, agility or power) of selected and deselected academy soccer players respectively.
3. To explore the interactions between physical abilities and subjective ratings of performance during the talent (de)selection process.

### ***Study 2***

Following study 1, the second study seeks to understand which attributes coaches and academy staff perceived as essential for success in soccer. The aims of this study are:

1. To define a list of attributes perceived by academy personnel as essential for progression in academy soccer, ranked by importance.
2. To determine what academy personnel define as talent in football and their beliefs around talent.
3. To uncover any variations in perceived attribute importance by academy personnel involved in the talent development process (e.g., Coach, Academy Manager, Head of Coaching, Head of Recruitment, Scout, Head of Sports Science and Medical).

### ***Study 3***

With coach intuition playing a prominent part in the player selection processes, the third study intends to identify the level of agreement between coaches and against objective assessments of abilities. The aims of this study are:

1. To identify the attributes related to soccer player (de)selection.
2. To establish the association of results between coach subjective beliefs and objective assessments of soccer player performance.
3. To identify potential soccer coach bias towards specific attributes in player (de)selection.
4. To identify the level of agreement between lead and assistant soccer coaches of the same soccer player age groups.

It is hypothesised that i) the strength/weakness of unique abilities will be associated with (de)selection outcomes ii) coach perception of player performance will be associated with objective outcomes, iii) Coaches may present a bias towards specific domain areas, and iv) player rating and (de)selection will demonstrate good agreement between coaches.

#### ***Study 4***

The final study is a qualitative interview-based research design, looking to further expand upon the coach's beliefs of abilities and skills required for future success in soccer. Therefore, the aims of the study are:

1. To identify the attributes aligned to soccer player (de)selection in academy soccer
2. Understand the development and selection processes applied within academy soccer

3. To determine the alignment between a soccer coach's beliefs towards attribute requirements of talented soccer players, and their actions within a soccer player (de)selection scenario.



## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

## **2.1 Academy Soccer and the Elite Player Performance Plan**

Prior to 2011, the Premier League (soccer's organising body in the UK, responsible for the competition, rule book and broadcasting of the sport) acknowledged 40 professional soccer academies and 51 recognised centres of excellence <sup>4</sup>. The model was reliant on grassroots soccer clubs to provide each player with a foundation of development before academy attendance. However, criticisms arose from the lack of such essential development, with beliefs of the coaching standards being below the requirement to develop academy level players, aiding in the reduction of home-grown talent <sup>40</sup>. Whilst speculation, it was suggested this was due to higher qualified and competent coaches being employed by academies and centres of excellence <sup>40</sup>. Consequently, grass-roots teams were left with less experienced and under-qualified coaches to undertake responsibilities beyond their capabilities in developing young players through the critical stages of development <sup>40</sup>. As a result, players were unable to attain the expected standards of academies or centres of excellence, highlighting a key downfall in the development system.

An additional threat to player recruitment concerned the transfer of foreign players into English academies, further reducing the opportunities for English players <sup>41,42</sup>. Additionally, the reported lack of sporting participation within the United Kingdom (UK) during this time <sup>40</sup>, was likely to contribute to the lack of home-grown talent, partially explaining why players were likely to be attained from outside of the UK. In 2012/13 the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) made a ruling on financial fair play to enforce tighter use of budgets and further reduce the transfer of foreign players <sup>42,43</sup>. Such legislations provoked more thought towards club spending and further encouraged the developments of club infrastructure and home-grown players <sup>42,43</sup>. Further issues within the development system surrounded the performance pathway, whereby late entry routes into the academy system were effectively non-existent. Players who were missed from early identification would ultimately drop out due to the lack of any late-stage development pathways <sup>40</sup>. Consequently,



the reported low level of playing time of English home-grown soccer players from U23 upwards in the Premier League was at a notable low in the season of 2012/13 <sup>44,45</sup>. The report from the Football Association <sup>44</sup> stated that an average of 2.5 players (per year) played in a premiership first team via academy progression, defined as playing only 10% of total minutes as the measure of ‘successful’ selection. Elevating these standards and overhauling the development model resulted in the creation of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) <sup>4</sup>.

The inception of the EPPP model was in 2010 and later launched to all English Premier League academies in the season of 2012/13 <sup>4</sup>. This moved away from the former combination of soccer academies and centres of excellence, to offering categorised academies from levels 1-4 (category 1 offering the greatest provisions, and category 4 with the least). The EPPP looked to ensure a higher standard of coaching, a “culture of excellence”, an enhanced learning environment and a stable and consistent system of learning <sup>4</sup>. To overcome issues remarked around player standards and practice, the EPPP consists of a system that dictates strict coaching timings per age band, rising as players age, linked with a curriculum for player development. Such changes evolved from observations of other sports, identifying that soccer previously provided significantly less opportunity and time for players to develop <sup>4</sup>. The Premier League report <sup>4</sup> compared coaching contact time with sports such as cricket, cycling and swimming (to state a few examples), consequently informing their timings. Therefore, the proposed hours of the EPPP account for equal opportunity to other sporting disciplines, whilst being comparative to European soccer standards. However, reports have demonstrated that a high quantity of hours employed within a singular sport can result in early specialisation, linked to risks such as burnout and overtraining, alongside a lack of enjoyment and health outcomes <sup>13,46</sup>. Therefore, the EPPP aims to develop elite performing players through a structure that aligns to positive and long-term outcomes, with the use and advocacy of multi-sports and social developments from early years, through to more specialised training as the player progresses in age (table 2.1). To aid with this

distribution of time, and overcome the barriers associated with early specialisation, the EPPP enforces an age banding and associated development ethos. These age groups consist of the following: the foundation development phase (U9 to U11yrs), youth development phase (U12 to U16yrs) and the professional development phase (U18 to U23).

**Table Chapter 2.1** The EPPP framework for delivery of coaching, strength & conditioning and sports science provisions across each phase of development <sup>4</sup>

Phase	Technical Philosophy	Strength & Conditioning	Sports Science
<b>Foundation</b>	Mastery of the ball,	Physical Literacy	Predictive size and shape
<b>Development</b>	Learn to love the game	Development,  Access to Multi-Sport	
<b>Youth</b>	Learning to compete	Intro to basic techniques	Maturation and physical /
<b>Development</b>			biomechanical analysis
<b>Professional</b>	Learn to win,	Individual programmes and	Maturation assessment,
<b>Development</b>	Rehearsal of the  professional game	enhancement of physical  attributes	Research and  development.

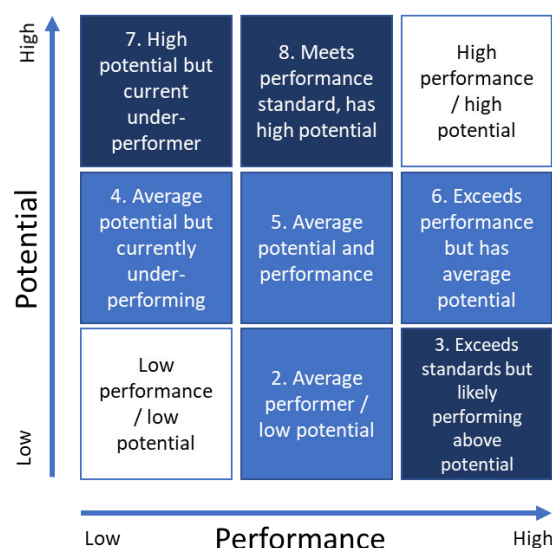
## 2.2 Talent and Potential

The concept of 'talent' has been extensively researched, with various definitions previously provided. Gagné <sup>8</sup> defined talent as *"the outstanding mastery of systematically developed competencies (knowledge and skills) in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of 'learning peers' (those who have accumulated a similar amount of learning time from either current or past training)"* (PP.5). Whereas Howe, Davidson and Sloboda <sup>10</sup> extend 5 propositions of talent: *"(i) It originates in genetically transmitted structures and hence is at least partly innate. (ii) Its full effects may not be evident at an early stage, but there will be some advance*

*indications, allowing trained people to identify the presence of talent before exceptional levels of mature performance have been demonstrated. (iii) These early indications of talent provide a basis for predicting who is likely to excel. (iv) Only a minority are talented, for if all children were, there would be no way to predict or explain differential success. Finally, (v) talents are relatively domain-specific"* (PP.399-400). Lastly, Simonton <sup>9</sup> offers a definition of talent as *"any innate capacity that enables an individual to display exceptionally high performance in a domain that requires special skills and training"* (PP.436). Therefore, talent and current performance are suggestively integrated, whereby the current top performers amongst a peer group are viewed as 'talented' <sup>7,8</sup>. Talent has also been proposed as a precursor in determining athletes with a high potential <sup>10</sup>, where 'potential' is the future beliefs of a player's abilities. Given the proposal that talent is suggested to be partly innate <sup>9,10</sup>, it is believed it can therefore be measured and detected, suggesting that talented players will showcase their potential within the top tenth percentile of a peer group <sup>7</sup> when undertaking assessments. However, this perception of talent has been challenged, with genetic factors finding low probability in discriminating talent <sup>47</sup>, and poor findings in assessments accurately predicting talent <sup>11</sup>. Therefore, whilst talent is partially innate, it is improbable that this defines talented from non-talented athletes.

The prediction of 'potential' has been stated to be a highly contentious aspect <sup>11</sup>. Given that players with the greatest talent are perceived to hold the greatest potential <sup>11,48</sup>, it is apparent that potential may be a by-product of talent. Whilst the prediction of talent is viewed as the identification of a present outstanding athlete (current performance), potential is viewed as the athlete with the greatest chance long-term to attain high levels of skills and abilities to succeed and thrive, within their given sport. Reports have demonstrated that talent emerges at different rates and is unique to each athlete <sup>9</sup>. In summary, talent identification is the acknowledgement of current performance, where potential is derived from, whereas the attainment of becoming a talented player is the long-term goal achieved through realising one's potential.

Whilst various natural qualities (i.e., anthropometry and physiological characteristics) may contribute to the development of talented players, players will require nurturing to realise their full potential. Baker, Schorer and Wattie <sup>11</sup> suggest that high-potential players are a product of their environment, whereby high standards of development provisions and coaching practice provide far greater influence towards achieving their potential. This is consistent with the proposed role of deliberate practice in developing expertise <sup>13,49,50</sup>, placing a strong emphasis on the development structure provided to players. Moreover, TID still plays a critical role in sport as a means to ‘shortlist’ players, given the mass quantities of participation within sport, who are then afforded continual talent-development and -confirmation opportunities through continual monitoring and assessments. The use of assessing both performance and perceived potential has been proposed as a method for talent identification <sup>11,51</sup>, whereby a three-by-three grid (figure 2.1) is used to offset current performance and perceived potential. This provides a convenient and straightforward visual diagram for coaches and staff to determine and compare player standards.



**Figure Chapter 2.1** The performance/potential matrix to determine an athlete's talent status (reproduced from Baker & Wattie <sup>11</sup>)

Unique challenges are presented with the interpretations of the three-by-three grid outcomes. Whilst the white boxes will cater for themselves, with players in the first box likely being deselected and the last box retained for further developments, the remaining boxes can cause additional issues. The lighter blue boxes (box numbers 2, 4, 5 and 6) have been stated to represent the 'average' player, and therefore not of a standard required to attain elite status, given that elite is beyond average <sup>11</sup>. Additionally, these athletes can saturate the system and prevent others, who may have a greater chance, from accessing the support. The darker boxes represent the players of the most significant risk. Players with the greatest potential (boxes 7 and 8) may be lost from the system if coaches focus too heavily on current performance <sup>11</sup>. Likewise, box 3 represents a player demonstrating high performance but low long-term potential and is, therefore, a risk of blocking the pathway for athletes with greater potential <sup>11</sup>. A criticism of this method is the interpretation of 'potential' and prediction of future sporting needs <sup>11,51</sup>. Research currently relies on measurable outcomes, typically focused on physical and technical performances, further neglecting the multifaceted needs of sport <sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, given the constant evolution of the sport, whilst research looks to understand the attributes related to success, the relevance of such research arguably reduces as the sporting demands change and evolve. This results in an improbable position for coaches to determine the future needs of an athlete and, therefore, potential <sup>11</sup>

## **2.3 Generalised Talent Identification**

Following the definition of talent, it is important to understand the methods employed within the generalised TID process. General TID is typically comprised of assessments related to a given sport, measuring components of fitness, psychological traits and sport-specific skills <sup>52,53</sup>. When an athlete demonstrates superior abilities perceived as essential to sporting success, they are likely afforded higher levels of support to fulfil their sporting potential <sup>51,54</sup>.

The application of TID has been used extensively across many sports and nations worldwide in order to establish the best sporting athletes <sup>48,51,52,54</sup>. Early usage of TID dates back to the 1950s when the Soviet bloc countries dominated in sporting excellence through the practice of athlete selection processes <sup>52,55,56</sup>. To expand on this success first requires distinguishing talent detection from talent selection methods. In short, talent detection assesses athletes with no exposure to systematic sporting developments <sup>48,53,56,57</sup>. Instead, talent detection assesses an athlete's raw attributes, measured in non-skill-based tests (such as jumping activities and anthropometry). Individuals are then aligned to sports most suited to their abilities and/or predicted as most likely to achieve the greatest performance <sup>53,56</sup> and provided systematic developments to realise their true potential for that chosen sport. Whilst talent detection considers individuals of no/low sporting history, talent selection reviews players currently participating in their given sport <sup>56</sup>, who are believed to show high potential for future success. Talent selection employs sport-specific/performance assessments as selection criteria and then provides further systematic provisions to aid the development of talent.

This process of talent-detection and -selection produced many Olympic medallists across a variety of sports <sup>56</sup>. Whilst the success of these methods was tainted by the use of systematic doping, their models have been stated as *"likely to have become a major force in international sport even without resorting to systematic doping"* (P.385) <sup>58</sup>. This early inception of TID has since transpired into the increasingly scientific method used to date, and many nations worldwide have subsequently integrated TID systems into their high-performance sports programmes.

One of the most reported TID programmes was the national model of Australia, which specifically developed a TID system for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, recording a 41% increase in medal success from prior attendance <sup>52</sup>. However, there is strong contention about the model's success. The model focused on a fixed criterion, with the greatest variable weighting focused on

anthropometrical data and aligning physical profiles to specific sports <sup>59,60</sup>. Such approaches have since been dispelled, acknowledging that different biological profiles are equally capable of achieving sporting success <sup>11,60</sup>. Furthermore, the model's achievements are questionable given that unreported confounding factors likely influenced the model's success <sup>59</sup>, i.e. the focus on closed-skill sports, the influence of a prominent sport culture within Australia and a focus on ages >16yrs, whereby sporting potential has likely already been realised and systematic developments have also likely been undertaken <sup>59</sup>. Additionally, there is little report on the technical coach inputs towards athlete selection, outside of physical performance testing. Given the reported reliability in coach intuition <sup>29,61</sup>, and the requirement of technical coaches to work with selected athletes on their development programmes, it would be logical that an integration of technical coaches and sports science would be provided. However, it is apparent that physical performance markers played the most prominent role in talent selection <sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, the model has failed to be replicated in other nations, highlighting the poor reliability in such TID approaches <sup>60,63</sup>.

A further remark around the Australian model, and general TID, is the use of isolated testing methods <sup>59,60</sup>. Isolated testing is the identification of singular discipline abilities, neglecting the impact of wider multidiscipline abilities. However, questions have been raised around the sensitivity of physical assessment measures <sup>19,64</sup>, in particular distinguishing performance standards within highly homogenous groups <sup>19</sup>. Additionally, whilst physical abilities are important, the execution of such physical abilities are underpinned by additional traits such as decision-making and tactical abilities. Therefore, whilst measuring isolated abilities may provide insightful results, it provides only a small part to a greater whole. Likewise, the considerations towards the multidisciplinary abilities and the integration of abilities currently lacks within TID <sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, the requirement for a more multi-dimensional model that considers an athlete's psychological and cognitive aspects, and sociological backgrounds, alongside physical capability and technical skill, seems to be a consistent message throughout the literature <sup>5,11,20,48,51,60,65,66</sup>. Consequently, there is now a greater appreciation for the multifactorial needs for sporting success, and the interdependence and influence of disciplines and attributes i.e., athletes' technical skills are influenced by their physical and psychological abilities <sup>66</sup>. This has been highlighted as an area that requires further research, given that acknowledgement of such interdependence is likely, but not yet measured or fully understood how attributes influence one another <sup>66</sup>. Therefore, TID models should look to employ a more holistic approach to measuring athletic qualities, demonstrating an appreciation of the multifaceted needs of the sport and the identification of talented athletes.

In consideration of multifaceted abilities, recent discussions have surrounded the idea of a 'compensation phenomenon', whereby an athlete excels in specific abilities or skills whilst lacking in other areas, without the expense of impacting performance <sup>20,48,53,61</sup>. For example, a player with outstanding evasive skills, but low levels of physical strength, will likely still flourish due to their superior ability to avoid physical contact. Previously, scientists have typically sought a more 'well-rounded' athlete <sup>11</sup>. In contrast, it might be equally or more important to look for exceptional athletes within particular areas relevant to their sporting discipline (or playing position) <sup>11</sup>. Whilst this may mean these individuals exhibit deficits in certain abilities, it is the role of the coach or supporting staff to determine whether this will limit overall performance. However, given the extensive range of abilities associated with success, identifying positive compensations (whereby the deficit will not limit performance) becomes increasingly harder <sup>53</sup>. Additionally, providing the athlete with the optimal provisions must consider circumstantial limitations. For example, does the coach have the capabilities and/or the resources available to provide the required developments? Therefore, gaps in performance may remain evident until professional limitations are acknowledged and/or provisions are outsourced.



Likewise, whilst it is the role of a coach to educate athletes around the benefits of such provisions, athlete personal motivations and agreement towards their development needs may further hinder progressions. Furthermore, future work needs to understand the influence of interdependence between attributes <sup>9</sup> to gain an understanding of essential underpinning abilities, or whether enhancing one ability results in a positive/negative utility of another ability. Whilst the acknowledgement of the compensation phenomenon and interdependence of attributes is certainly a step forward to addressing the multidimensional needs of sport, a greater understanding of successful and unsuccessful compensation patterns is still required to aid the development and identification of talented players.

In consideration of the challenges within the compensation phenomenon, caution should be raised around athletes' physical prowess around the age of maturation changes. Individuals of an early maturation will exhibit superior physical abilities that may be misinterpreted as attaining exceptional physical traits compared to their counterparts. With a wealth of recent research in this area, it is evident that individual athletes will enter puberty at different ages, and each will develop through adolescence at different tempos <sup>23,32,67–71</sup>. This variation makes it challenging to offer a fair comparison of performance or predict potential by chronological age alone. Research has determined athletes of the same chronological age can have as much as two years difference in biological development at an isolated time point <sup>23,72</sup>, with further reports suggesting this gap could be bigger <sup>73</sup>. Consequently, reports have found players with more advanced biological developments will typically outperform their lesser-developed peers, resulting in a heightened potential for athlete selection <sup>27,74</sup>. Given that such physical advantage is usually attenuated beyond critical points of growth <sup>32</sup>, whereby average or late maturing athletes 'catch-up' physically, it highlights the potential for coaches to be misled by early performance outcomes <sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, the sensitivity of assessments to detect changes in performance based on maturation are questionable given their one dimensional focus on

morphological or physical abilities <sup>19,64,72</sup>. Therefore, a maturation related bias has been associated with player selection <sup>25,75</sup>, identifying a need for biological age reporting to reduce such biases and increase accuracy in TID.

Conversely, Cumming et al. <sup>32</sup> highlighted the potential for an inverse relationship between psychological developments and maturation, whereby average- and late-maturing players are more likely to develop greater psychological capacities than their early maturing counterparts. Superior developments are due to average- and late-maturing players to require higher levels of self-regulatory skills to remain competitive within their age groups <sup>32</sup>. However, given that the complexities in measuring psychological abilities, and the lack of current research exploring maturational influence on psychological assessments, psychological capacity is often neglected and/or missed within performance-maturation considerations.

## **2.4 Talent Identification in Soccer**

Similar to other team sports, soccer presents a wealth of challenges to traditional TID models. Soccer has multifactorial demands and the success in attaining professional contracts have reportedly been achieved through a wide variety of skills and abilities <sup>2,3,5,6</sup>. Even when isolating a player's needs by position, a wide range of attributes (albeit smaller) is still acknowledged in attaining subsequent success <sup>3,5</sup>. Furthermore, many factors contribute to success in soccer. Therefore, talented players within soccer may possess one of many ranges of traits <sup>2,3,5,28</sup> and the approaches to identifying talent have required to move beyond traditional TID methods.

### **2.4.1 Coach Intuition**

The utility of soccer scouts plays a critical role in TID within soccer. For players to gain access to academy provisions, scouts will watch a player over multiple performance observations. Players may then be selected for trial periods within the academy where they are typically observed by additional academy personnel (coaching staff, sports science and medical staff, managers, head of coaching, to list a few). Decisions on player selection by scouts and coaching staff consider technical/tactical, physical, social and psychological abilities (coined the 4-corners <sup>4</sup>) of a player through objective (when possible) and subjective assessments <sup>5,6,76</sup>.

The utility of subjective assessments within TID and player (de)selection is commonplace within soccer <sup>28</sup>. Subjective assessments typically utilise coach intuition to determine performance ability <sup>6,28,77</sup>. The application of intuition uses observations, impressions and gut instinct towards players abilities, over normative performance data <sup>30</sup>. Commonly, perceived talented players feature abilities or attributes that coaches struggle to articulate, yet are believed capable in acknowledging their presence <sup>29,30</sup>. Intuition is the coach's personal belief, knowledge, experience and 'gut feeling' of a player's abilities <sup>29,30,61</sup>. Coaches develop a 'gut feeling' through experience of working with athletes, therefore arguably relies upon memory recall and pattern recognition <sup>29</sup>. However, given the subjectivity and the postulated lack of accuracy or systematic control within this process, poses a concern around the validity of intuition as a process for TID and player (de)selection. Whilst several research findings have reinforced reliability of intuition <sup>31,61</sup>, there are limited processes available to compare this subjective approach against. Likewise, whilst reports in reliability are present, a distinct lack of research is available that highlights the mechanisms underpinning coach intuition <sup>30</sup>.

Sieghartsleitner et al. <sup>31</sup> looked to explore the strength and validity of coach intuition (subjective) and holistic assessments such as maturation, components of fitness, psychological and

sociological (objective) assessments for player selection within soccer, utilising professional and non-professional Swiss youth players. The study compared a variety of interventions including isolated objective assessments, isolated subjective assessments, and combinations of both. The findings determined coach intuition as a reliable process for player selection, reporting ~80% of players correctly selected for professional contracts <sup>31</sup>. Moreover, the findings reported that subjective methods in isolation provided good prognostic validity. However, participant details on the coaches recruited in the research by Sieghartsleitner et al. <sup>31</sup> is missing, therefore, it is impossible to understand whether coaching experience and level of qualification are contributing factors towards correct selection. Likewise, whilst the coaches were able to select ~80% of the correct players (missing one professional contract), the model showed the least accuracy, given that they selected the highest quantity of players (52 players), compared to the holistic model that correctly identified the same number of players, but with a far finer level of accuracy (30 players). It is also not understood as to whether the long-term careers of perceived talented and non-talented players aligned to the studies outcomes.

Dugdale et al. <sup>28</sup> established similar results in junior-elite Scottish players, noting that coaches were able to identify player abilities at each extremity (top or bottom performers). However, within the study by Dugdale et al. <sup>28</sup> the coaches were unable to distinguish abilities within moderate ability players. Therefore, the findings suggest that as the homogeneity of the cohort increased, coaches were less likely to correctly differentiate between performance standards <sup>28</sup>.

Such findings from the above studies highlight that, whilst coaches have the ability to detect talented and non-talented players, this is either at the expense of accuracy, or with the lack of clarity around players of the same abilities, further highlighting limitations towards development programmes to aid these players.

#### **2.4.2 Objective Assessments**

Objective measures are commonly applied within soccer to cover the four corners (psychological, technical/tactical, physical and social) of player abilities. Whilst the most commonly reported variables are found within the physical corner, several methods are valid and utilised in assessing psychological, technical/tactical and social abilities.

Given the provisions of physical developments written into the EPPP for optimal player developments <sup>4</sup>, it is unsurprising that the assessment of physical activity (i.e., GPS and HR), physical profile (anthropometrics) and comparisons of physical outputs (i.e., strength, speed, power, etc.) against benchmark data are commonly used to evaluate player abilities. Typically, measures of speed have been highlighted as critical abilities for talented players <sup>1,78,79</sup>. Faster players are associated as being talented, with speed superiority demonstrated during critical moments of the game <sup>1,78</sup>. However, research has highlighted that the measurements of speed, change of direction, jumping ability and anthropometrics may be of great benefit in talent selection <sup>80,81</sup>. Components of speed and change of direction have been demonstrated to show strong reliability in measurement when using timing lights. However, practitioners must be mindful when considering methodological application (height of the timing lights <sup>82</sup>, starting position <sup>83,84</sup>, etc.) to ensure data is both reliable and comparable.

Likewise, the number of change of direction assessment methods appear to be vast, with tests such as the Arrowhead and the 505 as examples. Whilst both of these tests have demonstrated good prognostic validity <sup>85–88</sup>, both have also been reported to be sensitive to linear speed abilities <sup>89,90</sup>. Therefore, caution has to be taken when utilising these assessments to ensure the outcome is

representative of what is being tested. For example, Lockie & Jalivand <sup>89</sup> suggests that the arrowhead may still be a representative measure of completing a change of direction task, but not explicitly the change of direction ability. Similarly, Nimphius et al. <sup>90</sup> state that modifications can be made within the 505 to mitigate the influence of linear speed and focus on change of direction ability. Therefore, practitioners should be mindful that whilst change of direction assessments may demonstrate good reliability, they often serve to measure very different aspects of the ability.

Considering of psychological assessments, several instruments have been determined as both valid and reliable. The Psychological Skills Inventory for Sports (PSIS)<sup>91</sup> is one such instrument that is a self-report questionnaire that assesses motivation, confidence, anxiety control, mental preparation, team emphasis and concentration <sup>92,93</sup>. Given its high prognostic validity and reliability, the PSIS has been focused upon and developed into various forms explicit to different needs (PSIS Short-form <sup>92</sup>, PSIS Youth <sup>94</sup>, PSIS Youth Cro <sup>95</sup>). The PSIS has been used in hockey (mean age =  $13.2 \pm 1.3$  yrs) <sup>93</sup> and soccer (mean age =  $13.4 \pm 1.0$ ) <sup>96</sup>, concluding to be a good instrument collaborating in the identification of talented players. However, there is debate around the characteristics more associated with talent, with one study highlighting motivation as the key determinant <sup>96</sup>, yet a prior study failing to establish such findings <sup>97</sup>. Whilst this may be indicative of the cohort and/or environment, or perhaps the methods applied to determine talented from non-talented players, the PSIS remains a reliable and valid instrument commonly utilised within sport to assess psychological abilities for youths.

Technical and tactical abilities are commonly assessed with the use of coach intuition, however various analysis tools are equally applied to aid coaches with objective assessments. Reports have demonstrated that technical tests and match analysis may distinguish talented from non-talented players <sup>98,99</sup>. Furthermore, Instruments such as the Performance Assessment in Team Sports (TSAP), which accounts for interactions between technical and tactical efficiency, have been

demonstrated to hold good reliability in measuring within game performance <sup>100,101</sup>. Therefore, match analysis can play a key role in the objective measuring of performance. Furthermore, additional instruments have been found to demonstrate good prognostic validity, such as self-report surveys <sup>96,102</sup>. The Tactical Skills Inventory for Sports (TACSIS) reports on declarative (knowing what to do) and procedural (doing it) knowledge <sup>102</sup>. Reports have suggested that talented players with greater future potential demonstrate greater scores within procedural knowledge <sup>96,103,104</sup>. However, the mechanisms underpinning why such outcomes are observed are still yet to be confirmed <sup>104</sup>. Moreover, by understanding such mechanisms, coaches may be able to further identify gaps for player developments.

## **2.5 Confounding Factors for Talent Identification**

### **2.5.1 *Maturation***

Biological maturation is a naturally occurring process, whereby the body undergoes development of the bones, organs and tissues towards a mature (adult) status <sup>68</sup>. Whilst all individuals undergo the same process, the timing and duration can substantially vary <sup>32</sup>. Therefore, players of the same chronological age may considerably differ in maturation status. The critical markers for maturation are the growth spurt (acceleration of growth in height) and the attainment of peak height velocity (PHV) <sup>68</sup>. Whilst an average age of PHV has been established (average age =  $13.7 \pm 1.4$  yrs) <sup>105,106</sup>, players will also attain PHV earlier and later by as much as 2-years (if not more) <sup>23</sup>. Therefore, players can be grouped into early (advanced), average (circa) or late (delayed) maturation status. During the growth spurt, temporary declines in motor skills are commonly associated, due to the rapid limb growth and associated reduction of co-ordination <sup>68,107,108</sup>. Therefore, it is common to see dips in sporting performance during this stage of growth. However, once the attainment of PHV has been achieved, motor-coordination is usually restored. Therefore, this stage of 'adolescent awkwardness' can be influential on coach decisions during TID and player selection processes <sup>109</sup>. Maturation has also been

found to influence physical performance, with early maturing players exhibiting superior physical abilities against their average and late peers prior to their attainment of PHV <sup>25,26</sup>. Such superior performances have also been found to influence selection decisions and perceptions of talent <sup>34</sup>. However, this advantage is short-lived, as once average and late maturing players enter early adulthood, these physical advantages are commonly attenuated if not reversed <sup>25,109</sup>. Therefore, timing of maturation, and an early maturation bias, further influences the misidentification of talent <sup>26</sup>.

In consideration of early maturation bias, previous studies have established that attaining an advanced maturation does not offer any greater advantage to long-term success than average or delayed maturation <sup>25</sup>, with the latter proving to offer more benefits long-term <sup>32</sup>. The overstimulation and constant challenge placed upon the smaller, late-maturing player may result in greater long-term developments toward performance <sup>32</sup>. Similarly, a phenomenon has been posited entitled the ‘underdog hypothesis’, which argues that late maturing players are more likely to be overstimulated, consequently attaining superior levels of technical, tactical and psychological skills for their maturational age, in order to be retained within development programmes <sup>32,110</sup>. Moreover, a relatively greater challenge is undertaken to attain and develop their skills, hindered by their maturation status. This further develops player self-efficacy with particular impacts on resilience and motivation <sup>32,110</sup>. Ultimately, once adult status is attained, these superior developed abilities come into fruition to attenuate, or reverse, performance deficits previously influenced negatively by late maturation <sup>32,110</sup>. Nonetheless, studies have demonstrated that coaches within soccer will still demonstrate a bias towards the selection of chronologically older and biologically advanced players <sup>25,111,112</sup>. Coaches will typically associate more gifted or talented players with being taller, stronger or faster, all of which are inherent with advanced biological developments <sup>27,109</sup>. It is therefore essential to acknowledge that maturation is a highly confounding factor within TID programmes.



Numerous methods exist in assessing maturation status. Whilst previously, the gold standard method for maturational assessment was the use of mathematical equations (Preece-Baines model 1<sup>113,114</sup>), it has more recently been through the assessment of bone formation, via x-ray<sup>115–118</sup>. However, due to the unnecessary exposure to radiation, alternative methods should be pursued<sup>117–119</sup>. Previously, the tanner stages were used, where qualified doctors assessed for sexual maturation status (pubic hair, breast and genital developments)<sup>120</sup>. However, given the highly invasive nature of this procedure, non-invasive estimate equations (typically using anthropometric assessments) have been assessed for validity and reliability, and since been used extensively throughout research. Khamis and Roche<sup>121</sup> developed an equation to predict adult stature and the current percentile towards this attainment, utilising mid-parent height and decimal age, height and weight of the youth. Whilst the original research state its limitations to the use of only white American children<sup>121</sup>, the method has since been applied and validated within a range of differing cohorts<sup>122–124</sup>, including youth soccer players<sup>70,125</sup>.

Alternative non-invasive methods have also been proposed, such as the prediction of years from PHV<sup>23,106</sup>. However, this method has been found to demonstrate systematic bias in the over- and under prediction of early and late maturing youths<sup>117,126</sup>. Further iterations of the original concept have attempted to overcome such bias. However, further criticisms of such models have been reported, challenging the accuracy and stability of such methods<sup>127</sup>. Teunissen et al<sup>127</sup> assessed the reliability in the original Mirwald method<sup>23</sup>, the Moore adaptations, and the Fransen method<sup>117</sup>, finding 87% of the findings to differ from the gold standard (Preece-Baines), stating a high amount of findings over-predicted maturation age. Therefore, whilst only moderate reliability has been established, it is evident that the predication of adult status appears to be the most valid and reliable non-invasive method currently available in assessing somatic maturation.

### **2.5.2 Relative Age Effect**

Maturation and the relative age effect (RAE) have been commonly mistaken for being interlinked, however it has been noted that these two variables act independently of one another <sup>26</sup>. Moreover, RAE is a phenomenon whereby a selection bias is placed upon players born closer to the start of the competitive season (i.e., September for soccer). Soccer academies have consistently demonstrated an over-representation of first quartile born players <sup>36,74,80</sup>. It has been suggested that this is due to a belief that players born earlier in the calendar year are always more physically developed (higher biological age) than those born later in the year. Possessing a relatively older age will also assume a higher relative development (cognitive, social and physical abilities) <sup>116</sup>. Conversely, regarding physical developments (as detailed above), players of an advanced maturation have been found to exhibit enhanced physical performance outcomes <sup>72,108</sup>, and therefore considered to have the greatest potential for subsequent success <sup>27,34</sup>. However, high variance of biological ages has been observed across all the quartiles, highlighting that maturation is unique per individual, regardless of the time or quartile of birth <sup>26,36,74,128</sup>. This highlights that relative age and maturational status are not synonymous, yet it remains a popular misconception that has impacted selection within academy soccer.

Interventions have been trialled to overcome RAE, whilst further highlighting its bias. Mann & Ginneken <sup>112</sup> underwent an intervention whereby players wore numbered shirts in line with their age; older relative age players wore higher numbers and younger relative age players wore lower numbers. Twenty-five male scouts ( $56 \pm 11$  years of age) from the highest performing club in the Dutch first division took part in the experiment. The result of the study established a reduction in relative age bias when birth distribution and age are known within observations. Such outcomes demonstrate how age-related biases can mislead coaches' perceptions of player ability and potential. Therefore, it may be postulated that informing coaches of birth distribution can aid in mitigating selection bias.

However, such research findings do not account for the coaches' understanding and acceptance of RAE. Given the research design, it may suggest that details of RAE bias were provided to coaches prior to the intervention, somewhat defeating the research purpose. Therefore, with the absence of this education, it is questionable whether this intervention would have demonstrated the same outcome. Therefore, greater education of coaches is continually required, to ensure that RAE and maturation are not being confused as being one and the same, and further, that scouts and coaches do not discriminate players based on birth distributions alone.

### **2.5.3 Further Contributing Factors**

Another factor influencing coach intuition is the Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect <sup>129</sup>. This phenomenon was explored by Rosenthal & Jacobson <sup>129</sup> within teaching environments. In their research, Rosenthal & Jacobson informed teachers of students who had attained high IQs and had a high learning potential, likewise lower IQs and less learning potential. With such insights, teachers developed aligned expectations of these students, whom they would work with longitudinally. The research monitored the student's performance over repeated IQ assessments. The findings of the study determined that long-term IQ results were associated with the teacher's expectations (influenced by prior insights), whereby predicted higher learners produced the higher IQ scores and lower learners produced lower IQ scores. However, the information on IQ status was initially falsified, and instead, a random assignment of IQ status was provided. The research truly set out to understand whether a self-fulfilling prophecy would occur, whereby the informed belief of a student's abilities (predicted/perceived high learner) resulted in the teaching behaviours and consequently attainment of predicted performance (high or low IQ).

Whilst the Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect hasn't yet been evidenced within soccer, there is a potential such effects will be evident. To provide an example, if a coach perceives a player as top-

performing, they will be offered the best provisions to further aid the attainment of their perceived potential, with an outcome that likely aligns with the original belief. Conversely, if a player is perceived as a low-performing player, they may not be provided with the challenges and stimulus required of them to improve, resulting in a stagnation in performance, again, fulfilling the originally perceived beliefs (albeit without the equal opportunity to disprove these beliefs). Such confirmative bias associated with the use of coach intuition requires further investigation of its presence, alongside methods that can be applied to overcome this.

The above examples provide details that challenge the accuracy of coach intuition within soccer TID and player (de)selection and highlight the potential for misidentification or loss of opportunity to realise a player's true potential. Therefore, numerous authors<sup>5,6,28,31</sup> recommend that the selection process should combine subjective and objective outcomes to reduce bias and provide evidence-based support for subjective perceptions of players. Moreover, the use of both subjective and objective assessments allows for a wider and arguably more complete collection of data surrounding player abilities. However, further research is required to fully understand how best the integration of both methods can be used to provide optimal outputs. Likewise, how can objective assessments be used to understand the mechanism that underpin subjective and intuitive beliefs.

## **2.6 Four-Corner Attributes in Soccer**

Soccer has demonstrated an increase in its attribute requirements over the last decade, making player selection an ever-evolving conundrum for player recruitment. Many attributes are required spanning the four-corners (physical, psychological, social, technical/tactical) for soccer players to achieve senior-level success. Whilst technical and tactical abilities play a prominent focus, recent research has highlighted that coaches perceive highest importance in psychological factors for player developments<sup>2,5</sup>. Therefore, it is clear that an evolution has occurred in the wider appreciation for holistic abilities.

### **2.6.1 Physical Attributes**

Within physical needs, reports have determined a significant increase in high-intensity duration and acceleration demands within senior professional soccer <sup>1,78,79</sup>. A consensus seems to be acknowledged that agility and sprint characteristics are essential determinants within soccer <sup>36,80,130–132</sup>, due to their association with the critical and defining moments of a game <sup>1,78</sup>. Likewise, Mohr, Krstrup & Bangsbo <sup>130</sup> established that world-class players (defined as playing within elite European teams and European Champions League) performed more high-speed sprints and covered more total yardage throughout a game than moderate-standard players (top Danish league). However, more recent studies have established that distances covered have been greater in inferior standards of teams, whereby Championship level teams (2<sup>nd</sup> tier) covered greater distances than Premiership teams (1<sup>st</sup> tier) <sup>133</sup>.

In consideration of the physical needs of a youth academy player, research investigating the physical differences between selected and deselected academy players has consistently determined that superior physical attributes are associated with selection, in particular speed, power and change of direction abilities <sup>6,36,80,132</sup>. Speed and power have been distinguishable factors of player selection, with countermovement jump (CMJ)<sup>6,134</sup> and sprint tests <sup>6,134</sup> determining selected from deselected players. Furthermore, coaches and scouts perceive speed as an essential physical ability <sup>135</sup>. However, reports demonstrate that slower speed performances are typically associated with deselection, highlighting that being the fastest player does not coincide with being the best player, or most likely to attain a professional contract. Furthermore, speed is a contributing factor to wider abilities in the context of soccer performance (such as decision-making), so is required to work with the integration of other attributes. Therefore, whilst speed is acknowledged as important, it is currently not understood as to whether a minimum threshold of speed is more associated with professional success

or if speed is contextual, suggesting it is merely one component of wider abilities (decision-making, game understanding, etc.).

Regarding change of direction, Nimphius et al.<sup>90</sup> state that commonly used methods of assessing change of direction, such as the 505 or 5-10-5 agility tests, demonstrate an 89% relationship with linear speed (10m times), and only when utilising change of direction deficit calculations are practitioners able to identify true change of direction abilities. Therefore, given that a majority of the studies that found superior abilities in change of direction to be related to success (typically alongside linear speed), we can postulate this is likely due to the influence of linear speed. Further work needs to be investigated isolating change of direction abilities, utilising variables such as change of direction deficit, whereby linear speed bias is removed from the metric outcome.

However, further considerations need to be made around the collection and interpretation of physical abilities. Whilst the evolution of soccer is evident, including the higher physical capabilities of players, it also exhibits superior game intelligence and efficiency of play in higher league players, resulting in the reduced need to cover greater distances<sup>133</sup>. As stated earlier, critical moments of the game require heightened abilities in speed and change of direction, highlighting that decision making likely plays a prominent and contributing role within physical abilities. Therefore, attributes likely work in tandem across corners, consequently suggesting further research is required to understand such attribute contributions.

### **2.6.2 Psychological Attributes**

Psychological attributes have been found to be critical abilities for players to attain<sup>136,137</sup>, to progress into senior professional soccer. Behaviour characteristics, such as motivation and commitment<sup>138</sup>,

have been associated with elite soccer success. Psychological attributes have also been reported to define selected from deselected players <sup>3,6,36,132,136,137</sup>, with behaviour, character, coping and reflective skills as prominent abilities. Performance-related abilities, such as decision making and anticipation skills, have been reported as critical traits for youths to develop in order to attain future professional success <sup>3</sup>. Given the high requirement on psychological abilities, players who are exposed to psychologically challenging events in their youth are more likely to develop essential qualities required within senior levels (this further highlights how the underdog hypothesis may benefit the later maturing players <sup>32</sup>).

Additional attributes indirect to game performance have also been noted as critical areas for development. Trauma (overcoming challenge) has been established as a particular aspect of development that players should be regularly exposed to <sup>137</sup>. Dealing with setbacks within a safe environment provides positive growth for players that relates to later achievements <sup>139</sup>. However, whilst psychological provisions have been acknowledged as important, they continue to be misunderstood and carry negative connotations within sport. Such stigma is reinforced by comments from a psychologists' report working in Swedish soccer <sup>140</sup>, alongside further publications <sup>141,142</sup>. Furthermore, it is apparent that psychological assessments within research interventions may opt for the use of instruments (such as the PSIS), over the utility of a psychologist. However, whilst coaches realise the need for psychological developments, they are ill-equipped to provide such provisions themselves. Therefore, creating a paradox, whereby coaches desire psychological developments but decline the need for experts' input. Whilst progress within practice has improved, and further research has been undertaken that explores ways to overcome and improve openness to psychological provisions <sup>142</sup>, it is apparent that clubs still lack the provisions within the psychological corner. This has been postulated that whilst academies elude to holistic and whole-person development, the focus of academies on soccer success may impede the identity development of players <sup>143</sup>. Furthermore, this

may result in limited progression of player abilities and a full dependency on players' self-developed capacities to progress.

### **2.6.3 Social Abilities**

In consideration of the social and environmental influences, research has commonly found that establishing a conducive environment suited to nurture the abilities of youth academy players' is of high importance within a player's development and subsequent success<sup>132,136</sup>. This, however, would be dictated more so by the academy and staff to ensure favourable environments are provided. Arguably, this somewhat re-introduces the concept of the Pygmalion effect, the unconscious bias towards more favourably players perceived as exhibiting long-term potential. If a coach perceives a player as 'high potential' then he is more likely to develop a culture and environment conducive to that person, whilst other players may struggle to thrive in such environments. Therefore, coaches need to acknowledge that environments will impact performance, and players should equally be provided with the opportunity to develop to realise their true potential. Conversely, research has highlighted that 'chance', a somewhat uncontrollable variable (i.e. the chance of living in an area that offers wide coaching accessibility or the chance of being born to a particular family), is also a strong determinant of a player's environment<sup>7</sup>. Chance, or opportunity, may be the defining factor as to how a player was scouted, and selected for an academy. Likewise, the chance that a player gets on well with their coaches. Therefore, whilst uncontrollable, it is important to note that chance does play a significant role in the development of talent.

### **2.6.4 Technical and Tactical**

Technical and tactical abilities have been determined as essential abilities for players to possess to attain future professional success<sup>2,3,5,6</sup>. Reported skills such as first touch, 1v1 ability, ball control (dribbling, receiving and shielding), passing (long and short-range) and striking the ball are each



important attributes <sup>2,6,144,145</sup>. Notably, defensive skills have been reported low in skill requirements. This highlights a potential implication of the research, lacking position-specific traits. To overcome such implications, Roberts et al. <sup>3</sup> identified position-specific needs. In applying this variable, tackling was determined as the most essential attribute for full-back players only. A lack of defensive skills in additional positions may be postulated as reflective of the current style of play within soccer (more intercepted passes than tackles). Additionally, such skills are likely to be important, yet other abilities are more essential within the roles of non-defensive positions.

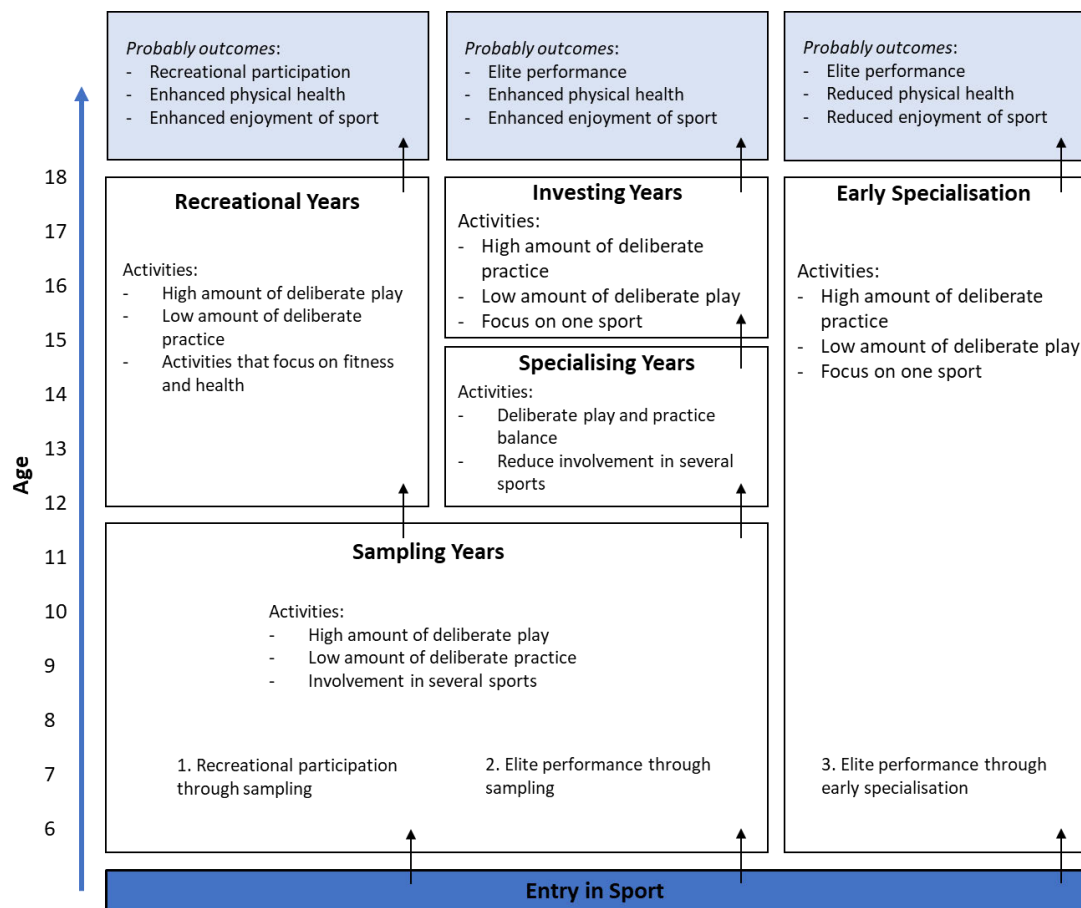
Furthermore, cognitive skills such as decision-making, game intelligence, judgement and anticipation have also been determined as critical abilities to attain and develop <sup>3,6,136,146,147</sup>. Decision-making skills have explained the difference in player performance standards across different sports (field hockey <sup>16</sup>, handball <sup>148</sup> and cricket <sup>149</sup>), supporting the ability as an essential attribute. However, decision-making skills are arguably a component of tactical knowledge and psychological ability, further outlining the complexities of player developments. Additional research has established that executive functions are perhaps strong indicators for sporting potential <sup>150</sup>. Executive functions are cognitive abilities, such as problem-solving, reasoning and planning, to list a few. More talented players were observed to have higher abilities of executive functions than lesser talented players <sup>150</sup>. However, this is to be expected, given that research has determined the importance of decision-making skills and game understanding. However, further work needs to be determined on how players are best able to develop these skills, to enhance their potential. Therefore, it is continually suggested that holistic developments must be offered, to fully optimise the developments of each player.

## **2.7 Soccer Development Models**

Having outlined a depth of research expanding on clear needs for player developments, soccer academies have a duty to manage advancements in player performances through development

models. Development models will typically encompass a holistic approach, whereby players are developed across the four-corners. Whilst academies follow the EPPP for coaching contact times, each independent club will provide a unique philosophy for tactical and technical developments, academies will also provide physical development models to adhere to the wider holistic development encapsulated within the EPPP <sup>4</sup>.

Early examples of elite athlete modelling have been established through observations of sporting participation, in attempts to understand the different routes available for athletes to achieve elite success. Côté <sup>13,46,56,151</sup> created the “Developmental Model of Sports Participation” (DMSP) through interviews of elite athletes and their families (figure 2.2). In essence, the DMSP shares two possible pathways to elite success (and a third to recreational participation), one of which being a singular phase of early specialisation, and the other encompassing a multi-sport approach, funnelling towards a singular sport over time. Considering the latter, the DMSP provides an insight into the benefits of ‘sampling’ (trying different sports through deliberate play), ‘specialising’ (moving towards the deliberate practice of an individual sport or sports), & ‘investing’ (a focus on development in one sport) over an ‘early specialisation’ route (a focus on one sport from a young age continually). A disparity between pathways (early specialisation or sampling, specialising and investing) can be observed with the probable sporting outcomes associated with the increased/decreased risk of injury and burnout, reduction/increase in enjoyment and potential disconnection from the sport/long term participation in sport as an athlete and beyond (figure 2.2).



**Figure Chapter 2.2** The developmental model of sports participation (recreated from Côté, Baker & Abernethy <sup>46</sup>)

Whilst the DMSP presents both the benefits and downfalls to each pathway, the attainment of elite success is possible through each route <sup>151</sup>. Moreover, the DMSP truly tries to encapsulate the need for holistic development, establishing psychological, social and technical/tactical and physical developments as crucial requirements for future sporting success.

Similar to elite performance pathways, physical development models are traditionally long-term, providing a pathway spanning numerous years. As stated within the National Strength and Conditioning Association's position statement <sup>107</sup> *"the term 'long-term athletic development' is the habitual development of athleticism over time to improve health and fitness, enhance physical performance, reduce the relative risk of injury, and develop the confidence and competence of all*

youth” (p.1492). Likewise the International Olympic Committee <sup>152</sup> define youth athletic development as a clear goal to “*develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement*” (p.1). Therefore, the desired outcome is the progressive mastery of holistic skills specific to the sporting discipline that aid sporting improvement, enjoyment and participation. The duration and attainment of such skills are currently unspecified, albeit with a plethora of speculation on future success <sup>12,153</sup>.

The Athletic Skills Model <sup>154</sup> takes a shared approach with the DMSP, considering the wider holistic developments of athletes. This model believes that obtaining and developing generalised movement skillsets, through high exposure to varying activities and sports, provides a superior and positive holistic outcome compared to a sport-specific focus. The concept builds upon historic models of training, as used within the Eastern Block, where Olympic athletes developed general movement skills prior to more specific sporting qualities. Considering the Olympic medal success of the Eastern Block, it is believed that a movement development focus aided such results <sup>60,154</sup>. Therefore, the Athletic Skills Model leans towards the requirement of good movement competency and enjoyment before athletic engagement. The aims of the model are to i) expose youths to having fun in sporting participation from a young age, ii) provide exposure to a wide range of sports and activities to enhance movement ability, iii) use such abilities to apply and thrive within a chosen sport as the athlete ages, and iv) become a specialist within this sport, developing both mind and body from start to finish. It has also been reported that developing a generalised skillset has its place within talent identification models <sup>155</sup>. The concept of general athletic movement competencies could play a role in identifying talented athletes <sup>155</sup>. This would ultimately lead to the systematic development of sport-specific skills, fulfilling the pathway outlined by the Athletic Skills Model.

The work of the DMSP has also been critical in offering context to develop the LTAD from Balyi, Way and Higgs<sup>156</sup> (table 2.2). The LTAD was a prominent model for physical development within soccer prior to the EPPP and offers a detailed structure for athletic development utilising a progressive model of 'play' to 'practice' and then to 'compete'. The model suggests how sessions could be themed, but also how athletic traits can be developed and even enhanced at specific time frames coined as 'windows of opportunity'. These windows are gender-specific, with the timings aligned to critical stages of growth during puberty. Balyi, Way and Higgs<sup>156</sup> state that missing specific windows may compromise later athletic ability, eluding that realising athletic potential hinges on specific development timings.

The LTAD model has been challenged for offering anecdotal and inconclusive evidence around such 'windows of opportunity'<sup>157,158</sup>. Furthermore, it lacks guidance around developing further essential traits such as power and hypertrophy<sup>158</sup>. A wider issue is the concept of age-specific training phases during adolescence, implying there is no 'late-entry' to the framework<sup>158</sup>. Additionally, the neglect of the variation in puberty onset and differing tempos of growth caused considerable issues. Given that the onset of puberty can vary by as much as 2years<sup>23</sup>, suggests that a player could be underdoing the incorrect phase of development based on their maturational status.

**Table Chapter 2.2** The different phases of the Long-Term Athlete Development model, including ages and descriptions of outcomes per phase.

Phase	Age	Description
FUNdamentals	Males 6-9yrs	Improve movement competency and fundamental movement skills.
	Females 6-8yrs	
Learning to Train	Males 9-12yrs	Higher skill acquisition. Understand rules, strategy and tactics.
	Females 8-11yrs	
Training to Train	Males 12-16yrs	Rapid physical growth and capacity. Develop capability for elite sports
	Females 11-15yrs	
Training to Compete	Males 16-23yrs	Full-time development for elite success.
	Females 15-21yrs	
Training to Win	Males >19yrs	Competing to win
	Females >18yrs	
Active for Life	Enter at any age	Retention within the sport beyond retirement

Although the LTAD model has come under scrutiny, its basic framework and progressions have remained a staple of many sports pathways. Lloyd and Oliver <sup>158</sup> adapted the model to accommodate for individual differences across growth and more flexible guidance on physical development timings, overcoming many of the model's limitations (figure 2.3). The YPD places a different emphasises on development depending upon the stage of the ageing process, with a consistent refinement of

fundamental movement skills (this inclusion accommodates for the natural process of rapid limb growth resulting in a decline of spatial awareness, known as the adolescent awkwardness stage). The YPD also looks to accommodate for the different entry ages into training, which the LTAD falls short on. Furthermore, the variations in athlete maturation are also considered, allowing for flexibility in the approach to training with this in mind. Lloyd et al. <sup>159</sup> even went on to directly relate to the DMSP, using the YPD framework to develop the Composite Youth Development model, which ‘blends’ talent development across a holistic spectrum. However, Lloyd and Oliver's models are based on hypothetical applications, and whilst demonstrating logical sequences of developments, longitudinal research is yet to validate this approach.

Chronological Age (Years)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21+	
Age Periods	Early Childhood			Middle Childhood								Adolescence						Adulthood			
Growth Rate	Rapid Growth			Steady Growth								Adolescent Spurt						Decline in Growth Rate			
Maturational Status	Years Pre-PHV										PHV						Years Post-PHV				
Training Adaptation	Predominantly Neural (Age Related)										Combination of Neural and Hormonal (Maturity-Related)										
Physical Qualities	FMS		FMS				FMS			FMS											
	SSS		SSS				SSS			SSS											
	Mobility		Mobility								Mobility										
	Agility		Agility								Agility				Agility						
	Speed		Speed								Speed				Speed						
	Power		Power								Power				Power						
	Strength		Strength								Strength				Strength						
	Hypertrophy										Hypertrophy		Hypertrophy								Hypertrophy
	Endurance & MC			Endurance & MC										Endurance & MC		Endurance & MC				Endurance & MC	
Training Structure	Unstructured			Low Structure				Moderate Structure				High Structure				Very High Structure					

**Figure Chapter 2.3** The Youth Physical Development model for boys (recreated from Lloyd and Oliver <sup>158</sup>). *Font size refers to importance, whereby smaller font is less important than a bigger font. Light blue boxes refer to preadolescent periods of adaptation. The dark blue boxes refer to the adolescent period of adaptation. FMS = fundamental movement skills; MC = metabolic conditioning; PHV = peak height velocity; SSS = sport-specific skills.*

A concern of the YPD model (as with all the others) is the focus on physical development. It has been continually acknowledged that holistic developments are critical for players to realise their true potential, and the application of abilities typically consists of multi-faceted needs (i.e., decision-making is both a tactical and psychological trait), yet models fail to move outside of isolated areas of developments. Whilst practitioners may possess areas of expertise (i.e., technical coaches focus on technical work, strength & conditioning focus on physical development), they still need to be mindful of the environment they create, how they deliver teaching and providing challenges appropriate to

the individual. In doing so, intentionally accommodates for the wider holistic developments of players, and aids towards subsequent sporting success.

## **2.8 Summary**

Talent identification within academy soccer is a crucial undertaking to ensure the best players are selected and developed for future success. To do this, players are observed on numerous occasions and assessed on competency for each academy programme. At present, coach intuition serves as the dominant method of TID and player (de)selection. However, whilst research has provided reliability in the use of coach intuition <sup>31</sup>, several issues have been acknowledged, such as i) the lack of ability to correctly distinguish performance standards within homogenous groups <sup>28</sup>, ii) age-related selection bias, whereby chronologically older players are selected over younger players <sup>112</sup>, iii) maturation-related bias, whereby perceived potential is skewed towards biologically advanced players <sup>27</sup>, and iv) the concept of the Pygmalion effect, the self-fulfilling prophecy towards a coaches belief of a player (both positive and negative). Therefore, objective assessments should be utilised in combination with subjective measures to overcome the downfalls or potential biases of coach intuition <sup>28,31</sup>. Furthermore, objective tests within TID typically focus on physical abilities, and whilst various physical qualities within soccer have been associated with subsequent success, a multidisciplinary approach to objective testing should be incorporated. Reports in soccer have demonstrated a strong desire for psychological traits <sup>2,3,6</sup>, as an example, which is arguably lacking within TID and ongoing player assessments. Lastly, critiquing the approach taken to select and develop players within soccer is critical to further advancing knowledge and provisions. Understanding the downfalls of current practice, and alternative methods that may benefit performance, may produce stronger outcomes for soccer success.





## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

The integration of research philosophy has been typically associated with qualitative research approaches. Recent studies <sup>160</sup> have proposed the wider use of philosophical and methodological applications to promote a greater depth of knowledge and enhance the quality of research. This approach is due to the acknowledgement of multiple realities amongst individuals and the use of reflection processes to improve knowledge and understanding <sup>160</sup>. Commonly, methodological designs are associated with philosophical standpoints <sup>161</sup> concerning ontology (what is there in the world? What exists?), epistemology (what is knowledge? How we know what we know) and methodology (how can knowledge be produced? The inquiry of knowledge) <sup>160,161</sup>. Different philosophical views will ultimately lead to different views of the world and the approach to research questions, and therefore the most appropriate approach must be adopted.

Typically, constructivism and post-positivism are the most commonly utilised and discussed paradigms within research philosophies. Constructivism is the belief that the world is shaped by our conceptions of it <sup>162</sup>. Therefore, constructivism believes that individuals live within different realities, research is value-bound, and outcomes are inductively determined to create more generalised emerging themes <sup>163</sup>. Constructivism is also commonly associated with qualitative research <sup>164</sup>, which embodies a philosophical approach to the research question. Qualitative research seeks to gather knowledge of the world and generate emergent themes or information to best understand or explain outcomes <sup>165,166</sup>. Constructivism accepts and embraces researcher subjective bias as a part of the research criteria <sup>167</sup>, and looks to attain a rich depth of knowledge. An example of a personal bias throughout this manuscript is a probable favouritism towards objective performance measurements by the primary researcher. This coincides with a strong background within performance testing in sport, and a current posting within a soccer academy sports science department, where tangible objective markers are a focal instrument used on a daily basis. Additionally, the research findings will

likely feature participant inputs from colleagues of the primary researcher, where interpretation of responses may be steered by anecdotal experience and beliefs of such individuals. Acknowledging and embracing this bias provides a greater depth of detail that can be examined within the research. Such approaches differ greatly from Quantitative research, which looks to test a hypothesis or determine validity and reliability, providing generalized objective outcomes <sup>167</sup>.

Quantitative work traditionally takes on a post-positivism paradigm, where reality is predictable and governed by laws <sup>164</sup>. This assumes that perception and experiences are removed from investigation or influence of outcome in order to reduce bias. It also accepts that research results are approximations and predictions, instead of precise or exact <sup>164</sup>. Post-positivism, therefore, holds a high dependence upon rigour to ensure methods utilised are valid and reliable, in order to accept outcomes as being representative. However, replication of studies within practice is unlikely, given the outcomes being a result of the cohort and investigators involved, the stringent rigour required, and in some cases the access to expertise and resources. Likewise, the influence of researcher belief will always affect the perceptions of outcomes. Whilst the processes employed within the analytical stages remove such influence, the interpretation of results will undoubtedly invoke researcher bias. Therefore, quantitative study designs have a danger of promoting outcomes not truly representative of real-world scenarios.

The present thesis was conducted within an applied setting, whereby the researcher was embedded within the research environment and each study was undertaken with a focus on answering questions that serve to enhance current practice. Therefore, a pragmatic paradigm was employed <sup>163</sup>, considering both post-positivism and constructivism philosophies, to challenge and seek greater clarity of best practice.

### 3.2 Pragmatism

A pragmatic approach offers the pursuit of inquiry, to establish answers to real-life problems. The current research was based within a professional soccer academy, seeking to further understand the development and selection processes used within the industry. Furthermore, the research sought to enhance methods and processes applied within the appointed academy setting. Therefore, employing a pragmatic paradigm is both optimal and practical within the current mixed-methods thesis <sup>162,164</sup>. However, pragmatism is more than just a practical paradigm <sup>162</sup>. Pragmatism requires purposeful actions to determine effective outcomes. Campos <sup>168</sup> provides an example within soccer, outlining the concept of pragmatism (p.30-31):

*“An individual football player may be a fast sprinter with a strong, accurate shot on goal; another may be quick in short spaces and may dribble and assist well; another may mark well and anticipate rivals’ intentions—all have characteristic skills that they hone to be able to play in a team. The team itself may have characteristic tactics and approaches to playing the sport, especially in relation to rival teams’ tactics. From a pragmatist stance, all of these skills, techniques and tactics are various forms of “habits” or incorporated beliefs that guide action. A good pragmatist coach can help sport players to cultivate and transform effective habits to achieve purposes reasonably deemed admirable by the community of players, teams and coaches involved in the practice.”*

This definition expands on the concept of different realities, or pathways to success, which need to be realised by researchers to optimise outcomes. Pragmatism, therefore, requires a balanced

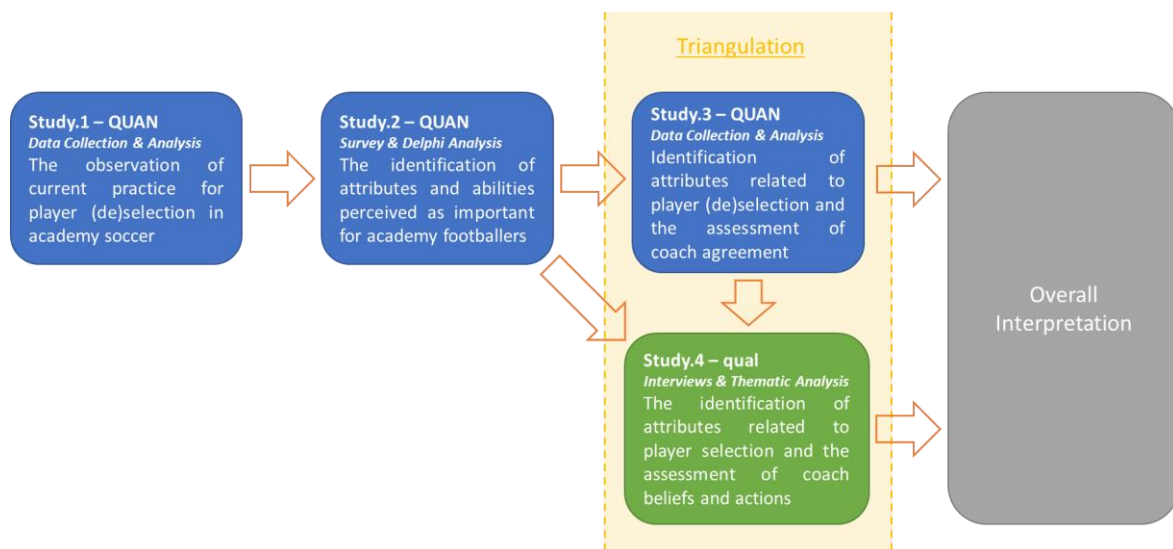
standpoint in order to advance knowledge. As stated by Dewey (cited in Johnson and Onwuegbuzie <sup>163</sup>), *“in order to discover the meaning of the idea [we must] ask for its consequences”*(p.17).

Downfalls of pragmatism have been noted by several researchers <sup>164,166</sup>. One common cited implication is the use of pragmatism through its assumed logical association with mixed methods research <sup>164</sup>, and therefore a lack of appreciation of underpinning philosophical values from typically quantitative focused researchers <sup>164,166</sup>. A further criticism of pragmatism is the disbelief of its position as a paradigm, suggesting it reproduces inherently post-positivist values <sup>164</sup>. However, pragmatism has been stated to bridge the gap between beliefs and actions whilst upholding the expected rigour within research <sup>162</sup>. In summary, pragmatism can be employed as a paradigm, so long as the researcher is mindful of the wider philosophical outcomes, beyond a purely practical application.

### **3.3 Mixed-Method Research Design**

This thesis employs a mixed-method research design, whereby both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in combination, allowing for the utilisation of the strengths of both methods, whilst attempting to overcome their individual downfalls <sup>162,164,165</sup>. The benefit of mixed-methods research allows for the greater understanding and contextualisation of results. For example, Rose and Parfitt (cited in Moran <sup>166</sup>) explored participant affective responses to exercise in conjunction with lactate thresholds. Whilst the study was able to determine the least and most effects above and below lactate thresholds, they were also able to identify unique experiences that participants needed to endure to achieve these outcomes. Consequently, these findings demonstrate the multidimensional need to establish the completeness of results within research.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, methodical triangulation was applied <sup>164,166,169</sup>. This entails the application of quantitative and qualitative methods independently, to answer the same research question, consequently developing a more complete interpretation of the results. Therefore, triangulation allows for the confirmation of results, the overcoming of potential limitations within one study design and the greater richness in outcomes <sup>169</sup>. Furthermore, the research is guided by previous chapters, reinforcing and providing relevant direction to the research questions (figure 3.1). Moreover, the pragmatic requirements are fulfilled given that the research is following real life issues appropriate to the research needs. In applying a mixed-methods research design, the outcomes are more capable in providing higher trustworthiness and completeness, overcoming the potential downfalls of singular research methods.



**Figure Chapter 3.1** An outlined thesis map of the explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design employed within the thesis. The capitalisation of the research design emphasises the weighting across the mixed-methods model.





## **Chapter 4. Study 1**

***Observations of player (de)selection within a professional soccer academy.***

*The following study observed the current processes used to identify and select talented players within a professional soccer academy. This undertakes an ethnographic research approach, whereby data is selected, attained and analysed from the current processes employed within an academy environment. Therefore, future research can build upon these findings to gain further clarity as to why such methods are used.*

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In an attempt to develop home-grown professional soccer players, the English Premier League implemented the 'Elite Player Performance Plan' (EPPP) within all English professional soccer academies <sup>4</sup>. The EPPP was developed to provide a long-term model of development, encompassing the holistic development of players (technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social). Within the EPPP, national benchmarking of sports science and medical assessments are a mandatory criterion of data collection <sup>4</sup>, ensuring each player's physical profile is monitored and measured throughout their academy journey. Physical assessments typically measure components of fitness; speed, power, stamina, to list a few <sup>28,76</sup>. Additional variables include anthropometric measures in order to determine somatic maturation <sup>23,68,121</sup>.

Previous research in academy soccer reported strong associations with talented players over lesser talented players in components of fitness and anthropometrics <sup>28,170</sup>. In particular, speed (linear sprints, repeated sprints, total high-intensity distance) and cardiovascular ( $VO_{2max}$ ) performance were reported to be greater in academy players than non-academy players, utilising isolated tests <sup>132,170</sup>. However, the lack of maturational consideration is a potential limitation of these studies. Maturational variations will likely influence physical performance amongst academy aged players, particularly around the years of the peak height velocity (PHV) <sup>80,171</sup>. Given that players of the same chronological age may vary in maturation by two years or potentially greater <sup>23</sup>, emphasises the physical

performance variations likely to be presented. Several reports have demonstrated that players with advanced maturational timing will exhibit superior performances when testing components of fitness <sup>25,72,119,171</sup>. However, beyond PHV, when all players have transitioned into early adulthood, such physical advantage from early maturation is often attenuated and/or reversed <sup>25,32</sup>. Therefore, caution should be taken when (de)selecting players based on physical markers alone, particularly within adolescent age bands <sup>25,119,170</sup>.

Furthermore, in the absence of informed data, coaches have reportedly demonstrated an unconscious bias in perceived levels of potential, with late-maturing players deemed as having low potential to succeed and a bias towards early-maturing players <sup>19,34,123</sup>. Yet, the 'Underdog Hypothesis' postulates that late-maturing players may possess a greater long-term potential, due to higher reported levels of self-regulation evolving from extensive periods of overstimulation <sup>32</sup>. Therefore, informing coaches about each player's maturational status may reduce coach (sub)conscious selection bias, enhancing development opportunities and realising player potential.

Within the EPPP, coaches are required to provide subjective feedback and reflections on player performance, providing a timeline of evidence for each player's development <sup>4</sup>. The collation of subjective feedback can later be used to inform coaches of each player's performance developments, especially when considering player (de)selection. Typically, subjective feedback is attained through coach intuition, defined as a coach's subjective beliefs based on experience and acquired knowledge, perceived contextual performance and self-belief in a coach's capacity to develop the individual <sup>29,30</sup>. Whilst research has demonstrated confidence in the use of coach intuition <sup>29-31</sup>, Dugdale et al. <sup>28</sup> established that coaches could not determine performance differences within the top and bottom performing groups. Consequently, these findings highlight limitations in the talent development process, based solely on coach intuition. However, when coach intuition is

supplemented with objective assessment data, greater clarity is provided to improve player selection processes <sup>6,28,31</sup>. Therefore, in line with previous reports <sup>28,31</sup>, holistic assessments employing both subjective and objective outputs (i.e., components of fitness, maturation, etc.) are intended to provide greater precision in player development and (de)selection outcomes.

The present study serves as a pragmatic exploration to observe the current processes utilised to measure and identify player standards and the protocols used for player (de)selection within a professional soccer academy. Moreover, an ethnographic research approach is employed to distinguish whether current practice best serves the academy in their methods to select players. Therefore, the data analysed emerged from the current methods and instruments employed within the academy. Additionally, whilst this study provides feedback on the current state of play within one specific academy, it is of the firm belief that similar processes are currently employed within other professional academies. Such assumptions are derived from previous research, whereby similar player grading instruments have been utilised <sup>6,34</sup>. Therefore, upon the completion of data collection, data interrogation will look to identify the differences in (de)selection and performance grading, with the hypothesis that i) subjective grading will align with selection outcomes, ii) objective measures will highlight attributes aligned with selection outcomes, and iii) the influence of maturation will be present within the selection outcomes. In answering these questions, further clarity is provided on academy decisions and best practice, whilst further offering the research findings and practical applications for other academies' interpretations.

## **4.2 Methods**

### **4.2.1 Participants**

Ninety-six male academy players of under-10 to under-16 age groups (U10-U16) (age:  $13.3 \pm 2.0$  yrs) and 4 coaches (age:  $32.3 \pm 2.3$  yrs) were recruited from a category-2 English professional soccer

academy during the 2020-21 season. The distribution of participation across each age was: U10 ( $n = 10$ ), U11 ( $n = 11$ ), U12 ( $n = 10$ ), U13 ( $n = 14$ ), U14 ( $n = 15$ ), U15 ( $n = 18$ ) and U16 ( $n = 16$ ). The four coaches consisted of lead phase coaches covering the U9-U16 age groups with each coach covering two consecutive age groups, all holding UEFA A-Licence qualifications and had been coaching within their respective age groups for a minimum of one season. Institutional ethical approval and informed consent was obtained prior to any investigations.

#### **4.2.2 Objective Assessments**

The objective assessments consisted of components of fitness and anthropometric assessments. Objective assessments were measured using a singular time point in November (with additional planned assessment dates cancelled due to COVID-19 protocols). Two age groups undertook all of the assessments each day, with all age groups completing testing within a week. Schedules were planned to ensure that each age group was provided a minimum of 48hrs rest from previous training or games. Of the two age groups tested per day, a rotation was performed whereby one group would perform speed and agility tests first, whilst the other underwent anthropometric and jumping assessments. The players were familiar with the testing protocols and had undertaken the assessments previously (as part of the academy quarterly testing battery). A standardised warm-up, consisting of a pulse raiser and muscle activation and mobility, preceded all tests to ensure players were suitably prepared.

#### **4.2.3 Anthropometric Assessments**

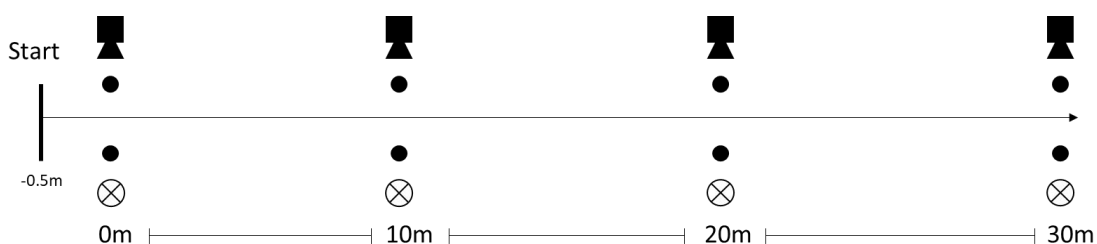
Anthropometric measures included height (cm) and mass (kg), which were collected using a stadiometer and scales (Seca, UK) with the removal of footwear. All measures were taken abiding by the guidelines provided by the International Society for the Advancement of Kinanthropometry (ISAK), taken by the same practitioner throughout. Additionally, somatic maturation was determined by calculating the percentage of adult height <sup>70,121</sup>. Following the methods of Khamis and Roche <sup>121</sup>, this

required the player's decimal age, height, mass and mid-parent heights. Parental heights were attained before the start of the season, and where self-reports were used, necessary adjustments were applied to handle typical over-estimation<sup>172</sup>.

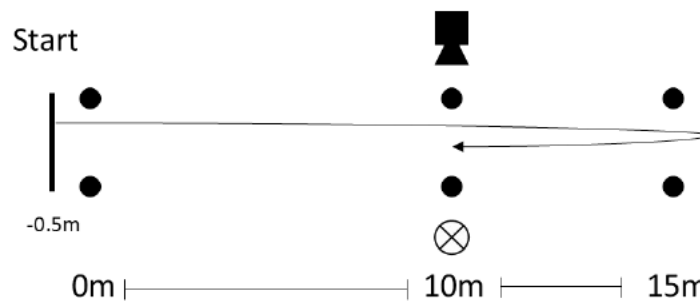
#### 4.2.4 Components of Fitness


Linear sprints and COD tests were completed using single-beam light gates (Smartspeed, USA) on an indoor 3G pitch. Tests were initiated with a falling start, whereby the player starts 0.5m before the first gate, with the feet in line. In both linear and COD assessments, players were informed to run beyond the final gate to reduce the potential of early deceleration. In the 505 test, markings were produced at 15m for players to change direction. The assessed foot was required to be placed beyond the 15m marking. Players that failed to initiate the falling start resulted in a foul attempt, likewise players that failed to place the tested foot over the 15m marked line resulted in a foul attempt. Three trials were used for the linear sprints, and two trials per turning leg in the 505, using the best trial for further analysis.

A)



B)



**Figure Chapter 4.1** Components of fitness testing layouts. A) 30m sprint with light gates set at 0m, 10m, 20m and 30m. B) the 505-agility test, with a singular light gate set at 10m. Items are as follows  
 ⊗ = Reflector,  = Light gate

Jumping tasks were performed using two force plates (Pasco, USA) set to 1000hz, and a compatible analysis software package (Capstone, USA). Jump height was determined using flight time, with the equation:  $\text{Jump Height} = \frac{1}{2}g(t/2)^2$ , where  $g$  = gravity and  $t$  = time in the air <sup>173</sup>. For both the countermovement- and squat jumps (CMJ and SQJ), players placed one foot on each force plate and were asked to remain stationary to capture bodyweight. In both jumps, players used a self-prescribed jump depth with the arms on the hips until the completion of each jump and were asked to jump ‘as high as you can’. During the SQJ, players were asked to hold the dipped position for at least 2 seconds before initiating the jump. Players were required to land back on the plates, whilst absorbing the landing forces. Three trials of each jump were collected, with the best trial being used for further analysis.

#### 4.2.5 Subjective Assessments

Coach subjective assessments were used to measure the technical and tactical abilities and overall potential of players, based on coach beliefs and perceptions. Subjective measures were taken on a weekly basis, identifying current performance, and a quarterly basis identifying a players perceived future potential. The academy employed a Red, Amber and Green (RAG) rating system for all subjective gradings as standard practice. The RAG rating system is commonly used within academy



infrastructures, whereby common definitions state that red is 'performing below the expected standard', amber is 'performing at the expected standard' and Green is 'performing above the expected standard' (or similar). This system is further integrated into the EPPP online audit system, the PMA, arguably explaining the original use of this method. The tallies of both weekly subjective performance ratings and the quarterly potential ratings were used for further statistical analysis.

#### **4.2.6 Weekly Subjective Grading**

Weekly subjective player grading of technical and tactical abilities was determined by lead coaches of their respective age groups. As per the academy's normal practice, player performance was graded by coaches weekly, focusing on technical and tactical abilities and ultimately their resulting game impact. For the entirety of the 2020-21 season, performance RAG ratings were collected and tallied into a cumulative total quantity of red, amber and green scores. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions during the season, only 25-weeks (of the traditional ~36-weeks) across all ages (excluding U16s) were recorded for assessment. Due to the U16 (de)selection process being earlier than other ages, due to scholarship transitions, only 16-weeks (of the traditional ~26-weeks) of coach gradings were collected before selection decisions.

#### **4.2.7 Quarterly Subjective Grading**

Further assessments included perceived measures of potential. Coaches underwent quarterly (Q1 = September, Q2 = December, Q3 = April) subjective assessments of player potential. The quarterly potential rating is determined across a player's holistic ability (psychological, technical, tactical, social, physical), whereby the coaches' interpretations of objective tests results (given that the relevant personnel from the sports science department is not present during this process) are combined with their subjective belief in the players performance and continual rate of progression. This collaboration of holistic variables is then subjectively summarised (coaches' beliefs) to determine overall scores of

potential, per player. Cumulative tallies for potential, across the 3 quarterly data points, were used for statistical analysis.

#### **4.2.8 Player Selection/Deselection**

Following the end of the season, players were either selected (n = 67) or released (n = 29) from the academy programme for the upcoming season. Selection decisions were made in line with the academy policy, whereby coaches and management lead the decisions, with inputs provided from a wider multidisciplinary team (sports science, medical, education and recruitment staff). Decisions consider both long- and short-term outcomes, incorporating the developmental needs of each player for the following season, and the beliefs of players' development requirements for long-term performance. The outcomes of selection or deselection (release) were used for statistical analysis. Furthermore, total session attendance was tallied and used for analysis to determine whether attendance levels influenced selection decisions.

#### **4.2.9 Statistical Analysis**

Data distribution was assessed by age group, using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was applied for the objective assessments, utilising maturation as a covariant and linear speed (10, 20m and 30m sprints), COD (505 left and right), jumping tasks (CMJ and SQJ) and anthropometry (height and mass) as dependent variables, to investigate differences between age groups and selection status (independent variables). Maturation was controlled for given its potentially confounding influence within the analysis of physical performance. An alpha level of  $<.05$  was applied and follow-up univariate analysis (with Bonferroni adjustments<sup>174</sup>) were used where appropriate.

Where violations of normal distributions were observed, such as within the tally of RAG ratings, a Mann Whitney U-test was used. Due to the comparison of data, a Bonferroni correction was applied to reduce type 1 error <sup>174</sup>. A Bonferroni correction level was determined as the quantity of independent variables multiplied by the quantity of dependant variables, with the outcome providing the division of alpha set at  $<.05$ . Therefore, a new alpha (with Bonferroni correction) was set at  $<.008$ . For the Mann Whitney U tests,  $r$  values were determined from Z-scores <sup>175,176</sup>, with outcomes  $\geq 0.1$ - $0.29$  = small,  $0.3$ - $0.49$  = medium and  $\geq 0.5$  = large effect size. Subsequently, Eta-squared was also calculated from  $r$  value outcomes. Eta-squared effect sizes were interpreted as  $>.01$  = small effect,  $>.06$  = medium effect and  $>.14$  = large effect. Outcomes from the Mann Whitney U test was reported as medians and interquartile range (IQR). All data were analysed using SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.).

### 4.3 Results

The findings of the MANCOVA determined significant variations in performance within only the age group (Wilks Lambda = 0.11,  $F(54, 254) = 2.61$ ,  $P = .00$ ) and the covariant of maturation (Wilks Lambda = 0.55,  $F(9, 49) = 4.39$ ,  $P = .00$ ). No significant variances were observed within player selection status (Wilks Lambda = 0.79,  $F(9, 49) = 1.49$ ,  $P = .18$ ) or player selection status x age interaction (Wilks Lambda = 0.50,  $F(36, 185) = 1.05$ ,  $P = .16$ ).

The outcomes of the weekly performance RAG tallies identified significantly (with applied Bonferroni correction) higher tallies of green ratings in selected players ( $U = 0.0$ ,  $P <.001$ ,  $r = -0.83$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.68$ ) and red ratings in deselected players ( $U = 4.5$ ,  $P = .01$ ,  $r = -0.82$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.67$ ), within the U14 age group only (table 4.1). Within the quarterly potential RAG tallies, a consistent finding was observed with the low quantity of red ratings for selected players, and high quantity for deselected players in the U13, U14 and U16 age groups (table 4.1). Only the combined age group, significant differences

were identified in the tally of Red ratings ( $U = 77.0$ ,  $P < .001$ ,  $r = -0.80$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.63$ ) between the selected (median = 0, IQR = 0-0) and deselected (median = 1.0, IQR = 1-2) players, and Green ratings ( $U = 174.5$ ,  $P < .001$ ,  $r = -0.56$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.32$ ) between selected (median = 2.0, IQR = 1-3) and deselected (median = 0.0, IQR = 0-0) players.

**Table Chapter 4.1** Results of the Mann Whitney U test reporting differences and median (and interquartile range) performances between select/deselect groups in weekly and quarterly RAG ratings.

Age Group	RAG	U	Sig.	Selected Median (IQR)	Deselected Median (IQR)	$\gamma$	$Eta^2$
<b>Weekly</b>							
U10	Red	7.0	.15	4 (2-4)	6 (4-7)	-0.45	0.20
	Amber	14.5	.81	13 (12-14)	13 (11-14)	-0.07	0.01
	Green	3.0	.03 <sup>*B</sup>	6 (4-6)	1 (0-2)	-0.65	0.43
U13	Red	16.0	.64	0 (0-1)	1 (0-2)	-0.17	0.03
	Amber	10.5	.19	9 (8-12)	12 (11-12)	-0.36	0.13
	Green	8.0	.11	2 (2-3)	2 (1-2)	-0.49	0.24
U14	Red	4.5	.01 <sup>*A</sup>	0 (0-0)	1 (1-2)	-0.82	0.67
	Amber	13.0	.11	10 (10-11)	14 (13-15)	-0.43	0.19
	Green	0.0	<.001 <sup>**A</sup>	7 (7-9)	2 (1-3)	-0.83	0.68
U15	Red	33.0	.82	0 (0-0)	0 (0-0)	-0.12	0.01
	Amber	12.0	.02 <sup>*B</sup>	7 (3-9)	10 (9-12)	-0.53	0.28
	Green	18.5	.10	16 (13-18)	10 (4-13)	-0.39	0.15
U16	Red	31.5	.96	0 (0-0)	0 (0-0)	-0.02	0.00
	Amber	54.0	.16	2 (1-3)	4 (3-6)	-0.37	0.14
	Green	23.0	.38	8 (8-9)	8 (5-9)	-0.24	0.06
Combined	Red	546.0	.15	0 (0-1)	0 (0-1)	-0.17	0.03
	Amber	524.0	.14	10 (5-12)	11 (6-13)	-0.17	0.03
	Green	436.0	.02 <sup>*B</sup>	7 (4-12)	3 (1-8)	-0.28	0.08
<b>Quarterly</b>							
U10	Red	4.5	.18	0 (0-0)	1 (1-2)	-0.53	0.29
	Amber	8.0	.67	1 (1-2)	1 (1-1)	-0.20	0.04
	Green	7.0	.52	1 (0-2)	0 (0-1)	-0.27	0.07
U13	Red	1.0	.01 <sup>*A</sup>	0 (0-0)	2 (2-2)	-0.80	0.64
	Amber	17.0	.87	2 (0-2)	1 (1-1)	-0.05	0.00
	Green	4.0	.03 <sup>*B</sup>	1 (0-3)	0 (0-0)	-0.64	0.41
U14	Red	0.0	<.001 <sup>**A</sup>	0 (0-0)	2 (1-2)	-0.91	0.83
	Amber	17.0	.63	0 (0-1)	1 (0-1)	-0.17	0.03
	Green	2.5	.01 <sup>*B</sup>	3 (1-3)	0 (0-0)	-0.77	0.59
U15	Red	7.0	.02 <sup>*B</sup>	0 (0-0)	1 (1-2)	-0.71	0.50
	Amber	17.5	.27	1 (0-1)	2 (1-2)	-0.30	0.09
	Green	8.5	.03 <sup>*B</sup>	2 (2-3)	0 (0-0)	-0.57	0.32
U16	Red	2.5	<.001 <sup>**A</sup>	0 (0-0)	1 (1-1)	-0.83	0.69
	Amber	17.5	.41	1 (0-1)	1 (0-1)	-0.24	0.06
	Green	7.0	.03 <sup>*B</sup>	2 (2-3)	1 (0-1)	-0.61	0.37
Combined	Red	77.0	<.001 <sup>**A</sup>	0 (0-0)	1 (1-2)	-0.80	0.63
	Amber	433.5	.32	1 (0-2)	1 (1-2)	-0.12	0.01
	Green	174.5	<.001 <sup>**A</sup>	2 (1-3)	0 (0-0)	-0.56	0.32

\* = significant outcome <0.05, \*\* = significant outcome <0.01, <sup>A</sup> = significant with Bonferroni correction, <sup>B</sup> = Non-significant with Bonferroni correction, IQR = interquartile range (25%-75%)

#### 4.4 Discussion

This study looked to report on the current processes employed within a professional soccer academy undertaking player (de)selection, via an ethnographical approach, with a focus on identifying the difference in performance between selected and deselected players. The key findings of this study were that coaches correctly identified (de)selected players using quarterly RAG ratings (measure of potential) consistently across age groups, whilst weekly RAG and physical performance data was unable to distinguish selection status.

The outcomes of quarterly RAG ratings reported a greater number of red grades associated with deselection, with observations of higher green frequencies associated to selection. This implies that coaches are capable in distinguishing players at either extremity of performance. Such findings align with previous reports <sup>28,31</sup> that identify coach intuition as a capable tool in determining (de)selected players. However, these findings also demonstrated that coaches may display indecision concerning the players of a moderate standard (amber), similar to previous research <sup>28</sup>. Whilst this middle ground is expected to cater to players with greater uncertainty towards their future, the range of abilities is vast and features players that were opted for both selection and deselection. Therefore, to reduce this range of abilities, it may be of greater benefit to further sub-divide grades to offer greater clarity in perceptions of player abilities and potential, similar to the nine by nine grid of performance and potential proposed by Baker et al. <sup>11</sup>.

Conversely, the quarterly RAG results fail to control for confirmation bias, given that the same coaches who graded the players were also the coaches who (de)selected them. Considering the process of deselection evolves from weekly performance feedback with managerial staff (within the

observed academy), it is fair to elude that the lead phase coaches may (sub)consciously inform and influence viewpoints on player performances. Moreover, the lead phase coach will steer inputs on the end of year (de)selection. Ultimately, the managerial staff will opt to accept or dismiss suggested (de)selection outcomes, based upon their own beliefs and performance observations. However, it is impossible to dismiss the potential for confirmation bias. Additionally, within the observed environment, the U16 age group is the only group whereby a full multidisciplinary team provide direct input on player selections, due to the higher perceived importance placed upon scholarship decisions. For ages below U16, multidisciplinary staff provided lead phase coaches with inputs on objective data (i.e., components of fitness, maturation, injury reports, etc) as they are absent from the decision meetings. Consequently, these wider inputs will be subjectively interpreted by the coach, with the potential for being subconsciously applied in line with their own beliefs.

Weekly RAG ratings demonstrated a low ability in identifying selected from deselected players, with only the U14 age group reporting significant findings of red and green grades. One explanation is due to coaches providing grades to their individual age groups only, with no additional inputs. Each coach will maintain an expected performance standard based upon experience, knowledge, and beliefs, as outlined within the definition of coach intuition <sup>29,30</sup>. This will undoubtedly vary between coaches. Therefore, whilst one coach may perceive a player to be a 'amber' performance grade, another may perceive them to be a 'green'. This lack of uniformity in player grading highlights the need for academies to provide comprehensive anchor points within the grading tool, so to enhance clarity in player grading, like in the earlier proposed instrument by Baker et al <sup>11</sup>. Likewise, academies may benefit from the adoption of a validated and reliable instrument for the subjective measure of player performance.

In consideration of the differing outcomes between weekly and quarterly RAG ratings, it may be postulated that the focus of each RAG (weekly vs quarterly) assessment provides the difference in selection outcome. Whilst weekly RAG focuses on current performance, quarterly RAG emphasizes perceived future potential. It is therefore plausible that coaches may measure current performance against a player's perceived future potential, i.e., a player who is believed to have high potential may be graded as currently underperforming, based on the coach's perceptions of the players' future abilities yet to be realised. Likewise, a player with low potential may be scored higher in their current performance, given that the coach perceives them as playing to the highest standard expected of them to achieve (or in some cases, beyond this). Therefore, current performance ratings may instead provide some context in the development and attainment of (perceived) potential and may be best employed by utilising frameworks that account for both 'current performance' vs 'perceived potential'

<sup>11,51</sup>.

Soccer is a multifaceted sport, and whilst technical and tactical abilities are essential, professional success hinges on superior abilities across a wider holistic skillset. Physical performance has been proven to be an essential criterion for success<sup>28,170,171</sup>. Therefore, whilst technical and tactical skills are essential, they account for only one part of a greater whole<sup>2,3</sup>. Previous studies have been able to identify physical abilities, such as speed<sup>170</sup>, as critical factors for success. However, in the present study, physical performance was not capable of distinguishing selected from deselected players. Given that the study undertook an ethnographic approach, whereby procedures tested are standard practice, and that objective assessments failed to distinguish selection outcome, potentially highlights the need for wider metrics to be applied to aid player selection. For example, a previous report has demonstrated the high interaction of acceleration within the 505 COD task design, resulting in only 31% of time spent changing direction<sup>90</sup>. Therefore, those with greater linear speed abilities are more likely to demonstrate greater overall COD outcomes<sup>88,90</sup>. Nimphius et al.<sup>88</sup> suggested using a



change of direction deficit (COD<sub>def</sub>) calculation to enhance the measurement of turning ability, due to the mitigation for linear speed bias and ultimately providing a more reflective measure of task assessment. Furthermore, whilst physical performance in isolation was not able to explain (de)selection outcomes, it's contribution towards coach subjective measures in potential identifies its use within the player selection process.

The current study found maturation to be a significant factor within selection. This further reinforces the need to compare physical performance outputs against not only chronological age but biological age markers, for a fuller comparison of physical ability. Additionally, there is a danger that late maturing players will not realise their full potential if they are not afforded the time to achieve adult stature. Late maturing players, in particular, may only progress through selection 'survival' <sup>177</sup>, whereby they can tolerate over-stimulation without enduring burnout, injury or demotivation <sup>177-179</sup>. Therefore, considerations of maturational status and biological age are essential for consideration in player (de)selections.

This study is not without its limitations. Whilst this was an observation of a single academy's practice, further research should include several academies to identify (de)selection trends. However, the outcomes of this study can inform academies utilising similar selection processes of the stated shortcomings and considerations for enhancement. Likewise, this study highlighted areas that are not currently accounted for during player selection process. Whilst there is an open understanding for holistic abilities, the lack of assessments for psychological abilities and social measures potentially implicates player developments and (de)selection.

A further limitation of the study is within the instrument applied. Whilst the RAG rating system is used within common practice, to the authors knowledge, there is little to no supporting literature for its application within player assessment in sport. Therefore, future work needs to be undertaken to determine the validity and reliability of this instrument. Furthermore, the quarterly RAG utilised only 3 data-points, which is arguably an insufficient quantity to determine player potential. Therefore, whilst sample size was good, it is possible that the findings established were due to insufficient data points.

Additionally, Uncontrollable challenges were associated with the present study; during the season of 2020-21, the COVID-19 international pandemic brought closure to academy soccer within the UK at various time points e.g., delayed start and closures in December and January. Academy closure (therefore a cessation of training) and imposed restrictions negatively impacted training provisions and physical performance assessment collection, traditionally undergone quarterly (June, October, January and April). This resulted in a singular time point provided for the 2020-21 season. However, the November time point is arguable of greatest importance given the timings of (de)selections (December to March). Therefore, whilst additional performance data would have been welcomed, outcomes may not have differed greatly due to outputs closest to selection dates providing the most influence on selections. Moreover, the outcome reflects the 2020-21 academy season, where the best operating procedure was implemented to mitigate risks and superseded the need for further data collection.

#### **4.5 Practical Implications**

Based on the findings of this study, coach subjective perception of player future potential, established via the combination of subjective (weekly coach ratings) and objective (components of fitness) assessments, was capable of determining player deselection. Therefore, sessional and game

performance should be taken across the year to inform coaches of each player's technical competency and rate of development for use within player (de)selection processes. However, to improve the rigour in these findings, grading inputs should be established across multiple coaches so to overcome potential confirmative bias.

When considering player gradings, this study found that quarterly RAG ratings (perceived future potential) demonstrated strong associations with deselection, whereas weekly RAG ratings (current performance) failed to provide any consistent results. Consequently, it has been postulated that performance grades may provide context and further inform the coach on the present status of the players' predicted journey. Therefore, the continual collection of weekly and quarterly grading is logical, with further research looking to better understand what further distinguishes these players. Similarly, it was clear that coaches were able to distinguish players at each extremity of performance, whereas uncertainty remains around moderate player abilities. Further research needs to be undertaken to investigate a coach's ability to perceive the development needs of these players, to ensure they are provided the appropriate and optimal provisions.

Given the effect of maturation, bio-banding interventions may be convenient to ensure optimal developments are maintained. Banding players by biological age entails grouping players by growth status, regardless of chronological age. Such provisions will reduce any dependence on physical prowess and the higher demand for technical and tactical ability, typically exhibited by biologically advanced players. Likewise, such provisions can also be offered to biologically younger players, moving down an age group, which should afford the time to develop confidence and develop leadership skills; opportunities less likely to be presented within their own age groups.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

The present study identified that coach perception of potential, a combination of weekly subjective grading of performance and objective physical performance results, were capable of distinguishing selected from deselected players. However, caution should be taken with these results given the high chance of confirmation bias associated with this process. Furthermore, it was apparent that whilst coaches were capable of distinguishing the extremities of player performance, it is uncertain around the grading for moderate ability players. Therefore, to enhance the measurement of players, academies should consider methods that integrate current performance and future potential beliefs to reduce the likely range of variation for moderate standard players and better understand their development needs.



# Chapter 5. Study 2

Published in: **Journal of Science in Sport and Exercise**

Kite, R. J., Noon, M. R., Morris, R., Mundy, P., & Clarke, N. D. (2021). British soccer academy personnel perceive psychological and technical/tactical attributes as the most important contributors to development. *Journal of Science in Sport and Exercise*, pp.1-12.

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***British soccer academy personnel perceive psychological and technical/tactical attributes as the most important contributors to development.***

*Study 1 provided insights into the current assessments utilised for player selection within a UK soccer academy. Additionally, the study acknowledged a breadth of abilities required for players to obtain future professional success. However, limitations were reported in the use of a singular soccer academy, and therefore lacking in generalisation. Therefore, this study looked to further identify which attributes and abilities are specifically deemed as important, with insights provided across several academies and key stakeholders.*

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## **Chapter 6. Study 3**

***The utility of coach intuition within a U.K. soccer academy: the influence of maturation on intuition sensitivity.***



*With the outcome of Study 2 providing a list of attributes that key stakeholders perceived as important for future success in soccer, the third study attempted to identify whether such considerations of abilities were applied within a 'mock' player selection process, or whether coaches can identify such attributes and abilities. Additionally, given the variations of perceived importance observed between personnel, further interrogation of coach agreement was investigated.*

## **6.1 Introduction**

Talent identification within academy soccer plays a crucial role in developing and retaining talented players for senior team enhancement, attenuating the financial costs associated with external recruitment <sup>182</sup>. In the United Kingdom (UK), professional soccer clubs develop players in line with a club philosophy, following a development pathway set out by the Premier League <sup>4</sup>. Typically, academy programmes require players to develop and demonstrate abilities across the 4-corner model (psychological, social, physical and technical/tactical) deemed adequate for professional contracts. Players perceived as exhibiting attributes related to success are afforded further developments, whilst those lacking are deselected and exit the pathway. Given that recruitment and retention of players are decided largely by coach subjective opinion <sup>28,53,201,202</sup>, it is in the interests of academies to understand the decisions made by coaches in (de)selection processes.

The utility of coach intuition to determine player (de)selection has been found to offer prognostic validation within soccer <sup>31</sup>. Coach intuition is developed and extends from previous experience and knowledge, temporal factors and self-efficacy working with each player <sup>29</sup>. Previous studies have suggested that coaches can recognise the qualities a player requires to be successful <sup>2,3</sup>, can subjectively assess talent <sup>61</sup> and can correctly distinguish between talented and lesser talented players <sup>31,203</sup>. However, several implications have been associated with subjective observations, such as selection bias attributed to maturation status <sup>6,31</sup>, the poor agreement between coaches in

perceived player abilities <sup>6</sup> and contention regarding psychometric assessment <sup>31</sup>. Therefore, whilst coach intuition has been reported as a reliable process of player (de)selection <sup>31</sup>, the addition of objective evidence may enhance selection outcome and overcome subjective downfalls.

In consideration of objective tests across holistic abilities; psychometrics <sup>92</sup>, anthropometric data <sup>184</sup> and physiological tests <sup>170,204</sup> have each respectively reported superior performance outcomes to more accomplished players. Physiological assessments, in particular, have undergone extensive research, demonstrating greater performances in speed and jumping ability relating to superior player performance <sup>170,184,204</sup>. Therefore, the implementation of objective tests may heighten the sensitivity in player (de)selection, whilst reinforcing or quashing subjective beliefs.

Few studies <sup>28,31</sup> have investigated the combined subjective and objective approach to player selection covering the assessment of holistic abilities. Sieghartsleitner et al. <sup>31</sup> compared subjective (coach ratings) and objective (components of fitness, anthropometry, age and maturation, training history, and technical, psychological and sociological assessments) outcomes respectively, and a combined model, to establish an enhanced accuracy in subsequent playing status utilising the combined method <sup>31,203</sup>. Likewise, Dugdale et al. <sup>28</sup> determined the use of combined methods to be more accurate in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of players for optimal development. Consequently, evidence suggests a combined approach of subjective and objective assessments, measuring the multifaceted requirements within soccer, is superior for both player (de)selection and development processes. However, the results from Study 1 highlighted a lack of associations with player selection and objective performance, challenging whether associations with subjective beliefs will be evident. Therefore, the present study aims to determine coach agreement on player performance between lead and assistant coaches, and identify attributes related to player (de)selection across holistic assessments. It is hypothesised that i) coach perception of holistic

performance will not be associated with objective outcomes, ii) player rating and (de)selection will not demonstrate good agreement between coaches and iii) the strength/weakness of unique abilities will not be associated with (de)selection outcomes.

## **6.2 Methods**

### **6.2.1 Participants**

Invites were distributed to 113 youth academy players and 19 academy coaches of an English category 2 professional soccer academy, of which 45 players (age =  $13.5 \pm 2.2$  yrs) and ten coaches (age =  $30.9 \pm 4.5$  yrs, coaching age =  $10.6 \pm 5.4$  yrs) participated. The players were divided into three groups, aligned to the EPPP<sup>4</sup> and the academies development philosophy: Foundation Development Phase (FDP) (U9-U11, n = 12), early Youth Development Phase (YDP1) (U12-U13, n = 11) and late Youth Development Phase (YDP2) (U14-U16, n = 22). The players had been signed to the academy for a minimum of three months of the season, defined by the academic calendar (September – August). Coaching staff included lead coaches (n = 3, coaching age =  $13.7 \pm 1.5$  yrs) who all held UEFA-A qualifications, and assistant coaches (n = 7, coaching age =  $9.3 \pm 6.0$  yrs) who held a mixture of UEFA-A (n = 3) and UEFA-B qualifications (n = 4). Data collection occurred at the conclusion of the 2019/20 season, aligning with traditional (de)selection timings within UK academy soccer. Institutional ethical approval and informed consent was obtained prior to any investigations.

### **6.2.2 Objective Assessments**

Given the high importance placed on abilities across the 4-corners (psychological, technical/tactical, social and physical) from Chapter 5, the appropriate tests have been selected in line with previous findings. Furthermore, overcoming the limitations of COVID, the use of surveys permitted safe and effective manners in assessing competencies, with validated and reliable instruments.

### **6.2.3 Surveys**

The psychological skills inventory for sports short form (PSIS-SF) <sup>92</sup> and the tactical skills inventory for sports (TACSIS) <sup>205</sup> were created as online surveys ([www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk](http://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk)) using Likert scales in line with the original conceptions. The surveys were electronically distributed to the players to complete over eight weeks. Parental consent was obtained before each survey and guidance was provided suggesting players complete one survey a day, to avoid monotony. Only participants who had completed both online surveys were eligible for further analysis.

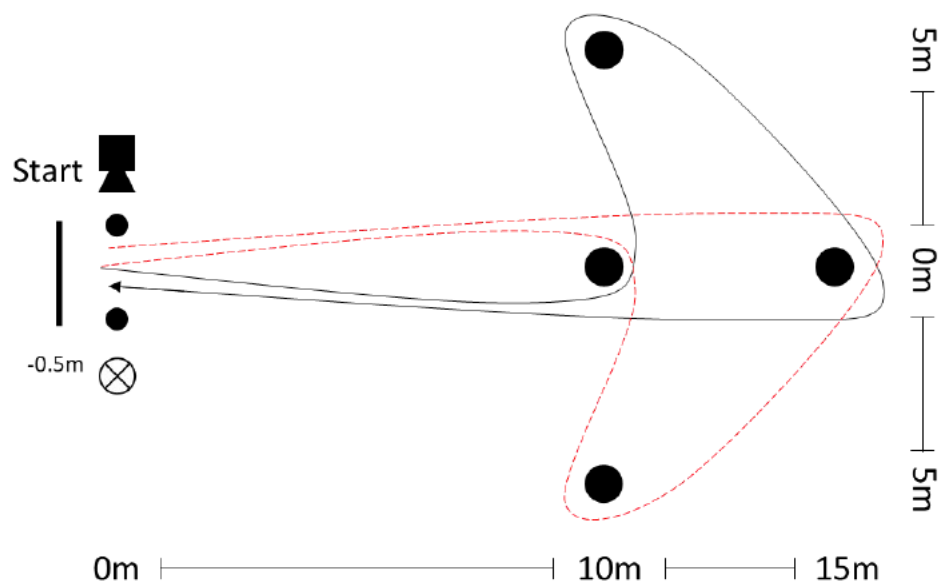
A random sample of players (n=10) underwent a second round of surveys to evaluate reliability, which included a two-week washout period between tests to remove possible learning effects. A mean-rater, 2-way mixed-method intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), with an absolute agreement, was used to determine test-retest reliability by survey sub-categories. Results for ICC <0.5 were deemed as poor reliability, >0.5 to <0.75 indicate moderate reliability, >0.75 to <0.9 indicated good reliability and >0.9 was deemed as excellent reliability <sup>194</sup>. The outcomes reported moderate-to-good reliability in the TACSIS (ICC = 0.67 to 0.85,  $\alpha$  = 0.65 to 0.83) and moderate-to-excellent reliability in the PSIS-SF (ICC = 0.57 to 0.91,  $\alpha$  = 0.58 to 0.96). A paired sample t-test was used to detect changes in response, identifying a significant change in only the PSIS-SF sub-category - Mental Preparation ( $T(9) = 2.74, P = .02$ ). Given the low-reliability outcome and the consideration that mental preparation is an internal process exclusive to the player, the variable was removed from further investigation.

### **6.2.4 Physical Testing**

Physical assessments included linear sprints, change of direction (COD) and anthropometric measures. Testing was conducted in January, during routine quarterly sports science testing. Two age groups

completed each of the tests within an evening session, with all ages completed across a week. All players were familiar with the testing protocols before data collection. Testing was performed on an indoor 4G pitch, with players wearing soccer kits. Moulded-stud boots were used for speed tasks, and barefoot for anthropometric and jumping tasks. Players initiated testing with a standardised 10-minute dynamic warm-up. A minimum of 2-minutes rest was provided between trials. The best-recorded result was used for further analysis.

The linear sprints included the collection of 5m, 15m and 30m distances using single-cell light gates (Smartspeed, Fusion Sport, Australia). Linear sprint performance was assessed as described in section 4.2.



**Figure Chapter 6.1** Physical assessment layout for the arrowhead agility test showing the direction of running for a left-sided test (and right side in dashed red). Items are as follows ⊗ = Reflector, ■ = Light gate

Assessment for COD featured both the 505-change of direction test <sup>88</sup> (505), as described in chapter 4.3, and the Arrowhead agility test <sup>86</sup> (figure 6.1). Both tests used a single cell light gate (Smartspeed, Fusion Sport, Australia) and four trials were collected in each test (two trials per turning foot). The arrowhead agility test required players to run a course in the shape of an arrow <sup>86</sup>. Players initiated the test with a falling start and were assessed on the total time to complete the course on both left and right sides, featuring three turns and four linear accelerations. Incorrect navigation of the course resulted in a foul attempt, which required retesting.

Before data interrogation, all physical outcomes were assessed for reliability utilising coefficient of variation (CV), whereby data above 10% variation was deemed as poor and excluded from further analysis <sup>206,207</sup>. This resulted in the exclusion of 4 data points from further analysis. . Additionally, CV was measured within age groups to identify and explore the variation in performance abilities.

#### **6.2.5 Tactical Analysis**

Video assessments were collected during routine games, following the academy analysis standardised protocols. A camera recorder was positioned on the halfway line of the pitch, and the camera tracked the ball during play. Twenty minutes of match video footage per player was provided for the Performance Assessment for Team Sports (TSAP) instrument <sup>208</sup>. Due to reasons outside of the control of this study, such as the selection of teams within age groups, illness and injuries, it was rare that all players featured in the same game. Therefore, performance scores were determined across a range of games. The 20-minute time length was determined as the typical length of a quarter as played by the ages U9-14yrs. The same time length was also applied to the U15/16 age groups for consistency across all ages. The time length was postulated as sufficient, considering this resembled the suggested total time for the original TSAP when used within soccer, of fourteen-minute matches <sup>208</sup>. Two analysts

(mean age =  $28.0 \pm 9.9$  yrs) assessed all of the age groups. In determining the reliability between analysts, a mean-rater, 2-way mixed-method absolute agreement ICC was used. The ICCs identified a good inter-rater agreement (ICC = 0.84,  $\alpha$  = 0.88).

#### **6.2.6 Coach Subjective Scores**

The match footage provided for the TSAP was also provided to coaches to determine coach subjective scores. The coaches were able to freely review the footage including the use of pausing and replaying. Coaches were also familiar with team performances across the season. In line with similar research <sup>31</sup>, coaches were provided with an online visual analogue scale (VAS) and instructions for online drawing tools to complete. The VAS featured a 10cm line with two anchors of 'Very Poor' and 'Outstanding' at either end, per item. Footage of an opposing team, from a Category 1 soccer academy, was provided per age group as a reference point for the 'outstanding' anchor <sup>31</sup>. The coaches were required to mark the VAS line where they felt it represented each player's ability. The VAS items mimicked objective assessments for psychological ('*Mental Preparation*', '*Motivation*', '*Concentration*', '*Self-Confidence*', '*Team-Emphasis*' and '*Anxiety*') technical & tactical ability ('*Knowing About Ball Actions*', '*Knowing About Others*', '*Positioning and Deciding*' and '*Acting in Changing Situations*'), physical ability ('*Speed*' and '*Change of Direction*'), with additional scores for '*Overall Tactical Ability*', '*Overall Performance*' and a checkbox for player (de)selection. Definitions for each item were provided to ensure clarity and consistency of interpretations (see appendix 3).

#### **6.2.7 Maturation**

Measures of somatic maturation were collected utilising player height and mass <sup>121</sup>. Anthropometric data collection was attained using a stadiometer (Seca, UK) and scales (Seca, UK), in line with ISAK protocols. The same investigator collected all of the measures throughout. The percentage of adult height was calculated from the anthropometric data and previously attained parent heights <sup>121</sup>. Where

self-reports were used, a correction for overprediction was applied <sup>172</sup>. Whilst maturation was not provided to the coaches as a variable to score, it was used to assess whether maturation subconsciously influenced a coach's decisions towards player selection.

### **6.2.8 Statistical Analysis**

To determine the level of agreement between lead and assistant coaches, a mean-rater, 2-way mixed-method ICC with consistency, was used to assess the level of agreement between lead and assistant coach subjective scores, by grouped ages. Cohen's Kappa was applied to identify the level of agreement within the binary (de)selection data. The results were interpreted as <0 no agreement, 0.01-0.20 none to slight, 0.21-0.40 fair, 0.41-0.60 moderate, 0.61-0.80 substantial, and 0.81-1.00 almost perfect agreement <sup>209</sup>.

Following normality checks (Shapiro-Wilk), the data were assessed for associations between objective (PSIS-SF, TACSIS, TSAP, and Physical scores) and subjective (VAS scores) outcomes. With the data displaying non-normal distribution within subjective outcomes, a Spearman's rank correlation was applied to determine associations throughout. Effect sizes for correlations were determined as; <0.1 very small, 0.1-0.29 small, 0.3-0.49 moderate, 0.5-0.69 large, 0.7-0.89 very large and 0.9-1.0 nearly perfect <sup>210</sup>.

In order to identify traits related to (de)selection, an independent samples T-test was used to distinguish selected from deselected players by objective outcomes. YDP1 was excluded from the analysis, due to an insufficient (de)selection group size. Hedge's G was used to measure the effect size, with outcomes set at 0.2, 0.5 and 0.8 as small, medium and large effect sizes respectively <sup>176</sup>. A T-test was also applied within subjective responses utilising the response from the lead coach (given



they were consistent across age groups, whereas assistant coaches differed). Furthermore, a Binary Regression analysis was used to determine any predictor variables associated with subjective player (de)selection by coach, age group, and combined. All data were analysed using SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.).

## **6.3 Results**

### **6.3.1 Subjective and Objective Associations**

When investigating the associations between subjective (coach scores) and objective assessments (components of fitness, TSAP, PSIS-SF and TACSIS), moderate-to-very large significant associations were identified between coach subjective score and PSIS-SF sub-categories (table 6.1). The outcomes identified significant associations with subjective score and '*Anxiety*' in the FDP, '*Self-Confidence*' in the FDP and YDP2 and '*Concentration*' in the FDP.

When assessing the relationship between TACSIS and coach subjective scores, large to very large associations were reported (table 6.2). Significant relationships were reported in: '*Knowing About Others*' in the FDP and '*Positioning and Deciding*' in the YDP1. The TSAP demonstrated no significant ( $P > .05$ ) outcomes between the instrument and coach subjective scores.

**Table Chapter 6.1** The associations of subjective scores (lead and assistant coach) and PSIS-SF sub-categories, by age groups.

Age	Coach	PSIS-SF									
		<i>Motivation</i>		<i>Self Confidence<sup>1</sup></i>		<i>Anxiety</i>		<i>Team Emphasis</i>		<i>Concentration<sup>1</sup></i>	
		<i>R<sub>s</sub></i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>R<sub>s</sub></i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>R<sub>s</sub></i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>R<sub>s</sub></i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>R<sub>s</sub></i>	<i>Sig</i>
FDP	Lead Coach	0.00	-.17	0.58	.05*	0.80	.00*	0.12	.71	0.70	.01*
	Assistant Coach	0.99	.60	0.27	.40	0.29	.37	0.48	.11	0.76	.00*
YDP1	Lead Coach	0.45	.16	-0.09	.80	-0.33	.32	0.24	.48	0.01	.97
	Assistant Coach	-0.11	.75	0.24	.49	0.08	.82	0.05	.88	0.11	.75
YDP2	Lead Coach	0.17	.46	0.48	.02*	0.18	.42	0.33	.13	0.16	.47
	Assistant Coach	0.26	.25	-0.12	.61	0.17	.45	0.02	.95	-0.01	.95

Significant results are marked with \* for <0.05, and \*\* for <0.01. Effect sizes for correlations were determined as; <0.1 very small, 0.1-0.29 small, 0.3-0.49 moderate, 0.5-0.69 large, 0.7-0.89 very large and 0.9-1.0 nearly perfect<sup>210</sup>. <sup>1</sup>Self Confidence and Concentration are reverse scored.

**Table Chapter 6.2** The associations of subjective scores (lead and assistant coach), TACSIS sub-categories and TSAP outcomes, by age groups.

Age Group	Coach	TACSIS									
		<i>Knowing about ball</i>		<i>Knowing about</i>		<i>Positioning and</i>		<i>Acting in changing</i>		<i>TSAP</i>	
		<i>actions</i>		<i>others</i>		<i>deciding</i>		<i>situations</i>			
		<b>R<sub>s</sub></b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>R<sub>s</sub></b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>R<sub>s</sub></b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>R<sub>s</sub></b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>R<sub>s</sub></b>	<b>Sig</b>
FDP	Lead Coach	0.28	.37	0.24	.45	0.17	.60	0.23	.47	0.22	.50
	Assistant Coach	0.39	.21	0.66	.02*	0.40	.20	0.44	.15	0.19	.56
YDP1	Lead Coach	0.54	.09	0.38	.24	0.72	.01*	0.06	.86	-0.41	.24
	Assistant Coach	0.34	.31	0.23	.51	0.53	.09	0.07	.84	-0.01	.99
YDP2	Lead Coach	-0.15	.49	0.01	.98	0.01	.96	0.08	.73	0.23	.31
	Assistant Coach	0.16	.49	-0.14	.54	0.06	.80	0.36	.10	0.22	.33

Significant results are marked with \* for <0.05, and \*\* for <0.01. Effect sizes for correlations were determined as; <0.1 very small, 0.1-0.29 small, 0.3-0.49 moderate, 0.5-0.69 large, 0.7-0.89 very large and 0.9-1.0 nearly perfect<sup>210</sup>.

In the comparison of physical data to coach subjective scores, moderate-to-very large associations were observed (table 6.3). Significant associations with subjective scores of '*Speed*' (singular measure compared across all distances) were identified in the YDP1 and YDP2 in 5m, and the YDP2 in 15m and 30m sprint. Subjective scores for '*Change of Direction*' reported significant findings in the YDP2, within the Arrowhead assessment only.

### **6.3.2 Coach Agreement**

The level of agreement between coaches demonstrated poor-to-moderate agreements across coach subjective scores (FDP ICC = 0.60 to 0.73, YDP1 ICC = 0.50 to 0.76, YDP2 ICC = 0.48 to 0.74). Cohen's Kappa outcomes of agreement between lead and assistant coaches within binary (de)selection data established that the FDP reported an almost perfect agreement ( $\kappa = 1.00$ ,  $P < .001$ ), YDP1 reported a substantial level of agreement ( $\kappa = 0.63$ ,  $P = .02$ ), and YDP2 reported a fair agreement ( $\kappa = 0.23$ ,  $P = .26$ ).

### **6.3.3 Selection Discrimination by Objective and Subjective Outcomes**

When interrogating the objective outcomes to establish discriminations for (de)selection, significant findings were established in only the YDP2 age group, demonstrating large differences between (de)selection groups within the PSIS-SF '*Team Emphasis*', and physical 15m and 30m sprints (Table 6.4). The PSIS-SF '*Team Emphasis*' demonstrated higher self-reports ( $t(20) = -2.13$ ,  $P = .05$ ,  $g = 1.17$ ) for selected players (mean =  $4.39 \pm 0.38$ ) over deselected players (mean =  $3.92 \pm 0.50$ ). Likewise, the 15m ( $t(19) = 3.24$ ,  $P < .001$ ,  $g = 0.93$ ) and 30m sprints ( $t(19) = 3.57$ ,  $P < .001$ ,  $g = 0.99$ ) demonstrated a superiority in speed performance in selected players (mean =  $2.53 \pm 0.14$ ,  $4.42 \pm 0.24$ ) over deselected players (mean =  $2.65 \pm 0.03$ ,  $4.64 \pm 0.03$ ).

**Table Chapter 6.3** The associations of subjective scores (lead and assistant coaches) and physical assessments, by age groups.

Age	Coach	Physical Assessments													
		<i>5m Sprint (s)</i>		<i>15m Sprint (s)</i>		<i>30m Sprint (s)</i>		<i>Arrowhead R (s)</i>		<i>Arrowhead L (s)</i>		<i>505 R (s)</i>		<i>505 L (s)</i>	
		R	Sig	R	Sig	R	Sig	R	Sig	R	Sig	R	Sig	R	Sig
FDP	Lead Coach	-0.07	.83	-0.40	.20	-0.41	.19	-0.18	.57	-0.32	.31	0.10	.76	-0.09	.78
	Assistant Coach	-0.34	.31	-0.43	.17	-0.34	.28	-0.18	.58	0.06	.86	0.50	.10	-0.09	.78
YDP1	Lead Coach	-0.63	.04*	-0.55	.78	-0.19	.57	-0.70	.86	-0.10	.78	0.20	.75	0.10	.87
	Assistant Coach	0.05	.88	0.02	.95	0.03	.94	-0.14	.70	-0.23	.52	-0.10	.87	0.15	.81
YDP	Lead Coach	-0.37	.08	-0.70	.00*	-0.65	.00*	-0.48	.03*	-0.52	.01*	-0.15	.51	-0.29	.19
	Assistant Coach	-0.51	.02*	-0.43	.05*	-0.36	.10	-2.80	.21	-0.31	.15	-0.09	.68	-0.29	.19

Significant results are marked with \* for <0.05, and \*\* for <0.01. Effect sizes for correlations were determined as; <0.1 very small, 0.1-0.29 small, 0.3-0.49 moderate, 0.5-0.69 large, 0.7-0.89 very large and 0.9-1.0 nearly perfect<sup>210</sup>.

**Table Chapter 6.4** The findings from the independent samples T-Test, effect size calculations and mean performances between selected and deselected players

Age	Assessment	Sub-Category	T-Value (Df)	Sig	Deselected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Selected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Hedges <i>g</i>
FDP	PSIS-SF	Motivation	0.90 (10)	.39	5.00 $\pm$ 0.00	4.77 $\pm$ 0.35	0.69
		Self-Confidence	-1.23 (10)	.25	3.34 $\pm$ 0.47	3.83 $\pm$ 0.53	0.93
		Anxiety	-1.35 (10)	.21	2.67 $\pm$ 0.00	3.50 $\pm$ 0.84	1.04
		Team Emphasis	0.30 (10)	.77	4.17 $\pm$ 0.71	4.06 $\pm$ 0.41	0.24
		Concentration	-1.60 (10)	.14	3.00 $\pm$ 0.47	3.87 $\pm$ 0.72	1.24
	TACSIS	Knowing About Ball Actions	0.91 (10)	.85	4.66 $\pm$ 0.53	4.50 $\pm$ 0.87	0.19
		Knowing About Others	-0.86 (10)	.41	3.70 $\pm$ 0.71	4.22 $\pm$ 0.79	0.66
		Positioning and Deciding	-1.18 (10)	.27	3.94 $\pm$ 0.08	4.53 $\pm$ 0.68	0.91
		Acting in Changing Situations	-0.55 (10)	.59	4.38 $\pm$ 0.18	4.73 $\pm$ 0.86	0.43
	TSAP	TSAP	0.26 (10)	.80	16.32 $\pm$ 7.33	15.20 $\pm$ 5.26	0.2
	Physical	5m (s)	-1.23 (10)	.25	1.25 $\pm$ 0.07	1.30 $\pm$ 0.05	0.96
		15m (s)	-0.70 (10)	.50	2.91 $\pm$ 0.10	2.98 $\pm$ 0.12	0.59
		30m (s)	-0.37 (10)	.72	5.22 $\pm$ 0.25	5.30 $\pm$ 0.29	0.28
		Arrowhead R (s)	-0.85 (10)	.42	9.34 $\pm$ 0.48	9.62 $\pm$ 0.42	0.66
		Arrowhead L (s)	-0.87 (10)	.40	9.47 $\pm$ 0.04	9.70 $\pm$ 0.36	0.67
		505 R (s)	-0.75 (10)	.47	2.63 $\pm$ 0.01	2.73 $\pm$ 0.18	0.59
		505 L (s)	-0.19 (10)	.85	2.72 $\pm$ 0.25	2.75 $\pm$ 0.16	0.18
YDP2	PSIS-SF	Motivation	0.79 (20)	.44	5.00 $\pm$ 0.00	4.93 $\pm$ 0.18	0.42
		Self-Confidence	0.11 (20)	.92	3.83 $\pm$ 0.43	3.80 $\pm$ 0.63	0.05
		Anxiety	0.85 (20)	.41	3.84 $\pm$ 0.88	3.44 $\pm$ 0.82	0.48
		Team Emphasis	-2.13 (20)	.05*	3.92 $\pm$ 0.50	4.39 $\pm$ 0.38	1.17
		Concentration	0.49 (20)	.63	4.33 $\pm$ 0.47	4.19 $\pm$ 0.55	0.26
	TACSIS	Knowing About Ball Actions	1.77 (20)	.09	5.00 $\pm$ 0.20	4.51 $\pm$ 0.53	0.99
		Knowing About Others	-0.55 (20)	.59	4.30 $\pm$ 0.50	4.46 $\pm$ 0.52	0.31
		Positioning and Deciding	0.54 (20)	.60	4.64 $\pm$ 0.41	4.53 $\pm$ 0.36	0.30
		Acting in Changing Situations	0.31 (20)	.76	4.63 $\pm$ 0.43	4.51 $\pm$ 0.68	0.18
	TSAP	TSAP	0.01 (20)	.99	8.53 $\pm$ 2.67	8.51 $\pm$ 4.28	0.00
	Physical	5m (s)	0.24 (20)	.81	1.15 $\pm$ 0.03	1.14 $\pm$ 0.13	0.08
		15m (s)	3.24 (19.94)	.00**	2.65 $\pm$ 0.03	2.53 $\pm$ 0.14	0.93
		30m (s)	3.57 (19.21)	.00**	4.64 $\pm$ 0.03	4.42 $\pm$ 0.24	0.99
		Arrowhead R (s)	1.00 (20)	.33	8.89 $\pm$ 0.25	8.67 $\pm$ 0.40	0.58
		Arrowhead L (s)	0.83 (20)	.42	8.89 $\pm$ 0.27	8.71 $\pm$ 0.41	0.46
		505 R (s)	-0.29 (20)	.77	2.45 $\pm$ 0.08	2.45 $\pm$ 0.15	0.00
		505 L (s)	0.09 (20)	.93	2.44 $\pm$ 0.07	2.43 $\pm$ 0.11	0.1

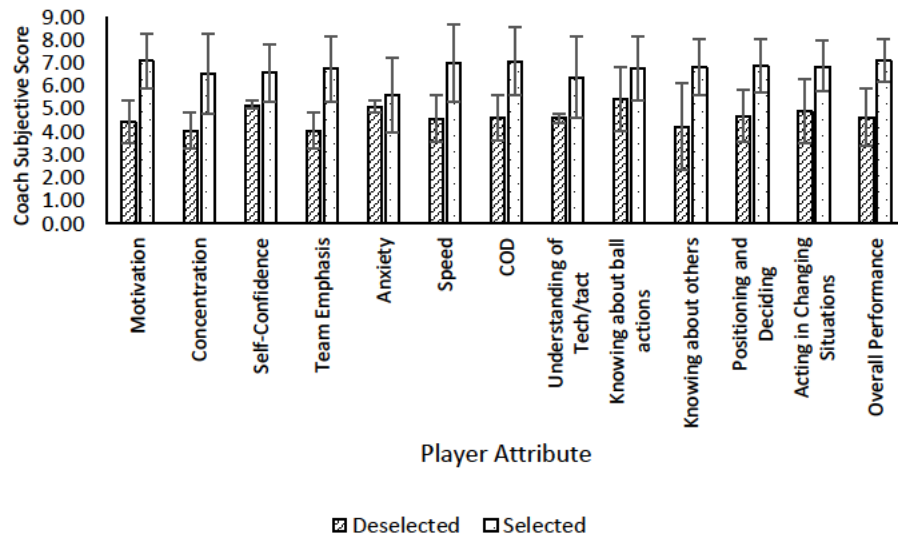
Significant results are marked with \* for <0.05, and \*\* for <0.01. Effect sizes for Hedges *g* were determined as; 0.2, 0.5 and 0.8 as small, medium and large effect sizes respectively <sup>176</sup>

**Table Chapter 6.5** The findings from the independent samples T-test from the subjective response across all objective instruments and selection outcome, by age group.

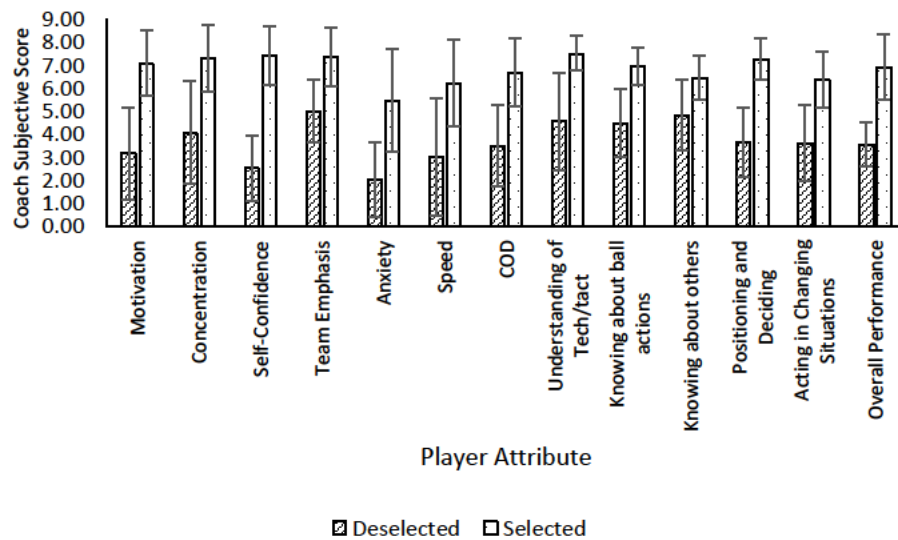
Age	Assessment	Sub-Category	T-Value (DF)	Sig	Deselected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Selected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Hedges G
FDP	PSIF	Motivation	-2.92 (11)	.01*	4.45 $\pm$ 0.92	7.10 $\pm$ 1.20	2.25
		Self-Confidence	-1.53 (11)	.15	5.18 $\pm$ 0.18	6.58 $\pm$ 1.25	1.17
		Anxiety	-0.43 (11)	.68	5.10 $\pm$ 0.28	5.61 $\pm$ 1.62	0.33
		Team Emphasis	-2.57 (11)	.03*	4.05 $\pm$ 0.78	6.75 $\pm$ 1.41	1.98
		Concentration	-1.92 (11)	.08	4.05 $\pm$ 0.78	6.52 $\pm$ 1.74	1.47
	TACSIS	Knowing About Ball Actions	-1.26 (11)	.24	5.43 $\pm$ 1.38	6.75 $\pm$ 1.38	0.96
		Knowing About Others	-2.59 (11)	.03*	4.23 $\pm$ 1.87	6.82 $\pm$ 1.23	1.99
		Positioning and Deciding	-2.43 (11)	.03*	4.70 $\pm$ 1.13	6.86 $\pm$ 1.16	1.88
		Acting in Changing Situations	-2.24 (11)	.05*	4.90 $\pm$ 1.41	6.85 $\pm$ 1.10	1.72
	Physical	Speed	-1.94 (11)	.08	4.58 $\pm$ 1.03	6.99 $\pm$ 1.67	1.49
		Change of Direction	-2.22 (11)	.05*	4.60 $\pm$ 0.99	7.05 $\pm$ 1.48	1.70
	General	Tactical Understanding	-1.38 (11)	.19	4.60 $\pm$ 0.21	6.38 $\pm$ 1.76	1.06
		Overall Performance	-3.39 (11)	.01**	4.63 $\pm$ 1.24	7.10 $\pm$ 0.92	2.59
YDP2	PSIF	Motivation	-4.68 (21)	.00**	3.29 $\pm$ 2.01	7.09 $\pm$ 1.42	2.50
		Self-Confidence	-6.82 (21)	.00**	2.54 $\pm$ 1.42	7.45 $\pm$ 1.29	3.75
		Anxiety	-2.90 (21)	.01*	2.04 $\pm$ 1.62	5.48 $\pm$ 2.24	1.59
		Team Emphasis	-3.34 (21)	.00**	5.00 $\pm$ 1.36	7.39 $\pm$ 1.29	1.84
		Concentration	-3.68 (21)	.00**	4.08 $\pm$ 2.23	7.31 $\pm$ 1.46	2.03
	TACSIS	Knowing About Ball Actions	-4.86 (21)	.00**	4.49 $\pm$ 1.47	6.97 $\pm$ 0.81	2.66
		Knowing About Others	-2.85 (21)	.01*	4.84 $\pm$ 1.54	6.47 $\pm$ 0.94	1.56
		Positioning and Deciding	-6.42 (21)	.00**	3.65 $\pm$ 1.53	7.28 $\pm$ 0.92	3.53
		Acting in Changing Situations	-3.93 (21)	.00**	3.64 $\pm$ 1.64	6.39 $\pm$ 1.20	2.16
	Physical	Speed	-2.94 (21)	.01*	3.01 $\pm$ 2.54	6.23 $\pm$ 1.88	1.62
		Change of Direction	-3.77 (21)	.01*	3.51 $\pm$ 1.75	6.70 $\pm$ 1.50	2.07
	General	Tactical Understanding	-5.05 (21)	.00**	4.58 $\pm$ 2.13	7.53 $\pm$ 0.75	2.77
		Overall Performance	-4.51 (21)	.00**	3.56 $\pm$ 0.97	6.95 $\pm$ 1.41	2.50

Significant results are marked with \* for  $<0.05$ , and \*\* for  $<0.01$ . Effect sizes for Hedges  $g$  were determined as; 0.2, 0.5 and 0.8 as small, medium and large effect sizes respectively <sup>176</sup>

A)



B)



**Figure Chapter 6.2** The comparison of subjective scores on attribute performance for selected and deselected players in A) FDP and B) YDP2 age groups



The results from the independent samples T-test, used to identify discriminating variables in player (de)selection from the coach subjective scores, found significant differences in the FDP, YDP2 and combined age groups (Table 6.5 & Figure 6.2). The FDP lead phase coach was able to identify selected players within PSIS-SF '*Motivation*' and '*Team Emphasis*'; TACSIS '*Knowing about Others*', '*Positioning and Deciding*' and '*Acting in Changing Situations*'; Physical change of direction; and '*Overall Performance*'. The YDP2 lead coach demonstrated significant variations in all variables. However, the binary regression analysis of the subjective scores demonstrated no significant models of prediction for (de)selection in any grouping (individual coach, age group and combined data).

**Table Chapter 6.6** The findings from the independent sample T-test and effect size calculations for player selection and maturation (percentage of adult height).

Age	Coach	T-Value (DF)	Sig.	Deselected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Selected (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Hedges G
FDP	Lead Coach	-0.75 (10)	.47	77.59 $\pm$ 0.11	78.80 $\pm$ 2.20	0.58
	Assistant Coach	-0.75 (10)	.47	77.59 $\pm$ 0.11	78.80 $\pm$ 2.20	0.58
YDP2	Lead Coach	-3.91 (8.64)	.00*	92.44 $\pm$ 0.35	96.27 $\pm$ 2.88	1.48
	Assistant Coach	-3.51 (9.46)	.01*	92.59 $\pm$ 0.58	96.23 $\pm$ 2.94	1.38

Significant results are marked with \* for  $<0.05$ , and \*\* for  $<0.01$ . Effect sizes for Hedges  $g$  were determined as; 0.2, 0.5 and 0.8 as small, medium and large effect sizes respectively

When looking at player selections and the influence of maturation, an independent samples T-test found a significant difference ( $P = .00$  to  $.01$ ) in maturational age within the YDP2 age group, whereby deselected players had a younger maturation status than selected players (table 6.6). A Hedges G effect size calculation determined this to be a large effect size in both the Lead and Assistant Coaches.

## 6.4 Discussion

Utilising a multidisciplinary battery of assessments (psychological, technical/tactical and physical), this study aimed to establish associations between coach scores (subjective) and components of fitness, psychological and technical/tactical (objective) assessments, whilst also assessing the level of agreement between lead and assistant coaches in subjective scoring. The key findings of this study were that coaches' level of agreement reduced as players aged, whilst higher variation in performance was noted within older age groups. Given that the timing of increased variation coincides with the maturation process, and the reports of a maturation bias present in selection from coaches, suggests that maturation remains a critical facet for academies to manage.

When comparing coach subjective scores and objective assessments, a low quantity of significant relationships was determined between instrument items and coach beliefs. However, where coaches did demonstrate associations, they appeared to be within explicit areas of multidisciplinary abilities. To provide examples, the FDP lead coach demonstrated large-to-very large associations of subjective outcomes with 60% of the psychological assessments, yet one tactical and no physical associations. Likewise, the YDP lead coach established moderate-to-very large associations to ~60% of physical assessments, with no tactical and one psychological association. It may be postulated that this is due to individual coaching philosophies, developed through experience, beliefs and knowledge <sup>29</sup>. Therefore, it is possible that coaches favour specific traits and abilities, likewise have an enhanced ability to identify and develop performance within these areas. Conversely, given the findings in chapter 5.3, it was noted that some aspects of talent are 'unmeasurable' and therefore we may not be able to quantify or measure these with simplified objective assessments or responses. However, this is not to say coaches are not aware of these, and this evidenced with the use of coach intuition <sup>29</sup>.

A postulation for the lack of associations may be within the ecological validity of the assessments. Regarding self-reports, both the TACSIS <sup>93,205</sup> and the PSIS-SF <sup>92</sup> demonstrated good reliability and validity. However, both assessments share an absence of perception-action coupling, whereby they lack the contextual pressures and team cooperation within a performance. Consequently, the assessments may provide a false reflection of abilities <sup>186</sup>. Furthermore, limitations have been found in self-report methods, whereby players' abilities to reflect upon performance increase with age <sup>211</sup>, and will depend upon the reflection skills taught to the players <sup>137</sup>. Likewise, the physical data were collected within a controlled environment and therefore may not be ecologically representative of performance conditions <sup>212</sup>. But, given that previous research has identified good relations between selection outcomes and physical tests such as sprints <sup>80,134,183</sup>, suggests a good level of confidence that the physical outcomes provide meaningful inputs toward player selection.

The findings of the between-coach agreement for selection outcomes reported a fair agreement between coaches in combined age groups. However, when broken down by age groups, the level of agreement reduced as the group age increased. A plausible explanation for this reduction in an agreement may be explained by the associations between age and the margins of performance standards (i.e. the increased homogeneity in performance by age group), as noted within previous research <sup>28</sup>. However, whilst performance outputs increased by age, in line with expectations, the coefficient of variation failed to report a reduction in performance variation as group age increased, across all tests. Therefore, it is improbable that the reduction in agreement between coaches can be attributed to a higher homogeneity in performance within older age groups, in the present study.

The reduction in coach agreement may also be influenced by player maturation. Maturation variation increased linearly with player age groups. This is expected, given that the critical period of growth (attaining peak height velocity) occurs within the oldest age group (average age =  $13.7 \pm 1.4$  yrs)

<sup>105,106</sup>. Likewise, reports have demonstrated the influence of maturation on physical performance, whereby players of a higher maturational age will typically exhibit superior physical abilities, likewise lower maturation with lower performance <sup>6,170</sup>. This is further supported with significant findings from both YDP2 coaches demonstrating a maturation bias within player selection. Both the lead and assistant coaches demonstrated a maturational bias, whereby younger maturation players were typically deselected, compared to their older maturation peers. Without the use of provisions such as allometric scaling accounting for maturation, coaches may unconsciously be biased towards overall performance outcome without the consideration for maturational outcome. Given that maturation has been aligned with measures of potential, this established bias is counter intuitive towards the focus of TID in soccer.

In consideration of physical testing, the coaches of the YDP2 age group reported good associations with sprints. Additionally, following further analysis of objective data, 15m and 30m sprint performances demonstrated large discriminative power within player (de)selection of the YDP2 age group. This may suggest superior physical speed will influence selection outcomes within older age groups. Similar findings have been reported in previous research <sup>6,170</sup>, whereby speed and jumping abilities have been the determining factors in selection. Given the evolution of soccer, in particular the speed of play at defining moments of the game <sup>1</sup>, it is unsurprising that speed was identified as a critical marker of performance. However, speed performances will be heavily impacted by maturational status, explaining these observations in older ages only. Youths will mature at different rates, so caution must be used not to discount players exhibiting lesser performances who are of late maturation status. Likewise, a player exhibiting superior speed within a younger age group may be exhibiting a short-lived advantage of early maturation status, and coaches should be mindful of over-estimating future potential without prior maturation assessment <sup>34</sup>. Therefore, measurements of player maturation should be implemented within player assessments, via allometric scaling, to provide

fairer comparisons of performance <sup>6,31,51</sup>. Moreover, these results highlight those superior physical abilities in speed may influence (de)selection outcomes in post-PHV age players, and the testing and monitoring of speed may provide meaningful information for future success.

Coach subjective responses were also assessed to observe if any attributes discriminated talented from non-talented players. The results found that selected players were perceived to generally outperformed non-selected players in all areas. Whilst this further highlights the need for multidisciplinary developments, these findings should be taken with caution. Given that only two lead coach outcomes were relevant to undertake such analysis, this demonstrates a narrow and unreliable cohort of coaches. Furthermore, considering the YDP2 coach highlighted all areas as significant, reduces clarity around attributes that are perceived as more important than others.

This study is not without its limitations. The current study lacks generalisation, given how the participants were recruited from a singular academy. Furthermore, the TSAP instrument reported no differences between selected and deselected players, or alignment with coach associations, initially challenging the use of the instrument. However, various studies have reported on the influence of match-to-match variations in performance <sup>213</sup>. Therefore, the use of numerous games to determine tactical performance may have proven more beneficial. Lastly, the choice of objective assessments provided constraints on subjective inputs, whereby the consideration of interdependent attributes was neglected. Further research should consider wider participant recruitment spanning multiple academies, with an openness to more qualitative approaches to unpick coach perceptions and actions within (de)selection scenarios.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This study sought to understand the difference between subjective (coach scores) and objective holistic player assessments. The results demonstrated few associations between coach perceptions of abilities, and objectively measured performances. Furthermore, coach agreement on perceived player abilities and (de)selection reduced as players aged. Given the lack of associations between coach subjective scores and objective outcomes, and the reduction of agreement between coaches, the study failed to identify a clear rationale behind coach (de)selection decisions. Additionally, it was evident that a maturation bias was present within the selection of older adolescent players, from both lead and assistant coaches. Moreover, these results further highlight the need for the combined methods of subjective and objective assessments to overcome potential biases, alongside the aid in clarification of athlete ability, ultimately improving player development and selection processes.



## **Chapter 7. Study 4**



***Player development and (de)selection in academy  
soccer: Coaches beliefs and actions***

*A limitation of Study 3 was the restrictions placed upon the coach, to define selected from deselected players by the provided assessments only. Therefore, this study looked to further expand upon the findings, whilst removing the previous boundaries of assessment methods, by undertaking a qualitative research design, permitting great freedom to express what defines a talented player. Furthermore, this study looked to further interrogate the utility of coach intuition through the use of triangulation, to understand whether coaches truly action their beliefs.*

## **7.1 Introduction**

English soccer academies are tasked with developing young prospective individuals into future professional players <sup>4</sup>. Such undertaking also serves to reduce the financial burden associated with senior level soccer recruitment, whilst improving the standards of home-grown players <sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is essential for academies and key stakeholders involved in the player development pathway, to fully comprehend the underpinning requirements for subsequent success in soccer. The previous chapters within this thesis (studies 1 and 3) have established that the processes applied within player selection utilise various measures (subjective and objective) of player abilities across the “4-corners” of player development (psychological, technical/tactical, physical and sociological). Whilst it has been established that coach intuition plays a prominent role within the player (de)selection process (study 1), and that coach perceptions of abilities favour psychological and technical/tactical abilities (study 2), when comparing coach scores of player abilities (subjective beliefs) against valid objective instruments (components of fitness, PSIS-SF, TACSIS, TSAP) no associations were established between perceived and actual performance (study 3). One reason for such outcomes is due to the constraints of the objective testing, given that intuition and ‘gut instinct’ is associated with an indescribable belief of abilities. Therefore, it is plausible that the objective tests failed to measure the critical areas of abilities, or that coach beliefs of abilities are indescribable due to the integration of numerous abilities contributing towards performance, which perhaps can’t be measured in isolation.

In consideration of player skills and abilities, previous research has explored attributes related to player (de)selection across the four-corner model. When in isolation, superior physical ability (speed and power <sup>36,170,214</sup>) and psychological capacity (mental toughness <sup>215</sup> and cognitive ability <sup>216</sup>) have determined selected from deselected players. As discussed, the findings from this thesis suggest that physical abilities were not able to identify selected from deselected players (chapters 4 & 6). Given that coaches have demonstrated strong associations in identifying selected from deselected players in both literature <sup>6,28,31</sup> and throughout this thesis (chapters 4 & 6), highlights that isolated methods of assessments may not be conducive in identifying abilities related to talent. Moreover, there is potentially a wider integration of abilities yet to be researched. The current body of literature within TID, or player selection within soccer, offers limited insight regarding the multi-faceted demands of soccer performance. Therefore, further research <sup>2,3,5,31,214</sup> sought to determine the contributions and inter-relations of abilities across the 4-corners, establishing key attributes in psychological and technical abilities. Whilst physical and social abilities were not as confounding, they were still considered important attributes essential to success. These findings are further supported within this thesis, given it was evident that coaches place a high perceived importance on psychological and technical abilities for future success in soccer (chapter 5). Moreover, players require developments across all 4-corners, as significant deficits within one corner may be the difference in (de)selection outcomes.

The manner in which player abilities are developed lies within the provisions offered by academies. Academies must provide appropriate environments for development, whereby a plethora of outcomes aligned to (but not limited to) the EPPP 4-corners can be achieved <sup>4</sup>. Psychological interventions, in particular, have commonly been misunderstood and/or misinterpreted for what they offer, creating unnecessary challenges for implementation <sup>140,217</sup>. The barriers to practice have been reported in establishing credibility <sup>140,217</sup>, working within an environment that requires reshaping its

culture to embrace psychological provisions <sup>217</sup> and negative connotations and stigmatisms around the need for players to speak with a sports psychologist <sup>140</sup>. However, given the reported importance of psychological abilities within soccer <sup>2,3,5,6,218</sup>, it is critical such barriers are broken down. Collins <sup>137,139,219</sup> reported the importance of overcoming adversity and the ability to cope, through the utility of trauma as critical elements of development, whereby players are presented purposeful challenges to overcome. Such challenges within an academy soccer environment may include playing an age group above, being assigned to different playing positions, (de)selection from competition or the increase in training load. Likewise, coping has been reported as a critical ability of talented players, whereby top-performers have strong coping capacities and reflect upon their experiences to positively adapt and develop <sup>137</sup>. Whilst traumatic experiences and challenges may naturally arise (injury, deselection, playing up an age group, to list a few), coaches should consider intentional and planned 'bumps in the road' to aid such developments <sup>137,139,218</sup>.

In order for players to flourish as a consequence of providing challenges, players must also be afforded the tools to cope and overcome such encounters <sup>137,215,218–220</sup>. Given that too much challenge on players ill-equipped to endure such tasks has been found to hinder developments <sup>218</sup>, it is key that psychological provisions are offered to prevent such stagnation. Previous studies have established Psychological Characteristics and Development of Excellence (PCDEs) <sup>219–221</sup> as the following skills advantageous for dealing with future challenges; commitment, focus and distraction control, realistic performance evaluation, self-awareness, coping with pressure, planning and self-organisation, goal setting, quality practice, effective imagery and actively seeking social support <sup>219–221</sup>. Therefore, coaches, peer support groups and psychologists should collaboratively work to equip players with the tools to overcome challenge <sup>219</sup>. This then allows for the appropriate and progressive programming of challenge to further action and ingrain such coping skills and enhance performance <sup>137,219</sup>.

Determining player ability for selection processes typically involves the use of measurable performance indicators. This is typically comprised of subjective (i.e. coach intuition) and objective (i.e. components of fitness assessments) data <sup>6,31</sup>. The use of 'intuition', whereby a subjective belief of a player's ability is based on experience, knowledge and 'gut feeling', is commonplace within soccer in both talent identification and player selection processes <sup>5,29,31,222</sup>. Whilst intuition has been reported as a reliable process of player selection <sup>31,203</sup>, such subjective practice has also been aligned with (sub)conscious selection bias, whereby an emphasis on physical profile <sup>27,223</sup>, early maturation bias <sup>19,34</sup> and birth date bias <sup>36,224</sup> has been reported. Similar findings were also established throughout this thesis, whereby maturation negatively confounded player (de)selection (chapters 4 & 6) demonstrating a maturational bias. Additional physical profiling has included racial stereotyping <sup>223</sup> and height based bias whereby taller players are considered of greater potential <sup>27</sup>. This false perception of potential links to early maturation bias, whereby advanced maturation is exhibited more so in relatively taller players (who have entered the growth spurt earlier) than their lesser mature peers <sup>27,34</sup>. Likewise, a birthdate bias, where players born earlier in the sporting calendar are perceived as more likely to succeed <sup>36,224</sup>. To overcome such biases, studies have found the collaboration of subjective (coach ratings) and objective assessments (components of fitness, maturation, psychological and sociological assessments) to have demonstrated enhanced selection outcomes <sup>31</sup>. Providing details around a player's athletic profile and maturation status, derived from objective assessments, with the additional input of coach intuition, provided the most accuracy in player selection compared to objective and subjective methods alone <sup>31</sup>.

A contentious issue with several studies exploring player (de)selection, is the consideration of present performance over future potential <sup>22,48,51,225</sup>. Research exploring (de)selection by performance, typically looks backwards on why players may (or may not) have been successful, whereas talent identification must look forwards to inform coaches on future potential <sup>51</sup>. Likewise,

several studies commonly use isolated test activities <sup>214</sup>, such as sprint testing using light gates <sup>170,183</sup>, exhibiting the player's current performance. The primary issue is that measuring current performance neglects the differing 'ceilings of potential' each player possesses. One player may currently demonstrate high performance in an isolated test but fail to further progress in future testing, falling short of long-term expectations. Whereas a player exhibiting lesser abilities now, may in the future become the superior athlete <sup>11</sup>. Should these results be used to dictate selection before realising this potential, an increased chance of misidentification can occur, deselecting the greater long-term prospect. Additionally, given that isolated tests of physical fitness lack contextual complexities found within the game, further caution must be taken utilising objective tests alone. Physical attributes harnessed within game scenarios are the combination of good decisions, game understanding, awareness and the execution of abilities. One method that may overcome misprediction is observing performance over time, to identify a player's rate of progression <sup>48,214,226</sup>. Observations of players over time, assessing competency to cope and eventually thrive, will offer coaches strong insights into each player's potential <sup>226</sup>. Whilst progression has been stated to be a non-linear pattern <sup>137</sup>, it will demonstrate a linear trend over longer observations, highlighting a player's potential. Therefore, isolated objective assessments will inform academy personnel on player abilities, in support of wider beliefs and observations, whilst also reducing potential biases.

Given the issues raised above, it is important to investigate how academies undergo development and selection processes to best identify players with the greatest potential for success. Understanding the attributes that underpin success is critical to acknowledge, to then allow for the creation of strategies to develop such qualities. Therefore, this study first sought to understand the attributes and abilities aligned to success in academy soccer and whether a coach's beliefs and actions aligned. Additionally, the study attempted to distinguish the development processes players require to endure, and finally, the approaches employed by academies when undergoing player (de)selection.

## 7.2 Methods

### 7.2.1 Research Design

A pragmatic approach<sup>162</sup> was taken throughout this study in order to offer findings that are embedded in coach beliefs regarding their current practice within professional soccer academies. Pragmatism identifies ‘real world’ problems to provide clarity towards future solutions<sup>162,168</sup>. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study, as they provide participants with a constraint-free conversation, resulting in a rich detail of responses. Semi-structured interviews also permit the interviewer to ‘detour’ from the structured questions, and further interrogate responses for enhanced clarity, aiding the richness of outcomes. Institutional ethical approval and informed consent was obtained prior to any investigations.

### 7.2.2 Participants

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit coaches within English professional soccer academies recognised by the governing body. Academies are grouped by categories from 1 to 4, with category 1 academies providing the greatest coaching hours, receiving the highest funding and providing the highest standards of staffing and facilities, and category 4 providing the least coaching hours, receiving the least funding and providing the lowest levels of infrastructure<sup>4,44</sup>. Twenty-four male participants (table 7.1) were recruited for this study, consisting of Lead Coaches (n = 22) or Head of Coaching (n = 2). Data collection occurred towards the end of the 2020/21 season (January-April), in line with typical academy (de)selection periods.

**Table Chapter 7.1** Participant information organised by academy category status

Academy Status	Unique Clubs	Participants	Coaching Experience	Years at Current Club
Category 1	8	9	12.3 ± 3.8yrs	4.2 ± 3.0yrs

<i>Category 2</i>	7	8	$12.5 \pm 1.9\text{yrs}$	$3.3 \pm 1.9\text{yrs}$
<i>Category 3</i>	6	7	$14.4 \pm 5.1\text{yrs}$	$2.5 \pm 1.3\text{yrs}$
<b>Combined</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b><math>13.0 \pm 3.7\text{yrs}</math></b>	<b><math>3.4 \pm 2.3\text{yrs}</math></b>

### 7.2.3 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure a consistency in questioning was applied to each participant, whilst permitting variations in phrasing of questions to improve the flow of the interview. Additionally, probing questions (such as “can you elaborate on what you mean by X”) were used to attain greater clarity in responses when ambiguity was present or to gain clarity in key terminology. A series of open-ended questions formed the main elements of the interview guide, focusing on 3 main-themes; 1) what attributes are related to talented players, 2) what strategies are employed for (de)selecting players, and 3) do coaches beliefs towards player selection, and actions within player selection align. To attain insights into these themes, the interviews consisted of three different sections: i) background information, ii) investigation of personal beliefs and biases surrounding player developments and selection processes, and iii) an in-action (de)selection activity (full questions can be found in appendix 4). The (de)selection activity required coaches to prepare a team sheet of the players/age group they work with, ahead of the interview (instructions were sent out prior to interviews). To maintain the anonymity of the players, team sheets were numbered and players were referred to by their corresponding number. Further utilising the team sheet, coaches were asked to group players into higher-, medium- and lower-performing groups, marking corresponding letters (H, M or L) next to each player (for coaches to refer to under further questioning). Once the coach had determined such groupings, further inquiry sought to understand the process for grouping players, recognise attribute consistency or variation both within and across groupings, and identify unique abilities or deficits contributing to performances. The interview guide was submitted to a research expert who provided feedback, with follow-up amendments applied. Additionally, a practice interview preceded formal data collection to determine potential design flaws within the interview questions



and allow for any required changes, whereby further minor adjustments were made. Formal participant interviews (n = 24) were undertaken and recorded online (Microsoft Teams) lasting between 41- to 124-mins (mean = 69 ± 18min) utilising the same researcher throughout. The research had been provided informal training in hosting interviews from a research expert, with additional feedback provided from observations of the pilot study. Furthermore, the researcher has extensive experience within the subject area, holding a Masters in research, several publications around athlete development and TID, and a decade of experience working within professional sport (3 years within a professional soccer academy). Of the 24 participants, the researcher had a professional history with 2 of the participants. Both participants were offered an alternative interviewer to avoid any restrictions in responses due to such relationships, but declined. All other participants were informed of the researcher's current position within an academy but reinforced that the information provided would remain anonymous.

#### **7.2.4 Data Analysis**

Each recording was submitted to a professional transcription service and transcribed verbatim. Following the guidelines provided by Braun & Clarke <sup>227</sup> and Nowell et al. <sup>228</sup>, the transcriptions were familiarised by reading and re-reading them (taking notes of potential codes and themes) and coded within qualitative analysis software (QSR, NVivo 12). Themes materialised using an inductive approach to data analysis <sup>227–229</sup>, whereby each participant was reviewed individually and themes evolved from the data. This was followed by a deductive research process, where refinement of themes and data was based on their relevance to the research question sought to be answered <sup>229</sup>. Themes were reviewed and refined into meaningful groupings, allowing a thematical hierarchy to be developed. The evolution of this process ceased once data saturation became apparent <sup>230</sup>. The codes were sent to an additional research expert (who has not been a part of the data collection or coding process) to review the codes and suggest alterations, so to improve credibility of the coding process.

Additional content analysis was undertaken to investigate the variations in decision-makers (academy personnel) by category status. Due to the data type (nominal and dichotomous, across 3 groups), proportional analysis was used to determine the percentage of attendance to selection processes by academy personnel.

### **7.2.5 Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, data triangulation was implemented within the interviews comprised of three different sections <sup>167</sup>. The first section acquired basic data, whilst the second and third sections sought to answer the same questions through different lines of inquiry (formal questioning and an in-action activity). This provided clarity around answers by understanding coaches' beliefs around their approach to player (de)selection and then assessing the application of such beliefs by undergoing a hypothetical (de)selection scenario. Therefore, tabulated data was created for the entirety of the piece (Table 7.2) and the (de)selection scenario in isolation, to determine such differences in beliefs and actions (Table 7.3).

Additionally, the credibility of the data was further enhanced through peer debriefing <sup>228</sup> and member reflections <sup>167</sup>. Peer debriefing is the utilisation of an external peer to confirm the 'fit' between participant response and the researcher's interpretation. Member reflections are determined whereby the tabulated data (Table 7.1) was submitted back to participants, followed by short interviews conducted to determine member feedback on the research outcomes <sup>167</sup>. Of the 24 invited participants, 7 participants agreed to undergo member reflections. A consensus was that the outcomes represented their own beliefs towards player developments and processes. However, a repetitious response from the coaches was noted; the outcomes of this research may summarise more

generalised expectations and beliefs, whilst within the practice, this will likely look different due to the internal dynamics of each academy. The following quote provides an example response; *“I think [the tabulated outcomes] reflect well on coach beliefs, but not necessarily their actions”*.

**Table Chapter 7.2** Outcomes from the thematic analysis, detailing the holistic requirements for player development within academy soccer

Main theme	Higher-order themes	Lower-order themes	Excerpt
4-Corner Model	Psychological Abilities (465)	Behavioural Skills	<i>"There are two areas, I think, that you cannot play professional football at the top level if you haven't got. I think it's enthusiasm, curiosity. So, attitude. Doesn't mean that you have the best character in the world, but it means you've got incredible drive and you're resilient."</i>
		Game Awareness	<i>"Yes, the high performing elite players have a better understanding of their strengths and their weakness, because they're better learners and they reflect more, they want to reflect more, they're more critically ... have a critical appraisal of themselves because they know that they probably can do it and they've probably got the ... because they're an elite, an elite sort of characteristic is they've got an understanding of what they want to achieve, so they kind of want to find a way, hence being more reflective, hence wanting to get better."</i>
		Negative Psychological Skills	<i>"...they're not really intelligent with the ball, they're technically okay, but don't show it enough in games, they don't really impact games. And then they lose that mentality, I think, in bravery and they'd probably quit and hide more than others."</i>
	Social Support (260)	Peer Influence	<i>"... And maybe also just a bit like back to the individualized nature of it that some lads are going to learn better with different coaches, and that's also fine. Like, they just resonated better or related better to that coach, and that's why they learn better, they just have a better relationship."</i>
		Environmental Impact	<i>"... And then, more broadly, just managing the - all the transitions at the 12s age group. So, the transition into secondary school, into the 11 v 11, into the youth phase is important."</i>
		External Influencers	<i>"Yeah, I'm sure there are boys out there who maybe have never kicked a football in their life but could have been; given the opportunity, they could have been excellent, and that probably goes across all sports that there are people just walking the street who could have been the quickest man on earth or something like that, but just never had the access to training and the opportunity to participate in that sport."</i>

Tactical Skills (309)	Game Understanding	<i>"Yeah, I believe that, you know, top level players have just got a better understanding and awareness and decision-making at optimal speed under pressure than the average players who don't see the pictures."</i>
	Tactical Competency	<i>"So, for me the best players are able to assess and see what's around him, at like Quick split-second speed, make the best decision and assess it and then also execute the quality of it to make sure that it's effective, and not just they see it but they can't execute it. And the top players were able to do that consistently."</i>
	Negative Tactical Skills	<i>"Yeah, their lack of consistency and game understanding. So, I will put it down to the game understanding, decision-making is the word I'm looking for. Decision-making is why they're in the lower group, because they're not making the right decision enough basically, so they're making the wrong decision too often. So yeah, there'll be some bright decisions and stuff but it's not enough for them to really have an impact in the game, how they would want to have an impact in the game."</i>
Technical Abilities (121)	Technical Competency	<i>"Because they're in an academy they should be good at dribbling, good at passing, good at defending, good at heading."</i>
	Negative Technical Abilities	<i>"Robustness, dribbling, shielding the ball, more ball manipulation stuff, kind of all things with the ball probably a little bit behind technically."</i>
Physical Abilities (158)	Specific Physical Abilities	<i>"Yeah, the player has got exceptional physical abilities, he's got exceptional pace and he's a great ball striker."</i>
	General Physical Abilities	<i>"...structurally he knows the game, unbelievable athletic ability, unbelievable physical application, and his attitude to learn and his desire to learn is through the roof."</i>
	Negative Physical Abilities	<i>"Then it's when it comes to recognizing or predicting when they need to use that explosive speed, Acceleration in a game, they might not recognize the stimulus to do that. So, for example, a loose pass or a poor pass from an opponent. They might not recognize that it's a poor or loose pass and therefore, the opportunity for the teams to use their speed and acceleration is lost because they aren't recognized."</i>

Player Assessments	Objective Assessments (363)	Benchmarking	<i>"You're looking at comparisons from players that have previously been in a similar situation, maybe five, six years ago, or current first-team players, you look at their data from where they were the same age and they might be of similar physical stature for example"</i>
		Holistic Assessments	<i>"And then we sort of really, by the end of it, we've kind of got an idea on profiling as to what that player is likely to be based on their physical output, their technical and tactical output, and their sort of psychological profile as well."</i>
		Potential Assessment	<i>"Yeah, so there might be some boys who may score lower on the physical testing data, but the opportunity to compare them to other boys who are, uh, of a similar biological age, as opposed to a similar chronological age, it's able to give you a greater perspective on perhaps where they really stand amongst their peers."</i>
		Performance Assessment	<i>"We do have a, uh, force plate now, with obviously hamstring strengthening and stuff like that. Yeah, we have a force plate. We do functional movement. FMS. But yeah, it's quite limited in terms of speed. And like one rep max, being able to get the boys into the gym."</i>
	Subjective Assessments (344)	Perception of Abilities	<i>"We look at we look at their ability, their potential we're looking at their skillset and we're judging against what we deem the standard and against our boys. Simple as that."</i>
		Player Grading	<i>"Every six-week block we're evaluating the players and put these processes in place, we will sit down with part-time staff have a meeting. So, I have a meeting with them and we look at who's excelling, who's achieving and doing OK, who's developing and a little bit concerned about, and who's aiming, and, you know, that's really far behind!"</i>
	Excellence (25)	Unique Abilities	<i>"Yeah, like I said, they've all got their own traits that makes them unique, whether that's mindset, whether it's something that's technical, tactical, whether it's again physical, it's very dependent on the individual so."</i>
		Natural Abilities	<i>"But there's also one or two in that group that are very different, that's not ... that's not something I would describe them as, they're just very gifted."</i>
Player Development	4-Corner Developments	Sport-specific Developments	<i>"Yeah, so I think, you know, a basic diet, and obviously they need to be stretched at certain times, like the light and shade analogy, you need shade at certain times. But then I</i>

(207)		<i>am a real big believer in that outside of the games the training should be really specified to the best individuals, but within then the games I see the game is varied. So I would, my personal view is that the game should stay as that, as a real, as a variational tool,”</i>
	General Abilities	<i>“So, developing values that are more humanistic than football-based, and developing good people, which should hopefully help develop better footballers. And doing that in an individualized and holistic way that learning is probably not going to be the same for everyone. I mean, different people need different things from different disciplines and different -- yeah, they need different support.”</i>
	Psychological Developments	<i>“If you can understand and master the psychological side then you’re robust, you’re resilient, you do a fail and success the same way, so you have to try and develop the players to understand that. So that’s why I think the psychological part is the most important part. There’s no point in just letting the player be technically brilliant, and then he thinks he’s technically brilliant, but he breaks down if something wrong happens. You’ve got to make that person psychologically strong enough to overcome feelings with his ability.”</i>
	Social Developments	<i>“I see psych/social is pretty much everything that underpins everything else. So, I always put psych social at the top and then have technical, tactical, physical and all the other elements come out of it. But for me, psych/social is pretty much your environment.”</i>
Performance Pathways (39)	Blocked Pathway	<i>“Yeah both, some ... they do have same abilities, other players just might be better, they might be okay for the standard you play against other teams and they might be performing absolutely fine, but you’ve just someone else in the pathway that’s better.”</i>
	Creating New Pathways	<i>“So has that player got the skill set or attributes to be able to play in a different position so that’s a discussion, you know, if you see his pathway blocked, just say he’s a midfield player but there are two or three midfield players ahead of him, you know, that discussion will look, can he play full back ...you know, can we convert him into a full back, or can we convert him into this position. And again, I think that just comes down to that discussion with that individual and the attributes or the potential we feel he has.”</i>
Player Trauma (131)	Dealing with Adversity	<i>“You can have as much ability as you like, but unless you can deal with what football throws at you in terms of that psych and social corners, Then the likelihood is you're not</i>

			<i>gonna get... you are only going so far up the ladder, you're not going to get past the next step."</i>
		Coping	<i>"We'd also be very interested in the later developers in the foundation who maybe are not excelling in every aspect, but they've coped if you like within the programme and they've shown glimpses of quality, we'd be really excited about watching them go through the YDP and design an appropriate programme for them with the challenges and that sort of stuff, to give them the best opportunity of continuing to develop."</i>
Maturation	Biobanding (75)	Management of Players	<i>"Yeah, but I think it can't be as simple as, and this is where I'm saying I think you've got to be a lot better at this, I think moving up, for how long, what does it look like, what games programme or games in the year up are you playing them in, and who are they playing alongside. More often than not you are playing a similar sort of team so you kind of know who they're going to be playing against. I think it really is a, it's just, you know, it's scrutinising it up to weekly discussions, in my opinion, I really do."</i>
		Implications of Biobanding	<i>"... by playing him down, would he absolutely boss it, and then develop something else. And I suppose that's the trade-off that is quite tough, but also I suppose the psych factor of it of no matter how people frame it, boys always see playing down as a negative regardless of what context it's in."</i>
	Performance Implications (133)	Growth Spurt	<i>"Again, the maturity of the body will come within different groups of ages. You will have people that have grown. In that year and you will have people that are still growing. So, if you are taking a decision when they are 10, 12, 14, on how they are you physically in physical aspects, you can be wrong because the player in half a year could change completely."</i>
		Early Maturation	<i>"Physicality comes into it again, at the moment you can impact games physically very easily, you could be very early developed and you can dominate games through that, whereas other players might not have that but they may have game intelligence and technically be excellent and you're just waiting on that, so maturation definitely comes into it. The challenge is then going forward is that person that is physically dominant with games always going to be physically dominant of games? No, they're not. So what are</i>



*you giving them to be able to cope, are you allowing them to be too successful too soon and not preparing them for what life will be ahead?"*

Barriers to Development	Coach Bias (257)	Late Maturation	<i>"That goes again against the smaller players who may be struggling to impact games. So, all of a sudden now the coach starts to be unsure about whether to use them and play them. They are the ones who always come off at halftime, or are they the ones who always start as sub. They don't play as many minutes. They then get into that... They know they're not considered as one of the stronger ones, so they're already now they don't have as much confidence because the coach isn't giving them confidence."</i>
		Intrinsic Beliefs	<i>"It's so many reasons, I think. It would be difficult to say them all but it can be just that the coach prefers their style of play and liked the personality more. I think naturally, often you confirm your bias. If you've got a bias around a player, you keep giving them positive energy and they see the smiles and everything. They know that they're going to be selected. It just helps your performance."</i>
		Current Performance Bias	<i>"I think you just have to try, and it's the hardest thing in football, is try and judge that potential. All the decisions are around potential, but then, of course, performance of that current stage does help, but maybe it blinds us sometimes, and I don't just mean our club, but maybe in a, you know, just 'cause he's playing well, Does it mean he's got the potential."</i>
		Relationship Bias	<i>"I always talk about positive cycles and negative cycles, so a negative cycle tends to be players out of form. Coach isn't having him. Coach doesn't really help him. Coach is quite negative towards him. The player then just goes into more of a shell. The performances drop even more. The coach then loses more faith in him. They have a negative relationship that just compounds it again and again, and then that player then really just spirals out of kind of like quality. Whereas the positive cycle tends to be: play well. Get loads of praise, loads of confidence, loads of coaching, loads of minutes, loads of support. The players feeding off it. Players feeling great. Player feels like he can take any risks and not get affected by it because he's got the backing of a coach and all of a sudden performance levels will really rise."</i>

Barriers for Long-Term Success (106)	Club Specific Barriers	<i>"We can afford to give a lad a four-year contract as a pro and get it wrong. In that four years, the lad does, he's not ready for the first team. We can afford that opportunity for the player. If you're at [club], when you get to about 18, if you're not getting close to being ready for the first team, they can't afford to keep you on the books."</i>
	Psychological Provisions Lacking	<i>"I think [psychology provisions] are under-resourced, maybe under-valued, and maybe misunderstood. It's probably more complex than the other three areas. And rather than trying to understand it, I think people probably shy away from it a little bit."</i>
	Risk of Losing Identity	<i>"I think that's a good example of when players play up, sometimes the danger is they can lose their identity because they then try and cope with the environment that they're in, whereas actually the plan was to help them excel, when in fact they end up in like a survival mechanism and they end up, you know, losing their identity because they're just doing whatever it takes to survive."</i>

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**Table Chapter 7.3** The results of the thematic outcomes of the selection activity detailing the holistic abilities of academy players.

Main theme	Higher-order themes	Lower-order themes	Excerpt
4-Corner Model	Psychological Skills (149)	Behavioural Skills	<i>"If we're going to go outstanding, would be outstanding at his leadership traits, his general sort of personality, willingness to learn, desire, sort of I'm going to get every single ounce out of what I can every single day."</i>
		Game Awareness	<i>"I've probably not worded it brilliantly but it's not [only] understanding the game, it's understanding your game. You have to understand how you get the most out of yourself, onto the pitch."</i>
		Trauma	<i>"I'd say a few of them have got a mentality outstanding, so that their drive, their perseverance, their character, their ability to deal with adversity under pressure is really good."</i>
	Tactical Skills (109)	Game Understanding	<i>"[Mid-performing players] are more likely to make a good decision than a poor decision, but maybe not make as many good decisions as the high-performers and maybe not make as many poor decisions as the lower performers."</i>
		Tactical Competency	<i>"Scoring goals, creating goals, making positive passes, being quite purposeful, out of possession understanding how to press, and their role within that and being dominant within that, would probably be the difference".</i>
	Technical Abilities (68)	Technical Competency	<i>"One v ones, running with a ball at speed, goal scoring, finishing, creativity, ball manipulation, dribbling, one v ones, dribbling so that's probably again my desires as a coach, and I quite like the creative dribblers."</i>
	Physical Abilities (58)	General Physical Abilities	<i>"Yeah but I would say the physical side is definitely probably the most determining factor."</i>
		Speed	<i>"Power and speed is definitely one thing I think that stands them apart."</i>

Player Assessments	Performance (113)	Consistency in Performance	<i>"Whether they're high performers to low performances, it's their consistency of their performance"</i>
		Current Performance Standard	<i>"[Players were determined] subjective really, in regards to performance levels across the season."</i>
		Expectations of Performance	<i>"He just hasn't performed to the level in comparison to the ones above him, that we are expecting, that is the level required to be a scholar."</i>
	Potential (22)	Predicted Potential	<i>"So what my next thing would be if I was to do this, you know doing this myself, I would then start looking at their potential, so he may be a higher performer but a really low potential."</i>
	Excellence (25)	High Abilities	<i>"You know, they don't necessarily have a super strength, they just... You know, they're just OK Players, they are good players."</i>
		Outstanding Abilities	<i>"[What tells apart the top performers from the rest is] their strengths. like I said earlier, their outstanding strengths."</i>
Barriers to Development	Coach Bias (12)	Pygmalion Effect	<i>"But yeah, I think that's how a coach could take a disliking to a player, definitely, through different ideas and the game and not producing what they want to see, and then as I say just sort of pushing them to the side and forgetting about them."</i>
	Maturation (33)	Early Maturation	<i>"I would say, if you were being brutally honest, they're either top players or they're early maturers."</i>
		Late Maturation	<i>"I would say being late maturers is a theme [in low-performing players]."</i>
	Performance Pathway (11)	Blocked Pathway	<i>"But again, I mean, I come back to this opportunity, we might have five, you know, midfield players, and you know, they're all ... they're all high performers, then it is about opportunity and timing I guess."</i>

## 7.3 Results

### 7.3.1 Thematic Analysis

The outcome of the thematic analysis (table 7.2) resulted in five main themes relating to player abilities, development provisions and selection procedures: i) The 4-Corner Model, ii) Player Assessments, iii) Player Development Processes, iv) Maturation and v) Barriers to Development.

#### 4-Corner Model

The 4-corner model embraces the concept of the need for wider holistic abilities, considering the need for psychological, social, tactical, technical and physical abilities to succeed within academy soccer. Psychological abilities demonstrated a high contribution towards such perceived success across several areas. Behavioural skills were a key example, with one coach stating: *“There are two areas, I think, that you cannot play professional football at the top level if you haven’t got. I think it’s enthusiasm, curiosity. So, attitude. Doesn’t mean that you have the best character in the world, but it means you’ve got incredible drive and you’re resilient”*.

Whilst behavioural skills encapsulate the approach to a player’s application and character traits, this doesn’t account for perceptual-cognitive performance skills. Therefore, game awareness emerged as a further essential psychological attribute. Game awareness consists of abilities to understand oneself and peers, within a performance environment, to achieve optimal outcomes. Conversely, it was highlighted that the lack of such awareness or positive character traits, i.e., low confidence or poor emotional control, resulted in negative psychological attributes that were closely associated with poor performing players.

Coaches also acknowledged that performance and development are often influenced by social support. In particular, the impact of peer influence on player development. Players fostering healthy relations with coaches and players, likewise external peer support (school, parents and siblings), were stated as important requirements for continual success. Additionally, coaches considered the management of various environmental impacts. This included school transitions (primary to secondary schools) and the advancement of team and pitch size. Lastly, the concept of opportunity and external influence was acknowledged as a contributor toward player success, with a coach stating: *“Yeah, I’m sure there are boys out there who maybe have never kicked a football in their life but could have been; given the opportunity, they could have been excellent, and that probably goes across all sports that there are people just walking the street who could have been the quickest man on earth or something like that, but just never had the access to training and the opportunity to participate in that sport”*.

As expected, tactical skills were perceived as critical skills to possess. Game understanding, a key contributor of tactical skills, was perceived as a defining ability, whereby top performing players have developed a greater game understanding than their lesser performing peers. Game understanding considers cognitive processing, such as vision and decision-making. However, in consideration of the execution of game understanding, tactical competency was also perceived as an important ability. A lack of tactical competency was also able to determine lower-performing players.

Coaches placed expectations on players to demonstrate technical competency. Technical competency has been suggested to be the basic technical abilities, such as ball manipulation, passing and receiving, and defending skills. Similar to previous responses, lower-performing players were perceived as lacking in this area compared to their higher-performing peers.

Lastly, physical abilities included the need for specific and general physical abilities. Specific physical abilities were interpreted as a player's possession of an outstanding physical quality: *"Yeah, the player has got exceptional physical abilities, he's got exceptional pace and he's a great ball striker"*. Whereas the general physical abilities were interpreted as a player possessing a good foundation of athletic qualities required to perform in soccer. However, coaches acknowledged that possessing a strong physical ability alone failed to result in greater performance outcomes. Therefore, negative physical abilities, whereby a player possesses abilities that they aren't able to exploit for positive performance outcomes, were associated with lower-performing players.

### ***Player Assessments***

Beyond the abilities of the player, player assessments emerged as a varied, yet critical process. These procedures allow coaches to determine player standards in order to create development plans and rationalise player (de)selection outcomes. Player assessments consisted of objective and subjective assessments and determining levels of excellence. Within objective assessments, benchmarking was a prominent response from coaches. Coaches commonly stated the importance of comparing players, but also identifying areas within each player that may need development.

Coaches also recognised factors that differentiated perceived potential and current performance. When considering assessments of potential, a coach stated: *"Yeah, so there might be some boys who may score lower on the physical testing data, but the opportunity to compare them to other boys who are, uh, of a similar biological age, as opposed to a similar chronological age, it's able to give you a greater perspective on perhaps where they really stand amongst their peers"*. Whereas

performance assessments focus on the current abilities and overall outcomes of each player, effectively comparing each player's current performances within their respective teams.

Within the subjective assessments, an expected criterion was for coaches to determine the difference between player standards. Therefore, perceptions of abilities came out as a subjective assessment criterion. Related, player grading was a factor within subjective assessments. Coaches will commonly assess performances and then grade/measure them based on their beliefs.

Coaches also considered excellence within a player's ability. Excellence was reported as pertaining to both unique and natural abilities. Unique abilities were highlighted as the identity of the player – the part that makes them exceptional – whereas natural abilities were associated with a player's ability to learn or naturally exhibit abilities.

### ***Player Development***

Coaches provided insights into what they believed to be important aspects of player development. These considered 4-corner developments, performance pathways and player trauma. The 4-Corner developments were further broken down into sport-specific developments, general abilities, and psychological and social developments. Sport-specific developments suggest that players need game environments to provide challenge or allow players to thrive, whereas training should focus on players' individual needs. Coaches also stated the importance of developing generalised abilities to improve players for future life (both within and external to soccer). The development of “good people” was a repetitious response. Likewise, psychological development also appeared as a strong requirement for players. One coach stated: *“If you can understand and master the psychological side then you’re robust, you’re resilient, you do a fail and success the same way, so you have to try and*



*develop the players to understand that. So that's why I think the psychological part is the most important part. There's no point in just letting the player be technically brilliant, and then he thinks he's technically brilliant, but he breaks down if something wrong happens. You've got to make that person psychologically strong enough to overcome feelings with his ability".* Additionally, the use of the environment and social developments were considered essential elements to consider within a player's development.

Performance pathways were observed as being a critical factor in deciding the progression of a player. Blocked pathways were particularly prevalent as a means to prevent a player from progressing, regardless of their abilities. One coach stated: *"Yeah both, some ... they do have same abilities, other players just might be better, they might be okay for the standard you play against other teams and they might be performing absolutely fine, but you've just someone else in the pathway that's better"*. Whereas creating new pathways was a further response that was essential for a player's development, that sought to overcome a blocked pathway.

One process that was repetitious in response was the process of player trauma. Coaches agreed that trauma provided a valuable learning experience. Furthermore, overcoming trauma would be a developed skill that players require, to progress. Therefore, coaches agreed that dealing with adversity was an important ability to develop. Similarly, coping was reported as a defining characteristic, whereby players that were capable of coping had possibly developed greater resilience, whereas players who could not cope would be considered as low potential and as a result, exit the programme.

### **Maturation**

Maturation was reported as an essential criterion to consider for player development. From a programming perspective, coaches deemed the utility of Biobanding as a useful approach. However, within Biobanding, management of players was important to ensure optimal developments were being achieved. This was directly linked to the implications of Biobanding as reported by coaches: *“... by playing him down, would he absolutely boss it, and then develop something else. And I suppose that’s the trade-off that is quite tough, but also I suppose the psych factor of it of no matter how people frame it, boys always see playing down as a negative regardless of what context it’s in”*.

Additionally, coaches stated that maturation is linked with several performance implications that should be recognised. Players of early maturation, likewise late maturation, were reported as important to identify to prevent potential player misidentification. Therefore, maturation was raised as an important criterion for coach acknowledgement.

### ***Barriers to Development***

Within the data, observations of coach bias and barriers to long-term success were noted. Coach bias exhibited concerns with intrinsic beliefs, current performance bias and relationship bias. Intrinsic beliefs consider the personal views and philosophies of the individual coach that moulds their approach to developments and player (de)selection processes. Therefore, players not aligning to such beliefs are placed at a disadvantage. Furthermore, performance bias was also reported, whereby coaches can lose sight of the long-term perspective and focus on the ‘here-and-now’. Additionally, the coaches acknowledged the concept of the Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect <sup>129</sup>. This is the potential for a relationship bias or prejudice that results in behaviours towards those players, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy (both positive and negative).

When considering barriers to long-term success, coaches acknowledged barriers that may be detrimental to the development of players. Club specific barriers eluded that some clubs may be in a far stronger position to provide the best opportunities to players, compared to others. Coaches also acknowledged that psychological development is important, but where provisions are lacking the majority of coaches were not confident in delivering psychology-specific content, in line with previous research <sup>215</sup>. Lastly, coaches acknowledged the risk of players losing identity. This suggests that, on occasion, players may negatively adapt in order to cope with more competitive environments, creating a potential long-term implication to their developments.

### **7.3.2 (De)Selection Scenario Outcomes**

Of the 5 main themes established from the thematic analysis, 3 of these were reinforced within the activity scenario, albeit with a far narrower range of sub-themes (table 7.3). The main themes that emerged were: i) 4-Corner Model, ii) Player Assessments, and iii) Barriers to development. In addition to this, Maturation was reinforced as a criterion within the scenario outcomes, but within the main theme of Barriers to Development, due to the context in which it was acknowledged.

#### **4-Corner Model**

In line with coach perceptions, coaches selected players based on the 4-corner model, neglecting only the social aspects. Psychological skills determined player selections with a strong focus on behavioural skills, such as attitude, desire and commitment, to list a few. Those with higher psychological skills were within top-performing groups and those with low abilities were in lower-performing groups. Likewise for game awareness – as defined earlier as understanding oneself and peers, within a performance environment, to achieve optimal outcomes – the players with the greatest game awareness were also the players within the top-performing group. Trauma was also noted as a critical

area, with players making it through the academy system as ones with the ability to both cope and overcome adversity and challenge.

Tactical skills were highlighted as an essential criterion for selection, especially game understanding. Players who understood the game and demonstrate good decision-making skills were within the top-performing groups, whereas low performance placed players in lower-performing groups. This was also true for basic tactical abilities, with coaches expressing a baseline expectancy of ability. As with Tactical skills, technical abilities demonstrated the same findings, with Coaches further highlighting those players with the greatest technical abilities were also the top performers.

Physical abilities included general physical abilities, and speed, whereby players with the greatest speed performances were determined as selected players. Of note, some deselected players expressed good physical abilities but were limited by other areas of the 4-corner model, whereas speed occurred to be re-occurring attribute desired by coaches.

### ***Player Assessments***

Player assessments offered explanations that underpinned a coach's selection of players. The data from these assessments were further broken down into performance, potential and excellence. This demonstrated similarities with coach perceptions (table 7.1), whereby performance and potential were lower-order themes, and excellence a higher-order theme.

Within performance, it was evident that coaches grouped players based on their consistency of performance. Players that produced a high quality of play each week were deemed as high-

performers, whereas those with occasional dips in performance as mid-performing, and finally those with inconsistent performance as low-performing. Linked directly, this was based on the current performance standard, which looks at the performance of a player now, instead of long-term. Coaches also maintained an expectation upon performance as a benchmark for players to meet, to demonstrate the quality required for players to progress in their careers.

Coaches were also considerate towards beliefs of potential, although this was observed more within Cat1 and Cat2 academies, with one coach stating: *“So what my next thing would be if I was to do this, you know doing this myself, I would then start looking at their potential, so he may be a higher performer but a really low potential.”* Excellence was also a key attribute, with a difference in player standards based on whether they had attained a high level or outstanding abilities. High abilities were typically associated with mid-and low-performing players, whereas outstanding abilities were aligned with top-performing players.

### ***Barriers to Development***

Several barriers to player selection were highlighted within the activity scenario. Barriers considered coach bias, maturation and the performance pathway. Coach bias played a significant impact on player (de)selection. The Pygmalion effect was offered as an aspect influencing coach decisions. One coach stated: *“But yeah, I think that’s how a coach could take a disliking to a player, definitely, through different ideas and the game and not producing what they want to see, and then as I say just sort of pushing them to the side and forgetting about them.”*

Maturation was determined as highly influential for selection outcome. Players of an early maturation were typically perceived as high-performers, in line with previous research <sup>34</sup>. Conversely,

players of a late maturation were generally perceived as low-performers. Lastly, a blocked performance pathway was a common barrier for player (de)selection outcomes. One coach summarises this by the following: *“But again, I mean, I come back to this opportunity, we might have five, you know, midfield players, and you know, they’re all ... they’re all high performers, then it is about opportunity and timing I guess”*.

### **7.3.3 Content Analysis**

A breakdown of attendance to selection processes (as a percentage) is presented in Table 7.4. On average, Category 1 and 2 academies have similar quantities of staff in attendance, whereas Category 3 has ~10% less staff in attendance, in the present study. Furthermore, the results elude that Category 1 clubs employ a greater breadth of staff involved in the selection process, as expected. Only Category 1 clubs stated the role of an Assistant Academy Manager or Technical Director. Conversely, Category 1 clubs also reported a reduction in selection attendance with Head of Coaching, Assistant Phase Coach and Professional Phase Coach compared to other categories. Category 1 clubs also demonstrated greater importance for Psychologists partaking within the selection processes, whereas all other categories reported no or low attendance.

**Table Chapter 7.4** The academy personnel attendance (%) within selection processes, by academy category status.

Academy Personnel	Category 1 (%)	Category 2 (%)	Category 3 (%)	Combined (%)
Lead Phase Coach	88.9	87.5	100.0	92.1
Academy Manager	77.8	87.5	100.0	88.4
Head of Coaching	55.6	87.5	71.4	71.5
Sports Scientist	77.8	75.0	42.9	65.2
Assistant Phase Coach	44.4	75.0	71.4	63.6
Head of Recruitment	55.6	62.5	28.6	48.9
Professional Phase Lead Coach	22.2	50.0	57.1	43.1
Head of Education	55.6	50.0	14.3	39.9
Lead Analyst	44.4	37.5	28.6	36.8
Welfare Officer	44.4	37.5	14.3	32.1
Psychologist	55.6	0.0	14.3	23.3
Assistant Academy Manager	44.4	0.0	0.0	14.8
Medical Staff	11.1	12.5	14.3	12.6
Technical Director	22.2	0.0	0.0	7.4

*The table has been organised by combined outcomes, to identify the greatest reported to least reported personnel involved in academy selection processes.*

## 7.4 Discussion

The present study sought to gain a greater depth of knowledge regarding the attributes, abilities and development processes associated with player (de)selection and subsequent playing success, whilst also acknowledging the related procedures employed within soccer academies. Furthermore, the study attempted to determine coach beliefs in player development and (de)selection, and then identify whether such beliefs were actioned when undergoing a hypothetical (de)selection scenario. The findings suggest that whilst coaches acknowledged a wide range of important abilities and development processes required for future success within their own beliefs, the hypothetical scenario demonstrated a strong emphasis on current performance and a far narrower belief towards required abilities. Therefore, with clear insight that coaches' beliefs and actions differed, coaches should be mindful of these findings to overcome potential limitations and biases in player development and (de)selection processes.

Coach intuition plays a prominent role within player (de)selection in soccer, with previous research supporting the use of its application <sup>31</sup>. The findings in this study suggest that the beliefs and the actions of the coaches differed, whereby the knowledge of coaches is substantial, but the application of such knowledge is far more limited. This aligns with the notion that demonstrating competency does not make an individual competent <sup>231</sup>, whereby 'competency' is having the underpinning knowledge, whilst being 'competent' is actioning such knowledge accordingly <sup>231</sup>. One consideration towards the outcomes is the time frame coaches are afforded. Whilst coaches are mindful of long-term developments, decisions are typically made from short-term perspectives (next season), which can implicate the (de)selection of the players with the greatest potential <sup>11</sup>. Examples of such implications are the selection of players exhibiting the best attributes now, over players who are yet to develop, or the focus on short-term achievement, which can result in early burnout and injury <sup>232</sup>. Moreover, coaches should be mindful that a short-term sacrifice may be required, so to attain optimal long-term performance. Impactful youth players may be selected for performance more frequently (potentially playing up an age group) and are therefore more prone to overuse injury and burnout. Resting these players more frequently, sacrificing short-term performance, will likely result in long-term performance where it arguably is more important <sup>11</sup>. Likewise, coaches offering technical inputs to achieve short-term goals (winning the next game) have the potential to implicate the long-term needs of each player <sup>11</sup>. Therefore, considerations should be made around short- and long-term goals, with a balance made between the two to ensure optimal developments are attained. Similarly, bias has been noted to influence several factors in a coach's perception of a player (discussed below). To mitigate such bias, objective assessments can be applied to offer clear and accurate measures. Therefore, the utility of objective measures should be utilised to reinforce or dispel subjective beliefs of players and improve the sensitivity in player assessments <sup>28,31</sup>.



In line with expectations, a player's abilities and skills play a significant role in determining subsequent success. In support of previous research <sup>2,3,28</sup>, coaches proposed that players are required to possess and continually develop psychological, physical, technical/tactical and social skills (the 4-corner model) in order to progress to senior professional soccer. In line with previous research <sup>28</sup>, coaches also felt they were able to determine poorer performance standards by the lack of, or insufficient standard, of abilities across the 4-corner model. Therefore, players lacking in one of the 4-corners are more likely to exit the programme if this weakness is not managed or developed. This suggests a concept of minimal thresholds of ability as a potentially defining aspect for player development and selection. Typically, previous research looks at thresholds that define the elite from sub-elite, or talented from non-talented. However, given the wide range of possible attributes and abilities related to success <sup>2,3,5</sup>, it seems imprudent to speculate on the requirement of talented players. Furthermore, given that the environment and provisions offered by academies contribute to the realisation of talent, it may prove beneficial to identify the players unlikely to develop so not to 'clog up the system' for players likely to be recruited with stronger potential <sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the identification of minimal thresholds, a concept of detecting the lowest threshold of abilities required to overcome deselection, may prove more beneficial. Whilst similar studies have focused on why players have been deselected <sup>6</sup>, further research may look to consider the application of retrospective research or longitudinal research and the identification of deselected players over their selected players. Follow-up findings may provide meaningful benchmarks for deselection thresholds, allowing coaches and academies to further identify player areas required develop.

When looking within each of the 4-corners, psychological characteristics, in particular, appeared to be a strong contributor to future success, in line with previous research <sup>3,5,138,215</sup>. Coaches reported high perceived importance in 'mindset' and 'game awareness', whilst also stating that 'psychological developments' are a critical aspect of the development process. This is supported by

research that identified the deselection of soccer players had heavily been influenced by game understanding capabilities <sup>6</sup>. Therefore, decision-making skills, self-awareness and tactical awareness are important abilities to develop, underpinning game understanding <sup>6</sup>. The lack of such abilities has demonstrated an association with player deselections <sup>6</sup>. Similar outcomes were observed within the (de)selection scenario, whereby abilities within decision-making and game understanding discriminated player groupings. Therefore, it is with confidence that decision-making and game understanding are critical facets of player development. A consideration around these findings is how decisions are being measured. Decision-making is arguably a very subjective measure that hinges on the coach's experience and beliefs around a 'good' decision. Previous research <sup>233</sup> defines a poor decision as likely resulting in the loss of possession and/or allowing the opposition to impose themselves on goal scoring opportunities. However, this is not to say a good decision (i.e., the best decision in the current scenario) will always result in maintaining possession. Therefore, good/poor decisions are arguably circumstantial, and simplified definitions may not warrant clear measures of player decision-making. Furthermore, good decisions should consider the wider integration of abilities. To expand upon this, tactical decisions are likely underpinned by players' capabilities to execute such actions. This may be a technical or physical ability. Therefore, if a player is not competent in specific actions, alternative decisions will likely be undertaken. However, a coach may hold experience and beliefs influencing decision preference, that does not align with their players experience and abilities. This potential neglect of individual capabilities, and bias from own experience and abilities, may provide further issues around distinguishing correct decisions. Likewise, perceptions of decisions are typically subjective. Similarly, coaches may measure decisions based on overall outcomes, such as a goal conceded, or loss of possession. Whilst research has determined no differences in the players' decision-making abilities by position <sup>234,235</sup>, similar studies have acknowledged that coaches may have a bias towards their perceived 'best decision' based on their positional expertise (i.e. attacking or defending) <sup>236</sup>. Therefore, positional demands may further magnify perceptions of decisions, whereby an error by a defender results in an opposition goal scoring

opportunity, which might be perceived far worse than an error by a striker that results in the loss of possession in the oppositions half (which may arguably have been a far worse decision). Moreover, in the absence of tactical analysis, coaches should be mindful of rationalising 'good' or 'poor' decisions.

Decision-making has been reported as a recall upon experience, actioned in line with coached philosophy/instruction <sup>237</sup>. Consequently, players making poor decisions may not have been afforded the required experiences and practice, which ultimately reflects coaching syllabus and opportunity <sup>238</sup>. Additionally, players ill-equipped to reflect upon their decisions, both internally and externally (coach or peer input), are unlikely to improve in their decision-making outcomes <sup>236,238</sup>. Therefore, one component limiting such developments is potentially the lack of reflective skills, which can be overcome through psychological provisions. This may be further linked to players needs to develop good self-efficacy; a players beliefs in their abilities to accomplish their goals <sup>239</sup>. Whilst 'decision self-efficacy' (self-efficacy within the decision making processes) has been found to be related to decision making with athletes <sup>240</sup>, a recent study reported low interactions within soccer <sup>239</sup>. However, links have been found with self-efficacy and motor control <sup>239</sup>. Therefore, a player with low confidence in their physical ability to complete the task may dictate the decision-making process. Moreover, a player requires reflective skills to further enhance their self-efficacy, which in turn may provide a wider range of decisions within performance. In regards to reflection processes, players also need to be provided with the opportunity to experience environments requiring decisions within training, to enhance recall ability and act upon this in future situations <sup>238</sup>. Therefore, ensuring equal opportunities within training, and the application of specific session drills, provides greater skill development to enhance player development. Likewise, how players deal under pressure has been reported to align with decision-making outcomes <sup>241</sup>. Players need to be able to make good decisions in both low- and high-pressure situations in order to succeed. This suggests that training needs to permit a range of pressurised environments so to develop decision-making skills. Coach input has also been established

as a key aspect in improving decision-making <sup>236</sup>. Therefore, considerations should be made on how training is shaped to reinforce the development of decision-making skills and game understanding.

Whilst psychological abilities have demonstrated high importance in coach perceptions of talented players within this thesis, such beliefs may fail to consider the potential limitation of cognitive maturation. Whilst research considering maturation of the brain and cognitive functions is presently lacking in sport, it has been identified that maturation and cognitive developments will occur at similar timings <sup>242,243</sup>. However, cognitive developments may only occur if players are permitted the opportunity to be developed <sup>242</sup>. Therefore, given the wide range of variation in maturational ages, it may be postulated that players need to be afforded individual development plans so to develop such cognitive skills. This somewhat expands upon the underdog hypothesis <sup>32</sup>, whereby late maturation players are overstimulated and, as a consequence, may develop higher levels of self-regulation. Conversely, players unable to deal with this overstimulation will typically demonstrate an inability to cope, and as a result, exit the programme. Therefore, maturational variance may be a critical to acknowledge when considering player psychological developments, potentially highlighting a need for further research in this area.

The psychological process of dealing with adversity and the attribute of coping were deemed as highly important processes players need to undergo and develop. Previous research has identified and reported the importance of trauma and coping skills in player developments <sup>137</sup>. Players are required to overcome 'bumps in the road' in order to develop reflective abilities to positively move forwards and enhance their learning outcomes <sup>137</sup>. These findings also align with previous work in rugby <sup>244</sup>, which established negative implications on player development when lacking awareness, failure to overcome challenges and poor coping skills. Therefore, coaches need to consider implementing purposeful challenge that is progressively programmed, to further stretch players'

abilities. However, player developments via challenge stem from the ability to overcome and learn from such encounters, which has been stated as a skill <sup>219</sup>. So, providing players with the tools to manage and overcome challenge is integral for the effectiveness of such provisions <sup>219</sup>. Research has determined that equipping players with PCDEs is important to overcome factors associated with challenge. Therefore, reflective skills, imagery, goal setting, the utilisation of peer support and focal control (to list a few) are critical for educating players on, so to optimise their abilities in overcoming challenge <sup>219</sup>. Furthermore, within the present findings, psychological skills were deemed as a determining variable between player standards within the (de)selection scenario. Players who were able to cope, or demonstrated strong behaviour skills, were deemed as top-performing players, whilst those lacking in such abilities were considered low-performing players. This further aligns with the utility of PCDEs <sup>219–221</sup>. In consideration of the above, we can postulate that psychological attributes are acknowledged as essential skills to develop within academy soccer. Academies should consider how psychologists and coaching staff can co-contribute to achieving effective developments.

In light of the strong advocacy for psychological characteristics, it seems counter-intuitive that coaches reported psychological provisions as commonly lacking from academy programmes, or often negatively misconceived, providing potential barriers to player long-term success. As previously stated, notable characteristics and traumatic experiences aligned with positive growth, require skills not inherently developed <sup>219</sup>. Therefore, players should be supported by coaches and sports psychologists to develop the psychological tools necessary for long term development. However, coaches have previously reported a lack of understanding and ability to develop psychological qualities <sup>215</sup>. Whilst a consideration towards this lack of resources may be reflective of a club's financial status <sup>140</sup>, academies could consider more creative methods (such as partnerships with academic institutions) to provide the necessary provisions. Moreover, academies need to overcome the stigma associated

with psychological interventions, so that players can be provided with the greatest opportunities to flourish.

In addition to psychological and tactical abilities, physiological profiles were highlighted as key determinants of player development and selection. Whilst coaches perceived athleticism – a general theme encapsulating speed, agility, power and strength – as a required ability, it was clear from the (de)selection scenario that speed was the primary consideration within physical abilities. Faster players were more commonly associated with the highest-performing and -potential groups, with the slowest players aligned to the lowest-performing and -potential groups. This finding is supported by previous research that equally identified speed as a discriminating factor within player (de)selection<sup>6,28,214</sup>. However, caution should be raised with the interpretation of speed performances, considering that physical maturation will impact speed performances. Players with an advanced maturation have been associated with an increase in speed capabilities over their lesser mature counterparts<sup>72,183,214,245</sup>. Therefore, speed performance should be compared utilising the context of maturation status. Whilst there is a good level of confidence that greater speed abilities contribute to a player's success, practitioners need to be mindful when comparing players without the context of player maturation.

Maturation presented wider implications in player assessment and selection processes. A repetitious response from the coaches was that game impact and consistency in performance were highly defining measures of the top players (likewise, low impact and inconsistency in lower-performing players). This suggests that an emphasis is placed on current performance over long-term potential. However, whilst coaches hold good knowledge of maturation and its implications, within the (de)selection activity a common finding was that high performing groups consisted of players of advanced maturation and lowers of late maturation. This aligns with a maturation selection bias<sup>25,32,34</sup>,

whereby players exhibiting early maturation are perceived as high potential and late maturation as low potential<sup>34</sup>. Given that extensive research<sup>19,25,32,34,68</sup> remarks on the early advantages of maturation typically being attenuated beyond the average age of peak growth, indicates the strong possibilities of misidentification (arguable observed within this study). Moreover, given the reported importance of coping, and the inherent nature of later developing players having to reflect, adapt and cope throughout extended periods of training<sup>32</sup>, offers a potentially enhanced psychological profile aligned to a coach's beliefs of success. This eludes, once late maturing players are beyond periods of critical growth, an enhanced skill set – as desired by the coaches – may be realised, but only if time is afforded to these players. Therefore, coaches should be mindful of player maturational status when undergoing (de)selections to overcome potential biases.

In addition to maturation related bias, reports of further coach biases were established. Coaches were biased towards specific traits or abilities (i.e., highly physical vs technical ability), which was associated with the perceived demands of the first team. It was also evident that personal experience and philosophy steered unconscious biases around expectations of player abilities. These varied significantly by coach, postulating an internal philosophical variation and suggesting that a player's development could substantially differ depending on their coach, between and within academies. This potentially links to the concept of espoused theories and theory-in-use<sup>246,247</sup>. Espoused theories are the values and beliefs that a person believes their behaviour is based upon<sup>246</sup>. When individuals are asked about their actions and behaviours, such as within the interviews of this research, responses will always be their espoused theories<sup>246</sup>. Whereas theory-in-use is the actual underpinning theory behind their values and beliefs that cannot always easily be articulated and may conflict with the espoused theory. Therefore, within the current research, coaches' beliefs and actions may differ due to their espoused theories and theories-in-action. Furthermore, the Pygmalion / Rosenthal effect<sup>129</sup> was reported several times within the study. The Pygmalion / Rosenthal effect is

the phenomenon of a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., a coach's initial beliefs of a player will determine their coaching interactions and long-term outcomes, resulting in behaviours towards the player that achieve outcomes aligned with their initial beliefs. Therefore, if a player is believed to be a high/low performer, they are provided/not provided extra provisions, and the outcome is that the player improves/declines in performance, aligning and producing the original belief. This directly links to a coach's beliefs around talent, whereby players are believed to be more talented than others. Whilst this places potentially unrealistic high expectations upon these players, it also steers a bias towards the development of these players over lesser-talented players <sup>11</sup>. This highlights the need for greater education around the social impacts and the importance of peer relationships between coach and player.

Player pathways were reported as a highly confounding variable towards a player's opportunity to progress. Player pathways were described as the performance trajectories of each player by position. A successful pathway was aligned to the attainment of a scholarship or professional contract. Conversely, a blocked pathway was the threat of other players within the same position (an age group up or down), demonstrating superior performance trajectories and, therefore, greater perceived potential. This results in players who may still be perceived as high performing, being released from the academy programme due to a blocked pathway by a superior player. To overcome this, coaches expressed the need for early identification of future pathways to acknowledge such blockages and attempt to transition players into other suitable positions to best serve a player's future chances. Whilst this may block another player's pathway (commonly a low performing player), it serves those players perceived as high performing yet within a congested position. One method to further overcome a blocked pathway, and for enhanced player development, was stated by the coaches that players are typically not allocated positions until later schoolboy ages (commonly between U14-U16). Whilst some coaches stated that players may be confined to attacking or



defending positions, a rotation of positions allows for a stronger breadth of learning, that may benefit them should they encounter a blocked pathway in the future (due to new signings, positional or formation changes, etc).

Every academy is unique in its offerings toward player development. Whilst some academies are lavish in resources, others may be lacking. This is likely due to category status and therefore the financial income of each club <sup>4,44</sup>, dictating the resources, infrastructure and staffing that can be provided. This research was able to determine that academy category did demonstrate a variation in provisions offered, staffing and therefore the processes used to (de)select players. The outcome of the contents analysis found that category 3 academies were typically lacking in personnel involved in (de)selection decisions. Conversely, category 1 and 2 academies had similar quantities of staff involved in the process, with category 1 demonstrating a greater breadth of staffing structure. Whilst this is expected, given that category one academies hold the greatest financial income, the gap between category two and three appeared to be substantial.

Whilst the findings of this study highlight a high variety of attributes perceived as important for subsequent professional success, it is postulated that many of these abilities will intertwine with one another, demonstrating the complex and multifaceted nature of player developments and player (de)selection. Therefore, the sum of all abilities, over the strength of individual abilities, may be more accurate in determining the talent of each individual. Previous research further supports that talent is both multi-faceted and multidimensional <sup>9,11</sup>. Furthermore, this notion may extend to the findings of coach intuition, whereby a coach's 'gut instinct' of a player are both unexplainable and intangible, potentially due to the integration of abilities working harmoniously <sup>29</sup>. Therefore, player assessments should look to employ both objective and subjective assessments to increase the sensitivity in

identifying player abilities, with objective outcomes utilised to reinforce or dispel coach beliefs of each player<sup>28,31</sup>.

## **7.5 Limitations**

A limitation of this study surrounds the environment and manner that the data was collected. It is possible that coach behaviours were influenced by the knowledge they were research participants, potentially resulting in stating perceived 'best' practice over current practice. Therefore, it is plausible that a gap in beliefs and actions was a consequence from the methods applied. To overcome this limitation, future research may consider more ethnographical approaches with the utility of real deselection outcomes.

A further limitation of the study is the consideration for positional difference. Whilst the outcomes provide a depth of information around the selection and deselection of players, these are broad beliefs and may benefit from being focused on individual playing positions. Further research may look to consider a similar approach with a classification of playing positions within the team sheets.

Lastly, further research may wish to consider variations by academy category status. Within the current study, category 1-3 was merged to create one output. However, it may be of interest to understand whether variations occur across categories, so to offer guidance on best practice if and where required.

## 7.6 Conclusion

The present study sought to provide greater clarity in understanding coaches' perceptions of abilities required of a player to progress in academy soccer, the development process employed to aid player development and the methods utilised in player (de)selections. The findings of this study found the need for wide skillsets across the 4-corner model. Furthermore, several abilities and characteristics were associated with top performing players, such as behaviours, game understanding and physical speed, likewise a lack of ability in those perceived as low-performing. To develop such behaviours, coaches should provide intentional challenges within training. However, prior learning should be offered to players to develop the skillsets required to overcome such challenges. Additionally, coaches need to be mindful of the impacts of maturation. Speed has been demonstrated to have high relations with maturation and, whilst highlighted as a key attribute, will likely be hard to identify abilities in players before critical periods of growth, or will create a false perception of speed qualities for players early into growth. Furthermore, coaches demonstrated a maturation selection bias, further emphasising the need for maturational assessments to play a more central role within player (de)selection. Therefore, the assessment of maturation is a confounding aspect that should be applied to further inform performance and reduce bias. Lastly, coaches should be mindful of social developments to ensure coach and player relations are beneficial for positive performance outcomes and prevent barriers to player development. Moreover, many of the outcomes are influenced by a series of variables, demonstrating the multifaceted needs of soccer. Therefore, the utility of coach intuition plays a key role in observing talent, and the utility of multidisciplinary staff and objective data should be used to reinforce coach beliefs and overcome potential biases.



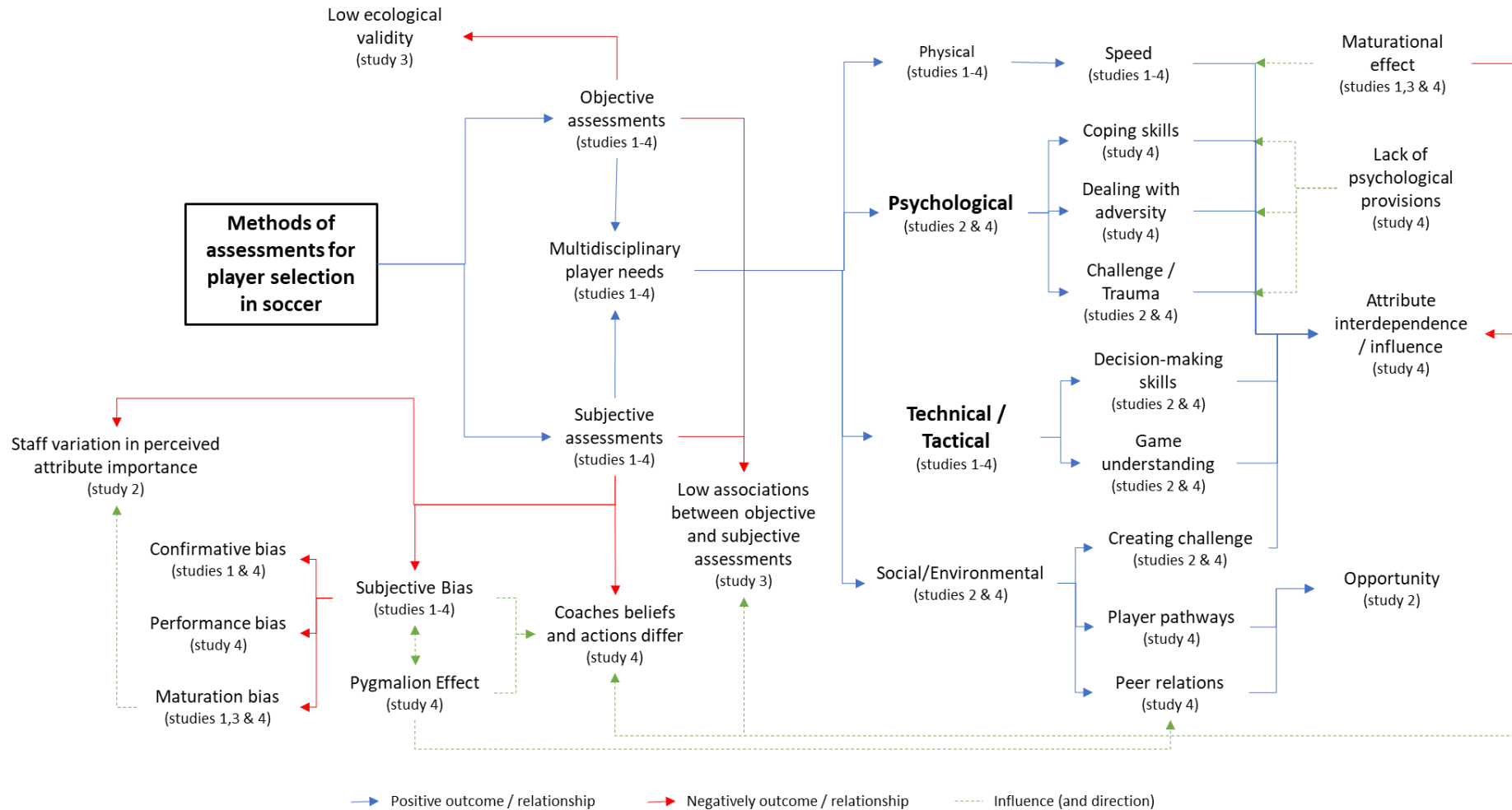
## **Chapter 8. General Discussion**

## 8.1 Synthesis of Findings

This thesis makes an original contribution to research in soccer by applying a mixed methods approach to determine i) the processes applied within academy soccer selection, ii) the role of coach intuition and objective (physical, technical/tactical, psychological) assessments, and iii) the attributes and abilities related to subsequent selection in soccer. A schematic of the thesis findings has been produced to provide guidance and identify interrelation/synthesis of findings across the studies (figure 8.1).

Study 1 investigated the current academy practice for player (de)selection, and whether attribute or ability performances were able to distinguish the difference in selection decisions (refer to figure 8.1, *'Methods of assessments for player selection in soccer'*). The study established that components of fitness were unable to identify performance variations between selected and deselected players. Likewise, cumulative tallies of coach subjective scores for weekly performance were incapable of determining player selection outcomes. However, quarterly predictions of player potential were able to determine selected from deselected players, notably in deselected players more so. Given that the quarterly predictions entail the synthesis of both objective (components of fitness, maturation, etc.) and subjective (weekly performance scores, coach perceptions, etc.) performance, suggests that both likely contribute towards the established score of potential, and therefore play important roles in identifying talent.

Building upon study 1 findings, the second study firstly sought to understand the attributes perceived as essential for success in soccer, utilising differing academy personnel across the UK through the application of a Delphi model. The findings established that 78 attributes were perceived to be required for success, with psychological and technical / tactical attributes deemed the highest



**Figure Chapter 8.1** Schematic of thesis findings establishing positive and negative relationships with subjective and objective assessments of performance and the development of talented players. Starting from “*Methods of assessments for player selection in soccer*” the research findings demonstrate positive, negative and influential factors on player selection.

of importance. Physical abilities were the only attributes significantly identified to be less important, although still essential abilities. This has been highlighted in figure 8.1 with psychological and technical /tactical abilities placed in bold and a larger font to highlight a higher importance, likewise physical in a smaller font for lesser importance. Additionally, the findings further identified inconsistent variations between academy personnel in the perceived importance of attribute abilities required of players for subsequent success, whereby recruitment staff appeared to overemphasize several attribute abilities.

With study 2 uncovering what coaches perceive as essential for success, study 3 sought to interrogate whether such attributes or abilities would be indicative of selected over deselected players within a deselection scenario. Therefore, following the need for multidisciplinary abilities established in studies 1 and 2, the study included isolated assessments of abilities across psychological, physical and technical / tactical abilities. Furthermore, study 3 also looked at the level of agreement between coaches when measuring player abilities, in attempts to identify if coaches' perceptions of a player's abilities, and the player's actual abilities, were aligned. This is important to assess given the prominence of coach intuition and subjective beliefs within the player selection process. The outcomes found only a few abilities related to (de)selection, with no consistency in findings in both objective and subjective outcomes. Additionally, when looking at coach agreement, the results demonstrated that the coaches' capacities to identify abilities reduced as players aged. This may be explained with the further findings of maturation bias, whereby coach selections were influenced by the player maturational status, similar to previous studies <sup>34</sup>. Therefore, wider variations in abilities would likely increase as players matured. The influence of maturation is highlighted in figure 8.1, where maturation effect is likely to influence coach perceptions and physical performance.



Study 3 also compared perceived abilities (subjective) against validated measures of physical performance, psychological assessment and tactical performance (objective) data, finding poor associations between subjective and objective outcomes. One reason for this may surround the ecological validity of the objective instruments. Additionally, coaches may not have the capacity to correctly identify performance abilities in isolation. However, a further postulation may surround the concept of interrelated attributes (as suggested in study 1), whereby several attributes work in tandem to yield performance. Therefore, measuring one ability in isolation may be incapable of reflecting true performance, with the absence of other contributing factors. This may further expand upon coach intuition and gut instinct, where coaches are able to identify players with high potential, but unable to articulate the precise standout abilities <sup>29,249</sup>. Thus, suggesting coach intuition may acknowledge performance as a contribution of abilities, over isolated abilities.

Expanding on the findings of study 3, a qualitative study design was used within study 4, in an attempt to overcome barriers previously presented, whereby the attributes and abilities investigated were confined to those only that could be measured in isolation. In doing this, a triangulation of responses was determined between studies 3 and 4, further enhancing the trustworthiness and rigour of the findings. Semi-structured interviews permitted greater freedom in explaining beliefs and rationale behind player development and (de)selections. Additionally, the study also utilised an 'in-action task' to establish whether a coach's beliefs of abilities were actioned within a selection/deselection scenario (similar to study 3), further measuring the competency of coach intuition. The findings demonstrated the requirement (and continual development) of multidisciplinary abilities (aligned to all previous studies), player assessment methods and essential developmental processes, whilst also highlighting potential barriers to player selection and development. However, the in-action task established that coach beliefs and actions commonly differed. Furthermore, coaches typically focused on current performance outcomes with short-term

goals, neglecting the wider view and general intentions of talent identification. Conversely, a variety of biases were reported with coach intuition, i.e., maturity bias, favouritism and a performance focus.

Studies 3 and 4 established a number of attributes that were perceived as important for selection in soccer. Cognitive based technical/tactical abilities (i.e., decision making), were found to distinguish selected players in study 3 (albeit in limited age ranges) and were also a prominent aspect within study 4. Given that previous work has also established high associations with decision making abilities and player selection or subsequent professional success <sup>2,3,186</sup>, and the importance of technical/tactical abilities in study 2 and previous research <sup>2,3,249</sup>, further reinforces these findings. Likewise, study 4 established a high demand on psychological abilities. This is supported from the outcomes of study 2, establishing psychological abilities as one of the most important, and study 3 establishing that coaches are able to identify some psychological abilities (such as self-confidence) and that psychological traits may relate to player (de)selection. Within physical abilities, speed and change of direction were compelling abilities in study 3, with only speed noted as an important ability in study 4. Such variations may occur due to the confounding role of speed within change of direction tasks <sup>88</sup>. Moreover, speed performance has been able to discriminate between selected and deselected players in prior research <sup>6,184</sup>. Therefore, speed should be considered a key ability for players to develop.

Conversely, study 3 highlighted that coaches may hold greater experience and, therefore, a bias within specific performance areas. This was somewhat confirmed within study 4 whereby bias was a prominent barrier for selection. Likewise, given the high reporting of maturational bias throughout, further strengthens the negative influence of maturation. Study 2 highlights that coaches are aware of maturation, whereas studies 3 and 4 suggest that coaches may not fully appreciate the

strength of its influence on performance. Therefore, soccer academies need to further consider methods to fully acknowledge and overcome maturation bias so to avoid clogging the development pathway with early maturation athletes and/or losing high potential athletes perceived as low performing, due to being of a late maturation status.

The findings of this thesis (figure 8.1) further challenge the utility of coach intuition in isolation. Therefore, the overarching contributions of this thesis are i) the need for multidisciplinary attributes and abilities for player development, with an emphasis on psychological skills, and the acknowledgement of the interdependence of attributes and influence of external variables, ii) the implications of coach intuition within player (de)selection, and the support for the collaborative inputs from objective assessments, and iii) a critical analysis of how players are measured and assessed for TID and future recommendations for improvements.

### **8.1.1 Assessment Methods**

Study 1 of this thesis looked to understand the methods applied within an academy when undertaking player selections. Subjective assessments (coach intuition) are utilised for measuring and interpreting the needs of players, as well as being a prominent instrument within the (de)selection process. Whilst previous research has found reliability in the utilisation of coach intuition<sup>31</sup>, this thesis found a greater challenge for its use in isolation. The outcomes of study 2 found variations in perceived importance by academy staff, although good consistency was demonstrated within independent job roles. Expanding upon these findings, study 3 sought to understand whether coaches' perceptions of abilities were actioned within a (de)selection activity. Only a few attributes were established that identified selected from deselected players, with low consistency across ages challenging their reliability. Furthermore, the study reported that agreement between coaches on player abilities reduced as players aged/performance increased, in line with previous research<sup>28</sup>. Study 4 further built upon study

3 and concluded that coaches' beliefs towards player requirements for selection differed from how the coaches actually selected players, uncovering and further evidencing the concept of espoused theories vs theories-in-action <sup>246</sup>. Espoused theories are the beliefs and values that individuals would describe themselves as applying within a hypothetical scenario <sup>246</sup>. However, theories-in-action are the beliefs and values that are practically applied to actually achieve the desired task, which may not align with the espoused theory <sup>246</sup>.

When looking deeper into coach decisions, further criticisms have been established from the findings of this thesis. Maturation has been reported both within this thesis (studies 1, 3 & 4) and in previous research <sup>19,34</sup>, to bias coach intuition. Study 4 found that coaches will typically favour advanced maturation players over average or late-maturing counterparts <sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, physical attributes, in particular, will be impacted by maturation. Speed is such an example, which was established in studies 1 and 3. This can, therefore, result in the incorrect perception of abilities utilising coach intuition, without the further support of maturation assessments (discussed further below). Beyond maturation bias, confirmative bias was reported in study 1, whereby coaches who graded players throughout the season also led in the selection processes. Linked with this, study 4 found the Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect <sup>27,129</sup> – the self-fulfilling prophecy of a player, based upon a coach's initial beliefs, to also impact coaches' decisions. Given the confirmative bias stated within study 1, aids the likeliness of the Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect occurring. Furthermore, a performance bias was observed within study 4, whereby short-term goals of performance were prioritised over long-term development goals, further compounding the previous biases.

Coach intuition has been previously established as a reliable process to (de)select players <sup>31</sup>, the findings of this thesis state clear issues in the uses of coach intuition in isolation. However, like coach intuition, the results from studies 1 and 3 concluded that objective assessments alone were

incapable of distinguishing selected from deselected players. This may be due to the assessments failing to capture the true performance abilities of each player, due to a low ecological validity. Moreover, the findings of study 4 have alluded to the concept of attribute interdependence (discussed in greater detail below), whereby attributes work in tandem during a performance. For example, during a game, the player will need to mentally analyse the playing field and acknowledge any triggers (game understanding) as when to sprint (speed) towards the ball, into space or towards a player (decision-making) for optimal match performance (within this given scenario). Therefore, whilst measuring isolated abilities is useful, it neglects the player's ability to apply and exploit these abilities within the performance environment, or the strengths of such abilities when governed by wider attributes.

Study 1 established that when coach intuition and objective inputs were combined, in addition to further variables (future potential beliefs of each player and maturation inputs) coaches were able to correctly determine selected and deselected players. This somewhat aligns with previous research, that established a wider holistic battery of assessments to be of greatest accuracy in selection discrimination <sup>31</sup>. However, caution should be raised to identify abilities in isolation, given that this thesis has highlighted the potential interdependence of abilities may be of higher importance than isolated performances. Therefore, trajectories of development may be of use within isolated performance (as used previously in other sporting disciplines) <sup>250</sup>, as well as the wider use of information gathering outside of tangible assessments, to provide insights on wider holistic abilities. Furthermore, the application of objective outcomes can be used to reinforce, or dismiss, coach beliefs, in attempts to mitigate the various subjective biases previously discussed <sup>26,112</sup>. Moreover, further research needs to investigate methods that account for wider attribute needs in optimal performance outcomes.

### **8.1.2 Multidisciplinary Abilities**

A consistent finding throughout the thesis is the requirement of multidisciplinary attributes, in line with previous research <sup>2,3,5,6</sup>. Players are required to develop and exhibit a breadth of qualities spanning technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social disciplines, coined the '4-corners' <sup>4</sup>. Whilst all corners were deemed important, a repetitious finding throughout this thesis, and a key finding from studies 2 & 4, is the coach's perceived importance of psychological and technical/tactical skills above others.

Within psychological attributes, dealing with and overcoming challenge as well as coping skills were established as essential (study 2 and study 4). Regarding challenge, reports have established that players best develop through programmes that intentionally plan for 'bumps in the road' <sup>137,139</sup>. These are pre-planned challenges for players to face and overcome, to further develop their abilities. However, overcoming challenge requires the input of developed psychological skills <sup>139,219</sup>. Therefore, providing players with the essential tools, such as PCDEs <sup>220,221</sup>, is a critical aspect of talent development programmes. Likewise, Study 4 and further research <sup>251</sup> have established coping as a further defining ability of talented players from their lesser talented peers. Whilst coping is a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities linked with social factors (peer support) and emotional regulation <sup>252,253</sup>, coping skills are developed through experience and time, with research reporting that players learn to cope progressively with age <sup>253</sup>. Coping and overcoming challenge are likely interlinked, and whilst coping will progressively improve with time, it is postulated that the development of the PCDEs to develop overcoming challenge will likely aid coping mechanisms. However, given that study 4 reported on the lack of psychological provisions offered within academies, it is likely that such developments will be stalled and the opportunity to realise potentially talented players may be lost. Therefore, given the strong desire for psychological attributes by coaches, as

established throughout this thesis, efforts should be made to provide psychological provisions for academy players.

A key finding of study 4 was the concept of interdependent attributes. In consideration of the findings of the thesis, coping and dealing with challenge (study 2 & 4), in addition to further attributes, are said to be the underpinning qualities of 'mental toughness' <sup>215,254</sup>. Mental toughness has been long debated as a key quality required of talented players <sup>139,215,254,255</sup>, with typical findings highlighting higher competency in mental toughness and performance outcomes <sup>254,255</sup>. Moreover, given the multidimensional nature of mental toughness <sup>254,255</sup>, exemplifies the notion of interdependent and multifactorial components to talent.

Likewise, decision-making skills and game understanding were highlighted as key tactical attributes (study 2 and study 4). The findings of study 2 established both attributes as some of the highest perceived attributes listed. Whereas study 4 determined that perceived talented players exhibited greater capacities in decision-making and game understanding, whilst deselected players lacked in both areas. Furthermore, in the consideration of both decision-making skills/game understanding and mental toughness, whilst on the surface, they appear very different, it may be argued that they are further interdependent variables <sup>236,237</sup>. Whilst one set of these skills is engrossed in the tactical aspects of the game, the other is a player's internal abilities to handle pressure and conflict. However, decision-making skills are developed through deliberate practice and experience <sup>256</sup>. Therefore, reflective skills will be essential to learn from both the success and failure within experience, to further improve upon, and understand, different performance outcomes <sup>237</sup>. This further highlights the ability to reflect, cope and deal with challenge (mental toughness), ultimately affording developments in decision-making and game understanding. This example within psychological and technical/tactical abilities demonstrates a key interdependence across attributes

required to achieve subsequent success. Therefore, it can be postulated that a wider interdependence of multidisciplinary attributes and abilities across the 4-corners may underpin performance, of which further investigation is required.

Similarly, it was also reported that several variables may influence performance outcomes. Maturation was reported throughout the thesis as a highly confounding variable <sup>19,34</sup>. As an example, superiority in varying performance measures has been attributed to advanced maturation. Players of an early maturation will exhibit greater physical performance outcomes <sup>36,47</sup> and be perceived as having a higher potential for success by coaches <sup>34</sup>. This maturation bias was demonstrated within studies 3 and 4 (coach selection bias). Conversely, this negatively implicates players of a late maturation status, who may have high potentials of talent that remain unrealised due to misidentification and, consequently, the early exit from an academy programme <sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, given the high demand for psychological abilities, late maturing players have been associated with higher levels of self-regulation, and ultimately developing superior psychological qualities <sup>32</sup>. This 'coping' effect has consequently benefited many players long-term, likewise negatively impacted others, therefore demonstrating how maturation is wider than an influence on purely physical abilities. Moreover, it is clear that maturation must be accounted for when interrogating performance data and overcome bias, especially in consideration of player (de)selection processes. Moreover, in the consideration of interdependence of attributes, maturation may influence attribute outcomes if not accounted for.

In consideration of maturation, and its influence on wider abilities, one such ability is physical speed. Studies 1 to 4 each established a need for players to exhibit the physical quality of speed as a key attribute for success in soccer. This aligns with previous research, which has established speed as a determining factor for selection <sup>170,184</sup>. Such findings are potentially due to the evolution of the sport,



whereby the speed of the game has increased <sup>1,79</sup>, especially during defining moments of a match. However, whilst speed is an important attribute within soccer, studies 1 and 3 established such prominence only beyond critical stages of growth. Therefore, maturation must be accounted for when utilising physical data, such as speed, due to its high impact on physical abilities <sup>75,245</sup>. Failing to control for maturation when comparing player abilities will undoubtedly result in the misidentification of talent and consequently, increase the chance of deselecting/selecting players of greater/lesser potential.

The findings of this thesis also highlight the need for more work that considers and overcomes survivorship bias within TID. The concept of survivorship bias has been credited to Abraham Wald, tasked with estimating aircraft vulnerability during World War II, using data obtained from the survivors <sup>257,258</sup>. Wald noted that the damage endured on the returned aircraft would typically influence vehicle developments <sup>257,258</sup>. However, the fact these aircraft had successfully returned suggests such sites of damage were potentially less significant, whilst the aircraft that had endured critical damage likely had done so in contrasting locations. A further example was reported from World War I, where the introduction of soldier personal protective equipment (helmets and others) was directly associated with the increase in soldier hospitalisations. Such associations could be perceived negatively. However, the use of helmets reduced the frequency of death. Therefore, soldiers who would have previously died following trauma would now survive and report to hospital <sup>258</sup>. In summary, survivorship bias is the one-sided focus placed on individuals or objects, with the abandonment of further clarity on those who were less successful (unrecovered aircraft or soldiers who died during the war).

Surprisingly, the acknowledgement of survivorship bias within sports appears to be lacking (to date). Research typically places an emphasis on successful players, looking at what processes aided

such success, or the skills and abilities associated with such success <sup>11,48,51</sup>. However, there appears to be little acknowledgement of why players are being released, barriers to selection or the measures of attributes related to deselection. Several findings within this thesis were linked to survivorship bias. In consideration of physical performance, study 4 highlighted that physical skills were typically at a high level within deselected players, but they were limited in abilities within other areas, resulting in the player's deselection. Therefore, whilst physical skills are important, they may not define talented from non-talented players, aligning with study 2 findings of physical abilities to be less important. Moreover, considering the concept of interdependent variables as reported in Study 4, it is likely the consequence of combined skills and abilities that determine talent outcome, i.e., having a strong game understanding to know when to exploit physical abilities such as speed.

A further postulation established in study 4, somewhat building upon the focus of deselection, is the concept of minimal thresholds of abilities. This suggests that players are required to exhibit abilities above a specified threshold, in order to avoid deselection. Whilst it is evident that an abundance of attributes are related to success in soccer, it was also clear that lacking abilities resulted in deselection. Future research may consider a bottom-up focus on the identification of deselected players (i.e., what distinguished deselected players from those selected) over the traditional top-down approach, whereby we look to identify the contributions of abilities to top performing players over lesser talented and deselected players. In undertaking this approach may look to overcome, or acknowledge, survivorship bias. Furthermore, determining benchmarks of minimal abilities may prove useful in recruitment and deselection processes, given the findings of the current study speculate a plethora of abilities may be associated with success. However, it is important to acknowledge the compensation phenomenon, whereby players lacking within one area are counterbalanced by the outstanding abilities in another <sup>19,20</sup>. Whilst statistical tools may prove beneficial in offsetting these abilities <sup>31</sup>, further research needs to be undertaken in order to handle this limitation.

## 8.2 Practical Recommendations

This thesis established several findings that can be readily applied to further enhance player development and (de)selection processes in soccer. The outcomes of this thesis established that coaches are able to distinguish talented from non-talented players, and the process in doing so utilises both current performance perception and future beliefs (within subjective measures). Therefore, academies would likely benefit from the application of a performance vs potential matrix <sup>11,51</sup> for enhanced understanding of player performances and pathways. This permits the greater clarity of players long-term offerings, whereby specific squares suggest threats of 'clogging the system', allowing action to be taken early to address such issues <sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, the utility of objective markers, such as speed, may prove to be beneficial in identifying players (or supporting coach perceptions of players) with greater potential.

In the consideration of player potential, maturation has been considered to be one facet used to predict potential (given its long-term predictions of height and biological status). However, maturation was a confounding variable throughout this thesis, highlighting a negative bias towards selection. Similar to this thesis' findings, maturation has previously been acknowledged to bias coach perceptions of potential <sup>34</sup>. Therefore, further work needs to be implemented to overcome this bias. Whilst it is positive that throughout this thesis coaches have demonstrated a good awareness of maturation and its impact upon performance, such bias was still presented. Therefore, previous education and awareness has been beneficial, yet further provisions may be required to address this bias. One consideration may be towards the use of allometric scaling when accounting for maturation within performance. Allometric scaling allows for the normalization of performance based upon confounding variables (maturation) <sup>259,260</sup>. This has been applied in sports such as Rugby, accounting for mass differences <sup>259,260</sup>. Unlike ratio scaling, which penalizes or favours scale extremes, allometric

scaling provides an equal symmetry in adjustments <sup>259,260</sup>. Therefore, allometric scaling controlling for maturation may provide a more meaningful method to compare individuals of differing maturation, to determine players of the highest potential.

Furthermore, from both previous research and the findings of this thesis, it is clear that psychological skills are essential abilities for success <sup>2,3,5,6,137,219</sup>. However, study 4 established that psychological provisions are lacking in academies. This may be due to financial reasons <sup>140</sup>, or the misconceptions and stigma of such provisions <sup>140,142,261</sup>. To overcome financial barriers, academies might consider fostering relations with local education institutes, whereby academic research appointments and student placements can be utilised to provide such provisions. Overcoming the stigma of psychological interventions requires the education of academy staff to better understand the benefits of such offerings, and remove common misconceptions related to psychology. Such approach has been applied within Biobanding provision for maturation. Biobanding is the grouping of players by maturation age bands, over chronological bands, for training and games. This reduces the physical advantages associated with age banding, whilst also providing development opportunities otherwise unattainable (i.e., social and psychological abilities) <sup>25</sup>. Conversely, a negative stigma was associated with younger biological players 'playing down' chronological age groups <sup>262</sup>. However, such misconceptions were overcome in educating players and coaches <sup>262,263</sup>. Therefore, such provisions may prove beneficial for psychological provisions, and long-term change within the sport. Moreover, greater education should be provided to coaches and players to enhance the clarity of a psychologist's role within performance. Furthermore, coaches should work in tandem with psychologists in order to equip players with skills to overcome challenge <sup>139</sup>, whilst coaches provide appropriate levels of challenge throughout training sessions to further apply and ingrain such newly acquired skills <sup>139</sup>.

Considering player recruitment and (de)selection processes, coach intuition currently plays a prominent role in deciding each player's fate. However, the findings of this thesis reported several limitations in the utility of coach intuition in isolation. Therefore, academies should look to utilise combined measures of subjective (coach intuition) and objective (components of fitness, psychological assessments, maturation measures, to list a few) data to enhance the accuracy of player selection. Coaches should also consider the multidisciplinary needs of players, and therefore remove any emphasis on technical/tactical performance, and account for the more holistic demands of each player. This overcomes various biases that can result in the misidentification of players.

In support of the above, further use of longitudinal data should be applied when considering player selection. Whilst it was evident that coaches utilise data collected across a season, it can be postulated that coaches focus on short-term over long-term goals <sup>11</sup>. Given that the development of talent is non-linear, players should be afforded the time to realise their potential. However, permitting longer time within the system may block other, more talented players from recruitment <sup>11,51</sup>. Therefore, a balancing act in providing enough, but not too much time, must be employed for optimal outcomes.

Finally, whilst this thesis expands upon the provisions offered within soccer, the findings may be relevant to wider sporting disciplines. Given that scouts are commonly used within a wealth of sports outside soccer, there is a high potential that similar approaches are administered in selected athletes. Therefore, this thesis may serve as a guide towards further research within other sporting disciplines, as a means to further understand and improve upon the provisions offered.

### 8.3 Thesis Limitations

A limitation of this thesis is the lack of positional consideration. Previous research has reported attribute variations by playing position <sup>3,78</sup>. Therefore, the findings of this thesis support more generalised findings for soccer players but could be further honed to isolate player positional needs. However, previous work has postulated the potential to misidentify performance when utilising generalised over positional requirements for soccer <sup>20,78</sup>. Therefore, the findings of this thesis offer a foundation of work to be built upon to understand positional demands within soccer.

Participant group size was a further limitation in several of the thesis studies. Whilst studies 2 and 4 were able to recruit a sufficient breadth of participants, from various clubs across the UK, studies 1 and 3 focused on a singular academy, with limited numbers of participants per groups (age groups). Therefore, a lack of generalisation challenges the integrity of the findings <sup>264</sup>. Recruiting wider academy participation would rectify both of these issues. However, gaining access to multiple academies may prove challenging, especially when the primary research is based within one academy, in a professional capacity. Additionally, guidance from research, such as Hecksteden et al. <sup>264</sup> in using small samples within football may prove beneficial (as applied within this thesis where possible).

Given the confounding influence of maturation, a potential limitation is within the use of the predication equation applied to determine maturation status <sup>121</sup>. The method applied, percentage of predicted adult height (%PAH), has been reported to demonstrate reasonable validity within soccer <sup>70,124</sup>. However, these reports demonstrate that %PAH demonstrated 62% agreement with gold standard measures of maturation <sup>124</sup>. Therefore, the potential for under- or overestimation is possible, particularly at the extremities <sup>124,248</sup>. However, access, financial constraints and ethical considerations prevented the use of bone scanning. Likewise, additional methods of predicting maturation status have proven to be inaccurate and less stable <sup>126,127,248</sup>. Therefore, the use of the

Khamis-Roche method was deemed the most appropriate method to be applied. A further related limitation was the lack of quantification for maturation status (i.e., early, average and late maturation). Should the application of such groupings been applied, further details may have been established regarding maturational influence. Moreover, future work should look to expand upon the current base of research, to include maturational quantification.

Further considerations should be made towards the data presented throughout the thesis. One major limitation is the use of singular time points (physical performance data), over longitudinal data. Isolated 'snapshots' of performance fail to account for performance variations, such as those confounded by maturation or considering the status of learning <sup>11,51,266</sup>. Therefore, players who perform well on the day, or more accustomed to the task, will outperform their peers. However, this is needless to say they hold the greater long-term potential. Moreover, whilst reference to isolated performance remains common practice (as demonstrated within this thesis), further research should look to understand if trajectories of performance, from longitudinal data, provide greater measures of potential. Conversely, where repeated data points have been applied, such as subjective grading (study 3), further considerations should be made towards match-to-match variations. Given the high expectancy of variation between matches <sup>213</sup>, this data needs to be accounted for when interpreting data. Therefore, longitudinal data may also require adjustment in order to provide greater interpretation of results.

Additionally, it is impossible to rule out researcher bias from the outcome of the studies undertaken. Given that the primary researcher was embedded within an academy as a lead role within the sports science and performance department and given that the research focused on areas influencing this realm, it is highly probably that an unconscious bias was present throughout. Furthermore, given the relationships with staff, there was potential for unconscious selection towards

participants, although this is somewhat mitigated by the fact all coaches were informed and volunteered to partake. The primary research has made their best efforts to reduce this potential of bias throughout, but it is essential to acknowledge and present such possibilities as a limitation of this thesis.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant closures across the country. Whilst the pandemic was an uncontrollable variable, COVID-19 likely implicated some of the findings within this thesis. Given that training schedules will have endured significant suspension and interruption <sup>267,268</sup>, group sizes would require adaption to smaller groups once training could recommence <sup>268</sup>, and several players would have likely fallen foul to sporadic isolations, the performance outcomes during this period will have not been reflective of traditional seasons pre-pandemic. Reports <sup>267–269</sup> have demonstrated that significant physical decline would have been highly probable, given the confinement required during lockdown. Players will have exhibited muscular atrophy and cardiovascular decline, resulting in a higher prevalence of injury <sup>267,268</sup>. Furthermore, psychological wellbeing <sup>269</sup> was also found to have been negatively impacted during lockdown. Therefore, measures of physical performance and perceptions of psychological abilities (study 3) will likely have been implicated by COVID-19. Consequently, selection processes will have been further impacted, in both how players are being selected, and the considerations towards player abilities.

#### **8.4 Recommendations for Future Research**

Having established the concept of attribute interdependence (study 4), future research should look to understand the essential combinations of attribute interdependence for subsequent success in soccer. Furthermore, with the acknowledgement of the compensation phenomenon, are their critical attributes (and their independent counterparts) required for success, compared to less critical attributes, based on the profile of the player.



With clear findings that psychological skills are essential for subsequent success (study 2 and 4), and the reports of psychological misconceptions and/or lack of provisions from academies (study 4)<sup>140</sup>, future research should look to establish novel methods to educate and integrate psychological developments within academy programmes. Additionally, should successful change be made, studies can further look to identify whether such interventions impact performance and selection outcomes.

Future research should be considerate of survival bias. Given the extensive range of abilities associated with talent (study 2), instead of the emphasis on understanding what the make-up of outstanding players is, research should look to focus on the least required abilities to survive selection (study 4). Given that a wealth of research has identified a high variety of attributes related to player selection <sup>2,3,6,31,184</sup>, establishing why players are deselected may provide further meaningful insights towards abilities or attributes confounding selection outcomes. It may be postulated that a finer standard of skills can be acknowledged identifying a deselection 'cut-off', to that of identifying top performing players, allowing for a more efficient focus on player development. Additionally, can benchmarks be utilised to assess the minimal thresholds of ability (study 2 and 4), to aid and enhance recruitment and deselection processes?

This study was able to establish novel findings due to the mixed-methods design applied throughout. Future research should look beyond the typical intervention approach to identifying talent and consider further mixed-method designs. Whilst broadly applied within this thesis, an ethnographic research design may provide valuable insights around current practice, in order to understand how selection processes can be reshaped. Additionally, the use of international clubs, or wider sporting disciplines, with long established success in TID, may provide critical insights for soccer.

## 8.5 Conclusion

This thesis investigated how players are selected within academy soccer, the processes applied, and the attributes deemed as important for success. Coach intuition plays a prominent role in the development and selection of players, however, given the extensive limitations presented and discussed throughout – maturation bias, performance bias, confirmative bias, Pygmalion/Rosenthal effect, espoused theories vs theories-in-action and low agreement between staff – coach intuition must be supported by objective assessments in order to mitigate and overcome such issues and increase the accuracy in player selection.

Considering player abilities, whilst various attributes were highlighted as essential for success (physical speed, coping, dealing with adversity, decision-making and game understanding) it is apparent that several attributes work in tandem in order to achieve performance outcomes. However, it is uncertain as to the length of these co-contributing attributes, and their influence on developments. Conversely, it is also apparent that additional variables will influence performance and must be accounted for, such as maturation. In failing to do so, the potential for misidentification is great. This further highlights and supports the multidimensional needs of talent development <sup>11,20,48</sup>. Future work should be undertaken to further understand the contribution of attribute interdependence, and the bi-product effect of developing contributing attributes.



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# Appendices

## 8.6 Appendix 1 Ethical Approval



### **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Richard Kite

Project Title:

A Comparison of Recruitment Criteria for English Academy Football Players

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

02 April 2019

Project Reference Number:

P88539



## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Richard Kite

Project Title:

Comparison of coach perception, non-contextual metric based assessment and  
contextual metric based assessments of academy soccer players

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry  
University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and  
approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

17 January 2020

Project Reference Number:

P99816





## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant: Richard Kite  
Project Title: Coach perceptions of player abilities

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval: 07 Dec 2020  
Project Reference Number: P110157



## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant: Richard Kite  
Project Title: Identifying soccer player (de)selection discriminations

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Low Risk

Date of approval: 12 Mar 2021  
Project Reference Number: P120319

## 8.7 Appendix 2 The list of 82 defined terms and phrases included within the survey (Chapter 5)

### Talent Phrases

Terminology	Definition
"Talent is unmeasurable"	Phrase
"Talent is multifaceted"	Phrase
"Potential outclasses talent"	Phrase
"Talent is the equivalent to a potential first team player"	Phrase

### Physical Attributes

Terminology	Definition
Athleticism	The physical qualities that are characteristic of athletes
Early Developers	Individuals with advanced biological developments to their age group.
Genetic Predisposition	Increased potential of physical build and abilities inherent from the parents
Height	A person's standing stature
Innate Gifts	An undeveloped and naturally high level of skill or ability
Late Developers	Individuals with delayed biological developments to their age group
Maturation	The stage or status of an individual's biological development
Peak Height Velocity	The period of time a child experiences their maximal upward growth during adolescence.
Physical Attributes	The physical qualities or characteristics of an individual
Physical Development	The advance development of skeletal-muscle size, strength and co-ordination
Physicality	The physical presence and developments of an individual
Predicted Future Height	The height an individual is predicted to grow to in adulthood
Relative Age Effect	The phenomenon whereby a birth month located closer to a seasonal cut-off date offers a potential sporting advantage

Speed	The ability to move quickly
Stamina	The ability to sustain prolonged physical effort
Strength	The ability to physically produce and resist against high levels of force

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#### **Psychological Attributes**

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<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Attitude	A feeling or opinion of someone/something, or the resulting associated behaviour
Character	The mental and moral qualities unique to an individual
Coachable	Capable and receptive to being taught
Competitive	A strong demand to win or succeed
Confidence	A positive self-belief in one's own abilities
Desire	A strong feeling to have or achieve something
Determination	The quality of trying to do, or achieve something that is difficult, without giving up
Disciplined	The ability to control one's behaviours and way of working
Drive	An urge to attain a goal or satisfy a need
Ego	A person's sense of self-esteem or self-importance
Goal Driven	Having self-motivation to achieve specific goals
Growth Mindset	A self-belief that one's abilities can be developed through dedication, hard work and external input.
Humility	Having a modest view of one's own importance or abilities
Laziness	Unwilling to work or put in effort
Learning Style	The variation in preferential ways students absorb, process, comprehend and retain information
Mental Resilience	The ability to cope with crisis mentally or emotionally
Mentality	The characteristic way of thinking towards a person, group or task
Motivation	A person's willingness and desire to do something

Open-Minded	Willing to consider new ideas
Overconfidence	An excess of confidence in one's ability or judgement that is not justified
Perseverance	Persistence in doing something despite delay or difficulty in achieving success.
Personality	Individual differences in characteristic patterns to thinking, feeling and behaving.
Positive Mindset	A positive established set of attitudes
Problem Solving	The process of finding solutions to difficult or complex scenarios
Psychological Profile	The emotional intelligence, self-awareness, behaviours and personality of an athlete and how they impact one another
Team Player	An effective worker within a team, producing results best for the team over the individual
Work Ethic	The belief that hard work and diligence have a moral benefit to strengthen character, abilities and outcomes

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#### **Technical Attributes**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Ball Control	The ability to maintain possession of the ball individually
Creativity	The use of vision and imagination to create effective plays
Decision Making Skills	The ability to make correct and effective decisions under pressure both technically and tactically
Dribbling Skills	The skill of ball trickery, the ability to pass an opponent through precise control and movement of the ball, or the ability to maintain the ball whilst running in all directions
Effectiveness	The capability of producing successful results or outcomes
Game Impact	The effectiveness and presence of an individual player upon a team, to achieve global and individual success
Game Intelligence	A players understanding and predictive reading of a game in action, and executing an effective strategy in attempts to overcome the opponent.
Global Skill Development	An adequate development of skills across all required areas and positions inherent with the game.
Inventive	The ability to develop new and unique skills, tactics and techniques

Natural Aptitude	A natural ability or skill
Outplay 1vs1	The ability to succeed in 1 versus 1 situation
Passing	The ability to successfully play the ball to another player without interception, using the correct passing option
Philosophical Alignment	Developing skills, techniques and tactics towards a specific and associated philosophy of play
Playing Forward	The attacking tactical strategy to continually move the ball upfield towards the opponent's goal, without retreat.
Position Specificity	Developing players technically and tactically specific to their playing position only.
Situational Awareness	An understanding of the environment and the players, reading and predicting the game for effective attacking and/or defensive outcomes
Tactical Ability	The ability to process information, choose the right action for effective play, and successfully execute this action both individually and collectively
Tactical Development	To develop one's knowledge and ability of tactical methods
Technical Ability	The ability to execute a variety of technical skills
Technical Mastery	The superior ability to execute advanced technical skills
Technical Skills	The ability to execute precision movements such as dribbling, passing and shooting

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### **Sociological Attributes**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Adaptability	The quality of being able to adjust to new situations and conditions
Challenged Regularly	Providing an adequate stimulus to stretch a person's abilities allowing them to continually develop and build upon pre-existing skills.
Commitment	A person's dedication towards a cause
Environmental Influence	The influence of a person's surroundings and social infrastructure on an individual's behaviours, beliefs, characteristics and social development.

Experience	Knowledge and ability through involvement or exposure to previous relevant events
Independence	Not having to depend on others to advance themselves
Individual Developments	Tailoring programmes to the individual needs of each person
Locality	A close geographical location to the playing environment
Opportunity	The accessibility, time and circumstance that make it possible to do something
Parental Support	Parental behaviours towards a child such as praising and encouragement, which indicate he or she is accepted and loved

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#### **Additional Attributes**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Development Process	The process of development through networks and community groups to development basic competencies, through to professional infrastructures with the development of advanced techniques
Holistic Development	The development of all aspects and attributes associated to performance (physical, mental, technical, social)
Outstanding Attribute	Having a single attribute that an individual excels within to a superior standard.
Phase Specific Developments	The development of players based on the phase (age) they are currently playing at

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## 8.8 Appendix 3 Definitions of VAS items provided to coaches (Chapter 6)

### Psychological variables

**Motivation** – Desire or willingness to do something.

**Concentration** – Action of focusing all of one's attention.

**Self-Confidence** – A trust in one's abilities, qualities and judgement.

**Team Emphasis** – Positive belief in co-operation within the team to work well together, over individually.

**Anxiety** – A feeling of worry, nervousness, apprehensions and unease towards something with an uncertain outcomes.

### Tactical Variables

**Knowing About Ball Actions** – Having the knowledge of ball actions, regarding where and how to play the ball, when to receive the ball, and follow up actions.

**Knowing about others** – Reading the environment and my opponent, and being able to predict the play of my opponent ahead of it happening.

**Positioning and Deciding** – Being able to get open for offensive plays, or being positioned well in defensive play. Reading the oppositions movement and being able to adapt to the environment to defend and attack.

**Acting in Changing Situations** – Understanding how to read between offensive and defensive situations, and being able to create opportunities to intercept the ball.

### Physical Variables

**Speed** – The rate of change of which someone moves.

**Change of Direction** – The ability to refocus speed in an alternative direction, in the least time possible, in order to change direction of travel

### Additional Variables

**Tactical Performance** – A personal belief of a players tactical understanding and execution within game environments

**Overall Performance** – A personal belief of a player's abilities to impact games positively, in consideration of technical, tactical, physical and psychological skills.

**Selection/Deselection** – A personal belief as to whether the player has demonstrated the standards expected to progress or be removed from the academy programme.



## 8.9 Appendix 4 Structure of interview questions (Chapter 7)

### Participant information

1. What is your current job title?
2. What is the academy category status of your club?
3. Likewise, what league does your first team play in?
4. How long have you worked in football?
5. How long have you been in your current position?
6. What age group will you be discussing today?

### Part 1

*The following questions are about you as a coach. The aim of this section is to establish background information and your personal beliefs. There are no wrong answers, and anything you say here will not be identifiable at later stages.*

1. Can you give me a brief overview of your background?
2. How would you describe your current role?
3. When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?
4. What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?

### Part 2

*This section attempts to gain insights around the strategies employed to develop and (de)select players as both a coach and club.*

1. In regards to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?
2. Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?
3. When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?
4. Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?
5. Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?
6. What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?
7. How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?
8. Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?
9. Likewise, Is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?
10. Probing question, if yes to Q5 & Q6 – to your knowledge, are the two strategies in any way related?
11. When considering the development phases, If a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?
12. If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?
13. Do you as a coach actively consider training age (years spent within both the sport and the academy system) for development plans or player (de)selection?
14. What is your understanding of 'maturation' or 'biological age'?
15. Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?

### Part 3 Activity –

> Using the team sheet, place the letter H (for ‘high performers’) next to the players considered to be the top performing players in the age group.

> Now, place the letter L against the players considered to be the lower performing players in the age group.

> The remaining players without a letter, would you agree these are all ‘mid-performing’ players? If so, place the letter M next to the player.

> Would you like to make any changes to player groupings, or can you confirm the groupings are correct (higher, middle and lower performing groups)?

#### Groupings

1. How have you determined who is in which group?
2. Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?
3. Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?
4. In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?
5. Do you think there are any players within the mid-performance group who you would also definitely select?
6. Likewise, are there any players within the mid-performing group who you would definitely deselect?

#### Higher Performing Players

7. Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?
8. Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding than the others?
9. Likewise, is there anything uniquely outstanding about each individual, which may not be replicated across the group?
10. Still within the top group, are there areas or abilities that each player is lacking in, but doesn’t appear to affect their performance?

#### Lower Performing Players

11. What is it that the players of the bottom group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?
12. Do these players lack complete abilities required to be in higher groups, or do they possess the required abilities but at a poorer standard?
13. Is there a consistent theme amongst the group in regards to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?
14. Going through by each individual, what is the key reasoning to why that player is grouped in the lower?
15. Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn’t affect their performance and therefore doesn’t aid them in progressing to higher groups?

### Middle Performing Players

16. How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the higher or the lower groups?
17. Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?
18. What does each individual player lack that prevents them from being in the top group?

## **8.10 Appendix 5 Transcriptions of Interviews**

### **8.10.1 Participant 1**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: So, my current job title is lead youth development phase coach.

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

P: We are a category Two status Academy

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: they play in currently League One.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: Uh personally 12 years

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: Just over two years

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**

P: Under 16's

**I: Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, uh, so I flirted with sort of academies in terms of myself, sort of, in around the ages of 14. I was told that I wasn't going to be big enough. Um, and I wasn't gonna be able to cope with the physical demands of the game moving forwards, so that's kind of where my professional sort of journey finished, If you like as a player, but went on to play sort of step three, step four level non-league. So as soon as that happened in terms of being told, I kind of focused my thoughts really on how to stay involved in the game. So, I looked more at the coaching side of things at 21, sort of did my B license at 21, so that's one of the youngest in the country at the time to do it. And then from there, sort of from the age of 21, I got involved at [club name] and sort of helping out with their under 11's for two or three seasons. And then they asked me from there would I take what was the 9's? So I took the nines, followed them through to all the way to under 11's, and then from there end of the under 11 year, they asked me to take the fourteens and assist with the 16's and then from there I just took the 16s, and then they asked me to be youth development lead phase. So, I did that for 12 months and then they asked me to go into the eighteens. So, from there I had

then two years with the 18 slash 23's which then kind of takes me up to sort of I left there two years ago to then take my current role at [club name]. That's kind of the journey, so I've kind of seen every such job and there is a thing across the chain to be honest.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

P: OK, so my responsibilities since I've been in [club name] is been to redesign the syllabus for the 13's to 16's, which then is now turned into a wider bit of work in terms of how it fits with the 18's and then how do we redesign the 9's to 12's? So that's kind of been a lot of the main bulk of the work. In addition to that, obviously taking the 16's on training and game days, and has also forged quite a large part of that, but then it is the overall management really of, you know, the part time staff, making sure that, you know, they're in the right places at the right time. They know you're coming into training in liaising with parents, you know all the... All the normal sort of management types of things if you like.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: I'm very much around, not prescribing. So, we're very much at the moment, around what you'd call constraints-based training where we challenge conditions to get outcomes that we want to get. The reason being is because ultimately the players are the ones that play the game. We're not! And the game is 1) ever evolving, 2) ever changing, and 3) because it is a random game, the likelihood of you being able to create the same situation exactly the same again, is very slim. So, it is for me around creating intelligent decision makers and then having ownership and a level of understanding and how we guide their development and their learning to make sure that they can start to see pictures themselves. They can start to see changes within the game so that it's not always reliant on us as the coach on a match day or whatever to say are you aware there playing this? Oh, I hadn't even thought about that, as a player you know. We're trying very much for them to be observant in those sorts of situations.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: So yeah, we've um. I've aligned the syllabus to a set of criteria I suppose that we would expect the players to be able to hit, and we rate them, sort of on... It's a 3-point scale really. So, 1 is infrequent, 2 is frequent and then at 3 it's a habit. So, ultimately, we're looking at creating habits and we have a set of things that sit across all four corners for that to make sure that we've got... it's subjective, obviously, because the game is. But it gives us some metric to be able to go, "Yeah, we think he's good enough to be looking at going to the next

level as a scholar” or “yeah he needs a little bit of work in those areas, 'cause instead of it being a habit and it happening constantly, it's only infrequent or it's frequent, but it's the success rate is not as high”. So yeah, we certainly have that in place which we didn't have before.

**I: For clarification are you referring to the 4-corners of the FA 4-corner model?**

P: Yeah Tech/Tact, Social, psychological, physical.

**I: In regard to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision making process?**

P: We include a lot of people within those decisions. Um so, if I was to list them it would... I mean the last one, which we are actually trying to do more often, It's got the Academy manager in it, the head coaching, the Under 18's lead, myself as the under sixteens lead, the under Sixteens coach is also in there and then we have a representative from sports science and medicine, we also have the player Welfare Officer in there, or player care officers as there kinda called now, Um and then we also include the education officer. So, what we tend to do is we kind of rate them in each area, red amber or green. So, where they're looking at, sort of, s&c, their rating them red, amber, green based on what their requirements would be. We're rating them from a coaching side of things. Education are rating, the more around, and welfare rate them around what they're like within a school setting, what their personal life is like so then we get an overall picture of the player if you like. So, then we can go if they're all greens and you know from the football side and sports science that you know is a nailed on scholar to be perfectly truthful.

**I: Within that, do you have freedom to pitch in your opinions outside of just a technical or tactical domain?**

P: I'll give an opinion of what I'm seeing and then we work quite closely then with the sport scientists where they would come out, we would show them what we're seeing, whether that be on a game day, or they were training, and then there's a couple of instances where we've already started to put in specific individual plans physically for certain individuals, because we feel as though they're not quite where we need them to be. I mean, one of them have been actually offered a scholarship anyway, but to get him to the next level within that program to be professional, we're going - He needs that little bit extra. So, then we created that, on the back of that.

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: So ultimately it would go back to that sort of RAG rating scenario. Obviously if they're all greens, then obviously they're getting selected. If their majority greens, but there's some Amber we might necessarily do a little bit more digging into the Amber areas, and then see whether or not your way up there. So ultimately those decisions, sort of where they are on the cusp, will get left to the senior member of staff, either it being the head coach or the Academy manager once they feel as though they've got all of the information that they need, and everybody sort of given their viewpoint, you know if it's a mixed opinion. Then yeah, that's kind of the way in which it works, both for selection and then obviously, unfortunately, deselection the other way in terms of releasing boys. We try, we try not to. We're quite different in a lot of respects, in that we run with very large numbers as a football club, so most of our squad sizes are 20 and above and we tend to try not to release where we don't need to. We try and exhaust every Avenue possible before it gets to that point. So, then we can honestly look around and go "look. We've done everything we possibly can do. Unfortunately, that the fit isn't quite right at this football club at this time", so yeah, that's where I would say we're probably that little bit different to others. Some I've worked with in the past and know of other football clubs that seem to be a little bit more trigger happy.

**I: Do you have any thoughts or reflections from having a bigger squad and not deselecting?**

P: It's harder, certainly harder in terms of logistics. It's certainly harder in terms of providing them an appropriate program, so we have to try and source a lot of additional games. And certainly, in these times that's difficult. We've been quite successful with generally being quite successful over this first half of the season to do it. But you know, the things around spaces and Flood lights and all that sort of stuff then start to impact on what we can do and what we'd like to do. In an ideal world. So, I see both points. I can see having larger groups and how that can potentially help, but I can also see the flip side of it and having small groups and necessarily allowing for it to be an easier pathway. We have lots of discussions around Individuals that are ready to play up, we've still got to create that pathway, even though we've got a large group in front. So that becomes a little bit harder. Yeah, there's a few at the moment that are playing up, which you know, if you look at it from a personal point of view, it gives you a headache because it adds another number into the group. But for their personal development it's certainly right for them to be in that next group up. So, we always

make sure that that pathway is not blocked and just try and source a different way to potentially aid some other players in different ways. So, It's a bit of a juggling act at times.

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individuals needs?**

P: so, we also do it in conjunction with the players, as well, so the players are fully aware of it and they buy into it. So, it is very much player driven. so, where like the two individuals that I was talking about earlier, we won't just say "tomorrow you're coming out of football and you're doing this physical program". It's "look. What do you think? do feel that this is beneficial to you? Yes or no". And yeah, looking past we've always had the ones that have gone "no I don't feel it's beneficial to me" and you know you try and find a different way round of trying to get the same outcomes. Generally, they're quite receptive and they buy into it, and then they want to do more 'cause they see it's for them. it's not a generic S&C session Or, you know. It is tailored specifically for them where they're getting potentially more attention than what somebody else might be getting. They ask more questions and They wanna take more stuff away and become that little bit more interested in their own development, which we've found works quite well.

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

P: I wouldn't have said in terms of specifics in terms of "he's definitely going to be a centre half" or "he's definitely going to be right back". We certainly at 16 look more around areas of the pitch. So, we'll cut it in sort of front half pitches of play or back half pitches of play. So, we do still try and rotate our players positions even after certain sixteens level. So, a centre half might go and play in centre midfield and play as a deep lying midfielder. Our front sort of five 6 depending upon what formation we're playing, we rotate the majority of them round so they're not seen as just a number 9. We may know their preferences is a 9, but they can also play as a 7, an 11 or a 10, or an 8 potentially to fit alongside that. So, I would say we profile them in terms of smaller areas of the pitch, but not specifically is as hard as "he is definitely going to be a centre half". The only one you do with that would be the goalkeeper for us.

**I: What are your thoughts on the FA 4-corner model?**

P: I think it's certainly, from when I started to now, it certainly has a bigger impact or a big voice, if you like, within programs. I certainly for me. I think, um. Technical and tactical for



me gets you in the door. Psychological/social gets you over the line, is the way in which I see it. So for example, you can have as much ability as you like, but unless you can deal with what football throws at you in terms of that psych and social corners, Then the likelihood is you're not gonna get... you are only go so far up the ladder, you're not going to get past the next step. So, we do have... and I do within my coaching try an always have those elements within a session. Sometimes, you know, I know the kids go away necessarily not liking me that evening, 'cause I, you know, particularly gone over, And you know, given wrong decisions against them on purpose, to get it to get a reaction. But I will always then make sure that I go and see them before the end and say look I was doing it for this reason. So, they have an understanding of why I've done it. Because ultimately that's what they're gonna get tested in. If they want to go and play at the highest level, which they say they want to, then you know, me making a bad decision against them is not going to be anything like 50,000 people shouting and screaming at them, Or, you know, a referee making a different decision that they don't particularly like at that particular time. we do certainly have a focus on those corners, and obviously I think where possible we try and work and merge all four of them together as much as we possibly can do.

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

P: The only objective ones that we would do, I would say, sit in the S&C field, so in terms of physical testing. so, like the 505, we would do. The strength... I'm useless on the names, but there's 5 or 6 that they do on the bar, and jump height, and so we obviously use those and benchmark those. we're not fortunate at the moment where we always get our 16s GPS, so that's difficult to necessarily compare them to what an 18 is. We're getting better at that, so over the last sort of before this Period we were getting them GPS every week and then we were being able to compare what they are doing compared to an 18 and stuff. I mean even our games necessarily aren't GPS in terms of sixteens at times. so It's difficult to get that objective data, but where we can, we do, and we do get it and try and benchmark it against other people both outside of the football Club and then sort of the next age groups up. So that would be the only objective physical data that we look at. I'd say everything else is more subjective in what we see with our eyes.

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

P: So, for me, over the years I've always found that that type of data backs up what your eyes see. So, if somebody is particularly, you know, slow at changing directions, and that

acceleration off their 505 are generally on the lower end of the scale. whereas, You know, a lad that he's got a particularly decent jump and you see him climbing..., You know he's not necessarily the tallest, but you see in climbing above over 6 foot players, then he goes and does his jump height, and he's like above all of the 23's and you're like "well, yeah, well, I see that that's just backs up what I'm seeing". So, it's good for that reassurance level as well. Do you always trust your eyes? There are obviously always those ones that, you know, necessarily come out of nowhere, if you like, with some of the things. And it just makes you think about it a little bit different, because we all have bias, and we just need to be necessarily more aware of these biases. They may or may not be kicking in. You know, both on a physical side or necessarily a technical or tactical side of what type of player we're always looking for, and I think that's important that we are aware of where the biases and what your bias potentially maybe more led towards.

**I: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

P: there is forming one to be perfectly truthful. I'm currently involved in in the IDP program, now 18's level and which is now sort of fed from the sixteens, If you like, it's going up, but we're also now implementing it as well into the 23's group more and even the first team, sort of fringe first team players, so there is beginning now to be a club wide strategy on Individual development; how can we get there? What's it look like? Because it then performs as a consistent for when players transfer through from age groups to age groups, that level of consistency is now there, whereas before yes they had them, but it necessarily wasn't always aligned in the same format in the same way. Everybody had their own little bit of license to take it depending upon whether you were the lead of the 18's, lead of the 23's, lead of the 16s. it fitted the same if you like, but it was there was little variance that was happening. Whereas that's kind of now gone completely corporate if you like or club wide so that everybody falls in the same line.

**I: Likewise, Is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**

P: I would probably say no. In a lot of respects. If they're good enough will sign them. Doesn't matter about the numbers. I mean, last year we ran with the youth team of 27 scholars. This year we're running with the youth team of 24 scholars, so you know, as I said earlier, the groups that we hold sort of even 13 to 16's are large. So, if we perceive them hitting the areas that we need them to hit and we think they're good enough, we'll take them. Likewise, if we think that you know the journey unfortunately, is coming to the end for them, then unfortunately will then deselect in the opposite way, so I wouldn't say there's a set... You

know, this is, we can only take this many, you know, and you have to make a choice on that. Well, you know I've worked in the other one as well. Where you've got 18 spaces in a youth team. once you filled your 18, that's it. So just be mindful about which ones you want to take and which ones you don't. 'cause once they're full you ain't getting anymore. They're just different ways of looking at it. I've been fortunate to work it sort of two clubs that have do it in two totally different ways, and it's and it's just adapting to fit in with their structure and in their points of view.

**I: When considering the development phases, If a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: Not necessarily. Obviously, peak height velocity, puberty all of those sort of things, maturation all sort of kicks in. So, we are mindful of that. Obviously, we highlight them as top performers in the in the foundation phase, and necessarily they may be that they are early developers, you know? So, we do look at trying to move them into the youth development phase and we've had late developers and unfortunately or Fortunately moved them into the foundation phase. It works both ways on that on that account. But it wouldn't say just because they don't under 12 is excelling example that you know, I wouldn't ever class them as being a nailed-on scholarship offer. Changes potentially more at the end of the end of 14's year. Purely simply because of where we sit on a category basis. Um and securing ourselves as a as a football club. So if they're still excelling at in the sort of in their 14's year, which is generally when that maturation period is happening, if they're still excelling in that period there, Then potentially we are looking at the offer of a scholarship on the back of that, because we can't feel that they've gone through the biggest change that they're going to go through and they still excelling, and potentially an awful lot of interest around certain individuals at certain times. So then to safeguard ourselves, It makes sense to necessarily offer that little bit earlier.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Personally, no. We've got a couple boys in with us at the moment that have not accessed Academy football up until the back end of last season, so joined us at sort of end up in under 15 and we're very much looking at, we haven't offered them a scholarship yet but very much they're in that that thought process of being given one. Likewise, in the same group, we've had a player that, well, it's been with us since the age of under 9, and unfortunately, we had to tell him that you know we're not offering a scholarship. So, for me, no, if you like. does it

help in some ways? Yes! Because they have an understanding of the club, the ethos, the philosophy, you know all of those things and how the system works, but would I disregard somebody that joins the program at 16 compared to one that's you know, carried on at nine? for me the answer would be no. It would be based upon how effective are they in games. How well they sit on the RAG rating when we sit and have those player audit meetings. we would look at their history to be fair. we look at their histories, potentially in different ways and see how that would add or take away different elements of them as a person which then ultimately will be there within the game.

**I: When you say history, what would you mean exactly?**

P: in terms of background where they've grown up, mom and dads? You know what sort of home that come from? Is it a privileged background? Is it not so much of a privileged background? the area that they live in. So those types of things we're getting certainly better at. Yeah, certainly now with player care and the education programs that are in place. We have a lot more understanding of where they come from, what they do how their treated within their own community as well, like when they're with us.

**I: Do you as a coach actively consider training age (years spent within both the sport and the academy system) for development plans or player (de)selection?**

P: So again, we have an example of a football club and he has played in the first team that was a [sport] player until the age scholar. He's come into the building and had the choice between sort of the scholarship of [sport] Club or the scholarship with ourselves, and we chose the scholarship with ourselves even though his footballing background in terms of he hasn't played like football properly, If you like, or in an organized setting. And has gone on and made three or four appearances this year for the first team, so. Again, I would like to think we judge them based on what we see at that time and don't disadvantage anybody that that potentially hasn't been in the program for as long or hasn't had access to football, as much as anybody else. So yeah, we have examples of those players that necessarily don't fit the norm, as you would expect them to be.

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: We try the best that we possibly can with the information that we've got. And we're very much aware of it and we will speak to the players about it. we will have those direct conversations with players if we think they're going through a, you know, a particular period

in their maturation status. You know 1) to reassure them that yeah, it is usual, and they happen. And the things for them may not look the same as everybody else at the moment, so try and get that level of understanding for them and then necessarily their plan would sit slightly differently to others. it may be how much they train. it maybe, you know, that they're doing a little bit extra when they're coming out of it to try and help with coordination. And you know, understanding their body again. So maybe they, you know, stay, and do a little bit extra than others. Um, but because we offer it for everyone, nobody sees it as he's getting special treatment. because it is there for everyone as they go through it. So yeah, that would be. That would be the only thing that we look to try to do. So, we take it into account as much as we can. The other thing for us is that. Say for example, somebody is a late developer. We wouldn't necessarily always place them if we were going to do bio banding or whatever., I wouldn't necessarily say that they have to go in that younger group if there still coping or excelling in in their own. Then we would, we would look at keeping him in there. rather than saying "oh because you fit in that band and you're an early developer, you go there". it is more fluid in terms of what we see in when we see it. I've been fortunate that I've had some of those examples where somebody would be classed as a late developer, had him as a 9,10,11 and then as a 14, 15 and 16 and he was probably the best player that we had in all of those age groups, however, never got the experience to play up, even though technically he was good enough, tactically he was good enough. Just physically we were concerned. We explained that to his parents, his parents fully understood, but then by the time we got to sixteens. Because we left him kind of where he was in terms of within his own age group he is again another one that has been on the bench for a first for the first team as a 17 year old, at different club and plays in their 23's Regularly. So, there's examples again of that. Where if you have just gotten necessarily always with the science of "he fits there", you don't know whether or not he would had the same journey or is journey would have been better, but. You know, we felt as though at the time it was right to do what we did and I would say at the moment, fingers crossed, It certainly had some benefits because you know he is a professional footballer he's 17 years old and is you know doing well from all accounts.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: Generally, the ones that are high performers are people that were offered scholars. The ones that are in the lower have been told, Well, one of them have been told they're not getting one, and one of them, my personal opinion is that, He wouldn't be getting one.

- I: And then the mid, I'm just assuming that just because they have not got a scholar but they've not been released either?**
- P: Yeah. There's one in there that's got a scholar, but it is had a little bit of a dip recently. The rest of them are. So yeah, in the middle boat to be decided to be confirmed.
- I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**
- P: The ones at the top? I would say. I've always been at the top. And I work with this group since they were, so I saw them first as a group of fourteens. so yeah, the ones that are at the top of always kind of been at the top. There's a couple, that have kind of move from sort of top to middle if you like. The middle ones are generally, been improving to be fair. so, they're sort of top end of the middle and then the lowers for me have always been around the lowers.
- I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**
- P: Yes
- I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**
- P: Yeah
- I: Do you think there are any players within the mid-performance group who you would also definitely select?**
- P: Yes
- I: Likewise, are there any players within the mid-performing group who you would definitely deselect?**
- P: no
- I: Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?**
- P: I'd say for all of them that I've put in there it is the level of the technical and tactical ability that they have and the key one is the consistency in the decision making. So, the rate of

effectiveness, if you like, that they have within a game, yeah, and the decisions that they make are generally positive and they complete them.

**I: Would you say it's more important of the consistency or the decision, as in, if there's a couple of options they took the better decision of the two?**

P: Yes, yeah, so it's the most is the most effective. Which is the most destructive for the opposition is where we'd look

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: It would literally for me only be the fact that they produce the goods or produce the most effective decision at the majority of the time on a consistent basis.

**I: Likewise, is there anything uniquely outstanding about each individual in the top players, which may not be replicated across the group?**

P: Yeah, they will obviously have their little individual bits that that make them 'them' if you like. So, there's one that's particularly good, I would say at dribbling Compared to some of the others. There's one in there that particularly is very, very good at finishing. So, if you're given an opportunity in around the 18-yard box 9 times out of 10, it's probably going in. You know that there's some that are necessarily more creative than what they do. So yeah, they all have their individual attribute, but whatever their individual attribute is there successful at doing it on a consistent basis, if that makes?

**I: And then we just linked to that. Or those are those attributes based on the position they play, or is it unique by player?**

P: Some are obviously based on where they play with someone through the player, so you can play them in a variety of different positions, but their attributes, if it was passing range, For example, would still come out whether it they were playing centre off or in midfield or centre back or right back because they've still got that and they have an understanding of how to use it. There is a centre forward that's particularly good at finishing. He isn't necessarily going to be is so effective if he plays as a centre half, probably not! So, in that respect, yes, it is related to his position and it is why is necessary stands out compared to another centre forward that doesn't take as many good opportunities or make the right decision at the right time.

**I: Still within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each top player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: Looking across what I've put here is the high performing group, I would say none of them lack what I would what we would expect for a 16-year-old. None of them particularly lack in any one of the four corners.

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: The opposite of the high. So, decisions that they make a generally not as consistent or the decision made is not deemed as the most effective within the way we look to play.

**I: Do these lower players lack complete abilities required to be in higher groups, or do they possess the required abilities but at a poorer standard?**

P: Yes yeah, they have the abilities but just to a poorer standard.

**I: Is there a consistent theme amongst the lower group in regards to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?**

P: I wouldn't say they're unique. I would say that the reason they're in the low performing is for the same reason, but based on their different. They do play the two that are in there are different positions but there they still don't perform to the level that we would expect on a consistent basis to be perfectly truthful.

**I: Again, by individual player, are their any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: Yeah 13 I would say is an exceptional athlete. I am so in physical corner potentially stands out more than more than others. But doesn't affect his performance that positively because of the other bits that sit alongside it. Five Is different in the fact that I would say physically, not in the same way in terms of the athleticism, but physically in terms of strength and power. I would say he's exceptional compared to some of the others in the group. But again. Instead of having that as a super strength and it being what makes him 'him'. He doesn't necessarily know how to use it. so therefore, it's not impactful. whereas if it was impactful then you look at him for me not being the lower group because he would have a greater effect within a game or a training session.



**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: So, I would say that their consistency in terms of consistent decisions, str mixed so it's varied. They have more success than less success, but distance in level of the top end, is higher if you like, so there for me if they were to perform something that would be sort of a 6 seven out of 10 times, they would get it right? whereas high ends for me, you're looking at your 8 or 9 times outta 10, being able to perform the action, whatever the action, maybe you know, and having the most impact within the game?

**I: And is that geared still around decision making?**

P: Yeah. Yeah, so you know as a lead back to sort of in that first part that's kind of where we're at. We rate them based on the decisions that they make, and you know we want them to be intelligent footballers while they're on there and make the right decisions at the right time. You know just say a right back, yeah you can you know do an overlap and cross the ball really well, but does he understand why he's doing it when he does it? How he does it yeah? the bits behind it we feel are really important. Because, and as I said right to start, they're the ones that played again. it is not us. You know, as much as. A word that keeps coming up at the moment I would say is 'patterns'. if you go A to B to C to D, what happens if there's a roadblock at B. What do they do then so? You know, if we don't give them all of the choices to go well, hold on a minute, I can divert B by going to C plus to go to D, they've got to be able to do that. if we just program and go "well you pass here", "you run here", "You then go there"... so we work more on the principle basis, rather than prescribe you go this and that.

**I: Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?**

P: I'd say yes,

**I: OK. And if the players then develops them, they then progress into the top group?**

P: Yeah,

**I: Conversely, if they got worse of them, they'd end up in the bottom group?**

P: Yes

**I: What does each individual player lack that prevents them from being in the top group?**

P: #2 would be physical. #2 would be consistency over the technique to make an impact. #4 would be the same. #9 has had a complete change of position, so he has abilities we're trying to get out somewhere else. So probably why is in the mid group. #10 has been a high performer, and it just had a little bit of a dip, but we understand why. There's other issues that are going on there. They've had a big effect on him and his performance level if you like, yeah. #12 For me is physical. Yeah, in terms of his physical attributes, is stopping him from being a high performer. And then 14. #14 would be the we don't know as much about, he's one of those ones that have come late into the program, and it's certainly on a projectory to potentially being a higher. But now I would say he's middle.

### **8.10.2 Participant 2**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: I'm the lead youth development phase coach

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

P: Cat.2

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: League One at the moment. So relegated last season from the championship. Very frustratingly

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: So, I've been full time since January 2010, so just turned 10 years and part time before that. I started at [Club Name]. The part timer in 0607. So, in the Academy environment around 15 ish years.

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: Yeah, so that's a good question. I should know the answer to that about. Oh, about five seasons. I think four or five seasons now.

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**

P: So, I currently coach the 16s group as well. Sort of like a dual role. 'cause we're pretty thin of staff, so I coach the 16's so I'll talk about them.

**I: Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: if I take it from a football perspective to an extent and broaden it a little bit. So, I played as a junior in a youth player. And Then having played sort of a... never played in any professional Academy but played a reasonable nonleague under eighteens and then into the reserves at [Club Name] who were at that point Ryman Premier or whatever the equivalent was in those days. Quite good side at a Cup run when I was there, which was which was quite exciting for the club. Went to University, played first team University football [location] and nonleague on a Saturday. Then University football on the Wednesday. I did a Masters in recreation management at [location] and played in the college program Their second team 11v11. But actually, ironically got into the 5V5 first team, which is a bit strange to say that, but. Yeah, so we did a bit of that. Graduated came back, went back to Harlow, then work Got in the way and I sort of stopped playing other than a recreational Sunday every now and then. And then when I moved to [location] where I live now in [location], Eventually joined the local non-League side again and played all of my sort of career from around 27 years old to the time I finished playing at around 34/35 first team wise and then That sort of took me into the coaching pathway really. It went from there, stayed at the club so I got involved with the reserves and supported so he played, played in the reserves and sort of supported the reserve team coach at the time. and then embarked, 'cause I enjoyed it, on the coach education pathway with no real vision of it becoming a career just because I enjoyed it. I had done the prelim certificate in 1990 years ago when I've been made redundant from a job and had time to do it, and then around the sort of 98/99 I think, They were upgrading the old qualifications into the new ones. and that sort of got me going again really, and I converted the prelim and was encouraged to do to B-license, which I did. Then really just sort of worked in Nonleague as a coach with local clubs, largely [location], but then moved on to two or three different clubs after that, and eventually that turned into an opportunity through an old colleague - a playing colleague really - To go and work at [Club Name] really in this development centre. they had a development centre in [location], just over the border from where I live. Got involved in that, similar sort of thing went on at the same time through another guy. A friend of mine and I, we got sacked from [Club Name] first team at that point as managers and the guy we were trying to get to sponsor us got me an opportunity. Also, he was involved at [Club Name] so I did a bit of an unusual thing really which was always tentatively working between two professional clubs not realizing that was it A conflict of interest at the time 'cause I didn't get the recruitment bit of it. but I was just coaching and enjoying it doing the pre-Academy as a volunteer for [Club Name] and then doing this sort of various age groups in a development centre for [Club Name] at the same

time. that turned into the part time role at [Club Name] around the time I passed my A-license 'cause I've done that off my own back. Just wanted to do that. In the meantime, I professionally had been working largely in sales jobs really. And just doing a normal day. Largely office based, but out and about by sales jobs, so, lot of my background was in a music degree, so I worked for record companies for quite a lot of the time Which was interesting and fun. I then got the chance to convert rolls, really. when I was offered the opportunity, somebody left what was at that point called the assistant Academy Manager role, but for the younger age groups prior to EPPP. And I applied and was successful in getting that job. So, I sort of role reversed and went full time football, part time work as I described it to retain the income as best I could. And that's really been it. Like I got did about 3 1/2 years as a size of part time right within the Academy. And then I've been at the club ever seen. So assistant Academy Manager Sevens to twelves that converted to lead foundation phase did that as I say from 2010 to around 2016. then Moved up to lead YDP around then and I've been in that one ever since.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

P: So I yeah I've sort of dual role really at the moment, so largely because of resources previously as the lead phase coach, I didn't have to Coach a team, so my role would be A somewhat logistical and operational, somewhat mentoring of coaches and the logistics and organization of the coaches. A lot of player and parent facing stuff and I would from a coaching perspective in the mentoring bit that I', talk about, get involved with all of the age groups really and have an input in terms of knowing the players, supporting the players and obviously doing all this, you know this sort of, recruitment end of it in conjunction with the recruitment team and obviously the player review process as well. So, a little bit of everything really, like logistics, leading teams and going to tournaments and stuff like that. Watching the games, watching the players being involved in the program, both hands on and as a managerial leader. So, managing a part time staff and I don't know, around 60 kids really and all of the by-products of stuff that comes off the back of that.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: Yeah, so very much believe in the long-term player development model. In terms of development I have, I have a pretty clear philosophy around how I think the game should be taught. So, I spend a lot of time in lockdown. Basically, really trying to sort of define my idea. My vision of what, what matters is, if you think of the individual player. Even if you were talking about a team situation. It starts with an individual decision. So even if you were in a

structure, you were in a pattern of play, you were playing a tactic, or you know, let's say we plan a low block. What's going on within all of that, is individuals are looking and deciding what they do within that context. So the philosophy I have in terms of sort of developing players is that you've got to promote The ability for players to be able to Have good observation skills, good awareness skills and then good decision-making skills based on what the game demands. if you then drill it right back into that particular individual so someone's someone thumping it over your heads, well we need to drop off a bit. And if a player may or may not recognize that and choose to do that because he hasn't worked out the tactical situation, yeah, I'm marking him, but the ball keeps sailing over his head, so my vision in terms of teaching places is that they have choice like you do in life. You have to make choices. You make choices as to what you do based on the circumstances you're Dealt and the and the and the circumstances that you see. So, in terms of player development I've developed some personal way of describing it. Sort of is an individual situation first, but it links in a triangle and it goes all the way around the triangle to collaboration and then to team. So, what I have tried to do in the Four corners is sort of detail it at greater and greater levels. More, more detail, more detail, so there's that aspect is I'm saying, like individually, players need to understand the game to be they need to be good at observation and awareness and then choice. So, on that basis you that your technique, your tactical, where your technical skills too wrapped up in there, you're physically some of their technique and physicality are given so some of the psychological skills. But they're all wrapped up in this yeah. So then when you're trying to teach it, You're trying to develop the utopian player who can technically do everything and can run effectively and move effectively and make all those good decisions, be completely resilient, completely confident, blah blah blah. So, my vision of how you develop that is then creating the environment, Creating the template of practice that brings those things out in the reality of the game so that you can then teach them. So, you gotta work on their technique to get him technically accomplished, and then you get to that long-term player development model that talk about where age appropriate work, younger guys, fun fundamentals, technique, development. But I think you can already disguise some tactical decision-making in that arena as well. If you put the right practices on. Teaching size of touch appropriate to pressure is an example. So big part of my coaching messages about how long have you got? Which direction can you play and why? You see that grows in complexity in terms of how you support body position. trying to see the videos of youth module such a [Player Name] work, the quadrant trying to see the ball in the goal, those sorts of things. So that's really what I would describe. It came across very well, but my

fundamental beliefs. You're developing an individual in a really precise way, and I'm all over the detail, so I think something that sometimes gets left behind a little bit in Academy is that you gotta remember that they are all individuals. But what I mean by that is sometimes you see certain types of players. So, a guy that will run for a wall, but he may not be particularly technical. Yeah guy that says he's not necessarily quick, but he's really thoughtful and intelligent with the ball. He's feeling highly technical in that way. Someone who's just a 1V1 maverick dribbler, you know you can give him titles almost, and then it's then developing those guys appropriately to what they need. I think sometimes we get a bit guilty of chucking everything into one basket a little bit and I know you're gonna talk to me about retain release decisions. I can think of a really good lad who they pigeonholed him, others seen him into being a centre half, which he wasn't. But he was already good player and I felt he was unlucky not to get a decision at scholarship aged. Because he was misunderstood by others and they didn't recognize who he was and what he was. those details around how people are. You know you're going to get people that are going to work backwards Sometimes, but you want them to, but it's not a natural thing for them to do. So how do you help them? All sorts of different examples. You know peoples, but this particular player his influence was often not with the ball in a way in it because he was also very good leader. he made others play in a in an understated way that got unnoticed when we're talking about developing elite athletes and elite players. What's his wow factor? His wow factor is; The others do well. That's not really a wow factor. It's a really clever thing to see if you understand when you see him over the course of time, you know he'll bang a tackle in, and it will give the whole team confidence. Played [club name], beat [club name] - he smashed this kid in the first 5 minutes. We've beaten 4-1 that was down to Jack and he hadn't played midfield for ages. He gets people saying, "hang on a minute we shouldn't be scared of these should we" and [Player Name] had shown them not to be. And then sadly we played up again three weeks so we got sent off after 20 minutes to one thing but, it's that what is you know in terms of recruitment and stuff and I want when I was doing the little-uns and then you started out pre-Academy, what's the wow factor? And what gives them the opportunity to be successful in that environment? So looking at what their little thing is, when they're little tiny ones there little bundles of their own personality, so you get the kid who won't share the ball, You get the guy that he's just really clever and naturally clever. Or you get the one that's really quick and get that one is really aggressive, and you know they're just little personalities. we didn't have the pick of the way [club name] would go "oh we want a physical type that looks like this and he's going to be brilliant at this. This. This". where we

go “Who's the best little technician? who's the best little passer? Who's the best little run through a wall for you” and we have a few of them and we eventually try and hone down what we thought was at that point the best one of that. And then we work with him. But yeah, the development thing I think is quite complicated. I think Doing it well is quite complicated. It's a real mix of all of the football bits, but then in terms of Being a really good developer, having that fine line between being very disciplined but being very trustworthy and having a rapport and a relationship with your players that enables them to make mistakes in a good way that becomes a learning opportunity, and then managing that and consistency of message. Whether it's within a season or within a session but within a career almost in. What is good development? It's a real tricky ingredients mix.

**I: within that you mentioned Decision-making as quite a bit of confounding aspect. you don't necessarily need to define it, but what is decision-making?**

P: So, I would describe that a little bit like I tried to a minute ago. Really, is the ability of a player should be able to observe the game? In a in a very clear and aware way, that the shapes their decisions. So, if you said in possession as an example, that they're going to make good choices with the ball all of the time, that's your target. Based on what they see and understands. If you're already out of possession, it's like recognition of danger prioritizing. so yeah, the decision-making part really is. It's about they can only decide if they can be aware and observe the right triggers and then sort of find the solution to the moment. That would be my way of describing that.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: I say yes firstly. I think there's an expected standard. So, at Academy level. What does that standard look like? And I suppose when you've been at a club like me, you've seen a lot of different pathways of the ones that have gone on. And once I have it and some that have been unlucky or h being a lucky charm actually and gone elsewhere. So, the answer is yes, the boys have to hit a standard. Maybe the question you're asking me is what does it look like when they're struggling a little bit? And what does that look like in medium to longer term future plans? So, I'd go back a little bit to the way I describe the way I would recruit. So, what is his wow factor? What was the thing that got him in the door? and if he physically can't deliver that as an example or emotionally can't deliver that if you went in the psychological corner for a minute, why is that? And will it come back? Because I often believe that's where I believe it will come back, particularly in the physical corner. I think the claim is guilty of allowing Boys that are incapable now of affecting the game but will be able

to come back and affect the game later on. But going back to What I'm saying there is. What is the thing that their standard is that high on a level playing field that's going to enable them to be successful? So, it could be a technical thing. It could be an intelligence thing. And obviously, for those that are powerful, that may be easier to see and know that they already dealing with it, then maybe that might be that they need Technical Support, but they're more likely to stay in the program if they can still shape The game.

**I: would they be more unique to the player?**

P: I think it is very individual. Yeah, it's incredibly individual because if you go back to my... So, if you're looking at strikers for example, you have different types of strikers. You gotta big battering ram, type one or you've got a fox in the box, who don't do a great deal, but scores every week or every game, and who can do nothing for 85 but wins you the game and sort of carry him. Or you got somebody that there's some maverick who's gonna beat players and score that way, and you're looking always for the best one of each type aren't you. And then you know there could be people that crossover in different ways. So, what's gonna make them successful in their career? How do they therefore need to be supported in order to learn things that are gonna make them more effective and add to their toolbox to be effective? I see it very individually, I think. I think the game sees it. Games to move in that way. I think, player development is Certainly moving that way, the FA's model is definitely been too. They talk a lot about holistic and all of that stuff done, holistic development. So yeah, it's interesting. I sort of think I see it's slightly out of the box in the sense that when you know the guy then it's really about what's gonna hold him back. How do you help him and sometimes it may be that the coach relationship isn't the right? You're not the right person to help with the same respect 'cause the relationship is now, touch wood, I haven't had that too often. But that's where I think that the mix is a coach of being incredibly knowledgeable. I'm a bit biased in the old-fashioned way that I think there's a lot of modern coaches that aren't so knowledgeable around the game. They're very good around the holistic development, the pedagogy. They're very good around the relationship building but are they actually capable of giving PhD level football, which is what our players need because that's the level they're at. They're the top 2% or whatever it is, aren't they? So, they need to be challenged in the ways of the game, and then that becomes very individual. Is it resilience issues, is it? Psychological. Is it technical issues? is it game understanding? Is it athleticism? Is it a flaw that can be easily polished?



**I: In regards to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision making process?**

P: OK so yeah, we have a recruitment team. This would be pretty standard. I would say across the nation. recruitment team: scouts look for players recommended to the head of recruitment. The head of recruitment does some sort of due diligence over that. And then they'll invite players in for a trial process. The eight-week trial. Coaches will then assess and evaluate within training and games. we will make a decision generally based on Are the players significantly better than the ones we have, significantly different to the ones we have, but often effective in a good way. And as you said, or we've touched on already, do we believe they have the potential to reach scholar, and beyond?

**I: So, is that the same with players that you have already, but you are going to deselect?**

P: Yeah, yeah, I think I think the process should be very similar because we should be measuring on the same criteria, if you like. you need a bar, by which, but then of course it can be incredibly subjective, so your question about how we do that. We do athletically test, but we haven't been great at using that recently and being able to do that for trial players, but we do within our own. The Sports Science Department has become much more important. I would say at [Club Name] in comparison to a category one with because we have it fast and loose. Do we use the data as well as we could? Maybe not, but you know, as a goalkeeper is an example, predicted height is massive. We do a lot of that with everybody. there is data driven ways of measuring, But I think it's still highly subjective in terms of the vision of the players, but we have quite a Democratic way of working at our club in that you know, the stakeholders. I mentioned I talk through the recruitment Department, but head of coaching would be involved, Part-time team coaches would be involved. Lead phase would be involved. the recruitment team would be involved, and we would discuss, probably as a group formerly, halfway through a trial period where we think people are. and a lot informally as well. that would be the same for all of our players. We use our phase meetings for the sign players to talk through our... we traffic light players, basically without going through the seasonal you know all the time formally and informally we don't have traffic like informally, but we discuss everything's going well and he's not playing well and why? So, it is quite collaborative process which does help dependent on the age to an extent of the player. Our Academy managers he would be interested at, definitely scholarship decision staging, would be part of that process as we did so if we collaboratively if we were looking at scholarship decisions, eighteens coaches would be involved. Sixteens coaches would be

involved. Lead phase would be involved. Head of coaching would be involved. Head of coach would always be involved in all these decisions as well. Yeah, so There's a lot of... It's Fairly Democratic as well. We'd almost vote. What I was saying to you on the phone yesterday. I've lost a lot of votes, and others haven't. So yeah, it's an interesting process. I sometimes feel our process is too many people in it. Sometimes. it's always good that there's a lot of opinions in there, but I think sometimes I haven't liked the Democratic process when I've heard views that I don't respect from certain colleagues and don't feel they should have been part of the decision-making, but they get a vote, if that makes sense. It's generally being a bit disrespectful to some of my part timers there, but that concerns me. but I've also lost votes with the full timers as well, so. But then I think becomes a little bit, you know, there's a collective view of what we want as a [Club Name] Academy player, and who's going to get through. We've been pretty good at it. But there is individual biases within the process for sure.

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: Um? No, it's linked. I think if I'm honest where we are in terms of the development program at the moment, that's certainly not being so easy with COVID and the reduced timetable as well, it's gone backwards a little bit from that perspective, but. because we saw under-resourced at the moment. The independent development Plans is a little bit reliant on the on the team coach to drive. and I think collectively and from a senior management perspective. In the schoolboy age groups, in the YDP and below it is quite subjective how that works. It's probably a lot better At Pro Development, because obviously There's a lot more Contact time is a lot more ability to be in and around the boys and have a close relationship. but in principle the answer would be yes, it should be. one of the things I believe in would be that the head of coaching role in terms of mentoring coaches would enable that to happen. So how I mentor a coach to then support an individual player in an area of development needs. That would become the focus in my view that I could really guide him in that way as a mentor. So how does he think and what is he saying? Obviously, you've got again, I'll go back to the complexity of coaching. You're dealing with team stuff. You're dealing with General development across the board, but then equally or looking at areas of Individual need. so, it's those nuances of coaching that as a good coach. You're having to sort of think in 3D in a lot of different ways?

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

P: Yes, so well. In its selection terms, if we've got a spaced in inverted commas, you know there's a structural need in a squad, that's a scenario for development. we got no left foot centre halves lets go and get the scouts looking for one. Our goalkeepers are small we could do with a taller one. You know, I don't think he's going to grow enough or Something. it's all those sorts of things. so, for sure. ask me the question again, sorry,

**I: Its positional demand for development.**

P: then the answer is yes and no. So, there's not, so sometimes you could sign in under 8 and you know he's going to be a striker for the rest of his life. we think, and often that's true. But you will also sign somebody who Evolves into something else through growth, development, maturation, change. You know, I was very fortunate as part of the ECAS course I did to go to visit Lille where they spoke about [Player Name]. [Player Name] was a central midfielder, slightly under matured, not able to beat people in the way he does now and played in a very different way. Very highly talented way. but different way to the player that he became so. So, the yes or no bit of my answer is that actually you know you don't know no. So, the development that they get can evolve into other things further down the line, and sometimes it's necessity will make that happen, but then there will be players that you are gonna go. You know, a dribbling Maverick will not turn into a centre half Probably. you know that, so they'll be players that you can go he's gonna work with him in that way all the way through his developmental journey, and there'll be somebody else that you might work and give him.. and I also feel like one of the things we like to do at [Club Name], and I'm sure other clubs do this too. Is give players opportunity to experience different positions. A) to experience the position B) to make him think differently, see a different picture. Challenge them in the awareness and observation stuff that I've talked about already. But there are players that don't suit. They don't do it. They don't get it. They can't comprehend it, and they're better served sticking where they are. I think if you're doing it well and you know your players well, you're going to end up being quite individualistic in that regard as well. So, what works for him may not work for him, you know?

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

P: Yeah, I think most clubs sort of tweak it because I think the FA model is technical, Physical.... Sorry I gotta get it right. It's technical/tactical, physical, social, psychological. That's the 4 isn't it. we tend to see it as technical, tactical, physical, and social/psychological, so there's a slight adaption about adaptation to that. I think it's a good model. I, even if I think in the way you've heard me speak already, I'm sure you get what I mean by this. It's a very blurred line

model for me. it's good that we think that way, and I know they've there's been a massive message from the FA, and I've heard them say this on presentations and stuff and courses that I've been at, the right side of the model is the bit you got to effect. Yeah, but I don't disagree with that. I don't think anybody disagrees with that, but I actually think it's a bit more complicated than that, because if you don't get the tactics right now, get the technical bit right, they blur well, and so you do need to be Aware of that and working those ways, but actually I would stick the game firmly in the middle as sort of a big round blob in the middle going first, so how does that fix that? Feel free to check on my [website], you may have already done this, but I wrote a piece not to be provocative, but something that I really believe in, you know they talk about the holistic development making, developing report with your player. And I argued in my little blog thing. The players are only going to get you as a coach if they think you've got something to offer them in football terms, because that's what they're there for, so of course it matters that you have a relationship and you ask how their day at school was and if they are having a tough time at home, you know, and you're aware and you support. But actually, none of that will matter as a coach, if they ain't buying your football coaching. he ain't got nothing for me. I think it's all valid and I'm not arguing against it at all. I sit a little bit outside of what really matters because I'm saying it's a game First, we are coaching footballers. Of course, we've got to have honesty, integrity, be a good person to be around those young people and support them and show them the discipline that's needed in the right way. But unless we get there, it's that line, the Roosevelt line, isn't it? They don't care what you know, until they know that you care. that massively important then. But then that in football context, in Academy context that they will want to know that you know football. And if you ever hear a sort of a I had an interview the other day, I can't remember who was on the radio as I was driving to work, and I were talking about new coach comes in. What's the first thing they're gonna measure him on? It aint how nice he is. It's whether he's got anything to say or not. oh, that helps me. Oh yeah, OK. This guys for me! it don't matter the rest of it. So it is massively important and it's a great way of guiding thought, but I'll go back to the point I made, which is my fundamental philosophy that it has to relate to how you know, it's football 1st and then it's like what the mix is off of that so that you can get the best outcomes in the best return from your players and make them the best version of themselves. And of course, that involves all of those corners. Of course it does.

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

P: more sports science than anything else in objective terms, I would say. I would like to see us be more objective in certain ways. We don't do anything like in the psychological corner is an example, psychometric stuff and things like that. I think there's a place for that in the modern world. I also think, is there a way of removing some of the subjective values of whether a player's A good player or not. and I don't think so. For example, we wouldn't use, and we perhaps should, pass completion as a, like the sort of data that you can get at first team level, lots of stats stuff, assists Obviously something is easy to see. People at scoring goals. but I think we can sometimes miss things a little bit. I can think of one boy that we let go. Who was... he was a quiet boy. he was a small boy. He wasn't slow. He wasn't particularly strong physically and. Wasn't that sort of player, but he was bright as a button and played off a one touch so much that I don't believe certain coaches notice him. he was actually brilliant. and he was one that we let go. and nobody in this sort of meetings I've described Would have seen him in the way that I was seeing him. Because they I didn't get him as a player, so evidence would have helped him for sure. I can think of 1 example where we've let a guy go and he was deemed that he couldn't get around the pitch, which is if you've heard that one a million times over. but when we referred to his test results and all the running results, he was the quickest over 30 meters., and so we're talking rubbish as a staff. We may or may not be, but we may be attacking the wrong Development area, because if you don't get around the pitch, it ain't 'cause he can't. Why isn't he? What does he need to improve to do it? and we didn't go anywhere near that. we saw him not so long ago. We played a friendly with [club name]. He was on trial there and he's grown. He was the tallest boy on the pitch as under 15 now, I think. we let him go at 13. And I was frustrated at the time and I became more frustrated when we looked at the figures because we didn't take those figures into the meeting and a lot of subjective opinion went ahead and then we look at him now and everybody can hardly recognized him. And he played well, but he was in a [Club Name] side and wanted to bang it. So, he didn't get on the ball but when he did he looked neat and tidy and he weren't a bad technician. He was only a young lad. But yeah, psychologically not the strongest at that point. People say you can't change their character, but I know you can. I don't agree with that. I think you can. I've seen players change. I've seen players toughen up. I've seen players learn it, become competitive in the Milky Under 10s and elevens and twelves. people say athletic development. If you're quick you gonna stay quick. You're not going to get quicker if you're not quick at the younger ages. I've gotten my oldest son was never quick as a smaller boy, but he grew, and he was. Like he grew, he hasn't played at any elite level of football, but his thing came at under 15-16 he

was quick 'cause he just changed shape, things got longer, and he was. But he was never from 8 to 14. I challenge a lot of this stuff that has become ingrained in people's opinions in my opinion, but

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

P: I think. The answer to that I'll answer little bit the other way round, in a way because I think it again will vary from individual to individual. I think I used a needle in analogy there with the boy that couldn't get around the pitch, but actually it was proved to be athletically developed. I remember a trial is several years ago who was a forward. Didn't seem to get in behind, didn't it was only under 12 level or whatever, but when we tested him, he was quick, but he didn't affect games with his pace. and he didn't seem quick in the game. so again, my challenge to us as coaches would have been to go "actually, we got something here". What we gonna do to make him use that effectively? Why was it? Why wasn't he doing? I don't know. He was on trial, we didn't. he did get somewhere because he went on to [Club Name]. So, he did get, he's one that we saw come back to haunt us, to come back and actually got in somewhere. Maybe you haven't found the way yet and we didn't help him find away. But then he did find the way further down there. So, a meandering route, I think. Doing that {education} course you know. Well, physical development is going to change. It's gonna affect people. But actually, if you think about it, emotional development changes as well. We're not looking at that now. Someone that's immature at one point, even as a 15-year-old possibly might still have an immature mentality that will change, and we just live on that sometimes. So, it's not just the physical corner that they said. Good talent identification to know my conclusion from this course was good Talent identification is a medium term to longer term Process. it's not short-term process and obviously the recruitment process is a short-term process. But you're guessing. You know you don't know enough and that's the problem. That's why I think you know keep it as big as you can for as long as you can. The system doesn't enable that or allow it, it's not. It's not possible. It is difficult.

**I: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

P: We have a syllabus, obviously, and we have what we would describe as the [Club Name] Way, which is a little bit not so easy to define and it would sound if I sort of repeated you hear it from every single club in the country. We're going to play through the 3rd's blah blah blah. we have a document in our Academy performance plan that sort of says at such and such age we would expect him to be able to do this, this, and this. and this is how we

develop that at such and such an age we're going to target him to do this seasons goals That we put into their PMA personal report. their individual development plan. but that can be quite generic as well. But yeah, it is the case that I suppose we do. Yeah, the answer is yes, we do. So yeah, the curriculum is what it is. So, we have a we have a vision of how we work, what we wanted to do. Steve has a bit of a vision of how he wants us to coach as well as our ACADEMY manager. So, the answer is sort of yes. But again, with a lot of nuance.

**I: Likewise, is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**

P: We do it in a kind of performance plan. We have targets to achieve in regards to retention. And I suppose on that basis We sort of do have a policy to try and retain players for as long as possible, and we have a target That players are going to get through, and they have been with us for a longer period of time for a minimum of three years, As an example. In terms of if you were asking me about how we select/deselect. It's a bit more general than that. I'd like to think I've sort of covered that, in terms of how that works. So, for example, it can be is as uncomplicated as the head of recruitment signing somebody. on his say so. he has the authority to do it. Others have no input in it, and often we get offended. We Don't like it. Sometimes get proved right and sometimes get proved wrong. So, the answer can be almost be no. But there is a general structure. that should be the exception, but we have had a head of recruitment in the past that it was the rule. it really put noses out of joint. We weren't feeling we were on the same page. Sadly, most of that recruitment guys players that he did it to are no longer with us. We Felt the due diligence wasn't done, and even if it was done, he took no opinion into account when he made his signings and that was his prerogative and the Academy Manager supported that at the time. We're not there Now, we got a different person now, but it has varied from person to person.

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: I think it can. If we're good. Well yeah, lots of things going through my mind about that. That's a really interesting question. Often the best player remains the best player. that can be the case, but we've seen many a player who was the best foundation phase player that gets released and doesn't step on or for whatever reason can't keep moving. I really disagree with this statement, which I've heard that people make - You gotta look after the best ones and the rest are there to make the numbers up to run your program. I don't agree with that. Someone will surprise you. And someone will surprise you in both good ways and bad ways, the ones that you hope are gonna go on. and then some of them it' as Rocky Road. so, for

example. I can think of a number of occasions now. If you think how generally academies work. Part time coaches in Cat2's and maybe even full time 'cause they work with the squad for a season or two maybe. And they pass him on, and every coach does the same thing. They always take no notice of what the previous guy had says they will look at them themselves and they have their own their own view of those players. So, I can tell you a story of a lad who just scored goals and scored goals and scored goals from pre-Academy through to about under 13. at under 14 He hadn't grown. He wasn't ever particularly quick, but he was clever, and he was reasonably technical. But he got lost and his relationship with his coach wasn't great. He didn't get on with him, didn't really enjoy the work coach was doing and under 15, having had a bit tough year, we announced who his coach was going to be the next season. It was the same coach! his head dropped! He also had a second coach come in to support the other coach who saw him as searly, as not particularly effective and wasn't having him either. Was that wrong? No, it was right. It was an accurate depiction of him at that moment. But, talking about that longer-term context, was the age 8-13 thing a fluke? in my mind it wasn't and I'm waiting for him to come out the other way. He sorta stepped out of the program he was in our school program, he stepped away, he went to nonleague, he wasn't enjoying it. He steps away, went in on these. Actually I think at Aldershot at the moment, just finished finishing his second year scholarship down there in a slightly different environment to the full time environment with us, but it would not surprise me for this kid to come back because he's still a goal scorer. He's change shape - is tall. He's still not quick particularly. but had a difficult upbringing as well in gaining the social corners. But the point I'm making is. The bias and or the perception in one moment of the coach Might not be inaccurate, but it don't tell the full story. So, it can kill people. It can also make people that somebody comes in and they really like, and they go on. And at [Club Name] we've seen both. We've seen people come late and go do well, and we've also had a lot of players that started at pre-Academy and done well. So, we've been good at that. So, most of those players were consistently good through their careers in the Academy I would say, but there are those that Fall away and there are those that suddenly Excel and suddenly kick on. whether that's a physical thing or that helps them do that, or you know it, could be something like that. It could be a mental thing. sometimes somebody just grows and has suddenly this advantage that he never had. and you go "Wow"! So, it's a real difficult one. One of the reason I think we've been successful at [Club Name], is that because we've had a very consistent staff. I can see a little bit of that. And ried with it, and [Coach Name] is similar to my view. I'm probably the furthest to 1 extreme in terms of being patient, but



[Coach Name] is patient and believes in... his sort of thing would be if someone's got pace, we keep them. we keep them, you can't send people away that got pace. It's harder for the technicians that aren't doing so well. But it is on meandering road. It really is a meandering road. I'm just trying to think of a good example. I can think of a boy. Just trying to think of one that's. I know [Player Name]. Played in our first team, he's between 23's and first team, played quite a lot of games. he was always a nice footballer, really sort of good technician. Very small, but it was never sure that he was gonna get there all the way through. He wouldn't have been deemed top of his group. He's played more First team games than most of his group, and it's got the further than quite a few of them. It's not an easy answer that, OK, I'll go back to sometimes defining certain players are always gonna go through all the way. but for most of them it's a lot more complicated than that.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: I actually think to get to scholar there, probably in a better place. occasionally we will take somebody Because of the rules to go, we think he's got something we need to give him Longer. We will sign him to the end of the season. But actually, if you're recruited at under 15, unless you're just doing what I've just described, your pretty much saying he's got a scholar already. If you go back to my I didn't say this at the time. When we asked me the question about how we would recruit. Generally, you're gonna take, I said somebody appreciably better or appreciably different. And one of those sort of caveats might be we'd see him in the top four or five. We're not going to take somebody that's similar to what we've already got. we would rather work with the stuff, all those years of development in our way. But So, what you're saying is that youth development there came in, say, 14's 15's 16's they are in a good place because they have broken in and they are appreciably better or different. we're taking him because we have a real belief that they have the propensity. You know the contract situation, and you got that 13/14's contract, 15/16 contract. We are very, very Considered that the end of the 14's year and what we also do at the end of the 15's year would be to if we see players that we feel are Unlikely to get a scholarship At that point we will Basically say to them that we don't think you're gonna get scholarship. We will do everything we can to support you to find another club so you're not going to get deselected here at the moment. We will keep you and retain your registration so that we can support you, but we recommend you get out on trial with permission from us. Because you're not gonna get nothing here. So, it seems a horrible thing to do, but actually it's a much more compassionate thing to do. 'cause it gives him lots of trial opportunity, prior to their exams

sort of situation. So, I think we've done that quite well. It's not always an easy conversation, but it's been effective. We've gotta boycott [Player Name], he made his debut for [Club Name] this season as a first year apprentice. He played off the bench, he hasn't started a game. We didn't take him. he was one when we told at the end of the Under 15 season, but it's helped him. We may have got that wrong? Maybe we didn't? but he's been the right thing for him, and he's played professional football in Football League as a 16-year-old. Great story, maybe he needed an attitude change and maybe we helped him, showing him the door. but we didn't let him go. we supported him. that's really important.

**I: Do you as a coach actively consider training age (years spent within both the sport and the academy system) for development plans or player (de)selection?**

P: No. We look at we look at their ability, their potential we're looking at their skill set and we're judging against what we deem the standard and against our boys. Simple as that. If he's not played and he comes in and tears it up, so be it! He's tearing it up. it's not an issue at all it is. Purely about performance

**I: What happens if you get a player that is only played for the year and he's not necessarily showing you great things? But if you consider him against another player, he might be really good. How would you sort of weigh that up?**

P: that's what I touched on before. I don't think we even know that. sometimes we do, the coach or the scout might, but it wouldn't affect their decision-making process. I think the difficulty you've got to back somebody. you only got a finite amount of space. So, what you're doing, and I think I hope you got this across already. You're making a judgment there and then, relatively short period of time to identify why you think they deserved to be part of the squad and to sign. But then the process continues. You're constantly monitoring and having those meetings and those, formal discussion, so it's a constant evaluation of how he's doing, where is he in the Group, how's he performing, what's going well, what's not going well, and you have to make these difficult calls because at the end of the day, what you're working toward... really what you're working toward is that pyramid that gets smaller at the top because of the number of scholar places. So, if I look at our 16's this season not all of them can get a contract, 'cause you can't take. We've got a group of 18-19-20. It was a big group. There bloody good! There's gonna be some fantastic players. but there isn't a space for. Now if you look at the Academy system, Which you sort of have to in one sense, but if you don't in another sense, if you look at the Academy system as something finite and an all or nothing. And I try not to look at it that way. I try to look at it as a developmental tool for

these individuals. So, some may or may not get on in football. Let's say they don't get on, but I did read an academic study that suggested that because of the nature of the way they're developed within the system, actually they become quite resilient and they're often quite good when they move into other walks of life. So, step away from football but reasonably well organized, there is a bit of discipline, they know what hard work's about. And they often Excel in their new world. now, in terms of actually like what you're driving at, which is the Academy in the football bit, there's winners and losers. There are, and someone that's really unlucky. I can think of one player is planet [Player Name] and [Player Name] that left us who was incredibly unlucky. I wasn't party to that decision. I'm not involved in those pro decisions, but he top scored for us from midfield. He played unfamiliar position as a 10 almost, but he was a deeper lying midfielder really. and we didn't take him and now he's struggling to get back in. OK yeah, I think sometimes had he stayed in, he would have still excelled but you can't get back in. It's a real difficult one This thing. Come back to the question, you know all you can try and do is measure against your own players. Look at the people above and below them and what the pathway looks like and sometimes for some that pathway is blocked regardless of their talent and potential and ability, and that you can't be... It's easy for somebody to sort of be people that go "Oh yeah, they got him wrong" but they probably didn't at the time. they got it right. Hopefully they got it. but that doesn't mean that it's easy. Because, I can think of [Player Name]. He's been on loan at [Club Name]. Left the 14 physically underdeveloped. Played at [Club Name], the [location] nonleague club for a couple years through an ex [Club Name] coach that worked at [Club Name], so there's your luck bit, he got him a trial for a scholarship. Got the scholarship. Got the pro. captains 23s. played in a friendly for the first team but loaned to [Club Name]. Played all last season at [Club Name]. This season is played at [Club Name] and has been recalled, I believe, which suggests to me you might be getting closer to the first team there. But you know, again, I was a party to him leaving, but knowing his character, I wouldn't have our have defended him, yet he was in the trough. He was like this other guy [Player Name] I was talking about, who is at [Club Name] now, so he's gone like that, and he hasn't quite gone like that, but yeah, I'm just trying to think someone else. There are others. [Player Name] would be a story that would be one that we got horrendously wrong. But what a career he's had. He wasn't for us at that point. [Player Name] playing for [Club Name], was offered a very paltry contract to turn pro at [Club Name] for six months or something. turned it down and took him a little while. He ended up at [Club Name] for a bit. He took him a little while to find somewhere but look at him now. Yeah, it wasn't a bad player, but in in the context of the

centre-halves we had at the time. He wasn't somebody that we felt was going to push on as well, but it hasn't meant he hasn't pushed on. It's an incredibly difficult Decision. The reason why we didn't sort of offer him more... [Player Name] who went to [Club Name] hasn't done as well as him and he was really well thought of. you had [Player Name] was a year below he's done alright. So, he's done better than [Player Name] so were we necessarily wrong? Well not necessarily. who was ahead? I can't Remember who's ahead in the in the pro terms and in the under 21's, but it don't make it wrong to get rid of the right one, sometimes if that makes sense

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: Yeah, I think scientifically we are not, As I said before, using the data effectively. But we have a handle on it a bit. we definitely have a handle, but we definitely have a subjective handle on it. This is the biggest contentious one, is it? It's an affecting now thing and in youth development phase for sure the bigger kids get on Generally. Certainly in recruitment, big powerful kids who can affect the game now and come in and do so, have a much better chance of getting signed and they may or may not necessarily go on, but yet the possession is nine tenths of the law of the development program. If they are capable of being developed it may not matter that been a bit ropery because they you can never tell what would have happened. You know what I mean? They get the chance and the ones that do get the chance and sometimes we make a signing and we disagree with it. And we go "he's not ready" and "he's not good enough", but actually they develop over 6 to 9 months and you go Actually, he's of the level or he's better than the level now. but you didn't deserve to be signed sometimes. that might be one way to wear the recruitment guy got it right and now you should take this one. and everybody's got Their biases, as we know, but it's a problem in the game, I don't think there's anything you can do to overcome that. it comes for those that Become unlucky with the system, how they could come back from that, and develop in the way that [Player Name] did. And go on to something, you know. But scouts, if you think of the logic of recruitment. When a scout is out watching a grass roots game. Who is most effective? It's often they're gonna be the most powerful and athletic boy that can on a lower level, be a bit of a flat track bully and it's a no brainer to bring him in. The next bit is whether he could do the same at our level, when sometimes and often they can, but it don't still make them the one that's gonna go all the way. But then there are we missing out? You know all this stuff about you know birthdate bias and you're gonna recruit front End of the year, and you're going to recruit a big powerful ones. Nobody has ever come up with a

system of stopping that. I did read part of the course, I think. I don't know if you're speaking to anybody from [Club Name]. I didn't realize this, but they have been incredibly creative in the way that they have endeavoured to Create, like, Left foot groups or a cults group of like, Second half of the year Birthday training groups and they form their own club in an area not far around the corner where there is no local club but a load of immigrant population where people are going to be hungry and determined. So, they formed a local club. You know they've been incredibly creative in trying to find talent like the guy that gone to [Club Name]. I didn't know that until the guy talking about, so yeah, there's a lot of different ways you're going about finding, but beating the obvious, working with as I say, 20% of the population, there must be telling the other 80% that we're not seeing all of those groups. have you read about? Oh, what's the team [Club Name]? [club Name] have just done this. [Club Name] have stopped doing nines and 10s. so [Club Name] have a program. they run a program at 8-12, but they don't sign anybody, but they let them play for their own teams. and they're saying good developments Important. but we don't know, we're not gonna get him right if we've recruited under 9's it's not going to work out because they're not going to be the ones. So, let's not. But let's work with as many kids as we can and will let him play for their local side and then will pick him off at 12. and go well, where are we now? And it will still change because of the other thing. But they will start there. It's interesting so you know I was intrigued by that. I think that the problem you've got as a [location] club is. You can't do that because everyone's gonna nick your best players. If you've got a good one in your development centre and you can't get him into your group, he's gonna go somewhere else. So, we take him, and we try and protect him and wrap him up. it's like [Player Name], [Player Name] we had as in under 8 but we couldn't keep him from [Club Name] in the end. everybody wanted him and he remained so. he's the best under 15 at the time in the country by all accounts. And he's not doing bad now is he?

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: I have determined who's in what group Subjectively, on my opinion, I would say yeah. If I said #7 Has played pretty much every game for the eighteens, that's not rocket science, but going back to all of our questions and discussions earlier, if we have had this discussion last season, he would have been nowhere near in our my mind's eye for the season he's had this season. so that's an interesting one. Just looking down. Yeah, we've got a striker similar who has been Barely around us at 16. he played against [team name]. We won nine, he scored six. That's sort of season he had, he's been unbelievable. but he's been on the bench more than not for the 18s, but he's busy doing really well and is a cracking lad as well, you know,

and he's accepted his fate of not getting enough game time for the 18's and gets along with it and he don't mind. He's really, really focused, I think, so there's a couple of good examples. We have a school program, probably a number of boys in this group were in it. Four of 'em. Yeah, ones not gonna get anything. One of those boys. The number one. tremendous personality so you know how I'm judging him is with the four-corner thought: leader, technician, Great character, focused. Ticks every box. slightly lacking in a bit of athleticism in terms of pace. can head it kick it with both feet fight great player. really, really strong. Goalkeeper has been good I've included him as an H. As I say, [player name], one of the boys has played for England so and he's a good character as well. We've got a very athletic Forward is a real handful. I've called him and H. scored has areas for development but doing really well. Yeah, that left back who's just consistently good.

**I: So how did you define your lower group?**

P: He has been below the standard required. He makes too many errors. Is a goalkeeper, doesn't stop enough shots. You know he has all of the physical stature. but just hasn't performed to the level in comparison to the ones above him, that we are expecting, that is the level required to be a scholar.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yeah, I think my answer again would be I think I said it before like someone couldn't surprise you and this particular boy. His athleticism has been that good and is his heart has outweighed His technique on tactical shortcomings. he's improving his tactical shortcomings. His technical Shortcomings are over an area for development over long-term. He's been certainly warranted His position in the team, and he's he makes some, you know, sometimes he gets found out little bit, but physically he doesn't, and he's made up for that. it's really interesting. the little bit like a little bit of luck, little bit of injury issues and a space in the team enabled him and another boy to train. And then they got opportunity and then they got the chance to play and he's grasped it. he wouldn't have necessarily been our first-choice last season in that position. and he was a player that His journey is involved a little bit of a positional change. He was really deemed a midfielder when he came in. But his technical tactical abilities have meant he wouldn't have been anywhere near getting first selection in that position, so we've had to offer development, giving his game time, but we had to manage that because he wouldn't be in the best team. So, we tried to convert into central defender and didn't work. because it is just straightforward up and down running

and his power and pace. He slid into fullback in the opportunities, interplay regularly there for 18's is unfolding. It's been really good for him so. but I wouldn't say that you know my opinion of the group is massively changed in summary. his destiny is changed for sure. And the benefit of being patient with him has served him very well. that has been that we've always known he's athletic, really, and it will be interesting whether we will get a pro in two years time 'cause he would have had to made massive technical strides to do so. But that will be his journey planning.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: Oh, good question. No, I would say not, I would say. The lad that's been hasn't been told he's not gonna get anything. He is being undone by the boy we just talked about. Yeah, and the second boy who's ahead of him as a fall back as well with athletic advantage. This lads come late growth. has grown now and he's a very good technically. I'm confident it will get something at another club. His pathways just blocked at ours? so he's played a lot for me this season. He's played well, he's got goals. We've played him out. Played him in midfield a bit because we've had two at times. He's done well. But I'm still looking at them very individually in terms of what their individual strengths and areas for development are. So, if I look at the ones that I mean mid table at the moment one of those is he's gonna start for the eighteens tomorrow. so that's it. Then he's the right, he's the other full-back that's keeping the other guy out. We've got a centre half who is just slightly short of athleticism, but he's got the heart of a lion. Isn't a disaster technically at all but doesn't always show that to the people that need to see him do well. we got another midfielder who I really like. But he's just behind the one that's played for England and the other one I put in the H. But he's a really good lad and he's in with a chance, and I hope we stick with him and give him a chance. 'cause the same group under 13 got through to a national final, lost to [team name] in the Premier League competition. And at that point this particular #6 he was ahead of the #12. Yeah, sorry #13. He was playing in the team and #13 wasn't we would accommodate #13 at fullback possibly. now he's played for England. He played as a centre half for England. It's amazing you know. It's so hard to take... most of these boys. If I went through that group. if I said that this, you'd be impressed with this; #1 #2 #3 #4 #5 #6 all signed at under 8 #7 came in around 12/13, can't remember, #8 relatively recent under 14 #9 very recent Under 14. So yeah, actually #8 would have been under 13, possibly? #10 under 11. #11 under 8. #12 relatively recent, under 14/15. #13 at 8. #14 I think was not 8 but maybe 9 or 10. #15

late. So, there's been a real longevity of development. 85% of them from pre-Academy 85% of them we've had a real record of doing that. and that is 1 hell of a group.

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: Seven out of eight of them Have already been offered scholarships. So, the answer is yes. #14 hasn't. He will be. I'm convinced he will. That's a personal opinion at the moment. I'm certain #14 if I were to back it and be a gambling person, I would say he's gonna get it. #2 who was in the Middle Group, has also been offered a scholarship already. and only #5 And #15, are not gonna get something. #5 doesn't know yet #15 does and the others are genuinely still in with a chance, in my opinion. #11 will be an interesting discussion. #4 will be an interesting discussion. #6 I can see people not wanting to take him, but I think he deserves to get it. #9 I think will miss out because of his injury and because you came late because we got a lot of forwards. But again, I think you have a chance of getting something somewhere else.

**I: Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?**

P: Yeah, they've all got unique abilities for me. So, like if you if you went through them #1, I described him already. He's just very good at everything is above average technically, and he's in. He's very, very, very above average person. Finds a way to affect games. Great character. #3 he has a wand of a left foot. one of those little left backs that just Don't get beaten, always been athletically challenged 'cause he's little, finds a way. Again, tough competitively, great character, focused. Excellent kid. #7, athleticism alone, really at the moment, super strength. #8., got a unique Burst of Pace. is a little one. Sharp, skilful not in a maverick way but can Go past people and finds a pocket and moves and beats people as though they're not there. Sometimes on receiving it with his first touch. he's got that little blistering bitter paste that takes him away. and he gets goals and he finishes well. He's a good finisher. #10 we discussed, goal machine. Does impact for goals, honest, runs quick, strong, tall. Great lad. #12 goalkeeper. Just yeah keeps the ball out the goal. really effective, athletic. Got let go by [club name] bit ungainly on the eye, little bit unorthodox, but very very effective. obviously, we're trying to Polish him, but he's done really well. Yeah, again a good lad. #13 is the England boy. Again, yeah, he's got a bit of a he's got. He's a good player. he's got a bit about him. And when I say a bit about him, I'll tell you a funny story. The other night we were, he's a cheeky. That didn't, as a younger lad, like to be coached much and



often will have an opinion. but the other day, it's funny, he's become really funny. I was trying to clear up the other night and he always has an answer, so going "come on boys get the gear" and I've gone "many hands make light work" and his response was "too many cooks spoil the broth". so that's how he is, so he's got a little bit about him. He used to be quite quiet, but he'd an argument with you on the pitch If you're trying to coach him. so, he's got a bit of spirit. His brothers a pro. His brother had it real... He came into us. We very nearly took him, but didn't, and he had to find his way. he's at [club name]. [player name] is his brother. But yeah, good, competitive, works really hard, tries really hard. Always 100% training games. Works hard, his technique is improved this technique a lot. Improved his reading in a game in his game understanding a lot. He's been a developable kid, if I can say it. #14 powerhouse striker. Two footed, bit untidy. Needs polishing, getting there.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: no, I don't think so. I think our group is a group Is well motivated and consistent in their focus. It's a good group. we've had some issues this year if I'm honest. A lot of anxiety around decision at the club. And not being helped by the world and COVID, pressure on them at school has been huge. I've noticed a change in the last couple of years. We've had a few, you know, like issues. we had one meltdown and had to address it as a group 'cause it had been over competitive. They kick the shit out of each other at times as well. They're very competitive, but it's not consistent. It's not inconsistent between the good ones and the ones that I'm saying. It's consistent, Personality wise, yes. They know if you if I pick the two that I would consider the best role models in there it be #1 And #10 for the others. But the rest of them, they're all at it, and they're all good there all day. And if they themselves, you know they're good,

**I: so there's nothing. There's nothing that the high performers just do better than the others.**

P: Well, I think I think when you're looking at in the detail that I'm trying to talk to you, it's very difficult 'cause I'm distinguishing very individually in terms of position specific stuff in terms of what they bring to the game., you know, if you took all that, if you took all of the forwards They've all got slightly different strengths. #10 and the and #14 aren't dissimilar. They can both do most of it. Both of them are tall and strong. But yeah, they just progressed well overtime and they were both really rough finishes at one point. you know, even beginning the last season under 15's missed a lot of chances. One of 'em was always offside. You know

it's very for development for him. No, I mean I can't help but look at them individually and go "He brings that" and then "he brings this". that's the way I see it really.

**I: Still within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each top player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: They've all got areas for development. so, if I am not the best example, I've already described his #7 who is ropy with the ball is feet. so scruffy touch, inaccurate passer. Unreliable technically in that respect but is so aggressive in terms of his... but that's actually an area for development because he gives away free kicks needlessly. but he can be a real strength 'cause you get... He was not intimidated by anybody physically. Yeah, he will have a fight. He'll do it in training as well as game. So, he's approaching it in the right way isn't here for development to calm him down a little bit, but he has got very very clear development targets in the next 2 years. the others I would say. There's a lot of what I would describe as they're not steady eddies because they're better than that, but They have the balance between their technical accomplishment and their character is good. They're obviously different positions and stuff. There will be one or two on the spectrum of difference there. you know that the #14 can be emotional. But it's a really, really well rounded, and balanced group.

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: if I looked at him in comparison to the others, he's... A lot of it would be in the in the in the social psychological corner, quite quiet, not dominant. Confidence a bit of an issue always has been. Doesn't seem to be able to arouse himself in the way that others can get into the zone to be successful. He remains at that level with. You know, he trains the same as he plays. He can't find a way. So even in training if we were doing a big shooting thing, we've got thing; musical finishes school, we do a lot of. And the two first-year goalkeepers. Their attitude to the session and being beaten in what could be an hour is very much more resilient, more energy and effort to keep going. Hating it when it goes past them. so, there's a lot of that psychological thing that I think he's gotta find away and we've given him that feedback and tried to help him get there. Physically, He's got the lot. It's not a disaster technically. But he don't appear to be out to get his mind in that zone to be What we describe as... I'm thinking the word aggressive, but you know what I mean. Yeah, aggression and be "I'm not gonna let that happen" and care. And I'm not saying he doesn't care 'cause I know he does care, but it doesn't show. He hasn't been able to Find it in his in his spirit to be

at the level. So, if I look at the #1 again, if he's having a tough day, it just inspires him even more. Even like the #6, obviously is in the middle of the group. He's a bit untidy. He's grown, he's a bit out of sorts with his body, but he's a very consistent character. And if he's having a tough time, it makes him dig rather than fold. And that's my point. That's why they've been successful as a team. They were really unlucky last year. Haven't done it under 13. We had a shocking under 14 year. It's another story there but under 15's we got to the final of the Southern Premier League Floodlit Cup out of a group with [club name], [club name] and [club name] had to qualify as well. You know being in a group with [club name], [club name], [club name], and someone else [club name], I think. then you know knocked out [club name]. And we beat [club name] in the semis and were due to play [club name] to go in the [regiona] finals. I honestly believe we would've won; they've got that thing. They know how to do it, they've got a bit about them, you know they really strong as a group and they've got wonderful individual components. Now going off at a tangent. 'cause it is a team game, but we Academy development is an individual sport for pro individual progress, isn't it? So, I'm talking across. the first thing I said to you was about the complexities I see and knowledge of what it's about. That's how I think that's how I see it. But this is one of our strong groups and it's a special group, really.

**I: Again, by individual player, are their any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: I'd say he he's not exceptional. I would say he hasn't got Exceptional traits, although he had very good traits to get him in the door. Can he become exceptional? That would be a different question because I would say his challenge and I believe he will get this because of his physique. There will be a pro club somewhere That needs a goalkeeper. he will get that opportunity. He will get his two-year development. He won't get it with us, but because of his physical, you know. you know what the exit trials are, if you ever go to the exit trials and you see the goalkeepers? They're all highly technical, but it all tiny. he's not tiny. If he went to that... and he will make a good save, By the way. And maybe that emotional maturation that he needs to find that spirit That I'm saying is missing can come just through, getting older. Just finds a way. I've seen that with our second-year goalkeeper who was lucky to get a place probably shouldn't have got one. We changed our mind on him actually and then he reverted to type in his first year, but he's come out his shell a little bit now. But still, 'cause he gets beat a bit too easy. So, It's a little bit about what that entry level standard. It's gotta be really high. I think it's one of the things we're very, it'll vary from club to Club how they,

how they see that standard. We are quite demanding. We're a League One club who have Premier League in my opinion standards. That's why we want to develop players like that. most guys that have gone on to play in Premier League football. They've had a good grounding. It's no surprise. If that's the standard and that we're not seeing him, but that can he, can he get that extra two years? Let his emotional penny drops and it brings out his physical. His ability to find that the heart to be a good goalkeeper, because he has the ability. He can make a brilliant save if you want to call that as an excellent attribute? Yes, he can! Does he come and catch a cross? yes. but does he stop things that he should? Does He let in things that you shouldn't let it? Does he make poor decisions? Yeah so that's about it. He's a junior goalkeeper Still.

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: Yeah, OK, so good question. In one case is physically behind, it has the capability to catch up an we see enough potential him at the moment and whether that's going to get him over the line for a scholar is going to be an interesting debate, but he's a high level technician with no legs. Just gone up a bit (growth). He's not a quick player like, he's not physically different, particularly to # 8, so I'm talking about #10, and he's not physically different in some respects, but doesn't have that sharpness. he has got the touch and the technique, but his physical attributes have meant He's been able unable to affect games.

**I: Let's just clarify on sharpness. Are you talking decision making or something else?**

P: No speed. so, his decision-making can be good? but he can't always find the yard needs to be good, and in certain situations, he's a great finisher but he can't get in the box to finish and get away from someone very effectively. He'll be a player, but he in the moment Has physical challenges that are stuck. I would say he's probably the only one that I would say that our physical corner thing is struggling. Obviously apart from the one that broke his leg. if I look at the others. If I looked at #6 in comparison to #1 and they're similar players, Slightly a yard off the pace compared and less reliable in possession, and so therefore his technical corner is slightly below the level comparison, but destroyer, hard, lots of positive things in a lot of good. he's gone through growth and maturation. physically had injuries at 14. So, like servers or Osgood's or something, Missed a lot 14s football. he had a bit of an injury last year. He's suddenly gone tall. That's where the injuries came. And now he's a bit out of sorts with his body at the moment, but he's a good lad. He's not bad technician, he's just not quite as reliable as the others. And sometimes he's touch lets him down 'cause he's

not used to his legs. And then he's just slightly off the pace, which I think is also we need to athletically developing in a certain way to helping with that and that's an area of development for us as a club 'cause we've ended shortage of sports science support for our players. But I like him. I really like him as a player.

**I: What does each individual player lack that prevents them from being in the top group?**

P: So, it's an interesting question. The immediate thing I'm thinking is that there obviously are at this point in time. Yes, they're not. No [player name] passing is better than [player name], you know? Yeah, if you look at [player name], his finishing rate is better than [player name]. Yeah, that's where [player name] hasn't yet been offered, but he should be. He will be in my opinion. So can [player name] become in tune with his body, of course he can. Then you become effective. In [player name] the goalkeeper's case #15. If his personality doesn't change, I believe he can't.

**I: If we try and remove the idea of the potential of them, what would you say is the difference between the ones that are higher and lower at higher medium right now?**

P: Yeah, so it's game effectiveness, really. That's that you know the measure of ability to consistently perform to high standards in a game changing way. I would say so. That's not to say, and as I said, there are very good group, that those that are in the middle are not doing well in games. If I use #11 could have a tough day and we had a situation earlier in the year where we do like him. We got another 15 who's got a bit more physical capacity. Has affected games for the 16's better than he has. But yeah, my vision of his potential is that he just have to swallow that. now Whether that means you get to contract or not, I don't know. That's not all down on me. I'd gamble with him, but we ain't got finite spaces and someone was gonna miss out so it's tough. But I do. I think you'll come back. I do. in terms of the others. Yeah, it's the ability to consistently perform to a standard that enables us to win football matches at the end of the day and part of the success, whether that's in possession by being creator, scorer, or you know, being out of possession, being a destroyer in a, you know I defender, or you know someone that's going to affect the game for the benefit the team that's them enables us to be safe

**I: What is game effectiveness?**

P: Yeah, good question. 'cause it's very subjective, isn't it? So, I think. Success relates to it's... It's a bit multifaceted, so it's a long-term development path that we've discussed. so, it's remaining on the level and above average within the program and so that you know what

are the measures of that, which is what your question is really is. It's based on a position so game effectiveness for say a #4 yes is his ability to pass out successfully from the back on a good, you know pass completion rates being higher level. Doing all the dirty stuff, so his aggression and his ability to compete and defend with the right heart and determination some of the stuff that I've talked about. The goalkeeper hasn't got. some of it's about his technical ability to head and clear and tackle and deal with 1V1 situations so. and in the context of then team performance and trying to win fixtures, is he contributing to that by doing all of those things Well? if it's the strikers, is it they're finishing and creation opportunity is their ability to find the ball and protect the ball and keep the ball for us in certain circumstances of the game. In in our beliefs, in pressing from the front, are they able to deliver those sorts of things as well? Are they tactically astute to deliver the outer possession work? now one or two of the more maverick players, Are they prepared to do the hard yards without the ball and when they haven't got it or they prepared to get into good positions that they understand the defensive strategy? And are they gonna be able to score and create goals?

**I: So would that kind of be? Ability to read the game. I'm guessing that in some ways it is decision making, right? So, am I making the right pass?**

P: Yeah, so if you go back to what we talked about right the early part of the interview, my perception is that the players have to be good at observation and awareness, skills and ability to be able to then read and understand and come up with solutions. That was the definition we gave, wasn't there? So, within that context. Good players who are performing well are doing that consistently at high level regularly. Doesn't mean to say they can't have a bad game. It doesn't mean to say they don't make mistakes. and everybody will not continue to do that all the way through their careers. If you gave him a sort of a 7 or 8 out of 10 all the time in terms of that ability to make the right choices and make something happen in their contribution to the to the team, individually, that's where we're measuring in my opinion, As academies to say, yeah, he's gonna go on because. what we try and do it [Club Name], which I've already touched on, Obviously I mentioned two of them play up (ages) all the time and it's because they are ready, and we want to push them. It's about the individual development program of all of them. actually funny, My Academy manager disagreed with something that I did with an Under 14 recently. We've gotten under 14 who plays in the under 16's. He's physically OK. He does well. he doesn't play, he gets half game, probably most times, but I played him in a game that was a 13/14 mix game at [club NAME] and My Academy manager was unhappy in a sense. he challenged me on it because he felt that was

a detriment to him. He said his only view of challenge is that you're pushing him up, but the reason I did it... when I spoke to his dad about what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it, he started talking to me about the influence of #1 or his son playing in the 16s and how, in terms of his leadership and his ability to look after this kid and welcome him and make him feel comfortable and support him in a really mature way, both off the pitch and then very much on the pitch about on that we you need to think about doing that and you need to do this. Brilliant, I didn't know he spoke with this guy's dad. Anyway, so I've said to the boy I said I want you to be the #1 of the under 14s and 13 players, because he is silent kid, you know we don't say a bloody word on the pitch, effective but quiet. and he did it. And then he played in the 15s which is his general game. Yeah, against [club name] on the Tuesday, you know we played on the Friday against Pace played the Tuesday. I didn't see the game, but apparently it was unbelievable. He'd taken that message on board, so I didn't get the chance to speak to the Academy manager to sort of go. You know what happened, don't you? But for me it was a really interesting opportunity to do something very different and creative. Try support this kid in a very specific area of his personal development, which is become a leader, become very leading his way, places aggressively tackles. He passes forward. Well he's quite reliable with the ball. And he's not been in the system very long. He's come out grassroots. He's only been with us about a year. Which he's missed half of it. maybe 18 months. Yeah, he's missed a lot because of it but. So, you know, like this effectiveness thing and this sort of, you're back to me talking about my philosophy about what player development looks like. It basically paints everything I do from a recruitment perspective from a development perspective. And I think because I'm quite long in the tooth and I've evolved this thing, I'm very confident in how I work. The nature of practice that I put on, and a mix of practice that I put on to try and drive what you said, Rightly So, you're back to the game reading. I'm saying that the difference between The most successful players is that they read it there ahead of the game, They read it better, there ahead of the game and as I said earlier there technique, their technique in their physical corner Stuff is a given at that point. sometimes it's their Special thing it might be their pace Is there special thing. For me, the ability to affect the game is all about the understanding of the environment there in and what we want to do. What's the danger? I'm sure already you know how long you touch the ball for in a 90 minute game? What are you doing for the other 84-87 minutes? It's All decisions, it's all observations. It's working, it's running, but every movement you're making Is driven by a choice. I'm gonna do this because... And it's simple as that! It's all about the observation and awareness skills for me. then we are as coaches teaching technique,

improving technique, teaching different things. You know, working on agility, balance and coordination of the guy can't move his feet in the right way. Yeah, to do to deliver that performance so it's this melange of stuff. But you're right that if you go down to the basics of what I'm saying is my perception of what matters is the ability to make really good choices all of the time Based on what the game conditions give you. one of the big things we talk about in the 16s in terms of a collective approaches, we want to assert our authority and our style on the game, but we do it by recognizing and respecting in a way what the other Team are trying to do to us. We're going to negate that. And then we're going to step on and win by doing our stuff and playing our way. and we'll take what the opposition give them. So, if there if there are highline and aggressive press. Maybe we gotta miss it, so they will go back here. Our policy is to play through the 3rd, but actually our policy is to work out the problem. So, we're going to play through the thirds by not using two of 'em in this occasion, 'cause they really. I've got [player name] and [player name] who can run in behind and that's how we're going to be effective. but maybe they'll drop off and then will play and will get it popping and will move it so we will work the game out. Yeah exactly will come with our way and that's the 8's to sort of however many years you have them Teaching those bits, those details those individual bits that give them that opportunity to be effective in the game. then they obviously have to be capable to do it psychologically, socially, physically, technically. techniques gotta stand up to the scrutiny of the standard.

### **8.10.3 Participant 3**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: Lead Coach of the U14's

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

P: Cat 3

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: League 1

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: 19 years

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: 2 years

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**



P: U14's

I: **Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yep, sure, so around 2002 a I was on loan as a football player in a third division in [Location]. I was on loan by [Club Name]. One of the directors of the of this small club in the third division asked me if I will be happy to take a team of kids on the 7th? Just to make sure that I could get extra pay at the same time that I was playing. So that is how I started. So, I carry on because I enjoy it working with the kids. Two year later I stopped playing football, but I kept the in the same club working with a different group of ages and teams. then I decided to take the UEFA-B. So, I started my UEFA-B. In that moment, my contract with [Club Name] was broken, but they offered me to join to make the work experience with one of the U12's at the Academy. So, I was there for two years. I did the UEFA B and the practical in [Club Name]. And then after two years, I did the UEFA-A as well? Which took me to a position where I was the under 19 coach in one of the local clubs. two years later I was the first team manager in that Football Club. Then I did the UEFA pro in 2012. By that time, I was the manager as well of the first team. I was for two seasons and then I had to stop because there was I a lot of stress between managing the club, all the structure, but also in addition to that we will try to finish the UEFA pro. So, I decided to give me a break and I was just coaching kids in a private Academy in [location] where a player from [Club Name] they were coming to do one to ones. then I moved to England to try to learn and improve on the English language. That time also I was working in a primary school as a PE teacher, but my contract in the primary school ended in the summer so that it was no another option to go to a different primary school. So, it was a good moment for me to Challenge myself and improve on the English. So, I moved to England to [location]. I started to work in different places. Meanwhile I was trying to improve the English. Finally, I gotta job at a school. When I started to work as a PT teacher and supervisor, but month later [Club Name] approached me. [Club Name] is a Step 5 football club in [Location], who the owner is [name]. And he asked me if I could go there and try to help the club, himself to make a structure because there was a squad of 90 players when he joined the club as a chairman or director of football so. Yeah, I after an interview with him in London I accepted the challenge and in five years later this was in 2015 when they join him four years later I had, or [Club Name] had a first team With a man, first team with a woman and under 23 for the men and then a proper structure for Academy, knowing that is grassroot so it's not an Academy. but like similar or shadowing a look what it will be An Academy with 15 teams. and after that I was in the thought of, I was no more challenged in the football club and I needed something else. So, I started to apply to different football clubs for their academies, [Club Name], [Club Name] and [Club Name] and in two months I was in [Club Name] after I talked to both different clubs. So yes, that is.

I: **How would you describe your current role?**

P: I always have seen football, maybe because my background as a football player That my role is to try to improve football players. To try to help them to understand the game. To try to make sure that everything, player takes the best on the pitch. not just on trainings also on Sundays. I'm a type of coach that I like to be a teacher on the grass Tuesday night or Thursday night on the training. Where there is a drill that always have something that needs to improve their player. It's not making a drill just to make them to run or make them to touch the ball. I would say my style is to try to Give the direction to the players for what they are going to find on the game. With the U14's it will be more I will direct them to what the

alternative is going to be on Sunday because I don't like to speak to them on Sundays. I will make a correction if I need. I will correct at somebody if I need, but I will be no telling them what they have to do because I think the Sundays, the games it for them to discover problems and to try to solve their problems.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: Working with within an Academy structure, it doesn't allow you to do us as much as you want. I feel that yes, I have to follow a syllabus in in [Club Name]. But, I'm aware as well that because of my experience playing in the structure, similar or more powerful that this Academy where I'm now. I will say that. I go most of the week by feelings as well. I mean by feelings. I notice very quick in the warm up when a player is not switched on or is Too much switched on that day, so I tried to give always a balance and with that balance try to find the best of them because sometimes a great attitude is very good, but too much attitude not can be no beneficial for the full player. so, I always try to find a balance in between what the Academy want and what I see on the pitch.

**I: So if there was things that you could work on outside of the Academy syllabus, what might they be?**

P: So, I will try to start the session on that day if, for example. We were no good or the player was no very good on Sunday on first touch Pass or something like that. I will try to use at Tuesday first part of the training for 10-15 minutes on first touch games. Or if we were not switched in, for example, let's say corners or throw wins. in my small side game at the end of the session there will be a rule, where corners and throwing are constantly on the game and that will happen on Tuesday and I will be at the end of the of the game and it will be with explanation of course of why we are doing that, an why we should be aware when we're playing again.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: When you talk about the expectations, you need to be aware that expectation never are going to match with what you find. That is the starting point if you want to call it. my first training session with the 14's two years ago. after I put a drill, I was surprised about being an Academy and I was expecting more level on the individual football player in the session. So again, I learned that probably my expectations just because it was an Academy of a professional football club, I was going to find something similar to what I had in Valencia, but that is far away from where I was expecting so you can never expect somebody is going to be a professional football player at 12 or 13 or 14 at 18. If you go without expectation, I think you fail as a coach and you fail as a teacher as well to them to try to make them better. So normally I don't go with expectations an what I try to do is, I try to work on what they are good at and what I think they should be improved to get to the level where they should be. As an example, we could have a player in under 14s. That is, having seen a lot of players in my career, yeah, he could be a Cat.1 let's say. Talking further, a trying to get into the Premier League or championship level and two more players that could be good enough for the style of [Club Name] in League 1 or League 2. So, my aim by watching that it should be that those players have when they leave this season, everything that I think that It will require if they got into that level. it doesn't matter if it's technically or tactically.

**I: In regards to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P: Yeah so, the academy manager, the head of coaching and the YDP lead are the ones that are involved on that selection or of this selection. Of course, I'm working during the week with them and so the one that see more things about them, is myself because I spent two hours on more on Tuesday every other Wednesday and on Thursday plus also the games. Sometimes the Academy manager or the head of coaching or the YDP Lead they don't go to the games away. so, my opinion, I want to believe, that sometimes it is listened about individuals. Having said that there was a player that in before the first lock down he was going to be released at the end of the season. And this year from when we started in August, I asked that They give a like a short term contract for a few weeks and I asked the YDP lead to extent that few weeks a little bit more because the player he was standing out also in different games. By the month of November, the player had a contract again. they listen, you know they listen, what you can see on or on the pitch during the week and they act also. But what I know but also what they Rate in PMA or in our conversations where we say

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: OK so I would say that every coach in the Academy environment, this is a difficult decision to take. but you know the expectations of the of the club. You know the style of the club as well. If there is too many good players, that probably the style of the football that is playing the club, they are not going to suit them, so it is better that they go to trial to another club. But there is others that also the style of the of the club If it's I have like we are in league 2 or league one. Probably they need more energy and more power an and you already can see that they don't have that energy that power that desire that it will take them through 16s to 18s into a professional contract after that. it's a hard decision. Because player can change from 14 to 15 or from 15 to 16 massively. And probably you can be wrong. And you carry that the rest of your journey. Maybe I was wrong! I had the experience of [Club Name] an, there it was more difficult Decisions then not here. I had always a feeling that our decision were not wrong when the players that we released there they didn't go higher than the, what it will be there that Tier 4 or the 5th Division in there. there are few other players that we kept, they are already in the first team, I'm told. So, they're playing on some different countries, but in the in the First Division, like could be [Player name] who was playing here in [Club Name]. I tried to be honest during the year in on me to the player so when it arrived at the type of decisions the player already knew that he was not performing as the club is expecting. Already this year, I had a conversation with three individuals with, In the way that we have done it this year, I think it will benefit the individual because in Middle October I spoke to two of them an and they understood that they were far away and now they have come from bottom to middle in just a month and a half. It's going to make my job more difficult, but at the end the player is at least more aware of what they were doing wrong and what they have to change

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individuals needs?**

P: that is very easy. you watch the games and a player shows everything that has on them in the on the game time. If they don't play game time you are not going to know never if they are missing this concept or a different concept know. So if I put an example as a centre back, you will want a centre back winning battles and not losing if your team plays out from the back, not losing easily the possession of the ball, being confident and all that type of stuff. So, if I have played at 2 three games on my centre back is not winning battles in the halfway

line and also when the key purpose is there the ball into the into this player. If he's missing Two out of three passes, in the third game, I'm going to be very, very focused on watching, or if we have film at the games, I will go straight to the to the player to see what is wrong with the player. In in this case of a centre back this year, I notice that the body shape it was already wrong facing the way that it was coming the ball. Why he wasn't winning battles in the in the halfway line it was just because when the body was coming to the striker, He was just coming backwards Instead of chasing the player and beat them. so that it was the conversation that I had with him two weeks later. And how to improve that? And so, a small conversation with a player because the drills that we do in training normally are for further improvement under development and every drill you can use it for the game time. I told the player in Rondo's, make sure that you have always 180 degrees to play with. you can you get the ball You cannot play the ball back never to the same player. That it was what it was happening at. He was receiving the ball from the from the keeper and he was giving the ball back to the keeper, put into keeping a trouble. so in that rondo by not giving the ball back to the same player he make him aware of other options on the pitch so he has improved massively now with the with the playing out because now he has corrected the body shape and he's able to play with fullback or link with centre mids or wingers.

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

**P:** No, it's just generic. I don't think you have to. You need to understand where you are an and you need to understand what the expectation from the football club that you work at. they are as well. You know that you have in your hand, 15 players. from the 15 players They are not going to make all of them first team in the club that you are working with them. so, from that you need to focus, Of course, in those that are standing out that they are going to, or the Academy believes, that they are going to make into the first team. But you cannot forget the Others. because the others, probably they cannot make it in [Club Name], but they will make it in a different club.

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

**P:** Look, I, I think I consider that there the four corner before the four corner came out. That's my belief. so, when they was coaching in my first club on my starting, I was using the Four Corners, and back in 2002. I don't think the four corners in the fa were there, no? so when I was doing a strength instead of doing gymnast stuff and all this type of a workout, I was doing a strength, based on one vs. one. you have one vs one are based on strength as well. So, if you are doing a competition where you have Premier League, Championship, League One, League 2 and conference because you have the players, you have a 2 playing as a Premier League an through the whole league structure one vs one. If you do, I mean within 1/2 game, and the player who wins stays or promoted or relegated the one that lose you are playing their psychological and also you are playing their social because they're having fun and are gaining confidence and also you are working the their physical corner because you are working the strength and you are working at the technical and tactical. How many dribbling soon on 1v1. How many defending actions blocking tackles are going to win a 1v1? I think I answered your question about the four corner. I don't think I need to think about the four corner when I'm doing or preparing an activity for them because already at the four corners are in in every single activity

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

- P: No, I don't, I've been too many years on this game, and I have put too many players on a good level. I believe my feelings about the player. I don't need more than three months to know where the player is going to be or where the player is going to not be.
- I: **Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**
- P: Yeah, that is a club strategy. And of course, we had in the last Two-year 3 different academy managers so that is been a bit difficult. Is it true that they are trying to implement something now but still not visible at all? He probably different to a place that an Academy manager is there for a long-time term of time. Not like five years, Six years. I didn't have that luck within this Academy and there were three different Academy managers. But I think now is the point where at the Academy understand that. There is a first team that needs this type of players, so we have, or we need to invest in Different type of fullback, Different type of centre mid, Different type of striker.
- I: **Likewise, Is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**
- P: Yeah, it will link because you don't want to lie to any of the players.
- I: **When considering the development phases, If a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**
- P: The problem with the foundation phase is that a player can Excel Because strength, because speed, because powerful shoot. When they get into 14s, 15s they start to match a little bit more. If it's true that that player that excels because of that, you need to carry on helping him to fairly to don't drop the levels. because when he Excel on with just one thing. He makes him to be more close not to the goal that they got us a full player, so you need to keep working on that strength, but also you cannot forget that it is true that he is excelling because of their speed, but you need something else.
- I: **So how would you do that?**
- P: Trying to work on the weaknesses as well and that what he Excel you cannot stop working on that, but you have to... like a bag; if you are good at history you have your book of history in your back but also you have to start a good day in science and math as well. so, if a player succeeds because he's very strong on a striker moving in behind and winning a space, but he's finishing is not good enough. You will have to make sure that when he is moving behind, he also had the finishing, which he will give more chance to get into a first team environment.
- I: **If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**
- P: that's the tricky question Because a player coming from u9s I could go into the first team and a player that has come into the club at 15s could get into their first team. We have both examples at [Club Name]. we have [Player name] that has been through the whole system of the Academy but also, we got [Player name] that he didn't touch the Academy until he was under 18. So, there is 2 players. At the same age in the first team environment within two different route into the first team. so, you never know.
- I: **Do you as a coach actively consider training age (years spent within both the sport and the academy system) for development plans or player (de)selection?**

P: No, I don't consider that. No is there?

I: **Is there any reason why?**

P: because there is too many talented players playing grassroots football. If I have two full backs in my team, I play on their right back as right back. and I have to deselect one of them because the club just want one. but they are very similar level, but the club told me "but A has been five years in the Academy, B Just join the This year" I will tell them "yeah, but you have the two 2 good right backs. Do you really want to miss both of one of them or you want to take them?" Not just because of the they have been in grass roots Environment I will take that as a consideration. if a the grassroots player or the one that has been in the grassroots environment for longer has showing during the year More ability, more understanding, I will go with him. When I was a kid I didn't join at an Academy until I was 12 and I was playing on the street and at school. so, it will be that around. Thing to do. I think we are missing those players playing more high school and also play more in the street together.

I: **if you had like a player who's only played for a year, and he's looking average but then he's average compared to another player who's played for five years. Would that indicate that one has more potential?**

P: if he learnt quicker means that the players bright and if the players bright You want to have a player that listens and improves constantly. You don't want to have a player on your team that you say "a" and he does "b". an next week, you say "A", and he does "C. I will take him right

I: **What is your understanding of 'maturation' or 'biological age'?**

P: the understanding off when the players mature? so I think a player is mature when there 25-26, you cannot know. You can understand a kid being mature just because he's showing Details of in some points that probably he has seen on TV and he just reflecting what he has watched. for example, a fan from [Club Name]. [Player Name], because he likes [Player name] and he saw the video of [Player name] against [Club Name]. Now he's trying to do that type of thinking or implement that type of thing. No that is good for the player but it's not showing that he's really mature. It's just a reflection of something that he has seen and he's trying to shadow.

I: **Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: again, the maturity of the body it will come with a in different group of ages. You will have people that has grown. On that year and you will have people that is still growing. So if you are taking a decision when they are 10, 12, 14, On how they are you physically in physical aspects, You can be wrong because the player in half a year could change completely. so I don't think for the time that I have been involved in [Club Name] that we have taken the decision that I've been involved with in terms of physicality. We have a scholar in under 18th which he could have been Release last seasons under 16 because of physicality. They offered the contract because, I was involved in that meeting and Perhaps I was going to lose their player because he was going to come to the football and education program. but I believe that the player was good enough to solve problems in games Against the physicality of their opponents. they hold him in the scholars. I missed a good player to win both in my program, but I prefer that he's there.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: so, if you are able to draw a line. I put an L in those that they have a good performance, but then they don't have consistency. But all the ones that I put on H are the ones that from August They have keep or maintain a consistency in their performances.

**I: So, what would a good performance look like to you then?**

P: So, depending their position is its. If for example, I'm talking about my full back, it will be, a player who is good at defending 1vs1 in the wide ideas. The when We are out of possession, they have a good understanding of where the opponent has the ball an where they have to tap in or go and get engaged with the press. But also, in possession by giving to the squad the correct options when they have the ball or when a teammate had the ball and helping the winger by going two vs one by going higher

**I: It's almost like a consistency in making the right decision as well as a tactical awareness.**

P: So, for me that their fullback lose 3,4,5 balls during the game is not problem. I want to see that they are understanding the game and where they should be at the end. the other team plays as well know and you leave, or you give the ball away You're going to happen at any level. Know for a few times within 90 minutes, or Children 80 minutes. A good thing is to know for me if they're understanding where they have to be. If they are tactical aware of where they should be at any moment. And if their decisions that they are taking some of them, they were high risk. There were no high risk, and also in those that they were high risk, they were successful. How many times?

**I: How have you decided the players in the lower group?**

P: So, for me the lowers have been During training and games they have No consistent line. the line is never straight is go up and down, up and down. so they go from Sunday to Sunday Not having a performance or say type of performance, so going from a Sunday where they got a lot of confidence to a different Sunday where they are not giving the ball where they want or what we want and they are giving the ball away and also they are not being strong. because I always say that I play football as well and there was games where already in the warm enough, I knew if I was there or not by trying to kick a ball from 25 metric distance and not giving the ball to the feet. So that day I knew already that I had to work harder. Because passes I was not going to make any pass. so that consistency on battles as well, when defending, when covering spaces for a teammate. there is no consistency.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yes, already we got a few of them that they are moving to with their 15s.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: my group is a funny group to be fair. before August I was looking at PMA; All the scores that they got. and for one reason, one other reason, they were not getting result. On this year from the beginning of the year they have been getting the results that it should be expected for this group., now with that Either means that is because of the H's or is because the L's are also pushing Now in the same direction, not at the same standards as the other ones, But then again there working on their pushing too to be if not in the H at least to be in the

M. I don't have the answer, but what I can say is that from when we started with them, I think we give a clear message to all of them. My assistant and myself. And from there they been listening a lot, asking a lot of questions and I think they're not there the improvement that they have done?

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: I would say so. I will say so. If there is not any drastic change or massive change in any of the age. because our team going to 15 sixteenths. all that H could get a contract and the ones that I grow to an L, one of them that he has improved as I told you about one of the centre was you that example at the beginning, So that is near to be an M and I will say that all the M will get a contract as well.

**I: Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?**

P: So if I compare my full backs again, I will tell you one of them has put himself by his desire, his attitude to learning, his attitude to, to run, and fighting in games, and training his competitiveness in trainings in games has put him where he is now. And the other one is completely the opposite. He doesn't have or he doesn't show that desire that I'm under pressure. But he has a natural set of skills with the ball that make him being successful in one v ones defending attacking. Basically, he's our top player without knowing he's our top player. he doesn't know. As he keeps enjoying his football and we didn't put any pressure on him. He just goes to the training. He's the better trained on that day without knowing an he goes to the to the game program and is also one of the best players always on the pitch. he doesn't show the competitiveness that anger that other players show on the pitch. he just go with a smile and you will say, well this player is switch off. No, he just enjoy playing football. He does very well because He had that set the skills already that allow him to pass player to defend against players and don't be beaten by other players pretty easily.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: So depending the position that you talk about, it will be just that (consistency in performance), but also for example in our winger it could be that he has been adding to his game how to play out of possession and how to help the team. When the team is defending, it doesn't matter if it's in the attacking third, middle or defensive third. I think before he was Completely not aware of what he was around him when the ball was with the opposition and now, he is completely aware of where he should be to help the team and to help himself to cover more spaces. So, it's just a case that, I told you before, they have something in the bag and we just been adding some bit more. some of them have taken all. some others Just have the bag with one book an and we are trying to put more books but at the moment they are not allowing us to put more books.

**I: Within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: if we go to if we go to the centre back. Yeah there was one L and the other one was an H. So, #6 having that H he plays on the left profile. But he doesn't pass the ball with the left. so from beginning of the season, and I had this player as an under 13 as well with me, I wanted



to make sure that we challenge him on his left and he's trying a little bit more now to be more confident with his weak foot. at the beginning of this year He was not making a touch at all with the with the left. For example, the striker or the centre forward. There's been days where he has scored four also five goals. But there have been other days where he has no score. OK my first thing in when I spoke with him individually was you are the centre forward and you need to be selfish When you are in the box, but aware if there is any better option for us to score at all. And I spoke with him, saying to him, I don't want your scoring for five goals in a game that we finish 15 - 0. I want just scoring the goal in the game that we're going to win 3-2. This player in those games that he has no score, He has open goals for another players or with his movement, or by giving the assist in the in the final third.

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: I think consistency. consistency on tactical awareness and consistency on technical detail could be a control. Could be passed could be dribbling with the wall for the winger? I was going to say, for example on our Cm. That it was #14. it could be that he's not getting on the ball in the areas that. For example, #10 gets the ball and this is impacting games. Not necessarily effective. Not necessarily effective on his movement coming too deep. That is not a problem. you come too deep to get on the ball when you are not getting a touch with the ball. But for me, when I tell you as a number 10 too many times you are coming too deep and when you get on the ball is fine. You use your teammates but then you are far away from where we want and there is no progression. As a player you should be understanding what we want from you and what is going to Be the best for you. if I tell you that once, Twice and then I can repeat it to you The same, is telling me the message that probably you are not a good learner an you think you know what is the best thing Every single moment and that you don't want that advice. I am helping you. Or are you not helping yourself?

**I: Do these lower players lack complete abilities required to be in higher groups, or do they possess the required abilities but at a poorer standard?**

P: Have ability but not to the standard required.

**I: Is there a consistent theme amongst the lower group in regards to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?**

P: Probably what we have say about an impacting games by taking different decision no. as a centre back you will impact the game if your striker don't touch the ball. or as a CAM you will impact the game if you fit with nice balls into their space to your wingers or to your striker when they do the movement. As a winger you will do every time that you are success with the 1v1 an making crosses, making assists to the to the players in the box.

**I: Going through by each individual, what is the key reasoning to why that player is grouped in the lower?**

P: If I go for Numbers probably #5, I will say Lack of aggression. He is a nice kid. And I have spoke with him and he is improving now. That doesn't mean that he has to kill somebody now is just go to the 50-50 with all your energy and if you win you have one and if you don't win, and you follow the other player, it's part of the game. with number 7 it will be that a positivity going forward believing more on his possibilities to dribble past players. Number M

it will be more about decision making about If you dribble player Just be more direct. Don't wait to dribble again. And #14 it will be about understanding better space is an how to create them. I'm #15 that it was also an L. It will be more about being hard to read your other defended and you need to defend better.

**I: Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: Yeah, that that is, that is. Yeah. He is standing out in in in some bits like it could be a for example 7 And 12 they are dribblers. The problem for them is the next action, which at the moment they don't Make that dribbling success the majority of the times because of the next action. Is never a good decision. like 2 number L he's very good receiving the ball. But, what's next? Because of the position that you want to play. Bits that they do very well, but there is big that they should be linking to that type of skill set that they got.

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: Because they are more regular in performances. but I mean say that. in every single game they have a period of Time where you don't know if they are in the game or no. so #7 can be impacting the first period with an assist with a goal, with a lot of 1v1 being successful. But then in the second or third period there is a period of time where you don't know if he's playing, you know that it is there, but the consistency is not there.

**I: Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?**

P: But probably they will be missing a bit of character. For example, they have better skill set than my right back, better on the ball than right back but my right back has that desire that attitude to be the best on the pitch knowing that he's not the best so that makes him better.

#### **8.10.4 Participant 4**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: Lead YDP Coach

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

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**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: championship

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: 15 years

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: A year in two months

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**

**P:** 16's

**I: Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

**P:** Yeah, so um, obviously play as a kid. Played kind of District/County. Trials at academies, but never really had the qualities to probably make that grade. Went to University, played for the football team there. Went out to America during that time. Played out there as well. Came back and then pursued, like, a coaching career. Went out to America to coach for two years and then came back to England and then kind of got it. I worked with [company] for about 7 years. And in that time working with different teams and an Academy at [club name] and then move there to go to [club name] and then kind of was there for 6 1/2 years trying to develop, like, a program there. So, having a really good opportunity to build a program from scratch, Almost, really. So that was really good. So again, kind of, little chunks of time at different places to really build projects really. And then obviously now I've got the role at [club name], which is probably the best opportunity to be part of a team more than just driving it yourself. Which is being good. and obviously just having a select group to work with more than trying to oversee everything. But yeah, pretty much coached for the last 15 years in a full-time capacity, really, at different places in different countries and obviously built different experiences and work with a lot of different varied players and people. So yeah, really good in that sense.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

**P:** Um, so I oversee the YD phase. That's mainly 13 to 16, but my obviously focuses 15/16. That means that I work on providing their sessions, working with them in games, supporting the coaches, developing the session plans, working with the head of coaching and phase leads on developing the program, and obviously then pretty much being there up there go to support on all elements. So, kind of administration wise, organization and planning. And then obviously the practical elements on the pitch.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

**P:** Um, so for me play development. The key thing is that it's a coach player relationship that the coach's role is to help the players improve. For me, the players can always get better so that our role as coaches, is to create an environment that helps them develop those ideas on growth mindset to improve their ability to appreciate process over performance, in regards to improvement and developing. And obviously my job as a coach is to help every player in the program not just a select few. So, for me, all those players that we work with are all important. They've all got their own journeys. They're all at different stages, so it's taking account of individual differences and making sure that we account for each player and where they are in their journey, maturation wise, mentally in regards to their social standing or pressure that they're in. And obviously their challenging ones to push them and progress them further as much as we can. But ultimately, it's about development and trying to improve players as individuals to make them better: stronger skill sets, develop their mentality and mindset, to improve their athleticism and to give them a chance to progress to the next stage onwards.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: Yeah, I think when you work in Academy system at category Two, you expect them to have a pretty good grasp foundation in regards to a technical level, an understanding of the game. And obviously then the athleticism to at least have stamina, speed, agility, kind of things that you expect. Mentality wise, Obviously, everyone's a little bit different. I think the ones who got the strong mentalities tend to be the ones who push through, so that's probably an area that probably is a little bit more, kind of, not guaranteed at any level. So that's what you're trying to find out or trying to develop. Ultimately, you expect them to be pretty capable of obviously having the technical, particularly technical, elements to, uh, to play the game. So, the basics really are receiving and passing, to be able to manipulate the ball effectively, to control the ball on the move to do their role. So, if they're centre forward, are they able to finish? Have they got those techniques? A defender, can he head it? Is he able to tackle? You know, elements that you expect to have, but at the same time as a coach, realizing that they're not finished projects and there that they're products and they haven't got everything, and expecting everything and then being frustrated is one of the problems with coaching. The actual thing is that there's more elements of OK we can improve elements and we need to think "OK. What does a player need?". And then within that, then we progress it. So, you expect to have a strong element. Some players come in in there more, athletically gifted and don't have as much technical ability and vice versa. Some players at young ages are very technically good, but then as they get older their physicality maybe lets them down, and they're not able to impact games as much. and perhaps at our level we're going to have a couple of those areas that aren't always their strengths. Because maybe that's why they're with us and not the next level on. and our challenge is sometimes to heighten the areas that they're deficient in, or to really push on the strength elements they've got to make them super strength so that they become even better in those positions. So, for me, like you said, you expect them to be to be good players because they're at this level, but you don't expect them to be fantastic. But our goal should be to develop them as far as we can go.

**I: Considering a player with a super strength vs an all-rounder, how do you weigh up if the impact is going to be the correct for your team?**

P: Yeah, so. I guess it depends what that strength is. If it's a super strength like speed, for instance, speed usually is pretty impressive at all times, because it's such an important aspect to have. But then if they're completely deficient on technical ability and they can't control the ball or finish or defend effectively, the speed's kind of pointless really. So, the allrounder element. Actually, you probably kind of. It's a tough one because they all average everywhere, which means that you've just kind of got average by actually they're good and proficient, which means that they might actually be someone who, as they progress, might improve, but they've got a nice grounding. Whereas some players who got super strengths, that's probably unbalanced enough and actually the player and then what they lack... So, say if they lack the mentality but they've got great speed. The mentality will let him down. Whereas a player who's kind of not as fast but mentalities kind of around the same. Probably someone you think long-terms got more potential, only because you kind of feel like they've got a more balanced all-around ability. So, it's a tough one to sometimes know what's the better option, because super strength is definitely will appeal. Say if you got a dribbler who's fantastic at dribbling but lacks certain areas on, maybe again, mentality or physicality. Although if a dribble is probably going to be pretty good. But say you've got a really good passer, but you can't run around the pitch. But his passing is fantastic, but actually doesn't really impact games because as it as the level gets higher, he's struggling to even get on the ball because other players just faster and stronger. So actually, seeing isn't

able to really be you utilized, because he can't do other things. So, the Super strength at times can be a benefit. But then actually if they are deficient in other areas, that does affect them on the game. It's hard to then see that superstrength in action, whereas if you are very kind of very good all round but not exceptional at something, there's probably an element that actually you would develop more exceptional skills as you get older. But if you kind of got a good basis of all those areas of psych and the body and the technical and tactical, probably going to keep progressing further on. But a player who maybe relies too much on one thing and deficient on another, maybe long term does suffer. So that's something to consider sometimes when we talk about players who are fantastic at 13/14. Actually, maybe they lack, I think, something that might hold them back in the next three or four years. But at that time felt feels like, Oh no, he's brilliant. Actually, are we conscious that he might struggle as the levels rise, or other players grow or get more physical? And then all of a sudden now that super strength becomes not as impactful because you can't really impact the game.

**I: So, there's almost a minimum threshold of ability expected?**

P: Yeah, I think so. I think these days you need to have players who are, kind of, all round in regards to their, kind of, if you want to call it a four corner model, they really are efficient in all areas and that also means the ability to play for the team and the collective as much as being individual. So again, in Academy football you get a lot of individual talent, but are they able to translate that into a team environment so we're producing professionals? Can they play is part of the collective? Do they understand what that means? Are they able to adapt to, you know, that senior environment? These are things that are, kind of, a skill set that sometimes we forget about at the younger level. You try to make them good footballers, but you're also trying to make them suitable and adaptable to that next level up. So yeah, I feel that it's important that players, well, they don't rely on one thing only and then neglect the other because I think that will be a hampering aspect of long-term.

**I: In regards to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P: so, we've got our MDT team as well as like our academy management team, so you've kind of you've got a very broad range of people from different departments all inputting and having an opinion, which I think is really important. so, you get a lot more of a balanced opinion based on different people's viewpoints and what they've seen. So obviously our sports science Department, Medical Department, our education, welfare, Obviously the coaching side, an analysis team. And then you've got like the youth team group as well who are looking at players for their level. So, you get in a really nice broad range. Obviously got Academy Manager, head of Coaching and everyone's involved in the process. It lets everyone have a voice. It lets everyone have a discussion. It actually maybe highlights blind spots that some people have. Whether they've got a bias towards certain players or they don't see certain things that you might see. So, it's definitely better to have a group of people having a discussion and one person deciding because bias is just too prevalent within that within a smaller group?

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: So, we use the rag rating system, which obviously allows us to colour do a red, amber, green on players. It covers their areas of mind, body, ball, and game, and it allows us to kind of just see where they come under all those areas. Obviously if we kind of got a green all the way through, and we think that long term there's potential, then obviously that's something that will continue with. If players start to see oranges and Reds in certain areas, and that's the way the discussion comes about what that looks like. And going back to that feeling of deficiencies like a certain element going to hold players back from that next progression and having that long-term view on players in a good and a bad way. So, in regards to thinking that long term he actually going to grow, because he's a late developer, so actually physical red right now is going to be different in 2/3 years, so we wait for that one. Where someone else might be like mentality. We don't think he's got that, and we don't feel like they're going to improve enough for us to persist with, so long term we see someone who's going to stay in our program? probably not. so that's why we have to look at it and consider whether we see long term benefit in retaining or releasing. but it isn't always a perfect science of "everything's a green", but that's where the discussion comes, and that's where expertise is used in order for us to understand and have that knowledge of player development and experiences from the past to kind of get the same feeling about what happened with other people, whether it was late developer, whether it was issues at home that are starting to become seen in regards to maybe parents separating or issues at school, so that the current climate for that player is quite toxic in regards to issues going on. But maybe we think in a years time we can address that and not be in a better place. So yeah, and that accounts for injuries as well. So, players going through bad injury run might be a knock to their confidence or their performance levels dropped. But we know that their body of work and we know their potential, that they'll get through this, so that's why it's important to have these discussions and not just base it solely on what you see on the pitch at that exact time, because there's a lot of things that obviously can be can be impactful then. And also, you can argue the coach relationship within that as well, in a good and a bad way. Some coaches can really help players improve. But maybe we can push them beyond the levels that maybe it is a false sense, but that's, I don't know if that's a bad thing or not. But then obviously other side usually is a coach who could be quite detrimental to players: restrictive, maybe just can't build the relationship, which means that the player then can't really fulfil their best. Does that mean that the players poor? Does that mean as a coach player issue? So these are things to consider in the process to make sure that we're really making sure we trust what our decisions and not just based exactly on what we see at that time and, again, use that bias of "Well, I watched him play last week and he wasn't very good, so we're not going to keep him". Because again, it's just short term is in there. So yeah, I think you've got to have a real good structured discussion and an idea about what you're looking for the now and for future to make a rational decision on it.

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: One of my own personal beliefs on development plans is that it should be seen as like a four-year plan, like it's almost like an Olympic set kind of aspect. So, kind of, 12's to 16's, 16's to 20 even 20 to 24 like these are young lads still. But then if you think of it in a four-year plan then you're thinking long term about what you're trying to achieve. You not thinking... you'll break it down, obviously into mesocycles or macrocycles and micro cycles, but ultimately you are thinking long-term. OK, what do we want the end of it? So, the youth development phase, for instance of 12 to 16 is perfect for that to take them through the journey. and

actually 12's to 16's is probably one of the hardest ones solely because of maturation effects and how much they go through during that period. Usually the onset of Osgood Schlatter's can affect players quite a lot, and obviously just general growth spurts can be quite detrimental. At the next phase on from that is more about their professionalism and their self-discipline and their ability to self-sacrifice. They're kind of where the big areas come under there. So, the 12's to 16's, it's very much for me about that long-term development plan to get them to kind of scholarship, year, and trust in that throughout there, really. I think if you were to trust what you do at 9 to 12, and trust then the next four year blocked off to help them develop. at 13's for instance they just started to play 11 V 11 so it's still a learning time. but we're still quite quick to judge their ability not to understand or impact games. So again, three or four years of helping them to develop, we should see things like that. and then obviously by doing that we're adding layers on each time. So, the individual development plans become very much about ILP where are you at? What can we work on? What's the short-term goals that we can improve? And, where are we looking long term? And then hopefully then that's a nice pathway and journey to keep helping layer different elements of their game to improve. And obviously then as they mature and grow, the natural kind of athleticism and physicality should come with that as well. However, you still put a S&C program in place to help them become stronger and durable and obviously adaptable to the next level. So yeah, I think it's really important to be really thinking long term about development plans, but really individualize it so that each player's journey is very much where they are. Not so much where we think an under 14 should be 'cause you're never gonna get the same. Every players got a different background, ethnicity, you know, kind of experiences, and now going through different stages of their growth. It's very rare to get someone in exactly the same position of that. So, treat everyone individually in the correct way, which means that you just cater for where there at and hopefully as a group they all work together for each other so that they can help in games. And obviously you sometimes can judge matches about where groups that. It doesn't always mean you've got a good group or a bad group. Sometimes it might be just a really good collective group, actually individually there quite poor, but they work for each other. But then long term you might not get any professionals out of that because they're actually really just average, whereas you might have a group that's actually got some really good individuals, but as a team they're not great right now, but individually, there's some exceptional talent. So as a coach, I think it is important to be focusing about developing all the individuals in the group as good as they can be, and not kind of restricting them just to win games. I think that's an important thing with coaching.

**I: How do you think coaches can acknowledge or even overcome that bias of seeing a player that's exceptional now but not thinking long term?**

P: I think it's one of the biggest parts of coaching. It's the ego of a coach. It's their ego on results. So, they get affected by what happens on a weekend. So, win a game and, as a coach, the group's brilliant. Lose a game and all of a sudden now questions are over certain players. I don't think he's good enough. I don't think he's good for us. He needs to go. And they're already making decisions on players and there still, you know, in one sense six months left till the end of the season, which means there's still six months of development time. If you're looking long term and you've gotten under 13, you still thinking he's got three years left with you. So, there's a feeling sometimes that were very short to judge and the results will cloud opinion. Again, a big strong lad who's an early developer who impacts games becomes a coach's dream, because he wins games for him. But again, it's the coach

really thought about helping that player. Or is he just giving him freedom just to play because he's helping him now. But long-term, are you really helping him? That goes again against the smaller players who may be struggling to impact games. So, all of a sudden now the coach starts to be unsure about whether to use them and play them. They are the ones who always come off at half time, or are they the ones who always start as sub. They don't play as many minutes. They then get into that... They know they're not considered as one of the stronger ones, so they're already now they don't have as much confidence because the coach isn't given that confidence. and I'm guilty of this, and I think it's very hard not to, and sometimes probably what I would always argue there is, that player has gotta prove that he's got worth to the group and that he shows that he's worth persevering with in a sense. so, you can always argue that you can play them down and play them maybe there biobanding stages so that it can help them excel. But I do think though, long term that those smaller players when they grow will actually become stronger because of this experience. But they've also they've almost got to be able to deal with this now so that you don't start to question whether or not there mentally strong enough because they have got it harder only because it's always going to be more of a challenge. But technically they're always playing up and being stretched. But then when they start to grow and close the gap, all that stretch and all that challenge actually produce more perseverance, resilience, probably a better technical ability, because there had to be. So you kind of trust the process there to think you've got a player longer term that your kind of getting out, but he has got to show something in the short term that makes you think it's worth staying with. so he's gotta have probably certain super strengths to make you think "Yeah, this players worth us continuing with", and then as a coach then you've almost got to be able to really just put players out there and say "I trust you" instead of thinking "I've gotta put him on" because that's so detrimental to a player because realistically they then know that they haven't got the backing of a coach or the staff. And obviously then because of that, their performance levels won't really produce. and if they do, if they do put through that mentality wise and they've got strength of character that says I'm going to prove you wrong, that's fantastic, but a lot of the time you see players who kind of go into their shell. They get nervous and then what you get then, I always talk about positive cycles and negative cycles, so a negative cycle tends to be players out of form. Coach isn't having him. Coach doesn't really help him. Coach is quite negative towards him. The player then just goes into more of a shell. The performances drop even more. The coach then loses more faith in him. They have a negative relationship that just compounds it again and again, and then that player then really just spirals out of kind of like quality. Whereas the positive cycle tends to be: play well. Get loads of praise, loads of confidence, loads of coaching, loads of minutes, loads of support. The players feeding off it. Players feeling great. Player feels like he can take any risks and not get affected by it because he's got the backing of a coach and all of a sudden performance levels will really rise. Which is why I really feel like the coach has a massive impact on our young player, because how they treat them will tend to see how the player develops and then it becomes a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy then on: I think he's a good player. I treat him like a good player. He becomes a good player, so then I was right. Whereas actually, there was a player who was could have been good, but you didn't treat them in the same way and because of that you kind again justified your beliefs, "I told you he wasn't very good". And that's very hard as a coach to almost be completely non, or I guess, non-biased towards your group of players, because there is going to be a hierarchy and there is going to be a certain quality in players that suit certain coaches and there's going to be things that they prefer in players then others. And so, some players will benefit. And this is where the journey of a player I think so



important about who they come across on their journey. So, if you get the right coach at the right time that suits you, as a player brings out the best in you, you progress. And obviously then from that, then you become a better player, which then makes everyone's perception of you into - He's a good player, and then you get more opportunities and you might play up more. Or you might just stay in the system longer. But then if you get the wrong coach and then it's just at that wrong time you have a bad season, you could be gone and all of a sudden now that journey is gone. and so, Again, timing an opportunity and luck in that sense, is so important for a player that there's not a perfect pathway. It's very much about right time, right place that works for certain people. So yeah, I think that's really that's, and that's why it's so difficult to sometimes map out a journey because it's never perfect, In that sense. but I think the key always as a coach to just try to think am I doing the best for each individual? Am I giving them as much support as I can, to make them all feel valued in their development? I think that's important part.

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

P: Yeah, I mean I, I do like the feeling of all-round footballers who can kind of play in a lot of positions, but it's something that probably, as a coach, you trying to develop overtime. I think in the short term sense they're going to be playing in the position if you scout them or they're going to come in and say "I'm this", and you're probably going to have to judge them in that sense. So OK. What does a centre half need? What does a fullback require? What does a midfielder have? and then do they tick those boxes really? I mean I, I've kind of got my own personal kind of talent ID tick box that I kind of score them on. Obviously, we work on the rag rating element, Um, with our certain elements. I think the key thing is, are you judging them based on, I guess as an Academy, what you expect of Academy player. Does he tick the boxes you expect? Is there something about him that you like as well? Because there again that goes back to the bias thing, but there might be just something that they do or the way they conduct themselves that you think there's something worth working with them. So again, sometimes perception and how you just meet a player and see them in action might determine where you think as much as just doing a checklist and he can do this, this, and this. sometimes you do get a feeling on a player and you just think there's something there. but ultimately, I think it's important that you assess them as well as you can, but that's where I feel like you have to have a six-week minimum trial. I think watching a player after one session is good and bad. It could have an exceptional session that you get blown away, but actually that was just a one off. Or you can have really tough few weeks, but they're getting to know the group getting to the environment, really not able to express themselves because they don't feel confident to do that yet. As a coach, you haven't probably built relationship yet as well, so you haven't really seen what maybe was worth coming in yet. You gotta give him time. And all of a sudden, then after that, maybe six weeks, you'd hope that they've either adapted to the group or not, and so you do need to go through that process to be a little bit more structured about, you know... And then through that process challenge them, you know. Put them under pressure and see how they deal with it. Shout at them and see how they deal with it, as an example, you know. Give him support and see how they feed off it. Play them in some different positions and see if maybe that suits them. It's a journey along the way more than so then just being this kind of either really safe journey, or overly kind of like dismissive, where you just don't... one of my biggest issues with trialists is that you treat them really badly. The players don't include them. The coaches can be quite standoffish. I agree with that because it's quite hard to treat someone like it. It's not. It's like almost like initiation, but actually it should be: there part of your group, you

treat him in that way, and you see if they adapt to the environment that you're trying to produce. Not, oh well, he's a trialist, he doesn't bother me, you know. And then you treat him in that way, similar to how you treat a player that you don't fancy. They feed off that as well. So, for me you try and make sure the players treat this trialist like a like a positive impact, not like you're a threat to me, so I don't want to deal with you. And again, it's trying to create the environment, to me, that's all about having the player or having the group working with each other for each other, then then the visually fighting against each other because I want I want that shirt more than you. For me, the harder everyone works, everyone has the potential to get there, instead of just this selfish "I'm going to climb over you to get there". Because in my opinion that doesn't help anyone really. Because it just goes against the group dynamics, so again, that's one of the things I always try and promote is that kind of a supportive, inclusive environment, especially for new people coming in so they feel part of it and hopefully within that they can show what they've got.

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

P: Yeah, so I don't really like it as a four-quarter model because I see psych/social is pretty much everything that underpins everything else. So, I always put psych social at the top and then then have technical, tactical, physical and all the other elements come out of it. But for me, psych/social is pretty much your environment. so going back on what I said there are group dynamics, individual mentality, everything I've discussed so far about how you treat people is your environment really and your communication and that creates the mentality then, to either progress and develop your game. So, if you create the right environment that makes the players feel like growth mindset, wanting to do my extras. I'm passionate and inspired about being a better player. Then they'll work harder on their technical side. You can't just box off psych social into a corner because it really is everything. So, you got into a pitch. How you act, how you talk, how you do things is psych social for me and so that will then pillar off everything else. So, it's not a four corner. It's not corner because it just can't be separated from the rest. It really doesn't underpin everything else, so that's how I look at it, and that's where I feel. That's why I'm so kind of passionate about the importance of that part, because then that creates better, better in all the other areas.

**I: Would you almost say that you could lack in the other areas, but if you lack in the psych social, you're really going to suffer?**

P: yeah, so for me I feel like we put a lot of emphasis on technical, but sometimes I actually think technical is one of the easiest things to develop, because I think that's all about practicing. I think you can go and practice and put the hours in an really work on your skills, but if you haven't got the psych to do that, then you're not going to have that perseverance or resilience or motivation to go and do that and find the time to do it. Tactically, obviously that's kind of coaching and learning the game that can be developed, obviously over time. but again, if you haven't got the willingness or the drive or the focus and concentration to learn, then that's not gonna help. And obviously the physical one is "Am I willing to put in the work" and "am I willing to learn from S&C coach". "Am I willing to put in the extra time"? Am I willing to follow a program? So, all these things are very much based on individual motivation, which again goes back to psych social and also the social side on peer pressure. So that's a big one at teenagers is do I want to be seen as the guy who does more because then I get my peers might, kind of make a joke, that I'm 'busy'. Where actually 'cause I you should be able to... what you want to do is push that aside and say I'm leaving you behind because I'm working harder. Do you want to work with me? Great, but if not, don't worry.

I'm not getting dragged down, but a lot of kids will get pulled back by peer pressure, which is why, again, you're trying to create a group dynamic where if you create a separation between good and bad, the bad will try and pull away or pull the good ones back because it's an ego thing. But if you can try and push everyone up to standards, then actually everyone's driving each other to new levels. So, for me again the psych social stuff will determine the outcome of everything else realistically because it really just creates their motivation for a player to do that stuff.

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

P: yeah, I mean obviously like this the objective assessment sometimes might be obviously sports science testing. It might be performance aspects in regards to analytics, so obviously what they shown in regards to the stats, because if the stats show certain things then obviously, we can kind of develop from that. So, if a forward shows provision or a lack of proficiency of scoring in the box from one touch, even though that's a very high need for top level players, then that's an important area to work on. so, I think sometimes subjective is a feel for that what they need. because obviously as a coach you hope to feel like you kind of get a gauge on where that person is at and your experiences show it. But you definitely try and use objective data because there's usually the numbers don't lie and obviously then within that it's very clear about what improvement looks like. So, I would use it, Yeah. That's why I feel like analytics are important and metrics are key on the pitch as well as obviously the physical data. So obviously it goes back sometimes into the have you got the means to do it? Have you got the ability to properly do analytics work or is it very much notational? But if you're getting something from it and there's some data there, then it's definitely worth using it, because sometimes that can back-up an opinion, or sometimes it can go against it. Sometimes people might have an opinion or someone, but their stats show differently. You know, so that might be if you're using GPS distance covered "oh, he doesn't run very far", but he stat shows that he runs the furthest in the game, but that's because someone sees it differently. You know I've got biased towards certain players that I see real value on the pitch, but then sometimes their stats or there then that it doesn't show that. But then as a coach it you can see the value that they bring, but maybe it's not enough of a 'wow' factor or there's just a perception that now it's just average. Actually, it feels like it's more than that, so that's where the subjective comes in at times. But then when you do the objective data on it, does the stats show that this guys actually had an influence on the game based on his position. not more so than maybe what you hope. At key moments, does he create, score or block? Well if he doesn't do any of that, but what else does he do? Because that might still be a part of football that's important. So again, if you base everything on a key moment, maybe that doesn't always give you what you want to see from a player, because actually is impacting the game is a more subtle than maybe what that shows. So again, I think it looked at the data and then thinking subjectively and then kind of bringing it together to see does that agree with your beliefs? Does it go against? if it goes against, why is it? Does it back it up? If someone else believes something but you can use the data, that's a really good opportunity to kind of say, well, look at this because it shows this, and then they can obviously do that the same way back to you, and that's where you have a proper discussion, and that's where the Committee or Group to discuss is really important. The key thing sometimes though, is that it doesn't get diluted, that obviously too many voices, too many cooks spoil it, can be sometimes a problem as well. But I think it is good to have the discussion because different people see different things and expertise is key to find out: OK,

what does this look like? What does this data tell us now? But what does that mean moving forward, you know, and that's important as well.

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

P: So, what we do... with the sport science data, the one thing that we probably don't show in the physical testing is stamina and endurance. So looking at some of the players that came back on the list, the surprising thing for me was that quite a few players that I feel are quite impactful in games and probably would be regarded as some of the fittest, on the physical data come down quite low. So, there's an element to kind of say, well that can go against subjective opinion or just general performance levels. At the same time, it means that there's deficiency levels these lads have in certain areas that could be enhanced. Because if they're already doing well and we think they're in a good place and actually they're still low on certain things, that probably means that there's still a lot more to develop in them, which is really positive because it means that they're still performing well even if their scores are quite low, which is often that's actually a good thing. Whereas a player who's at the top of a physical testing, yet in on the pitch really isn't showing it, makes you think, well, he's got a good super strength, clearly, but it's translating it into the game, so a development plan for him would be: OK. How can we help this? What areas is he deficient in that's going to help him become better on the pitch. Whereas other players are already exceling. But if we don't probably account for stamina and endurance and kind of see players who were able to kind of get through a full game and not start to fatigue still can make kind of decent amount of speed-endurance work throughout the game, then they're the ones that you feel have got the ability to, Obviously, you know, play a level that you know can play a full game instead of players who maybe can play for 20 minutes really high intensity, then drop quite significantly. But again, we're trying to build long-term athletes, so we have a long-term development plan to help that, but. That's again where we come under how they look after themselves. What's their diet and Nutrition? What's their sleep patterns? All these things that really do count for performance. we need to make sure we're aware of to give them the best, again, holistic kind of support and development.

**I: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

P: Well, our player development tends to be the ILP's and obviously then that's a player staff discussion, which is good to get the ownership of the player. There is a framework to work from, so it's not so kind of open to the player to do what they want. It's worked within the kind of philosophy and the model of a ball, game, body, mind, and obviously within that certain elements that we feel are important. So, the player kind of chooses their journey, but it's kind of got quite clear pathway. for me personally, the key thing after that then is to keep reviewing it and discussing with the player. I'm really putting in plans and schedules and goal setting that enables him to really focus on their plan, so it's great to put it together. But if you don't actually do anything with it, how are you gonna then obviously develop it, so it's probably up to the coaches and the staff to kind of have a more ongoing mentor support to help their ILP's progress. If not, then your development plans are really just a piece of paper more than a lived document that, obviously, then is actually carried out. And that's a big part for me, of what an ILP should feel like is actually. You should look at your plan and know that you've work towards it and then our job as coaches to kinda know where the where you focus should be now, what your short term goals are, what your long term medium are, and then build a plan accordingly to that. and that's where the staffing is so

important because it needs to be a joined-up approach. It needs to have different experts to have different times with players that, where they need to be in their journey and in certain people will help them more than others along that way. and that's where, again, discussions and support and having MDT meetings regularly to really discuss the players. That kind of time is important to have, and by neglecting that, sometimes you can either go into your own silo bubble and then just become very much your own silo decisions, or you just kind of just work on a day by day basis more than having a plan you know. So again, having a really, really committed MDT group are really focused on each players development plan and then action in it, and really working towards it, is an important part of development. Definitely

**I: Likewise, is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**

**P:** Yes, we have our rag ratings throughout the year, so as a staff will put together our RAG ratings where we tend to... what I do as well as I rank the group as well. So just see where they come under again in a subjective way. But where are they in regards to the group dynamics in regards to hierarchy and how does that factor? Does it show? Does it highlight that actual players were deficient are lower in the group, which tends to be the way? But why is that? And I think the keys after that, you have the discussion why certain players here in certain players there. and then what's their development plans highlight to help that? And then within that then, are you going to continue with him or not? So, our discussion then is, do we feel like this player is going to be a scholar with us in two years now? That's again, subjective decisions. But there's gonna be over a real joined up feel that no, we don't think he is, which probably then justifies it or there's going to be some voices who say, I think he's worth sticking with. And as someone else says, I don't. And then you find out what, what that middle ground is. Because there might be someone who just sees a potential there, that's like, look he's going through a growth spurt. His legs are a bit kind of gangly. He's struggling to move right now, but in a years time he's going to get through that, and he's going to be a good player. where someone might think, he's just not really doing very well right now. and then just kind of think he's not for us. Mentality wise, you might. I mean, we've had experiences. You know, a player you were with at under 10s's has come in now under 14's from a different club, so different environment, different background last few years, completely really different person. He's gone from Foundation primary School to secondary school. Gone through growth spurts, he's for me a different person, but you're still biased on what you knew it under 10s. and so that could still cloud your opinions on what you see now because you knew what the plan was then. So sometimes knowing a player for too long can also have a detrimental effect because someone who gets to know them quite in the short term Immediacy just finds out that person now, and because of that you actually can just kind of appreciate what you have now instead of sometimes use your previous bias to then make it make a decision. So again, all these factors come into a player's journey and it's a lot to consider. it's not so clean cut. You can argue, sometimes it should be easier. Just make a decision you think is good or not. But then by doing that you might lose a few through the cracks because you don't put enough thought into it. And obviously sometimes it's one of my big things really is, the long you keep in the system probably the more chance they have, Ultimately, you know. So, if you have got a really strong 23's group, in regards to it's a development group, and you can keep players in that system up until maybe 2021. And you really focusing on developing them. You probably have a pretty good player at the end of that because you just kept him in long enough to obviously help them. If you let them go too early, they lose now. Training time, coaching quality, you know, the environment. If they drop down levels, is that going to give him the best challenge, you

know? And some players benefit from it? It's a different journey for everyone of course, but, and also the rejection can sometimes help mentality and development of a resilience or Prove me wrong belief. so, they're going to come out and have more fire in them to kinda prove that person wrong. So sometimes you might make a decision and think "This player needs this" to help develop more of an intensity in him, because right now it's almost too casual because he's almost been in a system too long and got comfortable. So again, these things are some important things to consider when you talk about selection and deselection. This environment just might not be right for them now, because they've got too comfortable and stagnant in it. It might need a new a new thing to jolt them and actually a rejection might jolt them. A new place might get a new person, it brings out the best in them. Just had a lot of just had a debut for [team name] at 16 years old. Got released from [club name] at 11 went to [club name]. Now again, the rejection a new environment maybe he was he became the best player because he's at [club name] and they're not as good so he was given more opportunities. I don't know his exact development but now he's at [club name] and he's playing first team football at 16 and a lot of those lands at 11 at [club name] probably aren't. So, you can argue that it's again different journeys and different outcomes. But how you deal with each bit is what matters. So, if you get released, how do you deal with that? If you find a new club, is it the right one for you? If you're a young player, and a parent, I think it's really important to find out, OK, Is this environment right for my son in regards to? Is it supportive? Is it challenging? Is that coach gonna bring out the best in him? Because I think that you are trusting these people to develop your player and in one sense you only get one shot as a young player. So, you want to make the most of it. And obviously it's finding the right place. And I do feel that we have got a positive environment that is very much about supporting the players development. Um and it's it is a positive environment. It's not like a negative one, that's quite, kind of, like that Negative vibes, negative communication, swearing and shouting. I feel like it's supposed to be a place that's actually we're here to help you and actually enjoyable. So, you want players to come and enjoy it, because whenever you enjoy something, you'll put more work into it, and you'll have more energy about it. So, these are things that are really important to consider as well, about environment, but then that all then comes back to that. Do we keep them or not? And obviously hopefully if your environments right, you can almost say look. We create the right environment for this player, but it still we don't think he's good enough. Instead of probably having released question marks on how we have we treat him well is he with the right coach. You know, have we actually get neglected His development, because then if you feel like you haven't really helped him, you probably need to think well, we need to do more before we say he has to go. The other argument as well as if you got too many numbers in your group and you have to actually be quite honest and say there's players who are suffering because there's too many numbers that might be players who are just always a sub and hardly get any minutes and they're traveling a lot. And is that fair? Or players who are the better ones who still aren't getting their full game? And maybe that's hampering their ability to get through full matches more which obviously physically might be a detriment for their development long term. And actually, they might be the ones who need that more so there's a lot to discuss individually and as a group to decide whether to keep or release a player. But this is what I mean, I feel like it's a. It's a. It's a deep and intense conversation needed to make sure that you make the right choice that's best for everyone,

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: Yes and no. Obviously, if there's a player who's doing well, then obviously that's a positive thing. And obviously it means that he's got something that's positive to work with. One of the key things is the bridge between foundation and YD. So, some foundation players, maybe the environment, They're not technically skilful players. A lot of foundation tends to be around that, so as they get into the 11vs.11 game when they get stronger and they actually become better because they are more effective in games. So sometimes you can say that a player who's. Not great at foundation can still emerge, because maybe just grows, but the better ones that the challenge of the better one is always to make sure that the that bridge to YD doesn't stop doing what he was doing well. So, one of the problems is you get when you go to YD phases. OK serious, now OK we're playing proper football now. he's got to understand his role. He's gotta play things more simple. So, you get this really exceptional talent come out, who's got all this freedom and skill and expression. And then we restrict it and we go OK, Well, that's not we've done that now. The journey should feel like there is probably one of the problems we face with phases is that you already create separation between each one, so if it was just one whole journey, then what does it look like all the way through? Why should your 18's not have the same environment as the foundation? You know if you want to develop skilful, technical, creative players, which is what usually foundation is, surely you want that the top end as well? If we rave about all these talented players who are all very skilful and creative and they're manipulators of the ball they're dribblers they're goal scorers, why do we stop doing that as they get older? we almost go Oh no, you gotta stop that now, and all you gotta play more simple football. know how to play one touch, two touch, which is important, but my point is these foundation players are we given in the best opportunity to get better? or are we taking away what their strengths were? And I think this is where that bridge, the coach who takes on that that 12/13's player who's really got a really good group has gotta continue to keep that level up while not letting the player get comfortable. What you get, so we got the lad in the 16's. He was very good at foundation phase but he's that player now. Now that's because other players have bypassed him. But then at the same time maybe he hasn't been pushed enough. Maybe there was a sense of "he's already good. We don't need to challenge him". Whereas if you've got a good player you should be challenging him more, and you should be getting more out of him and asking more of him. 'cause if you think there's a good one there, it's not just easy enough to say, "Well done, you're a good player". It's actually, we need to put more work into you because you're actually seen as like a talented one, which means that our program with you needs to be even more in depth. But then you've got to get the best out of him, which means that we still gotta give him freedom. We still got them express himself. We still got to kind of get that extra working to make it more effective. And if that means that if his maturation isn't going to be a big lad, well, he's gotta be exceptional then at what he does, because there's a lot of lot of players in the game at the top level who aren't that tall. So, there's a big obsession with height too often. But actually, it's more about quality. And if you can get the journey right and get the right coaches with it and get them appreciating this player and bringing out the best in him. Then obviously that his journey is going to be in a positive way, but if you get too complacent, and just let him have too much freedom without asking more than he's going to then start to get stagnant and plateau. And then other players might go beyond that because they work harder than him. So, it's really important. It's good to have a good player foundation phase. The challenge is to make sure you get the bridge right to keep that challenge and keep his levels up and not just get complacent or just kind of say, oh, I don't know what happened to him, he just he just

drifted away, which means that you probably haven't done something right with him because he shouldn't be drifting away. He should be getting better.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Yeah, so what tends to happen, it seems, is that the older you bring him in, the more chance they've got of progressing. Because, a lot of players, if you look at Scholarship Decision tend to come in around under 14's tends to be. That's usually because you know what you've got, whereas at foundation phase. Like said, you got little kids really. Primary school lads coming in. They've gotta love for football. They have obviously talented lads, but then there's sometimes a feeling of they get too comfortable, maybe just in the system too long. like it's a long time to be in one place. Maybe they get a bit bored? so you get this young lad coming in at under 14 who's athletically good, so you already know what you've got. You haven't got that feeling OK when you get him in at 8, At 14 he might look like this, you don't know. but now you know what you've got. You know what his mentality is, because if you scouted him, you get to see him in his environment with his group. So, you kind of get into see him in his self instead of being in your environment where maybe you've, you've manipulated it. Like, one of the problems sometimes in academies is that you create that player and how they act. So, the values, the communication. Grassroots are sometimes a little bit more free and so you get more kind of organic, kind of, leaders come out of it. Whereas in Academy football sometimes we say Oh no, you can't say that here. No, you can't do that here. So actually, you start to create, I won't say robotic, but players who know what's right and wrong without having to be that kind of like, edge to them. because an edge, sometimes is "oh he is a bit of a bad one". Or "he's always a bit too aggressive" and obviously their needs become problems, whereas actually the players who make it have all got an edge, and all got that bit about them. So, getting under 14's there a little bit more, maybe rough and ready, little bit more edge, a little bit more about them, maybe just physically there so you know what you've got. So then all of a sudden then, you've taken him in. So you already kind of committed to think we think he's got potential, so now he gets that, that kind of adaptable journey of support because you might be the coaches brought him in. so all of a sudden now you've got a bias because you already like him. Whereas if you inherit a group, you already make judgments on "well, yeah, he might have been good, but I don't see it now". Whereas a new player comes in you like him and then you give him more opportunities and support. And that player also now is also loving the fact he's there 'cause it's all new to him. so, his energies high, He's got great intensity. He's got a real good like personal attitude, because he can't believe that he's in an Academy, because now he's come from... some players are being released from others and that goes back to the rejection. So, we got a lot of the fifteens gets rejected from Blues comes to us, really out of sorts of Blues, lost his way, hated what was going on, comes to new environment, loves it, feeds off it. 12 months later. Looks like a real player. So again, judging them when they first come in doesn't look like he's right for us, I'm not sure if he's physically good. But then people vouch and say trust me, we think there's something there. 12 months later he proves that right, you know. So again, that's kind of judging on why did he get rejected? What do we think he's got that we can help and then trust the process instead of just judging for now? Going back to the lad from grassroots? That's someone who hasn't been in an Academy and hasn't been sometimes sanitized to it. And also, he's just. It is like that; I can't believe I'm here. so, he just gives these all to it, instead of that sense of I've been Academy for six years. This is just normal to me. and they almost get complacent because of that. So again, everyone's Journey is a little



bit different in that sense. Because of that, how you treat them could be different, but for me, yeah, the older they come in, the more likelihood they're going to come into your because you probably already saying, do you think he's a scholar when you sign in? And where is it? 8 and 9? You're not really making that judgment. You're more judging them. Short term thing. Yeah, he's a good player. I think he's worth looking at longer term. Let's get him in. And then obviously then during that time you find out if he's got it. So, it is very much a scatter gun approach at younger ages. If you're being honest and you're trying to just get as many good ones in as you can and hope they stick. It's probably hard to really have a science towards foundation recruitment in that sense, because it's not easy. You know. Now I know [club name] are exceptional because they've got so many players that they've had from 8 and 9 that have made it to professional, so they've got a really great development pathway, Clearly, where they're having to not buy in at 15/16. Cause actually they have developed these lads all the way through, but they've got state of the art facilities. They probably be able to scout the best ones around, so it's probably pretty clear that you brought in the best ones in that area. There in a really good area of the Country that's clearly producing some top talent, you know, and that's more about environment. So, these lads might be at [club name], but they might be out playing with their mates. And there's a really strong Street culture, you know street football culture where they're all bouncing off each other for different academies and that's where their development really comes through. But [club name] they think well, look what we're doing with them. So again, what are they doing away from you, that might be the difference maker between what you seen on the pitch. and that's where sometimes we can be "look at what we've done with this player", but three nights a week, maybe it's the other four nights that are the difference, and you don't know. you know, so goes back to what the extras and the environment around the player as much as anything. But yeah, ultimately if you bring him in a bit later, you probably know what you've got and the younger the age is. You just trust that you get it right in, and one of the problems obviously is that they release a lot of players at 12, and if you're all we, who scouted these? It's like, well, you did, and you had it for four years. So, what have you done with them? You can't just kind of blame the scouts as you had for four years, so you have got a role in this. I mean, like you, you haven't. You can't just wash your answer this and then bring in new ones. I think that happens too often. I think sometimes you got like, you know, hold your hands up as a coach or staff and think, we let these lads down. And if you think like that then make sure the next time you put a lot more focus about doing it properly and helping these lads and not just being too free to say get rid of him and will get some new ones in. It's just too easy to do that, you know. But again, sometimes you come into a new environment like I've come in for 12 months and its clearly areas to improve. There's players who probably shouldn't be in, and players that we can better ones in, so you do look at that. But obviously if you're in somewhere for 10 years, 5-10 years, you've had an influence on that group. That's kind of on you now. And if you take that responsibility on then you hope that you drive it because that that's.... You Should be passionate and motivated to make sure you do a good job and not just be like blase. If it Oh well, forget it. Yeah, I can go. Because there are young kids, you know. talk about rejection and being a good thing, but it's not nice to be rejected. It's not nice to be released. it's a really tough thing to have for a young player to have. So, you don't want to be doing it so candidly If you can help it. What you want to do is give them a bring him in with the real thing they've got potential, and then work with them and make sure they had a really great experience. That's what you should have as an Academy is, you're not going to get loads of pros out, but you're going to influence a lot of young people, so make sure you do your best job with him. You know?

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: Yeah, so like maturation... I'm kinda sometimes biased towards a late developer because you do feel like there's long-term... There's long-term development there. the early developing, You can sometimes say, well, he's excelling because of his early development maturation, which is sometimes harsh on the early developer, because like I said before, you sometimes neglect their development then because all he's doing well so we don't need to worry about him. when actually he needs to be focused on, but certain areas like technically or maybe he's understanding the game. Maybe he's too reactive because he can be and as it gets found out he is actual reactions that aren't there because he doesn't read the game because he hasn't had too. So that's where you got really put that focus, but the maturation element sometimes might be that late developer, you just need to let them grow and develop and know that we've got a decent one there. But we just need to let him go through that process and keep them in the system because it's too quick to sometimes just let them go and say he's too small. 'cause I think that that's just not right. And then obviously then the development of maturation in regards to puberty and going through growth spurts. That's when the coach has to be aware of because there's an element sometimes have been managing that better and maybe having more breaks during growth spurts and being conscious of that instead of sometimes put in their bodies through quite an intense program, and then having their repercussions of injuries come out of it. And as at the same time that judging players during a growth spurt or judging players during their maturation and then making that judgment long-term on him to say, he's not very good, when actually he's just going through a phase. And we need to trust that he's going to come out of that. last year we had players who were regarded as bottom of the group. They've gone through clear maturation during the summer in the lockdown. They've worked hard, they come back and they look different players really in regards to their physicality, Really. They look they're just grown and matured, and their muscles are stronger. And there may be from that as well. Their personalities are a bit more stronger because they almost think I'm feeling quite strong here. So, all that all that matters in how that player perceives himself. Um the small skinny little kid, what I love about those players, If they've got a real edge to them and they're still doing it even looking like they are, I think that someone you've gotta put your hat on almost because as he grows, he's gonna be bigger as he gets bigger. But if he's still able to be the same personality who can get on the ball and show things, or at least demand it at least have an aggression where he's not afraid, there The things you love that, you know, because that's why I like the late developer. the late developer who looks shy and meek and nervous and scared and lacks bravery. Ok, what are you showing to make us think it's worth staying with? You know. the early developer is similar in a sense of, well, he's just fast, or he's just stronger, but he actually isn't that good of a player. But he's just looking good now and that's the discussion bit again. But then I was thinking, OK, how are we helping each of those sides? What are we doing then to help their deficiencies? If it's a size element of a big or small, what are we doing there to make them better so that when they catch up either way, then there are better player for it. You gotta be thinking about that. Date of births, late developer, early developer. I do look at all those elements because it does affect how you perceive certain players and obviously then it just it just addressed their selection element on. Do you think that there were staying with or not? Because that might determine a decision. When you see a player on 31st of August birth and you think you're not sure about him but actually is a day away from being a year below, you pretty much

makes my mind up to stay with that player, Whereas the 1st of September makes me think well he's the oldest in his group, but it doesn't really show that. You know, but again, bio banding or maturation effects are different, I guess. But the age, the date of birth does make an impact on me, so again, it's looking at the whole area and deciding. Also, siblings help as well. Like you might have seen their sibling come through the system. He went for a similar, you know, Development Path in regards to maturation so you know from experience these lads going through something similar, but there tends to be sometimes a family element to these things, so having that to back up certain things will help you know. Like looking at an older brother who is not in the system and thinking bloody hell, He's 6 foot four now, and he said he was just like that when he was that age. So, you feel trust. Trust that he's going to go there. so, it is having a more that holistic understanding and seeing the long term and deciding what you think it's going to look like in five years time to decide if it's worth staying with now. and then Obviously then, if you're staying with him, put all your focus and I'm developing them in the now, and then hopefully as they grow, they will just come through as well.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: subjective really in regards to performance levels across the season. Players who have probably excelled or impressed, players who at the low end of probably struggled to ever have a good season or struggle to impact games, and the medium ones who are who are kind of in that along the same kind of like, that they've done OK, but not enough to make you think, yeah, really really like that. The high one is kind of someone you think long-term potential. You can see it. The medium ones you are thinking OK, there's something there, but it's not fully either shown or you believe in it fully. The low ones are players I feel haven't got the ability to progress further.

**I: So, when you're saying about the medium, ones are showing bits. Is it almost like sometimes they play well, sometimes they don't play so well.**

P: Yeah, yeah. So, there's flashes, there's good performances. There's good games, but there's deficiencies. Or there's just an inconsistency. Or there's just probably a little bit of an unsureness about certain ones, some of them, like physically, aren't great, but you think maybe it's going to be better? Some of them, like you said, Ups and Downs in regards to performances, others again just struggle to like you know, do enough. but again, show moments that you think, yeah, there's some in there.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yeah, I think this is similar to the rag rating element that we do. I think throughout the I think players will have upturns and drops and obviously sometimes you might judge it on that kind of 6 to 12-week period. Other times you might just think of players really kind of come out of himself and start to show more, So in the move up. other times they might go from Really impressive, for instance, are really positive preseason and then again the weather changes or they have a they just drop off, they have a bad performance, can't recover from it all of a sudden they drop off and where you felt they were at. So yeah, I think it is a fluctuating element. I think if you do this sometimes element where you just know there's a player who's exceptional in a sense of that he's a high performer. But I still feel then you know they still have their ups and downs, but you're probably not going to go from

high to low I'd imagine, but in the medium ones could fluctuate between high and low quite quickly. Um, they might have that run where you think actually is alright, and then they go back through that phase of just losing it again. And I think it's important to know why that happens. But again, maintaining performance is probably the key bit about why they are in their levels.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: Yeah, they they impact games more so all the players who are high have more impact in games. And have more consistent quality in games I guess is the thing, so they are able to perform to a good level a lot of the time. So positionally they obviously Excel, they're also probably I would say the best mentality is in the group as well. The hardest workers, the ones who have got the best kind of consistency and attitude are the ones who kind of have a trust, I guess, from myself as a coach to know that they will perform, whereas the medium ones are probably players that you're not sure what you might get each time. Whereas these ones are pretty consistent, they're gonna probably give you a good performance.

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: Yeah, I'd say so yeah, yeah

**I: Do you think there are any players within the mid-performance group who you would also definitely select?**

P: Yeah, that's what I mean. I also I think this thing that you would deselect. I think that there that they could go over way in regards to what you think. I think that's where the discussion comes. I Feel like for the H's you almost feel like there's no discussion needed, I guess. you know, whereas the mediums you almost think that's where you need to have that decision. Are they doing OK? But they're going for a maturation. Are they are a late developer or are they just in a bad form but then you see it, you know enough that they've got the quality? That's where I think we need to put more emphasis on. Do you think that they've got the ability to go to the next stage so that H is the ones that you kind of trust that you think "Yeah, we trust that there gonna about to go on to the next one and we trust that that's the right choice", the L's are ones that you say no don't think so and the mediums are they have the real discussion around about why there in that, why they're there and which ones do you think have got the potential to go to the next stage?

**I: Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?**

P: Yeah, I mean, all of them are athletically good, so I'd say they're all kind of maturation wise there. There developed well, although there's still areas to still improve, of course. but they're probably ones who don't look like they can. They deal with the game, they deal with the demands of the game, physically. Mentally there's strong, so they've got they've all got good mentalities. They're all resilient and they persevere, and they take the game on and you know that you can trust him with that. and under adversity, they tend to all be able to kind of like push through that. and then in a sense of game performance wise in their positions they all, they all do well and they all have an impact on the game. So, if we look at key moments in it is a defender, they've got a good ability to block and create in fairness,

and obviously midfielders and forwards in there do make things happen. so, I would say holistically, they tick the boxes that you'd want as a player, and then you trust them to continue in your system to progress. exceptional talent wise, there's probably only one I would say is of that level, but the others you know you want us to keep him in the system again to continue to keep them developed. So that's why I would trust them to continue. the medium ones is the question of do we feel like he's nice he can progress? Or do we want him in our system Further, as we think he has got potential. But we're not sure now because there's a few questions over them. That's what the medium was really for me.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: I would say I would say athleticism tends to be one. there all strong, quite powerful, good runners, reasonably quick but not like speed isn't something that's really exceptional within the group to be honest, but athletically they are good so they get about the pitch and the impact the game in an athletic sense. But like I said they've all got the same mentality. In a sense that they are players who will step up and then technically they all can play. So, and they and they understand like each player here has a good understanding of their role. So, I would say that they tick those boxes on a on a four-corner sense again where they or ball, body, game, mind. I think they take those four, whereas others are probably got elements that you're probably orange or question marks on, but I would say all those have a green. Uh, that kind of gets them to that stage where you think their good enough in all areas and that's why they're excelling in games right now as well, which it obviously is another part of it. All those players are playing well, which probably determines 1) my bias towards them and 2) why they're doing well. cause if they're playing well, then obviously they're progressing and their mentality is good, and there are kind of having that good energy. The players who are struggling, maybe that shows in their performances and maybe that game compounds their performance level so. Important to be aware of. Again, if you perceive players in a certain way, do they then act in that way? You know which again, is a self-fulfilling prophecy element coming out again.

**I: Likewise, is there anything uniquely outstanding about each individual in the top players, which may not be replicated across the group?**

P: I'd say a few of them have got a mentality outstanding, so that their drive, their perseverance, their character, their ability to deal with adversity under pressure is really good. Others I've got a technical excellence and, I'd say one or two are athletically excellent, but mainly it's the mentality bit and their understanding of the game that seems to help them show kind of a high-performance element.

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: So, I'd say the mentality bit is probably the key bit. I think that there is a physical element with some of them that they are physically not as good, not as strong, not as fast. Not as tall, not as mobile about the pitch, so probably their athleticism is there is there problem? But then obviously then within that, are they able to find other ways of getting around it? And that's where that probably not. So, they're not excellent in other areas to make up for that. they're not really intelligent with the ball there. technically OK, but don't show it enough in games, they don't really impact games. And then they lost that mentality, I think, in bravery

and they'd probably quit and hide more than others. So that's why those are there. But I do think that maybe there's an element of late developer size that comes into that which are then again goes back into their personality goes into how they're treated, how they're used in games. They don't have, Maybe, that belief or trust that the coach values them so they're not able to perform. And maybe they're just there performing in that way that's almost again like self-fulfilling prophecy version. They're just playing how you, how they're being treated maybe, or how they are valued.

**I: Do these lower players lack complete abilities required to be in higher groups, or do they possess the required abilities but at a poorer standard?**

P: Yeah, I would say all four of them I've got here and actually I just I just I have changed one from out from M to L. So, I've changed 11 to L 'cause. I think that it was probably a bit too fair on that. I actually think their strengths are technical, their classes as technical players, but they lack in other areas too much. So, I would say that they're good technicians or classed as good technical players. Can pass the ball well, can cross the ball well, Nice touches, quite like, you know, but it's the other areas that make them there. so, it goes back to that sensor for me on an onus on technical players, sometimes neglecting the other things and saying always a really good technical player. But then, actually not having the other stuff to them make that worth that super strength. Or if that's what it's regarded as effective in games.

**I: Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: Yeah, see I think that looking at them, obviously that you can argue that if it's a size element on these players, do we trust that when they do grow and develop, they will be in a better position because they're technically good? But then goes back to the subjective short-term. Do you see it? Do you see these bits? Do you see enough to think yet worth sticking with? And that's why I think there Ls, because I don't think you do see enough. I don't think there's enough to make you think. We think we need to continue this with this guy because he's actually a very good player who's just a bit behind in a certain area right now. It's more that, yeah, he's a decent footballer, a decent player with the boy. He's got a nice touch, but he doesn't do it in games because he lacks too many things and that's usually comes under A mentality and physicality.

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: Consistency for some, so not performing to a level enough, but showing moments that you know there's some in there. Some of them are kind of flat athleticism or play some really good games where you think Yeah there is something there, but then a few bad one games or just like you know too many Ups and Downs. some of them, again it's like lacking in certain areas so can be quite effective in games but are they really intelligent enough? Do they really understand the game? Do you think they've got long term development or are they just quite good short term? Um and then also then that sense of like, OK, what's he gonna look like long term? so he's not bad now, but he's not exceptional. But then there's a feeling that, oh he might grow, or he'll get better at that. But then you're not sure, you very much just hoping and guessing more than maybe having that real assertion that yeah, he's

gonna get taller or faster. So that's more on the defender side there. But yeah, I think inconsistency performance too many Ups and Downs and question marks over Athleticism and maybe tactical intelligence

**I: Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?**

P: Yeah, exactly yeah. I mean, I think effectively they show more in games that you think that he's clearly, he's a good player, but he's not someone that you think, I definitely think he's got the chance to go on. Someone is more of a question mark, but definitely someone who's in the consideration, whereas I think the lower ones are ones that in my opinion. You wouldn't pursue further because they've just there's too many deficiencies I feel, or they've shown too many kind of like negative traits to think it's worth persevere in with. Whereas the other ones, it's like look that shows some really good stuff that you think Yeah, there is a good player there, or he has got some good attributes but maybe lacks the consistency or you lack the trust in him. Have they got the long term to trust to keep him in the system?

**I: What does each individual player lack that prevents them from being in the top group?**

P: Yeah, I believe that you know top level players have just got a better understanding and awareness and decision-making optimal speed under pressure than the average players who don't see the pictures. So for me the best players are able to assess and see what's around him at like Quick split second speed and make that best decision and assess it and then also execute the quality of it to make sure that it's effective and not just they see it but they can't execute it. and the top players were able to do that consistently. You know throughout a game throughout a season and show that again and again. So, the key thing again is to put the players into that in under that situation, enough to develop that decision making under pressure. the ability to see their pictures. And like you said, the risk taking is to make sure that we develop players who are able to be positive in their play and not just safe and secure like [player name] as a good example is so effective in his impacting games is really great, but he's actually quite wasteful, but he's always trying to be positive and trying to make things happen, whereas [player name] is more efficient than him. But then obviously [player name] is because he's positive makes things happen. So one of the lessons as coach is, try not to deny players the ability to be risk takers, because even at the top level, These players, like [player name], who still kind of in a statistical sense, is quite wasteful but also statistically makes massive impact in games. If we if we start to reduce players risk taking because we're scared of them losing the ball, we then end up just creating really safe, secure, safe players and not risk takers. So yeah, the risk taking at speed, awareness before they receive of what's around them, and their ability to obviously perform at speed technically, and then obviously then athletic athletically, there the key bits. The decision making under pressure, decision making at speed, decision making you know to see the best option. They are the tools of the best players.

#### **8.10.5 Participant 5**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: Lead youth development phase coach.

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

**P:** 3

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

**P:** League 2

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

**P:** 10yrs

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

**P:** 3yr

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**

**P:** 16s

**I: Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

**P:** Yeah, so um. I never really well, I didn't really play a high level. Obviously, always liked football, always loved it. I went to college into like a football Academy thing and then started my coaching badges there, Really, where guys came in on the leaders course on the Level 1. And they suggested me, and I was only 17 and there was almost at the age where you think I'm too young. You know you're too young to start your coaching badges or whatever, but um, I got recommended by the guys who came in to go onto it and then my lecturer, 'cause he was a former international, He could you add tickets so we got me onto the level 2. So I went on to level 2 at about 17 and, I was fed up with education to be honest, when I by the time I finished college, but my lecture almost pushed me to go to University, again another really good decision. I went to University, then [UNIVERSITY NAME] to study football coaching performance. so, done three years there. Went out to America after my degree just for a couple of months. Uh, and that, but like you in that I was working at [CLUB NAME] Development Centre, so obviously we all like different experiences during this. You know you got [SCHOOL NAME] like grassroots teams that I was taking, and stuff like that. But then, just in terms of how I got to my role now it was working at development centre when I was in UNI and then when I came back, I just got a job in the school. I don't really know what I was gonna do to be honest, but worried 'cause it's like you go out to America, and you come back to nothing. You know, so, when, yeah, so went into work as a teacher's assistant. Work one to one in a school and then I was like around the Academy trying to push volunteering here and there. And then got a place into the Academy Then, as a part time coach. And then in 2018, I think it was. Yeah it would have been. I got a full-time job as lead YDP, so that's kind of the pathway. I did a Masters just before I got my full-time job. So, I was finishing it off while as I got the as I got this job. So, I've got a Masters degree as well so. Yes, we know football I suppose.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

**P:** Challenging in the. Um, because we're Cat 3 Academy obviously limited resources. You know, we're very new Cat 3 Academy, but my first year in the role was the first year as Cat Three. Hence the job coming up, so you know we've had challenges. We've had a lot of change we had in my first couple of months. In the role of the Academy Manager left and we went the whole season them without an accounting manager, there was three of us running



the Academy. um, and then another one Come in and lasted like a month. So, uh, and then so now we've got, um, who was foundation phase lead and somebody I work with. He's Academy manager now, so it's been a lot of change. There's a lot of challenges because of course there hasn't been the people in post. So, then we had to fill their roles and you want the best for the players. Then you're trying to do all different things and trying to put things in place and build apartments and stuff like that. It's been very challenging in that on that front, but if you look back like you wouldn't change experience to the world because. You look back, you know you gotta be better at it to look back and actually reward yourself and give yourself a bit of a Pat on the back. But there was no analysis Department when I came in. There was no sports science Department there is, you know, there was nothing. and then you look back and you go bloody hell like where we are now. There's no life skills, which we do now, and all that so. During it's tough, but then once you get through it and you get out to the other end and you look back, you know it's my third season. So, you look back to where we were in the first year like it is really rewarding.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: person before player? Is the way I see things. I see them as people and young people who Just happen to like football. They enjoy football so I'm very big on developing the person, developing a good person, because I think if you develop the person you will get the best out of the player. That's my whole philosophy around it and hence why bringing in the life skills, and doing life skill experiences, and stuff like that, because not many of 'em make it with us. So, well, especially with us, because you know it's even more challenging. We haven't got a 23's or anything like that, so how can we set them up for life? And for me, Like, if I bump into somebody five years down the line and they've got a good job with the mortgage and a wife and kids and all that like, that's just as successful, because, Um, you know, yes, they've enjoyed football or, you know, they might be playing Semi Pro or something like that like, that's what we do to see a success as well, not necessarily somebody who's going to make it Pro or sold somewhere.

**I: What about training considerations?**

P: Yeah, so I think they need to be in a lot of Sessions where this is this decision making in there. I'm at the moment I'm very much against passing follow practices and I've been for the last couple of years and waiting for my mind to change on that just because I think in a game, When do you pass and you follow your pass, and then you go around in a circle so you can do things like that when there's loads of contextual interference loads of people around you know loads of bodies around just so, then they're getting used to people being around him and having to find the space around that. So, I believe a lot in that sort of thing. Um? I believe in allowing, so talking about a match they now, I believe in allowing them to make their own decisions, but then also supporting them when needed. So, giving them the opportunity to go and explore and figure out the problem? Or sometimes they don't know the problem at 16, so you just have to let him know of the problem. Saying right, you're getting beat. The Balls going into the full back every single time. Right, OK, so they know it's a problem like oh, you gotta stop that, right? Give him a few goes to figure it out. If the pass is still going into the full back, then you might have to guide them. It was a good example in a recent, well, the only game we've had all year for the under 16, our winger he was starting to high. And the ball was getting played behind him, with the fullback higher than him. So, we obviously use getting beat every single time. And it's a case of right. That's the problem. The full back end on the ball, or at least teasing them to get, so then you can win it. Give him

a few times, doesn't understanding it. right? You're too... you're too high, so we need to be at least in line with the with the fall back. [He] Wasn't getting it, still wasn't getting it, and then it was tactics board at half time, go through it, and then he got a little bit better Second half. So that's the kind of process that I prefer under 16. It is a little bit more, you know, compared to like under 13's, or whoever, it is a little bit more, Um, you know, telling them, because that's what they gotta get used to when I go into under 18's, so.

**I:      So Decision-Making is quite critical in your belief?**

P:      Yeah, I think because. If they do go make the first team, I suppose is a little bit different like, well, the managers don't want to be on to him all the time, so yes, they will tell him what to do and they will give an instruction but they don't wanna be babysitting them on the pitch, so it's important that when they go on they can be trusted To be able to make their own decisions. 'cause they have to solve problems in the game. I was reading something the other day where you know you can't really sort stuff until half time really because it's hard to get the message on and stuff. So, if there's a problem, or, because there's a lot of opposition analysis and all that, if they set up and then they've done it differently. Or, you solve the problem. it's been able to solve the problems themselves and giving him the best understanding, hopefully.

**I:      What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P:      Yeah, I think it has to relate to the League that we're trying to play them for. but then the difficulty is, it's also trying to prep them for what else could be, because if we get a sale or something like that, you know, and what other under 23's would look for? Um so. For our League is a lot of crosses, a lot of direct passes etc so they do have to be able to play Direct. my thinking, and it depends on positions, I think you look at Your centre backs have to be able to defend, quite simply, and I suppose it's the same at every level, but they have to be able to defend. Fullbacks, they have full well yeah, all defenders have to be able to defend. you got your wingers who have to be good 1V1 and good at crossing. Um fullbacks have to be good at crossing. Centre midfielders have to be able to go box to box and they have to have a little bit more about them then just runs, he just stays there. So, you look in a more box to box where you can. And then your strikers. Can they be physical presence? So, it's not just about a nippy Kid that runs in behind and scores goals. 'cause that might not fit the physical profile for us. You need to have somebody who can physically look after the ball when the Balls played up to them or physically flick the ball on, or, and ask more. So, based on our League, I guess.

**I:      In regard to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P:      Obviously, the older age groups, the more I think more people get involved. So, the 16 year looking at 18 staff, Academy manager, myself, Coaching staff, And you know, and then you can look at the, like, the analysts, 'cause obviously they gotta put the clips together, and sports scientists because they see them from the physical side. So pretty much everyone. I would say for under 16. But then when your lower, I suppose it's more of an age group Coach and myself really, you know. you run it by the Academy Manager, but because the account manager might know the number the player or think they see a different side. It is important to try and get as many perspectives as you can, but yeah. Obviously the older you get, the more people are involved.

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: Um? Performance versus potential? I think. So, you look at their performance. Are they playing really, really well? You know, are they doing well in their age group? If you answer is yes and obviously, they've made a good claim for themselves. and then I think it's the potential of if somebody's not performing, why? you know, why aren't they performing? Is it because they're just going through difficult stage of growth, for example? Or an? You know what's there?.. What's their potential looking like, um? But then I suppose it's the same with all the players. I think you just have to try, and it's the hardest thing in football, is try an judge that potential. All the decisions around potential, but then of course, performance of that current stage does help, but maybe it blinds us sometimes, and I don't just mean our club, but maybe in a, you know, just 'cause he's playing well, Does it mean he's got the potential. But then, If he's not playing well, then, you know, you get released, and then, he might struggle and... but like there's a boy in our 16's now, who last year, he went through a bad stage of growth and he was horrendous. And yeah, we told him this year, Like, you are borderline release mate. You know it was that and it was, you know, just being honest with him. If you are borderline release and now you've given yourself a really good chance. So, it's amazing and you just have to really be patient. And that's why it's difficult to make the decisions under 14's, I think. It's the biggest stage of when there's so many changes, but uh. Yeah, I think it's just... You have to look at everything holistically. You have to look at background and what's going on in their house. Like, you know, all those sort of things. Can we support them but. Um, I kinda like the idea that Academy football is just an opportunity to play with better players and better coaches and just play football. That's the way I like to see that. I think hopefully we can get to a stage where That's the way it's seen. I think there's a lot of work around education with parents and staff and then players themselves, just to be like, Well this is what it is, like, you can go and play grassroots with your mates, Or you can come and get better coaches and, like, build mates, build relationships, build a lot of stuff that you can get from playing Football Academy football. Don't see it as or if I get released at the end of my world. so. Yeah, I suppose there's a lot of things, but potential has to be the biggest.

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: Same process so this year we've changed our reviews in that, like we have reviews, which is just a player, coach and player, they'll go through development plan and it's very much driven by them, The development plan. very much driven by the player, see well they want to work on. That can be a weakness that can be a strength. And then it's a conversation with Coach to see how they can work on that and what action plan they can put together. And then the review with the parent then is. Is yes, it's around development plan, but then is more... you cover everything you cover the whole thing of the expectations of The Academy, I guess?

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

P: I suppose that gets more prevalent as you get older. because you know we've got it. It's quite funny enough. At our age group, we've got about five players we don't know where they're going to play. they can play anywhere. and there's one kid who's played everywhere except in goal. so, it is... what positions are gonna be? So you probably do have to like

people like him is more of a general, more general, like, what where can he fit in all this until like under 16's where you might nail down the position a little bit more. but then with ones like there's a boy in our 16's now I've worked with him since under 12 and you know he's always going to be a centre back. Defending, just always going to be a defender. and there's one in our 13 is now. you know, 'cause he loves defending at 12. just gonna be centre back. long as he gets a height or like a fullback, you know he's going to be a defender. So, with those it might be a little bit more specific and but if we're unsure in their position like well, this one, again, in the under 14 who's like Striker, just striker through and through. So, you just you might play different positions, but then you're more focused around the finishing and hold the play and stuff like that.

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

P: I think we've come away from it now with our development plans this year. Just because I think it limits people. It's also a lot of a lot of things to take in and, like, I think you force it. So, for example, our development plan used to be, you'd have 1 technical 1 tactical, 1 physical, 1 psychological or psychosocial. But then. It's like, some kids are great psychosocially, so yes, they can carry on building on it, but then like are we forcing that on him? or like, tactically, Why does the foundation phase player need a Tactical objective? so it's more so now, as a collective, where the player can choose what they want to work on. That can be... It could be 3 physicals. You know, it could be a 2 psycho-socials, and at 1 technical. Um and I think it just provides more freedom in that, like, we are very aware of the model, we're very aware that players have to be competent or all the levels, but it's not so much like this is a four corner model, you know, bring it in that way. I think we've come away from that a little bit this year, and I think for the positive. 'cause when it come out, like I thought it was great, you know, you start coaching about this 4 corner model and my cousin who hasn't really done much coaching, if he did the talent ID level one, in summer wherever which is obviously free online, and then you come across the four corner and he text me and was like, all over it, and I'm like, to us as working in Football is like, bloody hell! you know, and that's what you do. when you first hear it, it's like yes that's great. but then I think it's the practicality of it Really.

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

P: Um? we do predicted height. That's Something that we've got into a lot more over the past 12 months, I would say. you know, looking at that and, you know, we even looking at is there worth working with an under 13 because their goalkeeper. We've got small goalkeeper. Is it worth working with him because he's not going to be big enough? you know, how much do you go down by the science and stuff like that? So, it was all that conversation. And then there is there are player profiles that our head of coaching has done, that you almost like is he good at this, is he good at that? and I suppose it's just clips then. To be honest, I put together clips and you know for everybody to see. And yes, you've got your player profile right. He does this well. He does that well. You need to work on this, and can we develop this in two years as a scholar? You know that sort of. I think that's how objective you make it, and we're gradually now. Now we've looked to get GPS into the end of 16 this year hasn't been quite as possible. Hopefully when we go back that will be able to do that soon. That helps a little bit. we collect physical data, but it's more to be honest, like I'd like more speed stuff to be done because there are sports science and I agree with him to a certain extent. If you just run from here to there, and you gotta stopwatch, it's so susceptible to human error isn't it? So, unless you get like the speed gates, which to be fair

from a local uni they lent us, lent them to us before last season. So, like if we can get access to those, it makes it a little bit more viable, but if you just standing there with a stopwatch, it's ok, but then it's like. You know we it is so the standard deviation of this is, like huge, isn't it so? So, we haven't really got access to the full equipment. We do have a, uh, force plate now, with obviously hamstring strengthening and stuff like that. Yeah, we have a force plate. We do functional movement. FMS. But yeah, it's quite limited in terms of speed. And like one rep max 1, being able to get the boys into the gym. We did plan to this year is going to be the first year really been a couple of years where the 16's have been in the gym. We haven't got our own gym. You know, we have to go to a rented one, not rented one but like a public one. So, we were planning on getting the 15s and 16s in there this year, which then obviously you can do those sorts of tests.

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

P: Um? I think you look at performance first. and so, say for example, you say I think it needs to be there as a side order almost. so, if you say all these wingers really good, he can get past Players 1V1 and he's quick. Hang on, let's have a look at this speed data or what? Yeah, he's quick for his, you know, compared to a first team player, he's this, this, and this. that's how it needs to be used rather than, let's look at his data and go: Oh, that's a good one Rep Max. 'cause, you know, ideally like, really what is 1 map Max actually, it's just pushing up a weight in it so. I would say it's more performance based, but then you use the data's as a support mechanism if needed Really.

**I: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

P: Yeah, so we all have right through the Foundation phase and YDP. We have the same at PDP, I think. we have the same process. Um, so that probably hasn't happened in previous. Well, it hasn't happened in previous years, but that's just because we only know, like all the changeover and everything and people were doing their own thing and stuff. But now this year definitely. There is definitely a need to change and so we've got it all aligned. The only difference is like there's a couple of. Like for example, I don't think the foundation phase definitely under 9's and under 10s Have three learning objectives. OK, so it's like just tailored to them really, because they probably don't need three. it's on one thing you know. Focus on thing this year, focus on one thing next year and then it might be two things at 11's and under 12's. and then when you come into the 13's, bang, you got three things. you know a 9-year-old can say, I want to work on shooting. So, you just work on shooting if that's what, you know... Obviously there might be a little bit of a direction from the coach, especially at foundation phase to be like. You don't really need to work on that, or like what about this and you know, and rightly or wrongly, I don't know to be honest up 'cause I haven't been in the foundation phase meetings, but and I suppose it happens at all other clubs where the coach leans them towards what they wanted to say anyway, where is what we say with the YDP is, We allow you three. if there's three that you Fully believe in, and Go, right, I wanna work on these three? Fine. but we ask you to deliver 2. so, if you have two, then we will give you one. That's generally works nicely because they give like 2 and then there are not sure on the third one. So then we'll step in and say right this is one that you mentioned, but generally to be fair, they're quite aware and like the things that we want to work on, there's only a couple of times where you might have to say. Or what about this? but generally they give something that they do, you know, you both are on the same wavelength, really.

**I: Likewise, is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**

P: Uh, yeah. So well, in terms of game time. It needs we need to make sure that they get fair game time and you know, while we need to see him but we need to see that player and what we're starting to look at a lot more now as we're developing is certain games with certain players. You know, like we're talking about players playing down an age group and why and stuff like that so. Yeah, it's getting a lot better.

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: Um? And I wanna say, I don't think it does. I think it's great. and it for me it shows that they are in the right place, at that stage. At that stage of their development and they that age they should be in the Academy. performing well in that age group. But it doesn't mean that they're gonna potentially be one. And that's where I suppose it's just gotta keep challenging them. So, if they playing well, right? OK, so how can we challenge him to pull him out Their comfort zone? So then keeps testing them if they keep flying out of those challenges, then it's probably more likely that they are going to be something. But yeah, I wouldn't. I don't look at an under 9 and go, oh yeah, he's brilliant like he's going to be the next best thing, or whatever, you know. 'cause there's so many factors. So many factors.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Yeah, well, if we signed him, we wouldn't sign him unless they had a future you will have. We see potential in them so, you know, when we get a lot of that. Because 'cause we're developing Academy, we're not. We're not exactly at the position yet where we've had. I think the youngest we've had somebody. What will be now 'cause he's a pre scholar. It's like under 12 under 11, yeah? So, I think, and maybe if actually to be fair, the 16's group Now, you might get in under 10. Which is like quite good for us. We haven't had that for a long time, you know, like since then I would say probably, under 13's is probably, you know, it's usually YTP and then they follow through is. You don't get many from the foundation phase going all the way through so. So yeah, I think um. I think we only signed with, I think we're getting a lot better at that. You've previously I think somebody's come in and be like, oh, he's good. He's good academy player, let's get him in, you know without thinking about or yeah, OK, he's good now he's doing alright but is he gonna be, what we require in a couple of years or whatever. we haven't got a crystal ball, but we just gotta make our best efforts.

**I: Do you as a coach actively consider training age (years spent within both the sport and the academy system) for development plans or player (de)selection?**

P: Uh, not really. Not really, because like there's a good example now we've got a very good under 16 and he started playing football, I think it was the year before he joined the Academy? so you get those kids, And I suppose it opens up the whole nature versus nurture debate. but yeah, he started playing the year before. So like you know you start playing into 12 so that people will go, He's missed out on so much foundation phase and all this and all this kid can come in and just be one of our best players then, fair Play to him you know. so, I wouldn't say it's considered massively 'cause if they're performing and showing potential without it, does it matter?

**I: Well, I guess the flip that. might you consider that his potentials greater given how good his performances in so little time?**

P: Uh, maybe because it shows that he's taken on information a lot quicker. you know, and I think I always learnt. When I was in college there, my lecture always used to say. You have to be a quick learner. To be successfully, you have to be a quick learner and I think. For him to be as good as he is now. And he does take information on well, to be fair, so. If you're a quick learner, you're gonna. You're gonna succeed, really. I think in in any walk of life you can take information on well, then we can give you the next challenge in the next challenge. So, I think so.

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: Massively. Because we understand the difficulties that players and go through um. Maturation is quite big for us. Like I said, we talked about. Our League, almost the requirements of our League. We yeah, generally you need bigger players and all this, but we've just taken on, we've given a three-year plan or somebody Who doesn't fit the physical profile, but the most intelligent player There is. so, like you have to almost have a half thought on, well maybe he might not play in our first team, but he might play in somebody else's. Or he might play in somebody else's under 23's. Then we might get a bit of money for him. so, you have to look at that as well. Whether we come more away from that. Now we're getting better resources and stuff like I don't know, I don't think so. But Like I said about that player earlier. Like he went through a stage where he was horrendous, growth and stuff and I think. You have to be patient with it. I think that's what makes it difficult under 14's like we've said, but when you're like in under 13's then the 15's they've got two years anyway. So yes, I know a lot of clubs go, yeah, you're not going to make it see you later despite them having a two-year contract, were a little bit less like that. um, so I'll give you an example. We when I first got the job, the previous people just basically gave all the players a Position. So, bearing in mind they went from a pay to play, so anyone can pretty much play like. yes, it is some sort of performance based, but as long as they paid their money like. So, we went from that and then all of a sudden, they all got a two-year contract in a Cat 3 Academy. So our under 13's we've had to put up with for two years and I say that in the nicest way, 'cause it's not nice to say that because, you know, their kids at the end of the day, but they were miles off and it wasn't confirmed. They get battered every single game. It was really tough. And is only now really that we've got that down. years later, where we've been able to say sorry, yes it got extended, 'cause of COVID, and then it was a potential of extending again. But in the end, like they've got, they've been going on for too long. in this uncertainty to be honest, 'cause a lot of them got told the year before that it's unlikely I'll get anything, so it's just cut your ties. so, you know that's the loyalty that we show, a little bit where it's like, no, we've given you a two-year contract will adhere to it. Whereas I know other clubs don't do that, but I think the under 14's, I think you would have seen enough. In the under 13's and in the 14's to be able to go, Yeah, he's looking like it could be a player. And to be honest, Sometimes, like I wanted to try and reduce the amount of players that come into under 16's, but, you know, there's no harm done in having another player. and you can say to him, yeah, we've seen this in you, but we think that you're going through so we want to be patient, blah, blah, blah, and just as long as I think you make it clear and this is something that we haven't done yet. Because like I said, we've adhered to the two years. But for example, now we've got a good under 14 group. well then, we've merged 15/16

together to be like almost like a pre scholarship program. so, when they come in. So, 14's come into 15. We're gonna have to make big decisions 'cause there's a lot of good players in there. And we don't wanna hold the whole Age group with loads of players, but then we also don't wanna get rid of ones who are potentially going to be good enough, so it's important that we, that we communicate clearly like. Yes, it's a two-year contract, but with your permission like at the end of under 15... because parents wanna know and players wanna know. they don't want to be carried on for another year just for the sake to be told no. So, you know it might be a little bit different where we say right at the end of under 15 will give you an idea of whether we think you're going to be. Because to be honest, I think in previous years we've taken on, like this year. What is there, like, 16 in the 16's? you know, like it is, why? Because in a normal year you got three months to make a decision on them. so, it may affect game time. It effects a load of things, so that's definitely something that we want to get better at moving forward.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: Um? 'cause it's getting to close, so they are closer to being under 18 players., um. In in all aspects I think is by performance and potential. So, if you perform an under 16, I think you're more likely to be showing a lot more potential. Still loads to go, so you can still be a like. I think it under 16 and especially in this group, and that's why there's so many middles and there was one I gave a middle, He probably should be a low, because we've kind of told him that he's not going to gain, but that's because the other left backs miles better than him. So, They're good Academy players. You know, I think when you get to that stage, if you can all like they all good Academy players, but they're not gonna get this or whatever, you know so. Yeah, I think they all have to Perform. And be comfortable in under 16 environment. So that's the games program. That's the training intensity. That's Going in with the Under 18's in the daytime, obviously we haven't been able to do that, but in like half terms and stuff and being able to still, you know, not have a good session every session because their kids, but will be able to show a little bit potential Within that, um.

**I: How would you define 'being able to perform'?**

P: Well, it's a very good question. I think it is. Achieving what their targets of the position are. And that's not necessarily me saying, this is your target for the game. That's like I said to you earlier is, is our winger beating the fullback 1v1 Consistently. you know, how many crosses is he getting into the box and it doesn't have to necessarily, you know, under 16 again it's still learning, their crosses don't have to be unbelievable every single time, but at least they're showing their willingness to cross and you know they're doing the basics, I think of their position. So, for example, is the defender able to defend? if you can't defend at 16 then, probably struggling a little bit.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Um, there's definitely moving across groups, so. I'm talking now for like 'cause I've known these boys since under 12. So a lot of them have, Uh, you know a lot have come in later than that, obviously, but like the one player I mentioned, who was just massive struggler last year, now I put him as a high performer in there. So yeah, yeah, they definitely moved across groups, there's. Like I said, but the one he's a good Academy player. But then the player ahead of him is miles better and it's not his fault. He is a good player, but he's not going to



get anything because of him. so, it's just unlucky in bad timing I suppose. but he's a good Academy player, but he's probably always being middle to medium, middle to low of the group. I don't think too much has changed. There's one in the medium who to be honest, I'm pushing for a scholar, but I just need a little bit more consistency here the minute, so I think hopefully he'll become a high performer, but at the minute He's a medium. so, it's just breaking that barrier into the high.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: Uh. No, I think a lot comes down to intelligence and. Um, like decision making and like mentality. So, I think. Certain players have. Like for example, the one that I just said I want him to get into, like his concentration levels. He was the one that I was referring to with the fullback as well. Concentration levels and his ability to take on information is quite poor. what he can do on the ball is incredible. Where is the other one? He's got. He's a lot more receptive to learning and taking on information. But he's a high performer. so just comparing two players in the same position here. so, I suppose. Maybe, because you're comparing him on a player profile. Maybe you can look at it that way, but I think a lot comes down to the actual game intelligence.

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: I'd say so yeah at that stage because it's at that stage of the selection. But then we're saying like high performing, I think. You can't just say high performer, low performer medium performer, it has to be potential within it as well. So, you might have. You might be a high performer with high potential or not be a high performer with low potential. So, then I think you have to compare. Compare both to be honest at it. I don't think it just be purely. Um, based on performance, I think we've made that mistake, but we've got a player in our 18's now who was performing. We played up with the 18's and was good and previously I think that's happened with, oh they're playing up with the 18's and doing well. Yeah, but that doesn't mean they're going to be professional. But then we give him a scholar because it's hard. when they played well, they've done everything you asked him to do is like how would you say no to him now? you know. So, is that balance of like? Well, yeah, you've done great. You've been brilliant, but. Yeah, we don't think you're gonna be professional. so, and you know, and that's the hardest decision, I think. And that's where you have to marry up the performance against potential.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: I say their strengths. like I said earlier, the outstanding strengths. When you look at them and you go, That's what he's good at. I think the medium in the lower ones, like, sometimes you do reviews and you're like, hang on. Like, we did with one of the under 15's, like I said he was clutching on straws. Like, the coach was like, I can't just say everything negative. I have to find something he's good at, you know. And it was a struggle to find someone who's good at and that's obviously the problem of us being, you know, in the situation that we were in. But I think you have to look at a player and go: Yeah, he's good at this. He's good at that. if you don't look at the player and instantly you know after a game or whatever or. And you can straight away go. I think if you get challenged on what's he good at, and you can't

answer straight away, I think that's a good sign to show that they probably not a high performer. if you can real off, I'd say two definitely outstanding strengths. There's maybe 3, Then I think that's a good sign to where you asked me out and you go. Oh, he's good at this. 'cause then I think it's a little bit of doubt and you know it is not showing it as much as the others.

**I: Likewise, is there anything uniquely outstanding about each individual in the top players, which may not be replicated across the group?**

P: Yeah, they all have outstanding strengths. I think where you look at them and you go. That is strength. so, for example the left back. His engine is very very good? So, like his energy is the ability to get up and down the pitch is incredible. That fits left back. I think he's gonna turn into more of a 'cause he likes attacking as well, I think you'll turn into more like a [PLAYER NAME] where [PLAYER NAME] starred left back and then move forward. I think you might end up turning into that, but I think at the moment is ability to get up and down the pitch. Where is, yes, we've got. You know, in centerfield that's still important. But then you put him more in advanced areas where that doesn't 'cause you can play 3 in midfield. And obviously have one to just hold and then he just gets the creativity and stuff.

**I: What tells apart a middle and top player?**

P: I think they, They're all different in their own way. I think you know you have to be different. To be able to get something because you don't want the same three midfielders. they all have their own attributes and their own qualities in their own way. But like you said they probably more. They're consistent with it. Good passing range, intelligence and then wanting to learn. Yeah, so willing to learn and be an eager to learn so comparing those wingers again you've got one who, Um, he says he wants to learn, but then does he? You've got the other one who actually really does. so. It's a big... I was watching something. I was watching [TV SHOW] on Netflix, Actually, yesterday and the tennis coach [TENNIS PLAYER] coach said That, like you've gotta try and delve into them, and like they all say like what you want to do. They'll all say that they want to be a pro. Then Do they actually, you know, is that actually what they want? And that's the question. You gotta try and ask at times. and I think it's frustrating because, the outstanding player in that group is a midfielder, and I mean outstanding like by far like unbelievable. Probably the best around in our country, you know. Well, definitely cat3 program anyway. So, He doesn't have as much... or it doesn't show as much work ethic as in away from training, as the other two. the other two wanna do, like a, I had to really push the one to like to stay for extras and stuff and now he does that now and it is a little bit like of application away from it and stuff. But I think because he knows he's good, he's got a natural ability. It's almost trying to get him to continue to develop that rather than just resting on his laurels, whereas the others they still, they know they're good, like the one player knows he's good. But then he still willing to work on it, you know, so it's I think it's that education.

**I: What makes him so outstanding?**

P: technically outstanding. physically, very good, and be able to compete with even under 18? So, like he plays regular in the 18's. So, we, you know we can compete with that. but I think a lot comes naturally to him. So, like his technical ability a lot comes naturally. Where is the others? To be fair, the ones got good technical ability, but he's not as consistent as him. You know, like you're asking to play it from there to there and the fade he puts on the passes

and stuff like nobody's taught him that, we haven't taught him that. so that's just his, and I was reading something on feedback the other day where it's like allow the players to make their own feedback. So, if they've done a cross, rather than going alright, give him feedback, let them think. right? What was right? I need to put that much more on the ball, or I need to put my foot there. I think he's just learned that over the years it's like. I want to clip it there. But then if I hit it to straight with my laces it's just gonna go over him, so that he puts backspin on it and it just fades and it goes to his foot. So, like that's just him from experience, I think.

**I: Decision making is consistent across the higher group?**

P: I'd say similar in terms of. The. Well, the one who was outstanding. I think again, he's got that natural ability to, Uh, like awareness about to get on the ball and stuff like that and like you know his awareness of the game, game Understanding 'cause I'm not. I don't think he watches that much football. It's always weird are the better ones Never seem to watch football. but he doesn't seem... so, He's got like that natural just awareness and game understanding whereas his decision making, I'd probably say like they all make bad decisions, but that's just their 15/16, you know. they're not, none of them are consistent with their decision making. 'cause if they were, I think they wouldn't be with us. So that's what we need to start to consider, you know, there with us for a reason. You got Cardiff and Swansea on our doorstep. There's a reason why they with us at time so we have to take that into account.

**I: Still within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each top player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: Uh. It's a very good question. I no, I don't think so, because that's what makes him then, that's what makes them who they are. That's what makes him the player you know. And that's why I said, like everyone's gotta be different. They have their own way if you take. Um, that different elements away from them, they just become a normal midfielder than like in Academy football. I'm sure you would have seen it; you see so many centre midfielders because everyone wants to be a centre mid at the minute. So, everyone wants to be a centre mid but they're all the same. You ask that question you either a holding midfielder just passes sideways. It's like we can have a million of those. you can be that number 10 you like received on the back foot. And like yeah, I want to be creative. You can have millions of those. Or if you got that. That one is a little bit can do everything that box to box or you know, and um. That little bit of a different edge to them. So, for example, the one guy said he was struggling last year, and this year is better. Um? Like he's a holding midfielder. So, then he doesn't just receive it and pass it sideways or whatever. He can get it, and he's got a passing range to be able to go diagonal, like play direct passes. You can also read the game quite well in terms of going to intercept and making tackles, so he's. When he came in. He was a centre midfielder. He said you got no chance Playing centremid. You know, you're not ready, you're not there. So, we played him, centre back. He's the nicest kid in the world. This is the kid who went around and he's gonna learn he's gonna get better because he's a nice kid. We tried him upfront, did OK. Thought he could play upfront. tried him centre back and we were like, right centre back. so, he played centre back for most of his under 15 year, and then this year just because of circumstances, and also thinking we'll give him the best chance, He's played holding midfield. and then from under 15 when you first come in to not being able to play centre midfield. So now being able to play centre midfield, and he was like the one game we had, yet he was the best player by far. he brings

what he learned from centre back in terms of his tackling, his winning headers and stuff like that he takes into centre midfield. There's ability to be able to cover across. He brings that into centre midfield, and this is not me, because we don't know if he's gonna get one as a centre midfielder. He might get one as a centre back, but being able to play both and that's where, I think, he's grown massively because he's got that different elements just from him playing centre back, but then also taking his centre back qualities into centre midfield. But then also having his passing range and being able to pass it, I think it makes him a lot different to what most holding midfielders you see now. There's so many midfielders in Academy football who just bloody receive, like they're good passer and they can get on it and that's it. We got one in our 14's now, like he can't move at the minute. You just literally get a ball and passes it. There's nothing different to him for me, so is trying to see if he can flourish in his other qualities or develop other qualities to make him a little bit different

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: Um? It is, I suppose it depends on the position. I think what happens a lot in Academy football is comparison. So, like I said. The left back, so he's a good Academy player, but doesn't matter because the other one's miles ahead of him. So, then you compare those, and it's like well... You know you look at the profile of a left back. Then it's like, right? Can you cross the ball? He's better than him at that. What's his energy like to get up and down? Well, he's miles better than him at that and we've got the GPS stats to prove it. When you know if that does happen. Um? So, he's a better passer than him. he's more athletic than him, so that I think a lot of comparison happens. rightly so because of course you only want to pick the ones. And I, I think. In answer to your question, I don't know if the answer you want, but if he hasn't got what somebody else has.

**I: Is there a consistent theme amongst the lower group in regard to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?**

P: Decision making, I think. I would say. And then just thinking about it then as well, it's technically. so probably technically not at the level with the goalkeeper. To be honest, we didn't have a goalkeeper. so, he was on trial. He's lovely kid. He's being with us in our shadow squads for ages and we didn't have a keeper, so we come in on trial to fill a gap. then it goes back to that. No harm. We need a goalkeeper. We haven't got one coming through so sign in is well aware that he's probably not gonna get scholar. We made that clear to him. But yeah, he's technically not great. Um loves goalkeeping, though, and like he's technically not great in his decision-making rash, I'd say yeah, so two things that really but... psychologically well psychologically is not great. 'cause he puts a lot of pressure on himself and stuff, but I think it can be developed through experience and, but they are. They are the main reasons and just thinking about the other kid because even the right back lovely kid works, like, works hard. He was the first one when we first came back to ask do extras and stuff like that. So, like. Then, physically, he's OK, he's aggressive. But it says more decision making and technically not hitting standing

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: Yeah, so the in between. Consistency. I think, The level of consistency. So, if your lower performer. I'm trying to get into the middle group. I think you can become more consistent.

What you're trying to do, and then definitely from the middle to the high. It's like 'cause the middle to the high is probably not like we said, it's probably not too much difference. Like I said about that winger, something different. It's just being a lot more consistent with it. And the balance of that is that 16's and this is my bugbear, because all 18's coaches are like, you gotta come up to 18 and do well. No, he hasn't. He's 16. So yes, he might come up and struggle. But that's part of his development. Like go and cherish that. Use that as an opportunity for him and see where he potentially can get. So I think is that consistency, With the boundary of understanding of he's an under 16, you know she's not going to be unbelievably consistent at under sixteens, where every single game is playing well, he's doing it all the time. You know. So, like consistency of approach might be 10 out of 10. Consistency of an under 16 might be 6 out of 10. Uh, so that's probably the way. The way I would. I would look at it.

**I: Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?**

P: Yeah, I would say it's more things they lack then, well, you know in terms of comparison of actual ability, so I'm thinking of the one centre midfielder who's middle the group. He's middle of the group because he doesn't understand the game, as well as the other kid. You know, so he lacks that where it's like I just said the middle of the group to the top of the group, the winger. He lacks concentration. like in terms of dribbling there, both as good as each other. In getting past their man and getting crosses in, they're both as consistent as each other. But then that concentration and that decision making probably is what they lack as opposed to. Uh oh, he's not as good of a passer as him. because I think, if you start going... it has to be position specific like I said with the left back. But if you start saying. Um? that holding midfielder is not good as a passer as that centre midfielder or that one, but they have different qualities. You have centre midfielders now in our league who can't pass the ball. they're just very good at winning the ball back. We have players in our League you can't tackle or can't win it, but they're good passes. you know you have fullbacks. You literally just give me the ball and I'll cross it. Like, and you can make a career out of it. So, I think it's judging those and then it's more so around what they lack to then get to the next level. I would say.

#### **8.10.6 Participant 6**

**I: What is your current job title?**

P: Assistant Lead YDP

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

P: 3

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: League 2

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

7

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: 0.5yrs

I: **What age group will you be discussing today?**

P: 16

I: **Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: So, like I said, football is been part of me. Like all my life since about four. Played grassroots up until 14, just local sides in the local area. Got scouted and played at the Cat 3 Academy that I actually coach at last year, and so got signed at the start of under 15 played... Well actually to be fair, before that at the club I'm at now, I had two trials at under 12's and 13's didn't get signed. Then went back to grassroots for under 14's and then went to another club at the start of under 15. Played there for two seasons. Didn't get a scholarship, then went to college. I went to [COLLEGE NAME] in [LOCATION], so spend two years Doing my B.Tech in football performance. stayed there. Did another three years sports coaching degree. And then another two years they're doing my Masters, so spent seven years there in total, went through all the ranks. And it was only until sort of like me third year undergrad where I started to go into my coaching. And that's pretty much well stop playing football. Got a bit of an injury at the same time, so sort of a little bit of a blessing in disguise. Really got my got my foot into coaching there. managed to do my B licence During my third year of Uni, which was tough but got that done alongside my dissertation. And yeah, that's when it's already kicked on really, probably 3/4 years ago. Once I got my license or the door sort of started opening the little bit. Female RTC with under Sixteens. Coached the University and the college female team at [COLLEGE NAME] alongside doing my B Licence and Masters. Um? And then yeah, my final year of my Masters. So last season, got the offer to step up into Academy football. took the under 14s for one season. Loved it. And then obviously with lockdown and Pandemic and all that started finishing my Masters looking for Jobs was tough. Traveling to and from that club took longer than when I was actually there coaching, so I wasn't really getting any money out of it financially and also with the pandemic. And like said, finishing my Masters, I needed some form of income. and then Luckily one day the head of coaching at the club I'm at now, coached me, like years ago back at Grassroots, Now the head of Coaching now at the club I'm at now, and was like yeah there's an assistant lead yd Job, it's out on the table for you. and I was like, well, It's 10 minutes down the road. Rather than traveling an hour and a half to the other club. So, I was like it's more money, more hours. It's in the age groups I want to work with, which is the 16s – 18's sort of range? so yeah that's a little bit blessing really and that's how I'm where I am now.

I: **How would you describe your current role?**

P: That's a bit of a funny one 'cause I'm not actually got like an official job description / job role. It was sort of more of come in. The new head of coaches got lots of ideas. he sort of changed the way that from what I've heard, the coaches planned. the coaches go about there, sort of, day-to-day life working with the Academy players in terms of designing sessions etc. like a lot more detail than what was expected previously. And it now means that each phase of the Academy, so you got Foundation, you got your transition phase, which is the 12s to 13s and 14s to 16s. Obviously as the Lead YD, and each head phase has Now got their own assistant. So essentially, it's just taking a little bit of weight off their shoulders. But yeah, that is literally it. I said taking weight off their shoulders, just supporting them in terms of their day-to-day coaching. I'll do a couple of office hours during the week, but it's mainly just supporting

them on the grass and being just an extra coach to support the part timers. and across three age groups for one lead coach to support three age groups is difficult, so essentially, they brought me in. It's like we'll treat you like a full-time member coaching staff even though I want to part time wage. Part time sort of salary as well. But get treated like any other full-time member of staff. And the actual part time stuff like the real part timers, they know my role that on there as like a lead yd. But I just assist the lead yd. If that make sense?

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

**P:** My coaching philosophy is that the environment that we create both as a lead and assistant and any coach in the club we gotta make sure that 1) the environments professional in terms of general standards, turn up on time like the professionalism, how proactive and productive are you? So yeah, the professionalism around it but then as staff we gotta be able to create an environment where they can be challenged, learn, and enjoy at the same time. So, there's some of like the core competencies that we look for or that have been spoken about quite a lot within our coach Development sort of meetings, chats and on the pitch sort of conversations just to ensure that 1) our session plans are detailed enough when challenged; Individuals as well as a team and as units. there's plan B's if things go wrong, but in terms of creating that environment. Like I said, we've got to set the standards as coaches. We're always there half an hour early, Setting it up. the way we talk to each individual, we gotta be professional and clever with how we do that and got to be able to tailor our approach to each individual. so. Like in terms of session planning the head of coaching's brought in, he wants a lot of detail in our session Plans. It's not just a case of do this, make it look pretty. It's to do this simply, but in a way that challenges Everyone. and then within each session you may focus on a couple of players a little bit more. So, you might be doing a midfield-based session and obviously you'll focus on a couple of midfielders within that session, and Really bullseye them. So, see I think I sort of answered your question, think.

**I: Is your role more than just a technical coach though? Do you try and expand into other areas of development as well?**

**P:** A little bit, so when I sort of got introduced to the roll before I accepted it, it was sort of a case of right on the grass your support. Obviously, the lead YD 'cause the 14's, 15's, 16's all train on the same night. So, it'll be your 14 first, then the 15's and 16's They mix. So, it's two sessions. So, ideally the role was right, you'll support him, you'll lead the under 16's. That will be your age group on a game day. So, on a Saturday I'll lead the under 16's age group. Um? But in terms of training nights, I'll support all three age groups within the YD, and then there's three other part time staff. So, between the three age groups, there's five of us. It'd be the case of. Like I say, me and the lead yd will plan, we'll sort of oversee everything, and when I got brought in that case of. I'll go into the sessions and if one of the part time staff is leading it, I'll support him. Maybe just generally like on the pitch. I'll support him if I see anything, I'll highlight it. but maybe more like a mentoring sort of role. So, if you the part time staff, obviously they're coming from other full-time roles. They might have to pick a session up literally on the doorstep, or they might seem like an hour or two before and it be a case of right, Go and deliver it and I'll help you and I'll mentor you slightly in that case. And then like I said, I'll lead them, 16's on a game day on Saturday and then on the Sunday the 14's will play and again I'll be there with the Under 14's or the 15's and I'll just support the part time coach that leads that team. So just a case of overseeing it. So, I'll lead on the training nights, I lead the under 16's, but anything sort of 14's and 15's age group I'll oversee when the lead yd is either with another age group or somewhere else, so that was sort of

how I was introduced to the role that I'd be like I said, on the grass, but also supporting the part time coaches as more not a senior role but a more. I don't. I don't know how you'd word it. I'm not prolific, but I'm a higher rank or role, but still part of the team in that sense.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: So physically, they've gotta be. I wouldn't say we bullet point, but from the scholars that we've given out already this season, because we've given a few out before Christmas, they're all tall. there were all breaching 6 foot just over 6 foot again that take away the stereotype. He's gotta be 6 foot to be a good player like that. That's irrelevant, but on the general trend they're big, they're physical lads if you compare them to some of the late matures in that 16-age group, there's a big difference in terms of their height and their stature. how mobile they are around the pitch. We've given one scholar to one player whose number 10 technically brilliant, but his standout attribute is that he can get About the pitch quickly and smoothly. it's not scatty. It's not all over the place. He doesn't look like he's tripping over his own legs. Like, he's got that coordination to get about the pitch, impact it in and out of possession. And that was his standout attribute alongside obviously the technical side of it. and he's got some game intelligence about him as well. He can pick up spaces, but. Like said, his standout attribute was his physical ability to get about the pitch. that was they looked at. Another one was a striker. big physical but could drop in whose more of a target sort of centre forward. We then got another striker / winger who's on the bridge of Getting a scholar, but he's one that can run in behind, so that might be a potential scholar that links to the one that we've already given out. Here's one that can hold up the play. We now need someone that can run in behind. your sort of next in line, but there's off the other attributes that Have contributed to us not giving him a scholar just yet. There is thought, the Under 18's manager is very keen on making sure that they're part of the club and they respect the club. They're not just here just. They also there for their own journey, but they want someone that wants to play for the club. They want someone that's Committed. Someone that shown that commitment that motivation to actually get there. They know, that right? If I've been given a scholar that's not to be or the end or this is just the start. Someone that wants to be in that first team, someone that's not afraid of a challenge. So there's sort of social and psychological aspects are really important, which I think we might touch on it later in terms of how we create the plans for players, we take their psych and social sort of scores as well, and relating to the competencies that we'd expect as a club for them to have to then get a scholar.

**I: In regard to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P: So initially, the ones that I've experienced most recently there's been players that we've released, and then they'll probably within the space of couple weeks, we've then given out scholars. All sort of happened quite quickly just before Christmas. Me personally did not have much input, but I was aware of who's going who's staying. and I think being a football coach and football player you can see why, generally. Like I said, I had really been in the building a couple or two three months, so probably wasn't the right idea for me to really give a good account of the players to be part of that decision. I'm still learning about the players now. so, it was the lead yd, he's been there for 3-4 Seasons, obviously sees them week in, week out. Knows them, recruited a couple of them. You then got the head of coaching, the Academy Manager and the 18's manager. So, there's four key members of staff and it was almost a case of conversations in the office, that if Three say yes, and one says no, go the



majority. If it's a case of two and two. It might be a case that they bring someone in, but if it's a two and a two, are they really scholarship material? you want someone that knocked all four of coaches and says yes. Or worst-case scenario three. so, it sorts of goes on that. Just ongoing discussions throughout the season, are they? Are they scholarship worthy? Stick him in with the 18's on the bench, give them 10 minutes at the end of the game. How do they do? Do they stand out? Do they bottle it? Do they show little bits, that ... right, there's something to work with here. and then when they come back down to the 16's, we can work on it so that we can put me in a better position to get a scholarship. In terms of those conversations and actually dishing out scholarships, it comes from those four. Like I said, I've been part of those conversations. I've had an input, but I wasn't like one of those four that had the end decision. It's the same with deselections as well. And release implies. It's a case of listen out your squad list, who's the bottom three or four? Are they really challenging? Are they disrupting the learning of the ones that are pushing for scholars? Have they got the right attitude which nine times out of 10 they haven't. There's sort of an attitude switch, sort of midway through the season when one or two people start getting scholars. And the others don't. Then they start questioning and then they think of my chance is gone Now. they've given out 3/4 already. That means there's maybe only one or two left. Um, I'll bottle it. Have they got that mental capacity to graft and get that last one or two scholarships? But like I said you tally up your team, your top 4/5 there your dead certs, you got three or four that are on the cusp could be but haven't really shown enough This season potentially. And then you got yet like said, you four or five that Don't seem to be at the required level, so that's what, Sort of, the conversations that we have are about.

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

**P:** Be honest, I'm not sure. Um, I don't think so. I think it is a case of opinions. The Academy manager at the end of the day will have the end say. Yeah, I'm not really sure if there is a process like. There's gotta be certain boxes that act like I say every place different. Like I said earlier that one scholar is someone that's can get about a pitch, the other ones being given up because he can hold the ball up, and obviously good in front of goals as a striker. Based on their key attributes and maybe sort of link into the style of play that the 18's manager wants to play. depends on the players that he's got available on the ones that are coming through. You also got the likes of getting trialists in. so once we start dishing out scholars and start releasing players, there's been 4/5 trialists that we've got from Cat one and Cat two academies that haven't made it at the higher ranked Academy that have then come down a Level in terms of categories. And we've gone right, here's your chance. See if you can get a scholar will have a look at you, but also gives a little kick up the backside to the players that are on the brink. Right, we're bringing down some big players from like prem Academies, Cat One, Cat 2's, right? You've got to stand out amongst these players here. And if you don't, it is cutthroat and it is ruthless. If you do, then we'll back you the whole way because you're one of our products. We want to make these the club Academy products in the Under 18 and then as many under 18's to go into the first team. That's the end goal. We don't want to buy in players and be like well. We haven't really developed yet, but your good player. So that's sort of the. Like I said, I wouldn't say there's a strategy, it's made, just conversations. We constantly have 'em who's doing well. He's not doing well. What could? What could they do to get better? Do they fit what we might want in the 18s? Or what? Gender 18's manager wants, and that's sort of how it will, how it will run.

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: Each player gets their own development plan, regardless of what we think is going to happen in terms of giving out scholars. So, each player will have one. I think from conversations we've actually recently sort of start dishing out their development plans for them to complete just before Christmas. And it was a case of we got those psych and social scores, their physical outputs and all the technical and tactical sort of competencies that we'd expect them. I wouldn't really say there's, Like, there's a process, but we give them the development plans and we go, right, here's your key attributes that we want you to work on. This is what should, and we hope, will get you a scholar based on whatever else there is that you actually do well already. so, for example, there might be someone that's unbelievably technical, understands the game, lights the game up every week. But in the training grounds, an absolute pain in the ass. so, we gotta then work on those psych social sort of interactions and how he deals with those mental challenges to make sure that he keeps performing to how we'd expect him to, or the levels that he's already played too. We want to keep pushing him. but if it's a case of, at a training night he kicks off a for whatever reason, or just had a Bad day at school, then we need to be able to approach that as coaches and deal with it. and then we can work with him, then we put him in a better chance for a scholarship. So, I wouldn't say there is a real process around it, but we do give them quite an in-depth development plan. We call it an ILP. so, an individual learning plan, and that's what we will give them constantly. Some of them to look back on in the future as well. They'll also be a case that the Under 18 and the head of coaching and academy manager, they'll look at those plans as well. especially the ones that probably given out scholars to. We're gonna give him a scholar. What is main area for development. We'll make sure that when we're training full time, we can help that as well to make him even better.

**I: Do you consider positional demands for development or selection?**

P: So that their plans will be based on their position that they usually play. So, midfield is central midfielders. They'll all get... it's quite high-tech sort of development plan that we've created in terms of lots of dropdown aspects like an Excel spreadsheet. So, there is certain individual ones, so like I said you get your goalkeeper ones, your full back, centre backs, or different positions. they'll get their position specific ILP plan on each of the dropdowns that they'll get within the, Sort of like, the core competences within that role, they can then pick and choose. So, if we take centre mid, for example, one of the core competencies is be able to receive under pressure and then that subtopic will then drop down into. Is it my scanning, is it my first touch? Is it bravery in terms of your psych social sort of side of it? physically? Can I hold the ball up against pressure, and then they'll choose from those 4/5 within receiving under pressure as part of a centre midfielder? That makes sense. it's really break it down. What is the real detail 'cause you can say to someone he's not good at receiving under pressure, but why? So, we give him those 3/4 answers. They'll click which one relates the most and then that will be their ILP for their centre mid, receiving under pressure, that'll be there like, their main area for development.

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

P: I had this question a while ago. I think when I was doing my. I think it was when I was doing my undergrad. My dissertations around player development. And one of the coaches, He liked the fact that there was like a platform or a steppingstone to planning sessions and

working with players individually using the Four Corners. when it comes to planning sessions and reviewing them, they were like “I never use it”, which was quite ‘Interesting’, I think is the word. For me personally, like I said, I think it's a good steppingstone. It's a good sort of model to fall back on if you're struggling to find out why players aren't doing certain things or how to improve them in terms of session planning. Like I said earlier, the head coach is really detailed now in terms of what we deliver and how we plan. If you plan well and you prepare well, you'll deliver well. So, he wants us to go to real detail in terms of what we plan based on the individual and what they need. So, touching it earlier in terms of balls on players. If we gotta midfield specific role session, we'll focus on that role of a midfielder, will link it to their ILP's. So, if we go back to that example just a minutes ago, if I know that we're doing a midfield session building from the back, we need to evade a high press. and I know that my #4 struggles to receive under pressure, I'll either constrain the opposition to put a lot of pressure on him to challenge him. Or might just say here is an area where I want you to pick up the ball. He might be just in front of your 18-yard box, especially when you're up against a high press. This is dangerous area. That sort of high risk, high reward just to really challenge them. and then it'll be a case of right. There're you 2 two challenges or two constraints. Now, how do I work with that player? So, in terms using the four-corner model that can really highlight what you're delivering, I'm just really simplify it. Or just make it stand out a little bit more within your planning 'cause you can plan everything they look nice and pretty, but you can almost sort of get lost in the moment, and I'd like to say it's a good framework and sort of model to just re simplify what you're doing. I have a real narrow focus based on the individual.

**I: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

P: So, in terms of. So yeah, They'll do psych and social tests, so there's a lot of we just rattle through absolute ton of sort of psychosocial questionnaires and got their overall score whacked onto a chart, and then you can see who's who can deal with pressure, who likes challenges. One is about like imagery can players Picture things before it can happen. Are they aware of their surroundings, imagery sort of stuff like that. You got your physical stuff. So especially the 16's within games their weather GPS vests to get to monitor the distances, speeds etc. In terms of tactical or technically, there probably isn't as much data, until you sort of get to the Under 18's, and the Under 18 you got your expected goals. UXG's, I think they call 'em? or Ex-G's? So, you got stats on that and based on chances they create. Obviously, you got all your data, shots on target, corners. I think with the 18's they haven't, well yeah, they have got a Full-time analyst. so, someone that can go through count the passes, get your possession stats. As within the YD, we can ask the analysts for certain aspects of the game. So if we've been working on building from the back and creating the attack from our goalkeeper, we my asked, or we have asked previously how many times successfully do we get into the opposition half from our goalkeeper in goal kicks? so you can get stats like that, that are quite objective. again, there's a little bit of Discussion around what is successful and what's not. It can be quite subjective in that in that sense, 'cause it could be that the goalkeeper just lumped into the straight away from the from the goal kick into the opposition half, and our centre forward secures it. Yes, that's successful. But is that what we were working on in Training? No. we're looking at real simple play out to your centre backs. It might be a setback. Play into your centre mids, create your overloads, play wide to entice the opposition to one side, then export the other. That's all part of that building phase to get into the opposition half. so, it could be quite subjective in that, but in terms of that objective, sort of, data. Yeah, psych and social. Your physical test is pretty

normal. But the tactical and technical side of it is. The tactical side is probably more. Easier to gauge and to record in terms of stats. The technical is probably a little bit more difficult. I think that's where it comes more into opinions and just watching the players. are they executed passes right? Technically, are they able to manipulate the ball? I think it's quite hard to find data based on that, or at least we don't do much of that. that sort of technical side comes down to our own opinion as coaches. So general knowledge of what technical means.

**I: You mentioned imagery, is this important for you as a club?**

**P:** I think there's two sorts of sides to that imagery. one is in terms of psychologically using sort of like positive imagery before again to make sure you approach the game in the right mindset. So that might be either watching videos of yourself doing things right as part of imagery, or it might just be that you're imagining your sat in the change room and you're imagining all last week I did this really well in terms of, I don't know, hitting diagonal passes in behind the back four. I'm going to psychologically set myself up to be positive, which is that one side of imagery. And then you got the other one when you're actually on the pitch, what can you see? Are you just ball watching are you scanning? We absolutely hammered into the lads that you've got to be checking your shoulders 24/7. Specially as more central players. Obviously, the wider sort of players is a little bit more 180, can use the bylines as a sort of guides. In terms of peripheral vision, etc. But in terms of each player, some just scanning, being aware of surroundings, being aware of the players around you, where's the pressure come from? front, back or side? Where's the ball coming from, where's your next pass going to? We talk a lot about playing on opposite lines, so it might be a case at the ball goes out to the left hand side are the players on the right hand side in a position where they can receive on the opposite lines, then go out the other way. Imagine, well not imagining. Sort of picturing those little snapshots in those pictures of what's next? So then when I do get the ball, and if I do get the ball, I've already made my decision, I can execute that quickly. We can exploit the opposition rather than write the balls of my feet. I haven't checked my shoulders. I'm now having to deal with the ball at my feet. I don't know what's coming from my left-hand side, but I'm looking right. by then, it's all gone. those two sorts of types of imagery. the one the psychological side of it and confidence motivation, then the other one is spot in those pictures on the pitch and be able to execute skills and your decisions quicker.

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

**P:** I think if you start with the physical side of it, I think those the stats that we can get from the physical data in terms of the s&c work. It might just be like the hamstring reach. How flexible are you? You got your core Fitness tests, 3015, your bleep test etc. Your 30-meter run, your Sprint, you got all these physical tests. Then you got your distances that are mapped from those GPS vests. It's clear to see the ones that are more effective are the ones that have the higher scores. IE, if you get the higher scores in in your fitness tests, you're more likely to execute the level of performance longer for those durations. And in games where the levels are high, the competition is high. You fight for scholars, you're in tough games against other tough academies. Those players stand out and the ones that aren't quite as fit. They stand out even more. So, it sorts of does have an effect on games and those physical datas. And like I said it, you can see it. You've got the physical data for that one lad that I said that can get about the pitch more extremely flexible, which means that he's able to mechanically get around the pitch smoothly. But he's also strong within his flexibility as well. I'm not a

professor in terms of that S&C side of it, but yeah, I'm aware that you can be flexible and strong. Not flexible and just like Bambi. he can get about the pitch because he's got that stride length from his hamstring reach. he's able to execute movements without straining himself. Whereas you got other lads that mechanically can't move as well, and they get found out. They end up turning in circles they can't touch pass under pressure because they're off balance. They can't Sprint because their mechanics in terms of their running momentum isn't great. they can't lift any higher up to get that stride length. So yeah, those sort of stats you get from the physical side of it, I think, are really important and are evident within games. And just to touch on the on the psychological side of it. You got the imagery. It's almost real simple that if the players find themselves if you can see that they're in space, they all seem to have space around them. That sort of links with them, their imagery they're looking around for that space. It doesn't just naturally happen. You might not happen for them, but that's because they naturally check their shoulders, they're naturally looking, their naturally intelligent. Or they're just generally aware of what they're doing, they're not just playing the game. They're not just following the ball, so you can see that. I don't know, for example, a number 10 is really intelligent. He's really threatening, but it's because he's playing behind the lines of the opposition. he's found that space. He's aware what's next. He plays off minimal touches 'cause he knows where his next pass is. That's all part of the imagery side of it. You got how well they deal with challenges. You might have someone that's just scored an own goal. An example, we had one that scored an own goal, he couldn't do anything about it. It's one of those where it ricochets off your skin and goes in. if that happens to player A, he might have an absolute mare of a game for the rest of the game. It's on his mind he's playing on it, whereas Player B, which was what happened. He's like, right? I couldn't do anything about that, I'll laugh. We can see he's laughing as he's walking back to set up for the centre kick. He's like, well, can't really do anything about that, just gets back on with it. so, you got those two sort of mental states there and you can see it when things happen on the pitch if something doesn't go right, which Happens, how do they react to it. I'll go back to the example said earlier that we got one player That's unbelievable. Like technically a genius. He can waltz through a team, but if something bad happens to him or someone winds him up, he'll kick off. Next minute, He could be sent off. It's almost like the red mist just comes over like that like instantly. And it's how well does he control that? So, I think yeah, going back to the question about those, do the stats impact on the game? Massively! And it also helps us in terms of selections and, do we bring them off to calm down or whatever? Do they start because they're mentally confident enough? So yeah, it does have a big part.

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: Well, I think it puts the coaches in a mindset that, there could be something special here, if they stand out within those initial sort of age groups, those younger ages. if their standing out you, Coaches get little [butterflies]. This could be a little rough diamond here. Here's a project. Um, a lot of the coaches call them little projects. like you've got Player A in the under 10s. Who the under 10's coaches absolutely raving about and then 13/14/15's coaches are like, and the lead phase is like; right! Well he's our little project then for the next 2,3,4 Seasons. Let's see where it takes us. Obviously, you wouldn't just like narrow focus on him straight away off a couple of good reviews, but it's planting the seed that in a couple of years will keep an eye out. If he's doing well now. Let's bump them up, lets challenge him. Let's put him in a higher age group to see how he deals with it, if he stands out there, then

that's more rationale to be like; Here is someone that we can look on and be our little project in someone for the future. Yes, I think that that would be A little scenario with that foundations sort of phase. it's just a case of right, here we go. It is someone doing well. Let's work with him. And this is something we can probably 5, 6 years down the line, get into under 18's team and then call one of our own, which is also part of the club philosophy.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Obviously, 1) you gotta be good enough to actually get in in the 1st place! so if you bring someone in from grassroots, you wouldn't... I don't think they'd bring him in and be like, yeah, we'll bring him in but they're not as good as what we've got, or their mediocre. They'll bring someone in that They think and know that can challenge and be in the top of the group. so, in terms that recruitment side, there's that aspect to consider. but I think it be sort the same. So, if you brought someone in under 13 or 14's jumping into sort of yd sort of phases ages. It'll be a case of, right? This kids a player. We bought him in. We've got 3 Four Seasons with him. Let's bump him up. let's challenge him. It'll be very much the same. Obviously, it if that player is successful. Whether he's been there for one season or nine seasons, he's one of our own. he's coming through our ranks regardless of his one season or 9. So I don't think there be too much difference. Obviously going back to the previous one if it's come all way through foundation through the ages. Club Player. like he is one of our own. Um, if he's joined later in the season, obviously I said he must have been good to get in in the 1st place and be part of the team. If he starts excelling, then Bonus. if not, then obviously he was good at one point. He will then sort of not fall down the ranks, but just become like a steady Academy player and then it might be a case that someone else jumps up. You got a late developer or, that player might Just be hitting a little plateau in his journey. I don't know, like the 13/14 age groups, where he's going through that maturity phase. And then when he hits 15/16 and he's growing into his body a little bit, that's where he stands out even more. so, I think there's a lot to consider, especially in that yd sort of phase in terms of how the players mature. obviously, you got things that happen in their background. And their schoolwork, etc. Especially at that age. At under 9's/10s school is school. they go and play football. They don't really know the demands of the game at that age. Yeah, so I think then lean back to what we spoke about earlier. As soon as those psych social and physical aspects, they really come important in in those age groups. Even more so because of the maturity side of it. Are they late developers and are they hitting expectations that we thought they would when we recruited him?

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: So, the lead S&C guys. They obviously tracked there the maturation they got the stats from the parents and players height, weight and date of birth and all that sort of stuff, to sort of, predict, and use, some sort of algorithm to work out there peak, sort of, growing phase. and I think that there's a standout word for it, or key sort of phrase for it I can't quite remember some head, but they work out when they're likely to grow the Most based on their age, their parent's age and their background and stuff. So, it's some of that, as coaching staff, we're aware of. It might be right. In the next month or so, we think player A is going to go through quite hefty growth spurt. we're predicting that. It's almost just a case of go careful, just manage it, see what happens. It might be a case that you see a lot of players at that age developing Osgood Schlatter's in their knees because they're growing, and their muscles

aren't keeping up with it. So, it be a case of just managing what they do in training. If they're struggling with their knees for, etc 'cause they're growing more, it might just be a case of be a bounce player. Just manage it and Visit the S&C guy. The physios that are there. It might be it you have to prepare slightly different for training sessions and will support him in that. then that probably will lead into different sort of line-ups and decisions in terms of the games. It might be that right. We know you've been struggling this week because of your knees, 'cause you hit your maturity, growth phase, etc. We're not going to start you, but we'll give you game time. Obviously, it's rolling subs. So, if there's Any pain, like, tell us like we're going to protect you like. this growth spurt is not gonna last forever. It's just a phase that everyone is going to go through or has been through. So, it's not the end of the world, but we want to be careful 'cause it's also quite a dangerous time where they can pick up injuries. Which can be sort of. More long term. So yeah, in terms of those physiological sort of scores we do keep high tabs on them. We are aware of them. as coaches, it does impact decisions 'cause we've gotta be flexible to be within a training session while he's now struggling. We know he's growing. We know he's going through that phase. We need to manage him to make sure that the session still flows right? And he's getting something out of it as well as the other players is not disrupting too many people and then I'll see within games. It's a case of just being open, honest, especially the parents. Likewise, my kid not playing well, we know he's growing. He's predicted to grow a lot over the next coming months. He's showing signs of. Like he's running mechanics, he's growing, he's sort of still finding his body always losing his body a little bit as he started to grow. So, we're looking after him, so yeah, it does impact the sessions in the games and how we plan and deliver.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: so essentially four out of the six have been given scholars, so they are the high-performance group. They're the ones that have standout. They're the ones that regularly, sort of, get called up to the 18s when needed. They're the ones that are trusted to go up and perform at that high level. You then got the other two that are on the brink, but based on other factors, haven't been offered it yet, but are 2 that are very, very likely. you've also got a number 8 who's actually a year younger, so he's already playing up a year, so he's 15 playing into 16 age group. He's a high performer, which is why he's there. You then got the L player, who obviously we start him on the bench and we're going to phase now where we've handed out scholars. We've got ones that are looking to get them, and we still think that can, so we'll give them game time as Preference. obviously, we'll give the players that are low performing their opportunity. It's not a case of right, we don't think you're going to get one, we'll sack you off. Always got to be a little bit clever and be like, you probably won't get one. and it's almost quite bad. You don't want to say it, but you almost of setting him up to fail a little bit. here is your opportunity. If you don't take it, it's not our fault. We've given you the opportunity to get to go and get a scholar. so that's sort of will verify depending on who we're playing, where we are playing. Look at the scores from the physical data, have certain players played a lot of minutes in the previous 3 /4 games. Do they require a rest? Through visually, can we see that they are tired, ETC. and it might be a case that right this this is opportunity for a low performer. Go and replace a high performer that's been on fire recently but needs to have a rest for a game or two. Here's your chance. and then obviously you got the 4 or 5 that are sort of in between. So, the ones that I've got in the starting 11. So, you got 5 from there, all good players. You'd sign them if you're in Academy Coach, which is why we did, but we just haven't seen them progress much. it's almost a case of, right, I've got into an Academy. I will take my foot off the gas a little bit here, but I'm in the

building. but I want to be in the next building, which is the 18's. It's a case of, they've been signed, and they think right, I'm gonna get a scholar now. I might have been signed under 16, so one of them got signed under 16 is just to start the season. And obviously that's, sort of, unheard of really could use or like to think that you've got an idea. You got players in the building that you wanna give scholarship already and to sign someone so late you'd assume that they get a scholar and you wouldn't sign someone just for one year. But hasn't really hit the highs since being in the building. He's almost sort of settled in, rather than being like this is my chance to kick on and challenge myself and get myself that contract. So yeah, then the three other players on the bench #12 is under 15. Looking to step up, and so he's getting his experience in the in the higher age group and then the other two are trialists.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yeah, there's definitely one that personally I think started off, when I first met him, I thought he just sort of like a mediocre. He's a he's an Academy player. He's been in the building a few seasons, but probably won't [GET A SCHOLAR]. But over the last month or two leaning up till Christmas. Really kicked on. We sort of found his unique sort of USP, his super strength if you want to call it that? we've worked on him with it and he's been really effective with it. So That's been one stand out that we thought right, He's he struggled a little bit to start with. He's not really had much impact in games, but now we found what he can do. We've worked for him. He's then doing it in games. He's getting success from it, so we'll keep doing it. And we think that's what will potentially get him a scholar if other things don't happen. That'll be his standout point that we look at and be like, right? We need this in the team in the 18's. Here he is. Um? There's been a couple that I've thought, right, Yeah, looks decent, but then through conversations with other staff watching them in games and sort of getting to know them, I feel that there just Academy players again. There they're not really kicking on there, they are good players, they're good lads, but do they stand out to what the under 18 have got or currently have or currently have had? Probably not, which is probably why they're in the talks of Releasing, or wait until the end of season and being, no unfortunately not. Whereas, sort of like, my initial thought was right, Alright, these lads are decent here. But then when you get to know when you get to work with them week in week out you start to pick up their flaws and then their flaws outweigh what they are really good at, and what they are really good at isn't as good as what we already have. Sort of how the process goes really, yeah? So yeah, there's definitely one that has gone from sort of not bad to good, but mediocre to stand out and then there's one that gone from, like, initial thoughts of Good to not really.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: Uh. They've all, sort of, got their own individual aspect that makes them stand out, so I think generally across the board in terms that whole team technically very good, physically is probably the standout ones. Quite a big mature team. I think a lot of previous recruitment have been like what they're good size, they're a Good build, they're strong, they're athletic, they're able to get on the pitch. they can battle. They got the mindset that they don't mind putting a foot in and getting a bit dirty when needs be. But tactically good, technically sound. I think they're the ones that I've put H next to. So, you got #5. Tall centre back, physical. Reads the game really well. Understands what's happening in front of him. You got #6 again. Tall, reads the game well, but very, very good in the air, which as a centre back you need.



You got #8, is the player that I spoke about earlier, but unbelievable talent. Technically can sort of drift past players. Combative, likes to get stuck in, he's like a dirty #8. Almost a little bit of Roy Keane sort of esque, but technically really, really good with the ball at his feet. Again, is young as well. He's an under 15 so and he's doing that under 16 level, so he's sort of like one of those rough diamonds. Then got #9 who's the big physical centre forward, who can hold the ball up, can protect it, but can also finish. This is sort of standard qualities. The number 10 is one that can get about the pitch really, really well. Extremely athletic but understands his position and reads the game well. Can see what the opposition in doing and how to exploit them. So intelligent in that sense. And then you've got #11. Who's the player that can run in behind who's quick. It was the case of, like I said, I think I mentioned earlier that we found his super strength and that is to be able to run in behind threatening behind, to the stretch the pitch. Whereas previously it was all very much ball to feet, and then you have to sort of drive his own momentum with the ball at his feet and take players on which isn't his game. We found that if he can latch onto balls and you can open the pitch up, an threaten in behind which is now his super strength. Something that we really think he can use to get into the under 18. So yeah, they've also got their own individual qualities, but across the board, like I said, physical, and generally technically very good. They look powerful, protectable well.

**I: You mentioned Game Intelligence, how important is this?**

P: Yeah, I think so. That was one of the sole reasons why we've released quite a lot of players just before Christmas, as well as giving out scholars 'cause there was a big difference between Those five and the four five that we gave scholars to, in terms of what they do on the pitch, are they aware of what's going on? Can they ignite a game up That's a bit dead and lethargic and sloppy. Can they slow it down when it needs to be. They can do that. Prime example is we went away too, I think it was [CLUB NAME]. We were all over them in the first half but found ourselves one nil down. We then have to make Five changes at half time, because we need to give players certain amount of game time especially on long trips. So, we brought five players on at halftime. We lost the game three nil. So, we literally said to those five players in the team, you've lost us the game. We were in it, yes, we will one nil down, but we had 90% of the possession, We had twelve shots on target in the first half, they've had one and it's come from a corner, so like it was a game of two halves. If we stuck to that same team in the first half with our high performers, guarantee we would absolutely over run them. But the second half [CLUB NAME] setup is like a real sort of stupidly low block. We couldn't breakthrough and the five players we brought on at Halftime didn't know how to get through it. So, we asked them a question at the end. How do you get through a low block? He said, well, you either enticed them out of there out their area by lots of little short passes, committing players running up. You either go around them quickly or you go over them. But that's probably the hardest one, 'cause they were so deep. If you've given us 3 answers there, why don't you do it? And you don't get nothing back from him, you know, so there you are. They saw another game, but they can't do it. Out on the pitch to do it. It's almost case of right I'm on the pitch now, I'm going to play my own game. I'm not going to play against the opposition. I'm going to work them out and combat them how we should. So, that little bit of tactical warfare. Whereas like I said, those five or six that have been given scholars or on the brink of those high performers, they can see what's happening. Yeah, and when we do and if we do give him information they can, they can execute it.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding than the others?**

P: Sort of, professional standards. They're the ones that are always on time and so they're proactive in what they do. They want to learn that they are engaged in what you do, yeah. They're mature enough to understand when we're having a bit of fun on the pitch and having a bit of banter, but they also understand when to switch on and concentrate, so they've got that capacity to switch on and off of having fun, socializing, which is important to go, right, this is the nitty gritty work. They also know when to sort, pull the finger out a little bit. Nine times out of 10 they are the ones that we don't really have to sort of shout out or command to. 9 times out of 10, it's just right. Player #9, sometimes it's just a look. It's a look and like stick your arms out like what you're doing? Or it might just be like you clapping hands like you're making gestures towards and like to switch on sharpen up. And they'll do it, um. It's not case to some that you have to keep berating and repeating instructions to. Someone that knows their own standards. They know what they're good at and hold sort of hold themselves accountable. But I said that they're willing to learn. They're there on time. They get their sort of admin work done straight away, so they gotta do their match reports and their weekly sort of training reports and how they've progressed during that week. And they get their detailed with what they do there. Um, they prepare well. Even to the point where you got some lads that walk out into the pitch, they don't have a drink and then you got the high performers that they've got like 3 or 4 bottles with them. It's little things like that that you pick up on there where they're keeping hydrated. Yeah, I think it's in well casing how they conduct themselves on and off the pitch. That sort of makes them stand out a little bit more and that sort of then highlights to what they do on the pitch. Some of them say that I went for a run yesterday, or flip it, I had a recovery bath yesterday. The next training session you can see that they're fit and their sharp and they're ready to go where someone this had a hard game on a Sunday or Saturday, then train on Monday and they're walking in there like they've been kicked out the backside 'cause they're still stiff and aching and they haven't looked at themselves. So, it all gets noticed, and I think that's probably why those, at least four five of those high performing players are high performing players.

**I: Still within the top group, are there areas or abilities that each top player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: I guess on some of them you can almost take that that game understanding out of it a little bit. Are they aware of what's going on? Are they aware of the opposition? Are they aware of the task at hand? The way that we've set them up to play. Are they aware of their role? You could probably actually rely on most of those, just as general good footballers. They can look after the ball. They can put the ball in the net. They can take players on, so you got your defenders there that are rustic and rugged, they can block the ball. They're not afraid to have a little bit of a battle. Your midfielders there that like to take players on, their creative. They've got a little bit of flair about them naturally. You've then got your strikers that can put the ball in the back of the net, and that's the main goal at the end of the day. They can do that. Regardless of what the opposition do or our tactics. Most of them will still perform at about 7 out of 10 each week. So, then obviously just manufacturing what we want or what we're looking to get out of the game about the training session that can challenge them. But also, sort of, win us the game. especially at 16's / 18's we need to add that competition to them, which naturally they all are anyway. I think you are if you play football so. I think that sort of game understanding, being aware of what's going on. You could

probably, I wouldn't say take out, but if that wasn't as high as it is in those players, they still stand out with their technical attributes, which is again probably a high priority in football.

**I: Is there a consistent theme amongst the lower group in regard to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?**

P: So Physically, from those at least three from 5, the physically probably weren't as strong as the others. Ones that could look after ball, receive under pressure, put themselves about a little bit, sort of shyed away from big boys on opposition teams. Didn't look like they were fully committed to tackles. You can notice it. You have got that game intelligence. The one I mentioned about the trip to Portsmouth. We bring, excuse me, bring him on. We're playing at a low block is clear and evident to see, but they couldn't figure out how to break it down. And then a couple. You got attitude as well. Constantly have one, this constantly moaning like everything seems to be against him. Everything, even the weather. You then got one that's hard, huge talent in terms of what he could do with the ball, but mentally just wasn't there. Sort of, took it as a game in the park. He wasn't. You can see that he was desperate for a scholarship, it's almost just a case of what I'll turn up. I'll play if I start. I'll probably have a good game 'cause I'm starting. If not, then I will be like, oh sack it. It's cold and wet and windy. I don't really want to be here. If I lose the ball, it's not usually my fault, but I'll track back, but I won't track back at 100%. In possession like I said, was fantastic, can sort of, unlock teams, do a little bit of magic here and there, but was it enough to stand out? But that was his key actually, but is there a bit out of possession that really let him down? His energy off the ball was really poor? Just went through the motions a lot so. You got another one that was technically really poor. Physically quite good, quite quick but couldn't keep hold of Ball, could pass for anything. Really poor for looking after it, especially in the build-up phase, especially as a central midfielder was really poor. We couldn't get out a lot of times specialist press 'cause he let us out. And then. Yeah, I think I was about it. the other two were weak, weren't physically ready for it. Quite tall, like. Good statue about him, but I said lacks that intensity and aggression, especially out possession which is obviously massive, and some of that as coaches and as a club We look for ways you can do everything with the ball but, without the ball is just as important.

**I: So, it sounds like the psychology is quite a big importance in regards to who was in the bottom group and who's in the top group?**

P: Yeah, I say that as well. Yeah, the ones that got scholars are very competitive and like I said, understand the game. The ones that aren't here anymore were the ones that probably weren't competitive. Like said, went through the motions. They've got themselves into the under 16's 'cause they've been there for a number of years. they worked their way up through the Academy system and it got to a point where Other players are overtaking you. You're not developing as much as we thought you would. You sort of plateaued a little bit, or other factors have stood out so much that. You're probably not going to make it in Academy football regardless. So yeah, there's a lot of factors that that contributes those releases, but the ones that are still here definitely the competitive edge. The willingness to learn. And yeah, that ability to switch off well not switch off, but switch between different mindsets based on the task at hand. So yeah, hold that sort of psychological stuff was really important.

**I: Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

**P:** Um, you had one, like I said earlier, that couldn't really keep the ball, was poor with the ball at his feet. But could break the play up. so really good at sort of, ratting about as a midfielder, breaking up, play intercepting, making tackles, pushing other people off the ball, but it was then when he got the ball, what to do. He'd constantly defend because he takes a touch, then tackle and take a touch then tackle. He then secure the ball, release it, misplace a pass, then make up for it so he was constantly making up for his own mistakes to the point where we come up against good teams and they take him out of the game. They play off him and then they execute it and then they take advantage of it. Then other players that just make made poor decisions, like technically good. But we like to get the place to think for him, play forward 'cause we wanna go and score. It's a case of him just constantly messing up those opportunities to go forward 'cause he didn't scan. He wasn't aware what's around him. When he had the ball at his feet and he's almost looking at the ball down. Brilliant at controlling the ball. Brilliant little freestyle stuff that he does off the pitch that you can see. Can technically like strike a ball really, really well. But, couldn't utilize those skills 'cause you didn't know what was around him, yeah? Which again leads to mistakes. Players in good teams find them out. We had a striker who is very one footed so again that level if you catch him on his right foot, he's extremely dangerous but force wants his left, he's useless. Little things like that, um. So yeah, in terms of those like said, they all had bits that they were really good at, but when you get to 16 and you still got those glaring sort of areas for development it's really hard to improve those in a short space of time to get you into a position where the coaches can trust you to do a job as a scholar.

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

**P:** I think it was a case that there Super strengths and their areas for development were quite close together, if that makes sense. You've got a left back physically, like brilliant like he looks like a footballer. He looks big strong, he's quick. His left foot is incredible can cross a ball. can hit long, well yeah, he can hit long passes better than anyone else in the team other than maybe the goalkeeper, yeah. But those passes don't necessarily come off those crosses don't necessarily Come off. he uses what he's good at it in the wrong times. So, it might have been a case where we look to play out from the back is gone from the right-hand side. He switched out to left back. He's got space to gallop into. an go an advance into but decides to then lump the ball back into an area where we've just come from. Then sort like reverse switches it, but doesn't really think about what he's doing, or looks to hit the number nine straight away and then nine isn't even looking for the ball. Do you know what I mean? So, sort of making decisions and executing decisions that Were wrong and in the end. but has lots of attributes where he's really good would be just a case of highlighting and refining those decision-making's, which can be done. like it's hard but can be done. It's just a case of highlighting what is good, what's bad, what we're looking for, and just general praise and reassurance when he does things right. This is what we're looking for. Well done. If not, how do we approach it? Do we batter him for doing it 3 four times and not getting any success, which after three or four, you probably would do at that level. But if it's a couple of times and he's got the right intent, but it's just the executions wrong. It's a case of, right, well done but consider this. Do this next time.

**I: So just with that in mind, would you say that those in the Middle Group are more complete in regard to abilities, but they're lack decision making skills or game intelligence?**

**P:** Yeah, probably yeah. Yes, you got two full backs and you gotta #4 and the left winger. Yeah, I yeah, I totally agree on that. Or like I said technically very good. All have their stand outs. Which is why there still there. Something that could get them into the under 18 squad but, nine times out of 10 it is the decision-making. Are they aware of what's around them? Can they keep the ball? Do they make good decisions that that impacts the team positively and which is probably, It's sort of like a 60-40? We want to get it to more like a 70-30 80-20 sort of ratio.

#### **8.10.7 Participant 7**

**I: What is your current job title?**

**P:** Lead YD Coach

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

**P:** 3

**I: Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

**P:** League 2

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

**P:** 14

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

**P:** 4

**I: What age group will you be discussing today?**

**P:** 16

**I: Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

**P:** Yeah, so I'm from down South. The age of sort 13/14 I was going into football clubs. Well [CLUB NAME] with my dad who works in football. so, he's a previously a coach, and being a coach since then all the way through to only this season, where he's now kit-man at [CLUB NAME]. So, I'd go along with him to the Academy Sessions 'cause he was taking the 9s/10s and volunteer with him. And then I would also go in with the community sessions so he went full time at the community, so I'd go in with him. so, I volunteered there for a couple of years. Did my B.Tech in sports science. Started working at [CLUB NAME] part-time as a community coach and volunteer in the Academy again helping him out. I did a season at [CLUB NAME] as a community coach just to sort of step away from my dad for a bit. Then went back to [CLUB NAME] and continue to work there, just 'cause there was more availability in terms of hours and more opportunities. Then worked in America for four months for company out there came back, worked at [CLUB NAME] for a bit, went back to America for two years, working for {COMPANY NAME}, again coaching all sorts of communities or programs and travel teams. Came back and got a full-time job at [CLUB

NAME]. So, disability development Officer and before that community coach. And then I started taking one of the Academy teams at [CLUB NAME]. So, I started taking the Under 11's for short period of time. Then got offered the lead foundation phase role at [CLUB NAME]. So, I was at [CLUB NAME] for two years. Yeah, two 2 1/2 years taking the foundation phase there and just obviously being purely Academy. and then went for the YDP role here and now I'm here, 4 years later.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

P: So most so. obviously, being in charge of the 13s to 16s. So that's the biggest thing is taking their, you know, the foundation phase players as they progress from 12 into 13 and recruiting heavily trying to get, obviously, players to get scholarships. So that's how ultimately, I'm judged is how many players I can get scholarships each season regardless of whether they progress after that or not. So, it's not down to me, but I've gotta try and get players, ideally to progress or to be sold to other clubs. So, we have had you know, for example, we had one lad last season, [PLAYER NAME], who we sold to [CLUB NAME] for a nice bit of money. So yeah, that's my sort of purpose and as part of that I will take the 16s team and make sure that they got the attributes and understanding tactically going into the 18s.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: So, in terms of my Personal sort of coaching philosophy and the way I work, I'm quite. I want it to be an enjoyable environment. I want it to be quite hands-on an individual. so, you know, I think when I look at my coaching and compare it to sort of other coaches, especially looking at the club, I'm very. I want them to enjoy the environment they're in. Don't get me wrong, I will push the hard work and I have high expectations. You know, focused on hard work around the process rather than the outcome, but I think it's... I want them to. I want to be making sure within my sessions that I'm very lively and passionate and putting myself about as well and putting energy into the session so that you know they want to be in the session. So, I mean. I did a session at Saint Georges Park for the Advanced Youth Award, so I was delivering, so, my players were there, and I was delivering to the people on the course. it was focused on the social corner and it was nice afterwards 'cause you know a lot of them came up to me and a number of coaches from different clubs and said, you know the players would do anything for you. They absolutely love you. and that's the environment I want to create. Like I want them to be, you know. I won't put any expectations on them that I don't expect to myself, so it's one of them. so that's probably the biggest thing around my coaching. I want it to be enjoyable. I'm not going to come in. Don't get me wrong when I've gotta be harsh. I've gotta be harsh, you know, that's why... I did with a Masters in Performance coaching in my dissertation was on mental toughness in the youth development games program. so, I will make it harsh when I need to be harsh, but then also. You know, highly supportive as much as possible for the high challenge.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: Previously we've had club Wording in terms of what we expect in terms of like profiles of a player and things like that. It's something we've been sort of trying to iron down more recently, so we've had a CPD the other day and we're trying to implement an almost a checklist as they go, and a checklist, but also a timeline so at 9s we expect them to have, in terms of attacking, We expect him to have these attributes will be able to do these things. at

10s, we'll add another two things to it, so by the time we get to 18 they should be able to fill this whole list and it's... So that we can have almost there taking these things off and we're trying to work on these things each season and it then you know, when we work with when they go up to other coaches. we can say well, they've ticked these off but we've got concerns in this area so this might need a lot of work. Or that might be the reason for retaining releasing players off the back of that if they can't hit a number of those boxes, or if they haven't got you know, it might be that it's fair enough they have super strength in some areas, but we've gotta workout, right, are their weaknesses ultimately going to stop them? Or are their weaknesses OK, because, you know, you're going to be OK at that level because they're super strengths are so strong

**I: out of curiosity, is there anything which is consistent that you found that you'd almost need to have to get through?**

P: Probably the like the psychological side in terms of the. I mean, I want to say mental toughness probably go more down the route of Being able to cope with the transition. so, coping with, you know, youth football where you've got lots of individual support and then especially Cat 3 Club where we don't necessarily have a under 23 squad. we have, you know under 23's game which is made up of 18s and a lot of first second year pros and maybe some older pros as well. But you know they've gotta go in and have the mentality to work hard, the mentality to deal with setbacks and go from being, playing every week at 18s level to then suddenly not being played at first team level. They've almost got to go in there and impress and do all the hard work without someone on their shoulder saying what you need to do this. They've gotta go in there and go "I have to work hard. There's no one else pushing me. 'cause if I don't work hard, I won't get in the first team". I think we've got 2 examples of that. [PLAYER NAME] who is a first year Pros played a stupid amount of minutes. It's been incredible. but his mentality was completely different to other players who haven't played those minutes. So, we had another black called [PLAYER NAME] who again was did really well. Got Pro early played first team but. When he got his like, when he got into his professional season, didn't really have that mentality to work hard. it wasn't there. That's what we could see anyway, and that's what we sort of, heard as well. So, you know why you know there's a reason why [PLAYER NAME] progressed in and [PLAYER NAME] hasn't, so.

**I: In regard to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P: Um? So, from it's obviously if it's within my phase it will be me and then most of the time it would be the Academy manager, head of coaching. Depending on how close or far away they are from the PDP, if it's 16 or 15's and the PDP coach if it's 13's then it will be the foundation phase coach as well 'cause it might be trying to recognize if they've been incredible under 12, but then at 13 they've really struggled, that's where we will have a conversation. And rather than me just making that decision going is not good enough. It might be a reason for that. So yes, there's us involved in that process, plus the, obviously the part time coaches in your age group as well. So, it's obviously the part time staff we have. We have these trackers which I don't think a lot of clubs have, because we've been praised on it quite a bit from the EFL and the audits, so we have trackers. So basically. Every six week block we're Evaluating the players and put in these processes in place and every six weeks we will sit down with part time staff have a meeting so I have a meeting with them and we look at who's excelling who's achieving and doing OK, who's developing and a little bit concerned about, And who's aiming, And, you know, that's really far behind! so it gives us an

idea across the season as players progress and we can monitor that progression, or if players fall away and we can start to recognize why is that happening? And allows us to then start putting processes in place to Recognize what's happening and then how are we going to push that player, how we're going to get the best out that player, or you know, potentially release the player. so, it takes part of that process as well.

**I: Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: Yeah, so that so the trackers is probably the in terms of retaining and releasing players, and it's definitely based around sort of trackers and then obviously will be meetings overall between all of us to say like look this player got real concerns about what some thoughts on him and this is where we will have a little bit of input and then it might be over the next six week period. I'll go right. Head of coaching, can you go and watch this player for a couple of weeks? See what you think. Academy manager go and have a look at this player will all have a uh, you know, close eye and continue to monitor how he's getting on as well as speak to the coaches and make sure that we were trying to push different things. That's in terms of deselection and. Again, sometimes it could be based around the players we've got in that position anyway. Sometimes it you know, so it might not be that not necessarily doing anything wrong, but we've just got better players in that position. And especially at 16. So, I mean, obviously we're gonna offer up scholarships. You know we had, for example, last year 2 Unbelievable 16 goalkeepers. And if one was this year, he would have got scholarship straight away. They were both that good. But unfortunately, they are in the same age and had to compete against each other. So, when we release the one, it wasn't that he was falling behind. It just happened to be the other goalkeeper Had come in from a cat one club and he just was a little bit more social. He talked a bit more and that was probably the one fault on the other keeper, but it wasn't. It wasn't a big issue in the end he signed for another club anyway, so time will tell you know what decisions been if it was a good decision or bad there. But again, you know sometimes they need the release to kick on,

**I: So how important is opportunity?**

P: Yeah, yeah, I think. Again, it depends on what. You know, what we're looking for. So, if we've got a striker signed already and he's a 6-foot two striker, we might be looking for another. You know, #9, like we might be looking for more of a number 10 or something like that. We could have a really good striker come in, but if it doesn't necessarily fit the profile player we're looking for that time, then you know he's probably better off going elsewhere. so, it might be down to profile of player. It might be down to you know if we haven't left back then we're going to be looking for a left back. I mean, we had one couple years ago where we signed two lads from [CLUB NAME]. [CLUB NAME] release them at 16s and we signed them. one was playing right mid. He's now a centre-half for us. He's been doing really well. Like talking about, you know whether you'll get a professional contract or not. And then you know, so time will tell on that. and then there was another one as well. But it was like you know, [CLUB NAME] have got to look at that and go ,right, is that the right decision or not, to release them? But I don't think... I think it's hard because ultimately. You can't look at it and go, right, we've made the wrong decision there as [CLUB NAME] to release them, because ultimately they might need the release to then kick on, or they might not have the opportunity at [CLUB NAME]. And you know, we had we've had four which was 16s last year with us, who have been offered Scholarships elsewhere. One we released from here who's now gone to [CLUB NAME]. So, but again, like it was when he was with us, it was like, right?



He's not really offering Much. is OK at best, whether he needed the release. And then needed to, you know, really push himself. I know he went on trial at a number of different clubs and was really pushing himself. Maybe he needed that and then he went and did a college program and suddenly got picked up by [CLUB NAME]. Maybe you needed that to be the player is now? maybe physically he needed a bit more opportunity to develop into his body. And don't get me wrong, it wasn't smaller or unfit or anything like that. He was a good size, but maybe he needed that to progress. Then again, it might be that what [CLUB NAME] is looking for, and at that time we weren't looking for that type of player and we had, you know, we definitely had a player in there who is a stronger player. But then again, like you know that player who we, you know we had a couple of players in there who did get offered scholarships and unfortunately you know one of them is been sort of really lacking behind. But again, they've gone from playing Fair time, sort of, each week and half a game, to then suddenly being out the squad and suddenly they can't handle the mentality of "I've gotta work hard and keep working hard in the face of being dropped". You know, whilst at the minute you know he's got the mentality of or what's the point in trying?

**I: When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: Yeah, the trackers was. yes, I had seen before when I was at [CLUB NAME]. And then when I came in, they were already in place and it was something that was, you know, they've been quite keen on it. It's a good way to track the players. And again, like. You know I've got the... So for example, you know a lot of discussions about [PLAYER NAME], and how well he's done, and I was saying at middle of 14s he was probably our third choice striker, like he average at best, and it's nice 'cause I can go back and show like look at the trackers. you go right, this is where he's coming from and then we can start to think about what's the difference between this kid and others who have maybe more talented but haven't progressed. as well as it informs our decision-making now in terms of, you know, alright, you might have a player who is incredible at 14. Or a trialist comes in and you go and not 100% sure. And in the end, like you know, you might think right ok, but has he got the psychological attributes and, we've actually got one of them, it's just been offered. Offered a scholarship who we took in at 14 is really umm'd and ahh'd about. came in for the whole, you know, the whole six weeks and we really weren't sure, and, in the end, we like right we'll take a punt on him. And now he's you, know, he's been absolutely incredible, and he's got a scholarship. And that's again his mentality to work hard is fantastic, and he's got, you know, it's Dad supports him so much as well. Like if I could call him now and say right? Can you bring [PLAYER NAME] in, we need him in in an hour's time. You know he would do it, like, he will do anything to, so yeah, so again that that plays a big part in it.

**I: Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

P: I like it. I think it's a good way to. It's a good way to think about the objectives and outcomes of a session, as well as assess a player. I think it can be, it's hard to, and this is one of my arguments. Personally is. It can be hard to evaluate players in those positions if it's down to one thing, so you know we have it on our six week reviews, so we have reviews on the PMA every six weeks, obviously every club has to have an. If we are reviewing a player, it can be very easy to put them as a green for physical. But when you talk about physical, that could be that Because physically they've developed at, you know, and another player hasn't necessarily developed. it could be that physically in terms of strength and power, they really good. But actually, you know what? Getting around the pitch, they don't have the

cardiovascular endurance. It's hard to assess it on one. It's good that it's been broken down, but it could be broken down further, I guess, to... especially in terms of looking at retaining release and selection and deselection of players. So, we subdivide in the reviews so we have to... so if you take the physical corner we will have to say, right? OK here is you know most of the time I'll just put a yellow unless I've got real concerns over multiple areas. I'll go yellow. And then I'll break it down and go even though yeah, and this is where the testing like the fitness testing helps 'cause its objective data. And it's also takes away that sort of subjective side. And you know, that's what that's what can create issues with parents. The objective data can say actually, you know, you Sprint test scores and your agility test scores were very good. However, your yo-yo test score was extremely poor and often that will mimic what we see on the pitch anyway without having to say he's unfit. Which obviously you know, is tough to do nowadays. But yes, that's why it's nice to have the objective data there. But again, you could put in as a green 'cause actually is really quick, but at the same time. You'd be rewarding him even though his cardiovascular endurance isn't in the right place.

**I: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

P: Yeah. I mean, again, I guess this is the beauty of football, isn't it? It's you know you can have an athlete. But if they can't secure the ball if they can't move the ball, you know some people argue in some clubs have the philosophy of the saying like, well, you can teach them that. it could go. You know, I've seen that been said a lot, but then also goes the other way like you can teach, you can get someone to be an athlete. You could work harder and sometimes it can be a case of, and we've definitely been guilty of this in the past where we've said, like, you know, we've got 16 who looks good. Maybe not the best Yoyo score, well, is like, well, actually you know what, once he's in full time Football and once we get him running on a good plan, he could be incredible. But then. Sometimes he won't count it. You know, think about the psychological side. And is there a reason why his yoyo's not that good? Is it because he's actually doing the running away from the club? Is this diet right? This is it's hard to tell with it in terms of the objective data. The same with you know, especially for the. You know objective data from the technical tactical point of view as well, it's... yes, there's also event data. It's hard when it links into player development. because you know, there's going to be reasons why player isn't necessarily. You know that if they're being told right now, you need to work on your two-touch play and then you look at their event data and suddenly it's actually you know what? They're not making any dribbles, and this is one of the best attributes. So, they they've gone bad. there's a reason for that, so it's hard with you know, with youth players to look at event data. You know we don't do it. I love the data analytics side again and I think there are ways forward there. I know one of the guys at [CLUB NAME] quite well. He's doing some really interesting research at the minute based on Looking at trialists and looking at Event data in terms of the quantity. So, there's a study I can't remember what the study was, I think is based in Australia, but they looked at in handball, I think. But it looked at the quantity of actions and actually they want the players that had more quantity of action, not necessarily the quality with the ones that generally progressed. so, they started doing that within football. So, looking at years ago, sort of, under 23s games between [CLUB NAME] and [CLUB NAME], and things like that. Looking at the quantity of actions throughout those games. And then looking at where they are now, those players have progressed. Have they not progressed? Who's playing at the highest level? Who's not? Just you know that I think there's. In the future, there will be better ways to select players in terms of the objective side of the game, but. Obviously with

all this, it takes a lot of resources from your man hours to the technology to do it. so. I mean it, you know as technology advances. I guess we will get into a position like, you know we have the VO cameras now compared to 3/4 years ago where we had the scaffolding which would stand up to the top of the scaffold and someone had to be there. and the VO cameras are Fantastic 'cause it means that now everything is there. Players can tag themselves in events and you know, we've recorded more games this season than we probably haven't last two or three seasons, which is amazing. Whether it gets to a point where again with AI and All that, whether they can start to then tag events automatically and then suddenly find yourself in a place where you could actually look at event data for youth games and things like that, but. That won't happen for a number of years yet, I don't think.

**I: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

P: So, they have a couple, so they have their individual learning plan. Which is based on their thoughts and views of themselves, so again. We'll see an element of self-reflection and off the back of that, they'll go right, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, what they want to work on, how they work on it, and the process goals to sort of get there. So, they have they have that, and that's to one side. And then we also have our learning objectives which is set over a six-week period. But within that six weeks it might be a three-week period. So, we you know ours will be based around our sort of, our syllabus is focused on the thirds of the pitch, so the 1st six weeks will be based in 1/3 out of that six weeks. Three weeks will be based on attacking in the final third, so and then the next six weeks will be defending in the defensive third. Yeah, defending defensive 3rd so it's all worked on that one period that 1/3 and effectively. If you're working with the defenders, you could be doing six weeks on defending in there. So that then breaks into our learning objectives. so, we'll say for this player whilst we're working in attacking the final third, I want this left back to be working on Getting high up the pitch to find crosses into the box, finding overlaps and underlaps, To find End product. When they get into the defensive side, it might be right. I want you to think about and this might be linked into their ILP. They need to work on defending one V ones, making sure the show wide and then prevent crosses. So, they have the ILP. They'll have their own learning objectives from a club point of view.

**I: Likewise, is there a club strategy when it comes to player (de)selection?**

P: Yeah, yeah, it's. 'cause often most of the time our learning objectives, the ones we set in particular will be based around either what they're doing well or what they need to work on. You know if it's a player... Oh yeah, it might be linked to the next step, so we've got players who very good at getting forward with the ball, can beat fullbacks really well, but their end product isn't there. So even though their super strength is beating players, especially if they play as an inverted winger and they're very good at beating players and getting on the inside, getting shots away and slides into the box. Our next objective might be right. On the flip side of that, if you go on your normal side, finding crosses. so focused on the end product, trying different crosses out so it's not necessarily a weakness, but it's linked to their super strength. While sometimes it might be linked to, you know something that they have to have. so centre backs, for example, you know one of the biggest issues we've had is in terms of finding centre backs who want to defend and head the ball. We've almost had to work on that and strip it back to basics, and you know, really strip it back to the basics with how to head it? You know this is something that. Individual centre backs and as a unit we need, so we've got you know we've really gotta hammer down on this. 'cause if they give you fantastic at playing the ball out, and that they might be incredible, you know they might

be the best player we've ever had in terms of finding the different balls and things like that. But they can't actually perform the role of defending in terms of heading the ball, especially at League 2. They're not going to make it as a professional, so they've gotta have some. It doesn't have to be. They don't have to be the best header with the ball ever, but they have to be able to do it to some degree. we might then look at movements in terms of positions which might aid with that. So, we've had a. So, for example, the players just got a scholarship. He was a centre-half when he came in. and the reason why we're umming and ahing was that, he was a centre-half, He wasn't massive. His parents aren't massive statistically was looking at it was like, right, there's a good chance he's not going to end up being, you know, over 5 foot 10, let alone, you know, 6 foot 2. So right? Isn't going to be attributes in the long term likely to be a centre half in terms of what we're expecting? Can we try him as a right back? and we looked at him as a right back. Doesn't necessarily have the physical attributes to get up and down the pitch quickly. So that's another area of concern, and at that time we played 442 across the Academy, which made it difficult. And that's one of the reasons why we took a while and was like, right? We will take a punt on him. you know, he'll will hammer those points or whether he moves into. The next season, we changed the philosophy at the club, and we allowed us to play. We start playing 433. He went in as a CDM and was fantastic. That was the role, but that was the perfect position for him at that time. So suddenly went from, you know, unsure about positioning. You went into CDM and he flew like it's fantastic for him. In the end, He's now physically developed and grown and now gone back into sort of when he played in the 18s, He's played as a right back more than anything else. Whether that's because they've got other centre defensive mids in there at the minute that they prefer and there's an opportunity right back. Either way, [PLAYER NAME] has got in there, maybe because he's played those three different roles as well. He could, you know he can adapt and go into those different roles. So yeah, that's probably aided him in that selection.

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

**P:** I'm almost tempted to say it doesn't. Because the number of players I've seen. I'm just talking from personal experience. The numbers I've seen who have not progressed. They've been flying at foundation phase, even played up by the time they get to 13/14 and suddenly there then nowhere near it. And as I said Flipside earlier, you get players who are average sort things at 13's/14's, and really you know, crack on. I think before the age of 14, and especially when you look at growth spurts. It's tough to evaluate players because you don't know when they're going to get the growth spurt, what they will be like after they've had their growth spurt and you know, I think this is where that it can be tough from an organized, non, even organizational point of view, but. At the system point of view, in terms of obviously we have to make scholarship decisions At 16, they have to have a scholarship for two years at 18 and it's when you're trying to make assessments on players who maybe don't have a growth spurt until late. You almost don't want to take the risk on those players, and you can't afford to take the risk on those players, which is I guess is one of the reasons why a lot will fall out of football, but then. You know, if they have the right attributes, they push back on. So, I think you know when I'm looking at players who come from the foundation phase and the foundation phase Coach will be raving about them. You almost have to monitor that across the... and it does go the other way. You know we gotta 13 at the minute who, you know, was being raved about last year is coming at 13's this year. Unbelievable, he's gone straight up into the 14s. He's played there all season. He's been the

best player on the pitch at times. And he's not the biggest, but the way he puts his body about is fantastic. the way he moves His body is absolutely unbelievable. So, doesn't matter that he's small because he still protects the ball and he still moves it quickly and find ways past players so. You know it can go both ways. I think it's. I think it's tough though, 'cause if you just said like yeah, you know. Especially when I was foundation phase coach at [CLUB NAME]. You know I'll be looking at players and go, right, these are the best five players in the group. Let's see where they are in 10 years time or even now. You know, I speak to them and ask who still doing well, who's not doing well? Who have you released? who's? It's interesting 'cause some of them are released and I'm like wow. He was an unbelievable player at the time. As well as you get, as I said, the other way where some players were, there's one player in particular who was, you know, really unsure of. he did OK, he's good at 9s and in 10s sort of slow off, he was quite a tall lad though. And now he sees a giant absolute giant like I can't remember if he is 12 or 13s now but an absolute giant. And he's thriving, but again, whether that's because he's got the height or not, I don't know, but that might give him the advantage anyway. You know, that might push him through

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Almost similar like it is. It is tough because you've gotta look at it from a. You know will. Sometimes we look at it from a tactical point of view and go right ok. tactically he's all over the place, but you look at the physical attributes you look at the technical attributes you look at, what they can do on the ball in 1V1 2V2, think right ok. They're unbelievable at this, but you know we might teach them the tactical side of the game. So, you've almost got a look at the psychological side of it as well and go right. Have they got? There you know it is tough 'cause you gotta set this in six weeks effectively, but can they? Will they be willing to learn the game? And sometimes you know I've said this before with releases I say in every single. Sorry. Every time I recruit a player, I'll say to him that I've sat in the same room and that I'm signing you right now and release players a year later because they haven't had. You know they haven't wanted to learn. They haven't wanted to push themselves. They've gone right? I'm signed in academy football and put my feet up now so, you know, make sure you're not one of those statistics. That and one of those players who put his feet up or doesn't work hard. Make sure you're one of the ones who have really pushed on because you know you now in Academy football. And now there's the opportunity to really push yourself so. I think in terms of players coming from grassroots football into Academy football, sometimes it can be... Be things that need to work on which they won't have at the same time you also know that they've never been in Academy football. No one's necessarily taught them certain things, so they might. Absolutely thrive on that. Whilst you might have players who've been in Academy football all their lives. And it's like, right? They've had all this amount of coaching and they're only at this level Now, think about potentially, you know, how far a grassroots players never had this coaching Could go. So, I think it's tougher and again, that's the. Guess that's the beauty of football, and beauty of talent identification that you know players will come into your system and you've got evaluate them against other players. And sometimes they need. Sometimes players need the release to really kick on sometimes. You know they. They won't kick on an ultimate task to the point of elite sport. I guess when you. An elite sport. I mean in terms of professional game and trying to get there because ultimately, I don't. I don't believe Academy Football should be classed Elite but. You know it's. Ultimately, going from one job effectively aren't they. there's going to be certain things that they're going to not have.

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: Um? It does play a big part. So, I think about the releases that we generally make it sort of 14/15. And all, and also the players who are Generally sort of struggling at those age groups of the players who aren't as big as the other players, and I think it's not. It's not always the case 'cause we will have players who are the same size if not smaller at times, but they've almost found ways around that or their attributes. You know they are able. There might be small, but they are able to drop into pockets, move the ball quickly and we've got one player in particular who is doing really well at the minute from 16s and he's being involved in the 18a and number of times who you know for years we've been saying. He's not biggest. Is that going to be his downfall or not, but the difference is that he's really worked hard and pushed himself. And made that his strength. he will drop in the pockets, move it quickly shift it even though it's not the biggest he'll get into challenges, will scrap, He'll fight, he'll show it, will put himself about whilst others will go. No, I won't do that.

**I: So, what does he do different?**

P: I think it's the psychological side. I think it's you know, don't get me wrong, I think the technical side and top side of the game will play a part. Because ultimately, if they're not technically good enough to shift the ball quickly, then. If they're not and they get drawn into battles because they're not technically good enough, but then also they don't have the maturation at, you know the you know physically they're getting pushed off the board as well, They've got no chance. so I think it all plays a part, but I think the biggest, probably biggest thing for me is the psychological side of it in terms of wanting to get on the ball, wanting to really go right, I need to work on this area. So, I'm going to push myself there and also like the honest reflection with themselves as well, so they'll know talking to those players they know, right? This is all I need to be aware of this. I need to work on this. Well sometimes you read the... so on the six-week reviews. They have a section which they have to comment back on, and you'll get some players which is almost arguing back against you, they get defensive and it's just like... Not sure they have the honest reflection of themselves and where they are in the group, and where they are as a player, which you know if you go into work every day and go, I'm the best here then you probably not gonna learn much.

**I: Is this a better acknowledgement of what they need to do to be effective versus what they want to do?**

P: Yeah, I think. And again, I think like some of them, and this is something we say to a lot of 16 and even the 18s as well as, you know, they want to go and do. if you go right to individual time off you go, and this is something we used to do, you would be interested to see how many players will go I'm Going to go do free kicks! Is that really going to be the area that's going to make you a scholar or make you a professional player? what do you need to work on? I should probably work on this. OK, so why are you taking freekicks? So, I think sometimes it's that I mean. And then this is where I tried to push. Like I try to role model players and do role model in terms as best practice as possible by saying especially now that we've had [PLAYER NAME] who's progressed. It's a great, Recent, player who's really kicked on and I can turn around to them and say, well [PLAYER NAME] was going to the gym before school. [PLAYER NAME] was getting to Sessions early. He was standing sessions late. He was doing his own individual work away from the club. And it's almost trying to say that's what that's what you need to be doing. If you want to. If you want to reach what [PLAYER NAME]

doing and try and do what he's doing, sometimes it's. It's right to say it's easy to say the right things and say, yeah, I need to work on this, but actually doing it. going back onto the psychological side in the mental toughness in terms of the daily grind and getting up in the morning and doing the hard work rather than going, Yeah, I can do that, but not doing it.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: So, based on. Based on current performance, like you said a minute ago. so, in terms of probably the impact they're having in the games. So again, are they consistently each week performing at a high level. Alright, fine, they might have good games and bad games, but generally comes quite consistent with that. Their players, who in training. Probably do the same thing. Have quite a bit of impact, but also push themselves and work hard. so, I think all. Yeah, all six of those, those are players who do a lot of work away from the club want to push themselves and work hard. That's probably the reason why they have the impact in training and games. Real range in terms of physical capabilities. I mean, we've got one who's just really physically strong, but then we've also got one, which is one of the ones I talked about earlier who, Isn't the biggest but the way he might move himself and the way you know his technical and tactical abilities is very good as well. You know, he's not afraid to get into challenges and things like that, will throw himself about like he's a scrapper, that's for sure. So, I think that's probably the biggest reason why they've got a H. In regards to the lowers, Probably the other way, so in terms of their impact within games. Isn't the highest. You know they don't really have much impact in the games. They often you know they're quite inconsistent with their performances. They might have a good game or good period again, but then that's it for a bit of time. One in particular I'm looking at and He has a lot of potential, but just doesn't really know, hasn't really kicked on. So, he's one of the ones who was is a high performer two seasons ago, like playing up each week. Last season he was sort of doing OK and then this season, just. He still got that ability and he's done that, but you almost have to really get onto him for him to then almost unlock that. so right now, he's an L. I think if we on a good day he is an M or H but. He doesn't do it anywhere near enough, and I don't think he's got the psychological attributes to Progress. if he got a scholarship, I don't think you play and I don't think he would Be the right mentality to go right, I'm going to really push myself now. I think he'll be the type of player who will go and look and go, why is he planning, And I'm not playing? and I can do that better than him. And one of them.

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yeah, I think so. At the six Hs. One of them has always been H from when I knew him at the 13. H all day. I mean last year as a as an under 15 he played under 23s. So yeah, he's just something else. There's. One of them is the lad we signed not so long ago. So, at 14s again came in is probably an M. Unsure of how we kick on really kicked on. One of them has been at the club for a while, probably been an M for most of the time. Been OK, but again, he's not the most incredible, but so consistent with what he does. You know what you're going out with him, and it's generally a good level. One of them we've signed last season. Absolute giant, physically amazing, but He has got some other attributes as well. he does enough with those so and he wants to learn. the other two, one has probably been an L. Probably two or three times in the last four years. He's almost been released twice. It is almost like he saved himself each time, but then. Dunno, things have just really clicked for him this season. And again, he's developed this mentality of wanting to push himself and work hard and will do anything. He's not the brightest Kids. he's, you know, he Sometimes takes a bit of time to get

his head around things, but a lot of heart, wants to really work hard. And you know, if he continues to do that and continues to push himself, then you know he will continue to do well

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: Similar, obviously there's like a number of different profiles of players, and some of the lot more technically gifted added and work better technically, some are better tactically. I think the biggest thing for the high achievers is, the overall consistency of those performances, as well as the overall impact they have in the games. So even though, like you know, I take a take one of the m's, for example. He could be so good you can be so like you can impact game so well. But the problem is it's almost like sometimes he's just running at half speed. And sometimes I don't think he sees himself. Sometimes I think he sort switches off and can sort of end up going with the flow. Same in training sessions can end up almost or get dragged into like the bit of the banter and just sort of. Put his head at, you know, head up in the Stars a little bit times. so, you almost have to like, you know we'll really try and push him. But yeah, I look at most of those Ms and then go right. The majority of them will have something which could make them a H, but they don't do it enough. You know don't have. You know they haven't worked on it enough. And some of that. Some of the Ms on the same front. You know, don't necessarily have a super strength, they just. You know they're just OK Players, are good players and. You know it this is ultimately the tough thing. 'cause it was no different to [PLAYER NAME]. [PLAYER NAME] at 14's was Ms. 15's first half of the season, Probably an M. second half of the season turned into a H. that was because again he went from being average and not really having much about him, to really pushing himself and suddenly we play in the [COMPETITION] at under 15s that seasonally, and he's scoring hat tricks? He's got a hat trick against [CLUB NAME]. And we went through our group top, beating [CLUB NAME], [CLUB NAME] and [CLUB NAME]. And I'll be honest it was, you know it was incredible where his journey from being an average player, his amount of work rate and desire made him a very good player.

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: Yeah, I think so. I mean. The other day. To be fair, we between me, the Academy manager and head coach and we sat in a room with a board with all the players on. And it was off the back of a conversation or discussion we had about something else but ended up going on to that. And we sat there and gone, right, right now. Who do offer scholarship to who would you not offer a scholarship to? Who are you not sure on. so, a tick across or question mark? I think mine similar to what I've sort of said here. I think that there was probably like two of the strikers that question marks, but again that was more based along the lines of how many strikers we will offer. So, I mean that would be a question mark There. They are two different types of strikers, but that's ultimately not my decision in terms of how many players will sign in each position. So, I think it does relate, but there will be some, some slight tweaks and I think also like when we did that between the three of us. Alright fine some were just ticks, when you knew were gonna get one. Some were X's. We knew they weren't going to get one. That's when it got interesting, 'cause there's some who were ticks and some who were question marks and was interesting to see why certain players had that. Yeah, so one of the one of the H's in particular, Is a question mark on one and a tick on... a question mark for the academy manager, tick for the Head of coaching and I remember if I



put a tick or a question mark, he is the one I really had to think about and decide on. I think he's very good and I don't think I think if we don't take him someone else will. I'd be surprised if he didn't really kick on. But I think it comes almost down to will he, he's physically OK Size-ish for a left back. but he hasn't really filled out yet. Again, that comes into the question of this. Is my argument with it. We had a late growth spurt. She's never been massive. so, he will develop that. And also, he's the type of kid who will work hard and push himself. He's not the type of kid who said like right when we need you to start Eating the right things and pushing yourself in the gym. Who's going to, you know, not do it. He will do it. which is obviously a big plus. But again, whether he'll do enough to get. an Ultimately, when we're judging players as well, it's tough. 'cause we look at them in the 16. But then we also assess them in the 18s and the 17s. Which is where... as we play in like a separate 17s League as well. It's a lot of semi pro clubs around the area. It has advantages, disadvantages which are completely different, but either way that's it can be tough for him, because if he goes in the 18s right now, you look at him physically and players, depending on who they are, might be Stronger than him and be able to overpower him. However, at the same time, the player I mentioned earlier, [PLAYER NAME]. He's played in the 18s as a 16. He's not the biggest, but you know we played in the FA Youth Cup against [CLUB NAME] And won comfortably. And he was fantastic, and it was up against someone who is 6 foot two, 6 foot 3 and under 18. Dunno if he was a first year or second year for [CLUB NAME] but couldn't get past him and then they took him off. He was against the 16 who was. Yeah, he's probably 5 foot 6, 5'7. Interestingly, he's probably one of the strongest players in the air across 16s and the 18s. He's fantastic in the air.

**I: How do you define game impact?**

**P:** Um? Game impact, for me, and probably what we will look at players on, will be the number of actions they sort of perform within that game. not necessary, and probably links into like, like I said with that study, but I mean, that's something we've been thinking about for years. Is like, you know, what part of the game impact, it's probably the amount of influence they have in that game, most of the time. The players who really catch your eye are the ones who Have a number of actions on the ball, you know, if you're looking at players in possession on the ball, but then also off the ball and. Alright, fine, it's going to be the quality of those actions at times as well, but if you've got a centre mid who rarely gets on the ball, then, There's a reason for that. whether it's tactically, whether it's you know. Actually, you know what psychologically there a little bit scared again on the ball right now 'cause they lost it the last time. Whilst we have centre mids who, you know... we look at the look at the H is in there. Doesn't matter, they want the ball. they want to. They will push themselves. They work hard, even defending their defending an their press. It isn't like a jog to get there, they Sprint, they want to get there. They want to impact it. Whilst I look at some of the Ls on there and the M's on their, like the L's and the M's are the ones, I'm almost having to. You find yourself reminding. Recovery runs. you have to remind them about getting forward. You have to remind them about things. Whereas the H's are the players you don't really necessarily have to say that as much to. Yes fine. You're still going to coach and tinker their game and you know I look at the two strikers in particular and they've had things they've really had to work on. But they've worked on it and picked it up by the one who's a giant. He's probably 6 foot 1, 6 foot 2. I said to him, we played [CLUB NAME] earlier on the season and I said any was poor in that game like. It can be sometimes a little bit challenging with the understanding 'cause he's, I think he's half Italian half Nigerian. he's lived in Italy, but he can speak English to some degree, but I'm just trying to explain to him like your 6 foot 2.

Sometimes you play like your 4 foot 9. sometimes you play and your 6 foot 7. and I don't know like just saying out like click for him 'cause it's like, right? Who are going to be today? You gonna be? Are you gonna be 4 foot 9 or be 6'7? And then you suddenly see him using his body. It's almost like he didn't really understand himself, how big and strong and powerful he is.

**I: Still within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each top player you could remove, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: Um? I mean, there's probably elements of their game. I mean, I look at those players and. They have got super strengths in some area like. They have a super strength and they also have. Mentality, that's probably the two biggest things I look at those players. While other players might not necessarily have a super strength, they have a super strength but don't have that hard-working mentality, or that you know they're not Focused on developing that. So, I think for those Hs, I think that there are elements of their game which aren't maybe their strongest elements which you could take away. Trying to think of an example now. it's hard to say is we would like to take away an element in the game. It might be, I mean like. OK, so I look at one of them in particular, the one who's been a high achiever all this time. He's found like you know, his biggest strength is probably dribbling and beating players and skilful on the ball and can control it well and just again like you know, you can just shift the ball really well. He can also score some very good goals. He can also play some unbelievable passes. I guess you could take the scoring goals and the passing away, to some degree, and you still have a very good player. I think even if you took. He's the type of player who you could almost take the... he will defend, and I mean that's what's interesting against with him as well. Is that he's one that we've really had to hammer defending sides. At 13s didn't want to defend and would almost have to hammer that mentality. Now, He will work hard to defend. He will push himself to defend. Sometimes he's not tactically in the right positions or in the best place, but he will now push himself. Which you know is something he didn't have before. So, if you took that away, like he'd still been unbelievable player. you might have to carry him when you're defending. You might have to play more or more of the 10 or 9 you can get away with defending without him. So, I guess there is elements in some players games you could take away from them. I think for others it would be tougher. Like I look at one of them and he's. You know his strengths are runs in behind and he's very calm and you know, under pressure and scoring. But even him like you know he's, this season in particular, He's really worked on shielding the ball. like he's really worked on pinning defenders and he's so good at it now. He's absolutely fantastic and it doesn't matter. I mean we played [CLUB NAME] in a game and we drew 2 - 2. He was up against these two [CLUB NAME] Centre halves, Who were the tallest centre halves I've seen at under 16s. Giants! and he just pinned them like he did so well, like pinning them, and he did it consistently throughout the game. Ironically, the one time he didn't, and he lost the ball was the one of the times we conceded a goal later on in the game, but he was so effective at it. whilst I think other strikers wouldn't have wouldn't have done that. I think if you have taken that part away of his game away, it still be effective player making lots of runs in behind, but you know whether that will be the difference between him getting a scholarship or not. I'm not sure. I guess it depends on you know. Like I know Academy manager quite likes that in academy players who are able to pin players and that's one of the reasons why [PLAYER NAME] was so effective. Was that he's pinned players so well but he didn't have that, [PLAYER NAME] didn't have that when he started, you know, was in the 15s. it was only when the 16s in 16 season that we really start develop that so.

**I: Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: one in particular, and he's the one I mentioned earlier, could have so much impacting games. And it's something we've been really sort of working on recently, and that's what most of my discussions have been in with him. Is that you've got so much potential when it comes to beating players getting past players. and I said like he's just he's, you know, objectively, he's a second fastest player in the group. and I mean, that's only because this is the first fastest player the group holds the, at 14s when we signed him, he was 6 foot at 14s and he held the England or Great Britain schools record for sprinting. So, he's up against some competition, but it's the second quickest in the group. I said to him like when that data it came out, and I said, you're the second quickest in the group, but I don't think I would be able to tell you that. I haven't seen that in the games. What you've got this such a powerful strength here, yet you don't use it. 'cause often What he's, wherever it's what he thinks that he needs to be, or whether what is what he prefers. He likes to get the ball and go on the inside against players and try and beat players. And it's like you feel the second quickest player and, is very quick. he's quicker than a lot of the 18s. Why is he not using that strength to try and get past players. I mean, I think the other two. And then once a very unique case where he's just. He's a dot, like he's absolutely tiny. And the problem is like he was very, he could be a very effective player previously. when he was 13s / 14s and he was playing down He could impact games, even though he was tiny. But now he just he can't get on the ball like it is nowhere near. He's playing down at the 15 but he just can't get anywhere near. And I look at, uh, yeah, the other one we signed him at 14s. He came in, had a lot of impact on trial, and it's just sort of. So it's half coasted I think, and again, this is the problem with I guess with development in terms of 14s is that he's come in at that time as a slightly bigger player in the group, but was physically able to Push players off the ball and had that about him that uses a gritty centre midfielder. And now we just don't really see that in him. I think he knows that himself as well. And I've said that to him, like, you know, he's almost a shell of himself at times. We Can't work out why, he can't tell us why. And you know trying to get that out with him is into some degree, it's been tough, but I think that you know those three Ls in particular, very different causes and reasons why they're an L currently

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: It was tough. I think, The reason why some of them have gotten M and not another H is... well the reason why someone got M and not an L is because, They've either been more consistent generally because they've been more consistent in the games they've had their impact, not necessarily saying it's the biggest amount of influence, but they've held their own at times. They've you know they've generally been consistent to some degree in terms of their average. They might do things very well and be quiet about it so. You know, like, especially with the defending at times, it's sometimes it can be hard to be a exceling centre half, because if you tactically in the right positions all the time, or you've got players who are tactically in positions in front of you, you might not get to head the ball down. Might not get to win a 1V1 because you've done everything right. ironically that's what makes me laugh when I see trialist. When we get sent trialist videos and stuff like that from, you know they go, I'm a centre back, And here's my clips. most of the time it's really bad defending tactically, but they do a great slide tackle at the end. It's like, well, I don't wanna player

who's going to give the ball away, be in the wrong position and then make a challenge like that even they want it on the edge of the box. 'cause you know there's a lot of wrongs before he does make up for it so. So, I think that part of the biggest difference between the Ms and the Ls. between the Ms and the H is, I think it's the consistency, but probably more like the actual influence they have in the games, and that's why I think like the one I was really unsure about. Consistently, very like he's consistently good. I wouldn't say he's got like. He does some really good passes. He moves the ball quite well. I wouldn't say he's got absolute super strength there, like I don't know what that would be at the minute.

**I: Do they lack the decision making and game intelligence that the H's possess?**

**P:** No, I think. For some in particular, yeah. So, I think there's some players which will, one of the Ls in particular will probably take it easy. 'cause he doesn't want to get found out. Doesn't want to risk playing that longer ball, but then I think some of the Ms are almost the opposite way. I think some of them take too many risks. One player in particular. rather than play the ball, he's a centre mid, and rather than playing the ball on the... The safe ball into the right back, Who can then step forward with the ball, which is probably the best option at the time, he will try and play the unbelievable ball for the right winger over the top whilst facing the other way. and for him it's been a case of we've had to strip that back and go look. Alright, fine, it can come off, but you need to recognize the moments when it will come off and recognize the moments where you're better off playing into the right back, which is hard 'cause it's so unique. I mean like the really high excelling player, the one who's played 23s at under 15. He's one who's, as I said like, unbelievable at dribbling. his learning objective for last four years is probably been, recognized when to pass and went to dribble. And it's got better. But I mean. It's almost one of them hindsight's a beautiful thing when it comes to coaching because. If he misses this, if he tries to beat three players and misses the shot or gets tackled, the last one you go let, you should have passed it there. As you're thinking, and I've done it before with him where I've been watching, I'm thinking you need to release it. Needs to release It. Takes a touch, smashes in top corner. Glad I didn't say you need to release it. but again, like it's you know. The way I've worked with him is, I've said it to him every time. I'm other people might tell you other things. I'm never going to tell him not to dribble. What I will tell you to do is think about the decisions you're making. You think about what's the best option right now? Is it best to take a shot from 25 yards away or is it best to play that ball into the right winger, Who can then deliver a ball into the box or slide the ball into the striker who made that run, and they can take a shot from 10 yards away? Then again, it's so context specific that and again it's so easy. You know when we do look at the footage, I always say that it's very easy to look at the footage, stop it at that split second and sit on it for 20 minutes and chat about everything. But when that's happening and it's gone like that, it's harder to do so. You know we just, I guess, educate them on the decision making, yeah. Not to go off on a tangent there, but yeah.

#### **8.10.8 Participant 8**

**I: What is your current job title?**

**P:** Assistant YD Coach, Lead Coach 13/14s

**I: What is the academy category status of your club?**

P: two

I: **Likewise, what league does your first team play in?**

P: Championship

I: **How long have you worked in football?**

P: 14yrs

I: **How long have you been in your current position?**

P: 2yrs

I: **What age group will you be discussing today?**

I: 14s

P: **Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

I: So yeah, I'd probably describe myself as a coach first and foremost, and so I've got experience of working in sort of recreational slash development type coaching, general participation, and engagement at Grassroots sort of level. Then I say I'm fairly well experienced at, id class as a high-performance setting, such as an Academy. and then in more recent times I've added my Masters in sports psychology. So, looking at going down another multidisciplinary team route, but combining that with, it's a nice little hybrid of coaching and off field coaching as well as on field is probably the best way to describe it. So, sort of in those phases gone from participation, recreational grassroots into high performance. And it's, we're still within the realms of high performance, but just branching off in a slightly different tangent now

I: **Why choose Psychology for further development?**

P: Uh, yeah, I think first and foremost because it was something that captivated me. Understanding the mindsets of what helps to develop somebody who can one cope and then better than that, Excel in a in what can be quite a demanding setting, that was always something quite interested me. and I think it resonated with me. When I was a little bit younger that sometimes I would beat myself rather than an opponent beat me in the various schools I might played. I couldn't really distinguish why that might have been the case when I was younger, but, you know, in looking back in retrospect, I think it was more my mentality or mindset more than anything else at the time. So yeah, I think it's a little bit of retrospective for looking back on my own, my own sporting endeavours, which is which has led me to want to want to study it a little bit more as opposed to any other discipline?

I: **So, is psychology quite important as an athlete?**

P: I think so, yeah, I think. I think that if taken on an individual basis of an athlete or a player. They're gonna have to have a certain technical level, yeah, and a physical baseline level to be competitive. And in my opinion, I think it's the psychological make up your mind set of an individual that might, and you're talking about the real small marginal gains 0.5-0.1%, that might convert a Silver medal into a gold medal for example. I think it's, especially if you're looking at any athlete or any player. They're having to reproduce consistency over and over again, and the real top players or top athletes find a way to reproduce top level performances consistently. I think there's many athletes and players outside of that top ten

percentile that on any given day, can produce a world class performance, but perhaps they just don't do it as consistently as, other people in their field.

**I: What do you think is? Why do you think they are more consistent than others?**

P: Wow, then yeah, I said. I mean it's a. It's a very specific question but it opens up whole realm of possibilities. I think they want. I think they have a real driver or a motive first and foremost, and there's, it may be financially related. It may be with rejection mindset. perhaps they've been told they're not good enough somewhere and it's given a motive to do better. you know, in some instances it might be the driver of someone who's close to them that's no longer there and they're trying to do it in their absence and make them proud, or maybe make their parents proud of them. I think there's one, Or maybe a couple, but usually one real underpinning driver which is an active and I think that's you'll come across and will come across a lot of individuals who They might have a great physical makeup. They might have a technically might be very good, but I sometimes look at some individuals and think I don't see the drive, you know, maybe they don't have those motives. It might have been quite easy for them to get to where they are at present. without having those, Yeah, those drivers to maybe prove someone wrong. or, come out of adverse situation's, and have to really dig in. I think they become. Become stuck at some point. But those you've got a real motive. I think it gives them that extra bit of incentive to succeed or achieve.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

P: I describe, it is a bit of an again a hybrid of on field and off field support for. Well, not only players but parents as well. Yeah, I feel. Well first and foremost. Yeah, I think people identify me as A coach who overseas but is also quite hands-on with two age groups, Thirteens and Fourteens. So, I'm quite involved with both age groups. at the same time, Almost feel like I'm a bit of a parent liaison type officer and get in, Dealing with Queries that might lead to conflicts dealing with all sorts and, but I think a lot of my role is Very reliant on communication, and using communication, not only on the pitch when you speak into players and coaching players and instructing players, but also managing perhaps expectations or educating parents, I think is another is probably a role part of my role that isn't discussed quite as much, you realize actually when you really reflect you spend a lot of your time doing that. So probably say that is a 2 two main aspects of my role, and I think more so now with... particularly the last 12 to 18 months is liaising more so with the wider Academy team, so different faculties within our MDT and tying all The intelligence and feedback together to help hopefully develop good athletes, good players, good human beings.

**I: When considering player development, what are your personal beliefs or philosophy?**

P: I will try and draw on. I know the FA use sort of like that for quarter approach about it. Just use that, as my analogy. I would look first and foremost are providing are on the right-hand side of that. The quadrant you've got this psychological and social side, so I think. Helping to create an environment where players can, I think, feel like they can approach and ask questions and it almost feel... Well feel physically and emotionally safe to get things wrong, With A view to then actually getting them right, but. Try and create an environment where there's high demand on those players, but also a high level of support as well where they are being challenged, but they're also being supported at the same time. I think it's a very tricky balance to get 'cause I've done it in the past there. I think I've provided high demand and not

so much support and often you can get a bit of a bit you know close to sort of mental and physical burnout. and then, Also, there's been times probably earlier in my coaching career where I provided a lot of support and not much demand. And then you get a bit of complacency and not much growth at all. on paper, it sounds very easy to do, just demand more and support more. But it's actually quite physically and mentally exhausting to provide that. That's it from a holistic point of view on the field, off the field. And that's the sort of environment will help to create. And then within that, the demands are placed on the players for developing robust unbreakable technique which they can produce on demand That's game realistic. Ensuring there physically capable of performing the day-to-day rigors of Academy high level performance. And then add in their sort of the next layer of adding the detail of the tactical knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the certain positions that they're asked to Play. and part of my philosophy at the age group I work with, the 13s/14s, is to not necessarily give them one position at the expertise, but perhaps give them a couple of areas on the pitch or a certain area of the pitch, maybe in attacking or defending areas where they sort of developing for perfect their craft or worker towards perfecting their craft in those areas. So yeah, in a fairly large nutshell. I'd probably describe that as my own philosophy.

**I: What are your expectations on player capabilities for future success?**

P: I more generic answer, I'd say, I'd expect them to Excel in at least one part of those areas. So, for example, if it's the physical area they don't have to be Exceptionally agile as well as exception with exceptional acceleration. They might be a big physical boy whose strength is their strength in the physical area. whereas another one might have exceptional agility. and likewise there is so many different techniques that you'll be asked to produce in a game of football where you can't explore, well I find for a 14 year old, you can't expect them to be excellent at receiving, passing, dribbling, Finishing, heading, but again, there's going to be a couple of those where they've gotta be looking to Excel in, particularly in our environment. So, across those four corners you're looking at being able to Excel in a few isolated attributes in each of those four corners and being competent at the level in all the others.

**I: In regard to player development plans, or (de)selection processes at your club, who is included in the decision-making process?**

P: So, player development plans. We will have an MDT meeting. in the actual formulation of the player development plans it was predominantly, Academy manager, Lead phase and myself. So, we Develop those player development plans across ball, game, body and mind, our player a curriculum, for lack of a better phrase. And we draw sort the expertise of strength and conditioning coaches with regards to the body aspects of an individual player's plan, but the ball and game was exclusively coaching staff. And, likewise in mind as we don't have sort of psychology Department in in situ at present. When it comes to reviewing those individual learning plans, it was a case of Having a wider MDT meeting where you'd include coaching staff, lead Phase, Age group specific coach, or cell lead I should say, with strength & conditioning coaches, perhaps analysis team, Education and Physiotherapists etc. Just to give some Intel and background on those players. So, when it comes to reviewing it's probably draws on a few more different perspectives when it comes to reviewing the player. Um? So yeah, I think that's the process.

**I: Would that include your head of coaching and your Academy manager or is that more with the older age groups?**

P: On the basis of this season, we've had the individual learning plan was helped to be developed by the Academy manager and when I did my first review, the head of Coaching was involved. So yeah, that's your question. I don't think it's a consistent Academy manager and head of coaching are always involved in the conversations, but if they choose to be, or they wish to be involved, I think that's when they might do at their own discretion.

I: **Likewise, when you undergo player (de)selection, what process do you undergo to determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: We will have, but we have regular reports written for players. On a on a 6-weekly basis we will write a review. We will then have, if I remember rightly, will have two... we have a review on the player performance midway through the season, just before Christmas time. Which will then, Will give us often overview of the of the players development and progress from the first half of the season. And then we will have a further conversation, just maybe 6 to 8 weeks before the conclusion of the season where we will then explain to certain boys whether they are going to remain at the club or we see their future as a pathway being elsewhere. and those are the sort of in pencilled in the diary type meetings, but we will have regular or, described as, more informal, well formal to the point There are scheduled in. We have weekly coaches' meetings and will spend time discussing player performances on the back of games, so we'll have quite regular dialogue with regards to player progress, but actual documented and uploaded onto a onto a parent / player portal. We will have probably two of those type meetings where the minutes are taken and documented.

I: **When it comes to creating development plans for players, what process do you undergo to determine the individual's needs?**

P: yes, so from one multidisciplinary team meeting to another. Yeah, we will look at perspective changes to the individual learning plan that can be made. So, for instance, a player who's been tasked with developing ball striking, for example, off their left foot. They may have spent two to three weeks or close to actually two to three months of developing the action plan. And we might decide if they've made significant excellent progress on it, it may be an opportunity to persist with that, but it also may be an opportunity to identify another area for them to focus on and develop. Or it may be across those targets; Ball, game, body and mind, where actually we say yeah, you need to work across all four, but I want you to pay close attention for the next block of six weeks where you focus on your physical target, whatever that may. So, you may choose to, Uh, prioritize one over the others.

I: **Are you familiar with the FA 4-corner model?**

Um, I think it's. for me personally It gives me a nice visual of. It's a nice visual of those four areas That can be used to Developer a player. I think it's perhaps a little... in terms of working with younger players and relaying that information to young players. I think it's pitched at, in terms of the terminology, perhaps it's pitched at a level that's above their level, at present. So, at [CLUB NAME] we refer to ball, game, body, and mind, which I think rolls off the tongue quite easily and quickly. I think it's more friendly for the children to relate to, so I think the terminology first and foremost. from a coaching perspective I think it's fine. It informs me quite well, but from a player perspective I think it's. I don't think it's pitched at players level personally, but I think if you were to try and relay the information to the player it'd be advised to reframe, the terminology.



**P: What objective assessments do you use for player development or selection processes?**

I: And I think the main objective assessments we use are physical testing data that we get. So that helps us to see a players, well, a bit of their maturation and growth. Yeah, so there might be some boys who may score lower on the physical testing data, but the opportunity to compare Them two other boys who are uh of a similar biological age as opposed to a similar chronological age, I able to give you a greater perspective on perhaps where they really stand amongst their peers. so, I think that's a really useful objective data we gather. We do keep track of, sort of, objective data from games analysis, such as goals scored, assists on an individual level, as well as using objective data such as. So, we might be working on a block, a tactical block of keeping possession to draw teams in to then exploit space somewhere else. So a big component of being able to do that, and a good measure of seeing whether that's been successful is and the number of passes you may have completed as a team, or the amount of possession that you've managed to get as a team. we don't quite have the resources in the analysis Department to breakdown the areas where we've kept the ball in possession, but those are Just sort of the baseline of, if you've managed to dominate the ball more than the opponent, the chances, are you've been able to draw teams in with the ball. So, whilst then not completely fool proof, they give a good indicator as to whether you are achieving sort of your objectives you set out as a team, and for the individuals that you coach as well.

**P: How well do you think these objective assessments replicate and report on match performance?**

I: I'm that's an interesting question because there will be occasions where there might be some boys who score highly on the testing data in the sameness in the physical data, in the sense that they might appear very quick over 20-30 meters. Then it's when it comes to recognizing or predicting when they need to use that explosive speed, Acceleration in a game, they might not recognize the stimulus to do that. So, for example, a loose pass or a poor pass from an opponent. They might not recognize that it's a poor or loose pass and therefore, the opportunity for the teams to use their speed and acceleration is lost because they aren't recognized That was the that was the trigger to do so. whereas when they're asked to stand at the light gates and run through, it is fairly simple. You do it on the light turning green and you go. Whereas that sort of stimulus isn't there when you're in the game, it's more variables on when and where to use an explosive Sprint. Or when you might... so yeah to an extent it can be quite misleading because some boys look very athletic and quick in their testing data, but then you don't quite see it when it gets to games. So, then they need a lot more tactical understanding and knowledge. And similarly, there's been instances where some boys in terms of they don't look like they can be explosive and quick in the testing data They get. But they've got incredible endurance and they get around the pitch for long periods of time and you'll never have to. You'll never see them in the in the 80 plus minutes. We play 80 minutes supposed to 90 at our age. in 80 added or minutes there, they're still going with great energy. Because Physical endurance levels are much better, so again, I think it's like any data you is how you interpret it. And having the knowledge behind knowing that it's there's going to be some biases behind by not any data that you collect, and it's regular those biases.

**P: So, the assessments are correct, but they lack the specific needs of the game?**

I: Yeah, I think I think probably the word is contextual, isn't it? So yeah, right in in, in a test where we tested speed. Yeah, it's fairly conclusive that if he scores a first time then he's fast, but then. understanding that context of when to use that speed when it is a decision to be made or multiple decisions to be made, when to use it. Sometimes if you are half a second to a second late to make that movement in footballing terms, that half second to a second equates to a couple of yards and then all of a sudden at that speed that is so effective, all of a sudden becomes a lot less effective because the timing of when it was used is not as effective.

**P: Is there a club strategy when it comes to player development plans?**

I: So I think if I remember rightly from everything we do for a year which are documented there will be I know myself and other coaches will actually do a lot more with individual players where they might get in touch and we might have a sit down in a 5 to 10 minute conversation about their performances because the players are given opportunity to reflect on their weeks of training and games, so they might request at or have a conversation. There's an option for them to pose a question to their coach, so that opens up an extra bit of dialogue if they want it, but. On the basis of the four meetings that we have, some of them are player and parent, where again it provides opportunity to educate the parent and involve the parent in the plan, The individual learning plan. And then also they'll be player only meetings. So, it provides a bit of ownership on the players to bring up any questions or concerns they have with their individual learning plan. But it promotes a great opportunity to have that dialogue between player and coach or player parent coach in that Triangulation dialogue. So yeah, that's sort of the plan we have with that. And then, as I said, we will have regular MDT meetings where we discuss any potential changes we can make to the plans.

**I: When considering the development phases, if a player excels in the foundation phase, how does this inform you on the future success of the player?**

P: really is quite an interesting one because I think. I'm thinking of, I know I've got my own biases here. 'cause I have 8 years at being at [CLUB NAME] and I've seen a lot of boys where they've been An under 10 or under 11, In foundation Phase age group, and they've been what you would describe the most effective player on the pitch. And usually there efficient because majority of the time, if not all of the time, because they're physically more mature than their peers at present in time. So they get to Under 13s, 14s, 15s and, they perhaps haven't been challenged enough, and in which case it may be partly at fault of the Academy or the coaching staff to find a way that really challenges that player, of that age group, where their success Comes relatively easier, in comparison to their peers. and therefore, the opportunity for them to experience adversity isn't as prevalent as their peers as well. So, they get to an older age group, let's say 13/14, and other boys who have had to endure or persevere with adversity or challenging situations, Have that in their locker. they've got that at their disposal now, where they can come through those tough times and They've hit a bit of maturation where they've grown and therefore they have a little bit more than a little bit more in the bank, so to speak. In comparison to the player who has had size on his side for a longer duration of time and has had less of those adverse experiences to try and overcome. and then all of a sudden at later age when they are finding it difficult and tough. They can't then, you know, sort of withdrawal from those experiences they've had in the previous they don't have as those situational experiences of where they've Been in a diverse situation and fought through it and found success, because they can't draw on those experiences or don't have as many experiences to draw on. They find it difficult to come through those times, so

then it requires a lot of going back to what I said earlier. Requires that player has been Perhaps demanded on quite a lot, but it managed to succeed. Now they're being demanding a lot and they're not performing as well. So from a coaching perspective you have the issue of the bias of being able to recognize that boy when he was a dominant 10 or 11 year old, and you then see him as a much worse player than perhaps he was 3-4 years ago. so that player in that sense still needs the same amount demand but needs need to turn the dial up on his support and support him more. whether that support could be in terms of education or maybe one to one tuition or help in the gym or on the pitch. But then also keeping that demand high because they need to know where the level is. what tends to happen, and I've been guilty of this as well is. They get to a certain point where you think that peaked and you don't adapt or change your coaching philosophy for that individual player. and because they're not getting it tailored work for them or tailored sessions planned for them, and they tend to sort of fall by the wayside a little bit, which is, which is a real shame, and it's probably something that academies across the country perhaps need to do a little bit better is catering for them. We hear a lot about catering for the late developers and how we do that, but how do we cater for those early developers? I'm not sure if anyone's got the definitive answer on or best practice answer on how to do it, to be honest.

**I: If a player joins the academy from the youth development phase, are they any less likely to succeed than a player who has been in the system since the foundation phase?**

P: Um? I don't think so, because again, drawing on my own experiences, we've had boys who have come in. And their first taste of Academy football is as a maybe 12/13/14 year old. However. There they sort of experiences of the... and I think this is where the grass roots and recreational game and has a vital part to Plays. in Academy football games are not competitive in the sense that League tables are kept, And there's promotions and relegations from leagues. and whilst any game of football you play is competitive in the sense that you're competing against another team. Because there isn't that incentive of promotions and League places etc. I think there's a tendency for some Academy players where a game just becomes a... some players might just go through the motions of playing a game and going back to training on the Monday or Tuesday when they report back in. and it becomes a bit of a cycle. Whereas there's other boys who are in the in the grassroots game, and whilst the techniques and, I'm massively generalizing here, whilst the technical aspects of their development may not be quite as catered for as an Academy environment. They're learning how to win and learning how to compete, and they learn how to compete with the essence of getting 3 points or wins or draws and competing in Cup competitions where there's finals at place, and competing for trophies, so tangible rewards as well, which perhaps you don't get as much in the Academy system. So then sometimes those boys come into our environment and Sometimes they just seem, OK there a bit rough around the edges with their techniques, but their ultra-competitive. and I think I think when players have got that sort of mentality of that real ultra-competitiveness and then within the environment they're in where they getting access to access the great facilities and you know a very professional standards of coaching and holistic support across the board. You can refine those technical aspects and those physical aspects but try and keep that fire of intensity burning inside of them. As I say, I'm massively generalizing because they'll be boys in the Academy system who will have that as well. but there will be also boys in the grassroots game who've never kicked a ball in an Academy environment who then come in and Perhaps don't look too out of place at all. So yeah, I don't think I find it very hard to predict based on

someone who's not been in the system before, whether they will stay in the system or not. It's very much on an individual basis, really that one.

**I: Do maturation outcomes impact your decisions towards development plans, or selection strategies?**

P: Yes, so I'll answer the development 1 first. Yes, because, If there's a boy who is, let's say, reached almost 100% maturation at a fairly young age, such as 13/14, then for me and going back to that point about catering for the early earlier developer, I think you have to look at opportunities to integrate them into training sessions with older boys. we've had instances of one boy who's a trained within the under 15s, and it's more or less part of his permanent program now. he may drop him with a 14s when the 15s don't have a game. But, by and large you see now as an under 15 despite being under 14, and that's to again, provide him with sufficient challenge and stimulate with sufficient challenge where His levels of success he might be getting with 14s are very high, whereas actually the levels of success he gets with 15s nowhere near as high, but still achievable. And then the second part with regards to selection. Again, I think it has to, because I think that the future game in terms of football is looking increasingly like Techniques and speed and you know technical speed in terms of how players can pass a ball quickly, and receive it quickly and the game just gets faster and faster. So yes, players can compete and compensate from that by being able to predict play quicker. so Better being better cognitively, but then I think you've got to be exceptional. If you don't have, If you're average physically. If you're going to be physically, then you have to be exceptional technically and tactically. So, to compensate for that, if you can't be or you don't reach those sort of excellent standards, then physically you've got to be very good., just to cope really, and being able to cope in a game of football sounds quite negative, but it's actually an achievement, especially in Academy level, You can cope at least. those players that can cope because they've got the physical attributes with the increased technical and tactical quality that you can look at, maybe striving in games and then going back to the very first point I made was, Then the mentality of being able to produce those performance consistently. but to be able to cope and perhaps not look out of place, Then I think the physicality is a bigger percentage of the overall pie when it comes to developing an efficient footballer. So yeah, with regards to selection or deselection, if a player isn't exceptional in certain areas and physically can't cope, then it's very difficult to really make a case for them being to get any sort of success in in the program going forward.

**I: So, it might be the better option for them to not be in their program in that instance rather than overstress them?**

P: I think so, and I think you know 'overstress' is a good word, because if players are getting so much demand and they're getting so little success then I think sort of physical and mental burnout is going to only become more prevalent and more likely, in that case. So, from the players own wellbeing in terms of enjoyment, participation and part of that is being able to achieve some success at some stage, which and you can't undervalue the importance of achieving success, as much as we want to drive in demand and stretch plays as much as possible. it is imperative they achieve some sort of relative success. And if it's so very little, then burnout only becomes prevalent, so it's in probably in a player's best interest to look elsewhere, In that instance.

**I: How have you determined who is in which group?**

P: I think the first thing that really jumps out when I'm scoring players. Whether they're high performers to low performances, is their consistency of their performance, so I'm quite harsh in the sense of there might be someone who produces a very good performance and can produce high levels of performance. But if it's one in four one in five times, they produce that performance. I'll be reluctant to class them as a high performer, and that's even that's at 14. I might differ with that if I was coaching a younger age groups such as 12s/11s, it would be perhaps a little bit more lenient on their consistency. but I think, you're preparing these boys for an environment where you don't necessarily have to perform brilliantly Every week, but I think you've got to perform well every week. so, there's an element of reliability and trust when it comes to being high performers. So that's why only three, four, or five. I've got 5 actually high performers, and that's where only five out of the 18 I've given that. Equally, there's a lot of boys in there who are sort of middle of the pack, again, probably for that reason I've just mentioned. have shown good levels of performances, but not consistently enough. or they've been consistently good, never really outstanding, so they sort of form that middle pack, and likewise those low performers. It's consistently Their performances are below sort of the benchmark and therefore a low performer.

**I: So, is that benchmark set by the squad itself or something you have in your mind?**

P: Yeah, it's a good question. That is, I think I'm basing that based on the squad when I look at it and that's for my own sort of CPD is to actually try and understand the general under 14 level, particularly in the Midlands, and not just based on the 18 players we have at that age group at [CLUB NAME] so that you know if you ask me that question in 2/3 months time, and I'd based on as a sort of landscape across the Midlands, It might look different. but based on sort of my knowledge where I my understanding is at now. It's based on what I see on a weekly basis with the boys at [CLUB NAME].

**I: Since your time working with these players, would you have always grouped these the same, or are the groups more dynamic, with players moving across groups regularly?**

P: Yeah, I think that there will be some boys in that middle of the pack now who I would... if you could put a high performance of Capital H and somebody might just bubbling away is a lower case H there might be a few lower case H as in there if that makes sense. so, there's some boys who are not quite a full maturation and their coping in the environment. so, they're not performing exceptionally in their age group, but based on their biological age and their physical stature, there more than coping in the age group. So, when they hit a bit of maturation, I'll be expecting those boys to be sort of your late developers that surprise a few people in a few years time. So yeah, I can see if you were to ask me the same questions in 12 to 18 months, the landscape would Look quite different.

**I: Are the players in the top group exhibiting the same abilities as the other groups, just at a high level of ability?**

P: I would, um, yeah, so for instance, uh, some of the boys I don't have any of this centre backs won't be a good example. I don't have any centre backs in the high performing group, but I've gotta centre mid in in this high performing group. And yes, so for instance, some of those objectives measures that we spoke about earlier in terms of one boys goal involvement for example, and I think that's a good measure to have a centre midfielder while scoring goals isn't their primary objective, but their involvement in goals, if they're able to either score or assist in a number of goals, it shows that there performing at a good

level. You could also break that into objective stats of how many times they recover the ball, and again, if it's higher than their peers and generally better than the players around, and then I class them as a high performer.

**I: In consideration of player selection/deselection, would these groups represent those who you would most likely select (higher) and most likely deselect (lower)?**

P: Yeah, yeah, in simple terms, yeah.

**I: Do you think there are any players within the mid-performance group who you would also definitely select?**

P: in the mid group players, there are definitely ones I would select, yeah

**I: Likewise, are there any players within the mid-performing group who you would definitely deselect?**

P: Yeah also and reason for that is because you. They are performing that so for example in if you go back to that four corners, they might be technically very good, but... no, they will be technically very good, but without being exceptional. physically you may describe them as poor, and in which case They're currently coping, but then unlike perhaps some of those later developers who may have a little bit more to give in six to 12 months time, it's very difficult to see if some of those boys have any more to give and as, sort of, the demands of they go from 14's in a couple years time, they go to 16. The pitch gets another couple of yards longer and wider. The game then becomes even tougher for them, and if they're only just coping at this age group, the likelihood is that they start to struggle in six to 12 months Time.

**I: Is that like saying that those players might be on a bit of a downward trajectory?**

P: It possibly they don't think it's it can be defined as, uh, as consistently as that. I think that some of those boys on a downward trajectory they might be experience difficulty and understand that actually they can reflect on times they've been Superior, and then now a bit more inferior than, their performances suggest that they're more inferior than they were before. But then they still might produce a good performance. And maybe one in three occasions, one in four occasions. Where, like I say, as those pitches and the opponents get bigger and it gets tougher, those good performances may go from 1 in 2, to a 2 in 7 or 2 in 8. so, it becomes that their effectiveness across the season becomes lessened, whereas you take a sort of speculation on those later developers where their coping right now. There's no definitive evidence to suggest that just because their coping right now, they will start to Excel in a couple of years time. They might only be able to cope at the level still, and in which case you'll just be having this same sort of discussion with them. But you'll probably see a bit more potential in those at present just because of sort of where they are, and again, that comes down to individual biases. I tend to favour those late developers for that reason, 'cause they have to overcome a lot of adversity. And, I need to be better in trying to develop the earlier developers and finding ways to get them through the pathway as best as they can.

**I: Referring to the group of the top players, can you go through each individual to offer some context as to why they are in the top group?**

P: Um, yeah, I'm just looking at them now. I think again, I think. Maybe the word is could be personality or an. I don't use the word them being coachable, because that sometimes that conjures up in my mind plays just being compliant and some of these boys, I have selected a far from just being compliant. They can be very. They can be very challenging, but what I would say is that they're very driven. And you do give them tasks, and some will do them, and some won't. so, you find another way to engage them, but I think when you do find that way to engage them. You can get a real big buy in from them and so yeah, I think what I'm saying here is that, when they see value in what they're doing, they really fully commit to it. whereas There are perhaps some boys who are very compliant and will do whatever the coach says, but that may not be the best course of action to get the best out of them. So those more challenging players, I think it's challenging because they want to be coached in a way that benefits them. They wanna be coached in a way that that stimulates them. And if it doesn't stimulate them, they're not interested. But when you do get that buy in any do it, you're able to stimulate their performance because you perhaps place constraints or demands on them that they see the relevance behind it, and they see the transactional relationship Is that or the reason that's being done is because it is going to help my performance. Then they really buy into it, so I would say that's probably quite consistent. You find a way to challenge their more challenging players, definitely the ones selected, but you find a way to challenge them and get a buy in from them and they really buy into it.

**I: Within the top group only, is there anything consistent amongst all players that makes them more outstanding then the others?**

P: Yeah, so there's I'm looking at some of the names now and technically I think it comes down to skill level. There's a love for what they do. so, they love football, they love the competition, so they're naturally very competitive. Um, and they may Sometimes, you know what, they may sometimes practice away from the Academy and it might not be what, I know It's quite a bit of a buzzword in a in the coaching circles of that purposeful practice, They might just do it for the sake of enjoyment. Whether they go down the park and just play games. There's still benefit from doing that because you get the competitive element you get the... even if it's just what we might class as silly little games such as Crossbar Challenge, there still technical demand and still, uh, there's still competition in that that there's a tangible way of winning. If I hit the crossbar in that game. So, they're finding ways of challenge themselves and bettering themselves, but then never too far away from the ball. I think some boys like the idea of being Academy football or potential footballer and they will do the bare minimum in the sense of turn up to every training session, but perhaps not doing the extras away and accumulating the hours.

**I: Still within the top group, are their areas or abilities that each top player is lacking in, but doesn't appear to affect their performance?**

P: So difficult to say whether still be a great player, I think. 'cause I'm looking at all across the boys. I've put this high performance and I'm I've sort of like as I'm reading their name. I'm subtracting their super skill. If that makes sense. I'm trying to visualize if that game will be impeded because of it, so I've got one boy here, I love his tenacity and his energy. You take that away from him. He's still technically a good player, but I think what makes him great is because he's got those techniques and that tenacity and energy. that tenacity and energy just enhances the techniques that he already has. it definitely enhances performance, so probably air on the side of probably say no if you take it away, you don't. You lose that. Yeah, they'd be good players, but not great.

**I: What is it that the players of the lower group are lacking, that resulted in being in this group?**

P: I think they're gonna have a level of relative competence to be where they are, um. I'm looking at again. So, for example, there's certain positions in our team now where They're quite saturated in terms of the number of players. so, there level of ability just might not be as good of what is what's around them, and it's a bit of a double whammy for them because, They're not gonna have the time to develop that because we have so many of their positional type in the team, so it just makes natural sort of natural deselection for them to be told that their pathway is elsewhere, however. But there are also instances as I look down the list where it might be Poor techniques, so maybe physically they were good, but now it's is caught up with them and technically they can't compensate for that. equally they might technically be good, but physically they struggle now so. And one sort of affects the other because. If during a game, you start to tire and fatigue sets in it. It affects technique and it affects decision-making so. Sometimes they can look like they they've got worse technically, but maybe actually, they're just physically spent and tired and you can't give anymore, and so decision-making is affected.

**I: Is there a consistent theme amongst the lower group in regard to player ability, that underpins why they are in the lower group?**

P: Um? Again, probably say its consistency of performance, so I'm looking at the boys who are middle to higher. And as I looked through their names, I can visualize them all playing a game. If there was a game tomorrow, they could all play that game and I would know what I was getting from them. There's that sense of reliability. the boys who were in that lower category. In some sense is I don't know what I'm getting from them. In some I do know what I'm getting from them and I don't like what I feel I'm gonna get from them. So yeah, it generally there just unreliable in that sense. As harsh as it sounds.

**I: Again, by individual player, are there any areas that the player is good, maybe exceptional at, that doesn't affect their performance and therefore doesn't aid them in progressing to middle or higher groups?**

P: Maybe some of the, maybe some of the psychological aspects of they might keep going and still be resilient and keep working. So, if a mistake happens, they might be so conditioned actually to understand they're going to make a lot of mistakes in games, and they compensate that by working hard. Now, that allows them to be competitive, but it doesn't allow them to necessarily cope or Excel. So, yeah, I think that's probably the standout quality that they might still have levels of determination, but it doesn't help them produce real competent high-level performances. probably easiest one would be says its general level of technique, so being able to receive, pass the ball with speed and with quality because as the game gets bigger, more players on each team at 11 aside and a bigger pitch. Team will realize that they can't press an engage and win the ball off everybody, So what they may do is set certain traps where you might be able to figure out within the first few minutes which players look comfortable and controlled on the ball, and you say, well, the ones that look comfortable controller will let them have it, but as the ball gets played to those we isolate and it's like yeah, classic survival of the fittest. If it's you look at the ones where you can pounce on and punish, and they go and do it and they hunt in numbers, and sometimes that's the case. So is often they might be the ones where their targeted for that and if they're targeting can't cope with the press, then they always get found out. And that's I think



that's the difficulty for those boys. Is that having that consistency of quality to receive most balls. it's tough because they get into a bit of a fluster then because they realized that they're being targeted. And it's very difficult, but that's a great strategy for a team to try and win A game is isolate the so-called weaker players and punish them.

**I: How have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the top or the bottom groups?**

P: Yeah, I think so. Again, looking at a few of these names I've got. I think a lot of it comes down to the level of skill and level of techniques so. You might get players who are comfortable on the ball and they look easy on the eye when they receive it and can dribble, but they can't quite convert those technical qualities into game affective qualities where they're making those right decisions at the right time. So I think I've sort of answered that question in a different angle where I think that decision-making and effective use of skill is probably what separates... the ones we've got good technical ability and Produce those techniques, Any technique you ask them to do, They can produce on demand in an isolated practice. but they put it in the context of a competitive game, the ones that can then use the right skill at the right time to get game effective results. There probably what stand out as being a high performer one.

**I: Do these players possess the same abilities as the lower group, and are just better at them, but not as good as the top group?**

P: In in a very short answer, probably just say yes, they're not lacking, but still reliable to the sense they can receive and retain the ball and not give it away. and maybe still find a way to create something. But yeah, they they're not likely to give the ball away under little to no pressure.

**I: What does each individual player lack that prevents them from being in the top group?**

P: Let me just look at some of those names, 'cause I think generally again. Yes, so I'm looking at a couple of them, I think. For a couple straight away there in that Middle Group, I'd say technically very good. I think part of it is um. However, you want to term it with its heart or desire or drive. That seems to be lacking, so it's having that real competitive streak. That winning mentality I think has been thrown around in the coaching circles. But whatever you want to call it, it's that. An and then as others perhaps where it's maybe a couple of boys here who come in fairly new to the squad and it's now having that self-belief that they, you know, I think in the psychological circles they call it impostor syndrome, where they actually they're there by merit and now it's time to back their own abilities. so they've dealt with the pressure of coming in on trial in trying to take someone shirt and now they're in there, now they've gotta hold onto their own shirt and it's being able to still Not avoid situations in games because they're fearful of making mistakes, but still approach those situations in order to showcase what they're capable of. and then for one or two others, it's perhaps just now technically good they've got the drive, every everything that you could possibly want to give them as a coach if they've got. And now it's just waiting for them to grow and develop, so that when their technique marries with physical prowess, they hopefully got a real good performer on your hands.

#### **8.10.9 Participant 9**

**I: The basic stuff to begin with. What's your current job title?**

P: Senior lead youth phase coach or senior youth phase coach, lead.

**I: And what's the academy category status that you're at?**

P: Cat 1.

**I: Okay, and what league does your first team play in?**

P: Premier league.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: 15 years.

**I: And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Are you just talking about coaching, by the way?

**I: Feel free to share anything outside of that, if you've been involved in other areas.**

P: Yes. Professionally, playing was five years. Coaching, 15 years and the current role is 6 years, a slightly different role for a couple of years before that.

**I: Okay, and which age group are you going to be discussing later on today?**

P: Under 16s.

**I: Brilliant. That's the basic stuff out of the way. More interesting stuff now. Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yes, no problem. Born in [place]. I suppose, always just had an interest in football, playing football from a really young age. Joined a local football club at about five, to be honest, and played up a few years. To be honest, I had a good background, really, familywise. I was the eldest of four boys, always had people to play with and go out. All of us really had an interest in football, which probably made it a lot easier.

Then, skipping on a bit. School-wise, was probably very capable, academically but like most lads, I suppose, just had a real interest in sport rather than sitting in front of a blackboard, as it would have been back in my day. So, just didn't give it everything, really but still came away, reasonably happy GCSE-wise and everything. Then, probably, my biggest knock back at the start was I was involved with England, [club]. Never really broke into the England setup. Just always trialled and got to the final stages. To be honest, wasn't really good enough for that level. The likes of [name] and players like that were playing in my position. They were a fair bit better. I knew my place, quite quickly.

Then, yes, [club], I was July-born and really late physical maturer. Didn't really grow into a man until 19, 20, 21, really. I think that was one of the reasons I got released at [club]. That was lack of physicality but in reality as well, I think it was probably a valid decision. Tactically, I wasn't great. So, got released at 16. Signed a scholarship as it was called then, at [club]. Did four years at [club], two years as a professional, two years as a scholar. Then, went to [club] after that, after I got released. Then, did a year there. Both [club] and [club], broke into the first team and I had some games without ever being really, a consistent first team player.

Then, joined the slippery slope, I suppose, down into the non-league football and to be honest, I would say it was a failed career, really, playing rather than a career. Yes, that's fair. I look at it. I never really broke in. It was a career full of rejection, which probably toughened me up a little bit. Wasn't particularly enjoyable at that time. Then, I went over to working out what I wanted to do, probably my big venture into coaching. I'd always took the coaching badges seriously, which not many players do, really, whilst they're playing. The other lads used to just twat around, to be honest, whereas I would really give it everything and really wanted to learn.

There must have been something there I had an interest. Probably come from my dad, who was a coach at [club] as well. He did it casually, alongside a job but certainly, piqued my interest. Then, when I left [club], I got an opportunity to do a football scholarship at [location] University, which meant I could combine all the things I wanted to do, continue playing full-time, learn more about coaching. Then, it was at that point, not too long after, I got an opportunity to coach at [club] alongside that.

As a typical student, my days tended to be 7 a.m. and ran right through until 12 o'clock at night but I think, to be honest, that was probably one of the best educations I could have

had because I just learnt to really graft and work hard and do things I enjoyed and knew that I wanted to go that path. When I got to the end of that period, finished uni and started to get a bit more money to play for other clubs, so I left. I started teaching in a school. I was down as a cover supervisor. I literally taught everything, subjects that I knew nothing about. French and GCSE science, which was comical because I got a D in science.

Yes, just a real lesson in teaching and I started to probably, understand coaching in a little more depth in that period. Rather than just subject knowledge, how to really engage people. I realised I hated being in a school, if I'm honest, quite quickly. So, spent most of the days just searching for jobs to get back into football. Then, pure luck, call it that if you want and hard work but I was just about to take a role at [club], full-time. They'd offered me something and then, I got offered double the wages at [club] on the day that I was going to say yes. I'd not been for an interview at that point. It was just a bit of a, do you want to come along for an interview? We've heard you're looking for jobs. So, I went along for the interview.

I got something at [club] and that was nine years ago now. I'd always coached across the phases at [club] but mainly, 12s up. Went to [club] and my job was lead [location] coach. That's their satellite centre and I was, I suppose, second in command there to [name], who's now the academy director at [club]. Me and him moved together, in a way but I look back at that one, education into coaching. Just working for what I believe is one of the best academies in the world, all those brilliant people around you but then, also just my typical day, I would coach 18s in the morning. It was the [project name] project. Then, I'd coach eight-year-olds, two hours later, which I was not very good at, if I'm honest. Then, I'd coach 12-year-olds, four hours later and then, I'd coach 16-year-olds or 15-year-olds in the evening.

Just that throughout the day. Just the skillset that you had or that I didn't have, to be honest. I had to learn, was just amazing. Then, finally got a role came up at [club]. Thought I had no chance of getting it, if I'm honest. At the time, being quite young and it was a senior role but thought, what the hell? Have a go. If anything, the interview is an experience. Again, got it. Then, I've been in that position really, for six, seven years now.

**I: That's an incredible journey. I like the idea that you were doing stuff which you had no idea about, which if I'm honest, it shows a lot about your personality and approach towards stuff. That's brilliant.**

P: If I'm dead honest, if I look back, my personality profile is quite outgoing. We use a DISC profile but mine would be high i, which means you're very outgoing, positive and I suppose, the downside of that personality is you fear social failure and rejection. Actually, I probably wasn't like that for a long time. I'd almost convinced myself not to do things that you could publicly fail at. Then, when I got to [club] and we started doing... Before that, you'd read a bit, not fully understood it but I knew that was part of my personality.

Then, at [club], met a guy called [name], who's the lead psychologist at the club and he was a gamechanger for me because he just sat down, spoke about my personality and he just seemed to know me better than I knew myself. Part of it was he said that and from that point on, any time that I get an instinct that I don't want to do something because I'm fearing failing at it, I just say yes and then, worry about it later. I've lived by that mantra for a long time now. Any big presentations for the Premier League or anything, say yes. Don't even look at the content and then, worry about it later. Normally, it goes all right.

**I: That's brilliant, from a growth mindset. That's exactly what you want. That's impressive to hear. The next question is actually how would you describe your current role?**

P: I look after the programme leading into the scholarship year, 15, 16s. I used to look after the phase 12s to 16s. It was too big. Such differences in those ages that you could never do it justice, really, to oversee all of those players. I mean, we've brought it down now, to 15s and 16s. Really, when they come in, that's the period where we decide whether they're going to have a career in football with us, I suppose. I look after that sort of phase and that means I oversee the implementation of sports science, of coaching, of performance analysis. I look after that and then, the bit that I enjoy most about the role is coaching under 16s. I think a lot of clubs have gone down the route of sometimes, having a lead that oversees it. I've always fought against it. I love coaching so much that I don't want to get off the pitch. It's not something that I think I'll ever do.

**I: When you're doing your coaching, do you have a personal belief or a philosophy towards player development?**

P: Yes, I do. I'm fortunate that it aligns with the club and I think if it doesn't align with the club, then you're better off looking for a new club, really. Yes, mine pretty much aligns. I believe that each player is different. They're all human beings and they're different human beings. My belief is everyone should have a slightly different programme. We don't do big, generic programmes. Everyone has a slightly different programme. A belief of mine is that

coaching, like anything in the world, is an ecosystem. Everything impacts everything else. An example would be the four corner model that the FA use, which is fine but it's trying to understand that the technical aspect of football is impacted by the tactical aspect, the social aspect, the psych aspect, what's going on in their life, what's going on in school. Are they getting bullied? Coaching is holistic and again, I come back to remembering that you're dealing with human beings, not robots.

Then, I believe that probably, there's experts, to an extent, for different ages. You can't take a first team manager and expect him to be outstanding with a group of 11-year-olds. You don't need to stay with that age but whilst I'm working with 16-year-olds, I need to be an expert at understanding 16-year-olds. Then, if I do really well at that, you might decide you want to do eight-year-olds or something else but whilst you're in that role, you can't have your eyes on the first team job all the time. You need to be the best at it, you need to be an expert at working with that age. Probably, those are the three things. I'm stealing those, as such, from the club but when I joined the club, I knew that we were pretty aligned, really. I've never had that battle with my own philosophy and the club's.

**I: Yes. That's almost a belief I share with you in some ways. Especially the last part about being an expert of an age. That's good to hear. Do you hold expectations on player capabilities? To make it specific to your role, when they're approaching the scholarship, do you hold any expectations of things that they should be able to do?**

**P:** Yes, is the easy answer. We would have a player characteristics, which is a five pillar model, which looks at ball mastery, enthusiasm, curiosity, game impact, things like that. We have five of these that we look at and then, we would subjectively, to an extent... Also, with data to back it up, measure them against these. The only thing I would say is of course, you have to be at a particular level but it's so different for two 16-year-olds. One in the middle of a growth spurt, one fully developed. One that's already attained a scholarship so is quite relaxed and confident, another that's under pressure and trying to get one. You have to be really careful, having a player matrix that's set, on they should be able to do this.

We've got players in our first team now that come through the academy and were far from perfect at 16, a million miles away. Yet, you could see something in their attitude or something that made you want to give them the next opportunity of a scholarship and then, other things caught up. Their strengths were really pushed on. Yes, of course you've got to be a certain level to play category one under-16s football. You're going to have to be pretty

good, technically. You're going to have to have a reasonable understanding of the game. Your attitude is going to have to be good. Physically, you're going to have to be a certain level but yes, I would just be really careful, trying to nail down, this is what they should look like at that age because it's just so unrealistic.

**I: Yes, I completely agree. The next part. This is going to go more towards strategies that might be employed within the club, but it still leans on your personal beliefs as well. So, don't feel that you're constrained to only what the club permits. With regards to development plans or player selection processes and just to clarify, when I say selection processes throughout, I'll mean release or retention at the end of a season as opposed to game selection or trial lists. Who would be included in that decision making?**

**P:** A lot of people. Ultimately, the decision comes down to the academy management team, which I'm not a part of. So, I wouldn't make a decision. My job, with all those other people, is to give them information and give our opinion and then, they make a decision. In those meetings, let's take a 16s audit meeting, to decide a scholarship. Right at the top, you'll have the technical director on the board level, academy director, academy manager, assistant academy manager, player loans would be in there as well, having an understanding of what else is out there and how the lads are doing. You have a representative from recruitment so they can answer questions on are there better players out there than what we've got? You have an S&C coach that largely talks around the physical potential. You have the analyst in there.

I don't think every club does it like this, by the way. We're probably quite unique in this sense but we have Opta stats in there to back up or challenge what the coach is saying. Psychologist is in there, if they've got an opinion on the player's attitude or wellbeing or anything. Player care attend as well. They might have information on what's going on in the lad's life outside of football, that might be impacting on our view on their potential. Education, at times, will sit in there. Not for all of them but there'll be information from education, just so we can link what we're seeing to what the school is seeing. It might have an impact. Obviously, the coach of the age group. Have I mentioned them all? Yes. I think that's it.

**I: That's quite an impressive collection. Obviously, you would expect a certain quantity because most clubs will have blah, blah, blah but I didn't quite expect so many. That's impressive.**

P: Yes. We probably pride ourselves on the audits and stuff like that, but our view is that the more... You don't just want noise but the more information we can gather, the better chance we've got, of assessing potential. Also, knowing that we don't get it... Assessing potential is almost impossible but the more information you can get, you're in a better place. For example, some people's jobs in there, I'm the lead coach and I'm going to talk about all the lads. Some people's jobs in there is to challenge what I'm saying and see if I've got an answer for it.

You have people sat in there, just playing devil's advocate. Well, you say that he assists a lot of goals but data wise, he's assisted only the third most of any player we've brought through. That isn't particularly high. [Inaudible 00:20:29]. Why do you think that is? Might be think he's going through a growth spurt. That could have an impact, blah, blah, blah but you have to have an answer and then, the academy management team are in the background, really, making notes, asking questions. Then, they're just trying to collate. That's the hardest job. They have to collate all the info and then, make a decision.

**I: Yes, that makes a lot of sense. When you actually go through those processes, how do you determine who gets selected and who doesn't get selected?**

P: Again, nothing is perfect but at the end of... Say we've all chatted about that player, we have a matrix at the end. We use letters to assess their potential and numbers to assess their performance. Their performance and their potential will be different. The performance one is easy because we've got grades. This player has had a bit of a dip this season and he's a two. Then, we'll get asked where do we think his potential is? There'll be statements that match. Say A is the highest that we have and at 16, A might be that you think he's going to be on the first team or that he's outstanding in four out of the five pillars that we've got. There'll be a number of statements alongside each letter and then, you have to try and argue for which one he'll be in and we'll debate it.

All that does really, is spark a debate and it gives us a number. Then, we have a debate as to whether we think they merit the next two year contract. That will be then, the conversation. Do we think this lad should get a scholarship? Yes or no. You go around the room and then, people make a decision on him. To be honest, that's the club's way. My personal view is that sometimes, that can complicate it a little bit. I think it's good. It allows us to go back and check what we thought of the player. Actually, the most important



conversation you have in there is the one at the end where you look around and say, does this lad deserve a scholarship? Almost, you could simplify it to that.

**I: Yes, I get that. Is that a similar process to when you're making development plans for players within the season?**

P: Yes, good question, actually. Yes, very similar. Wouldn't be quite as in-depth with that but it wouldn't be too far off it. Every 6 weeks, all the 16 staff meet. That's coach, S&C, physio, who's also in those audits, by the way. Physio, psych, the analyst. We all meet every six weeks for a formal meeting, where we go through every single player and look at their individual development plan and work out whether it needs to change. Then, we meet with the player after that and with their input, decide what the IDP looks like. Yes, very similar.

**I: Yes, and I know you mentioned the four corner model earlier. Do you have any opinions about the four corner model?**

P: Yes. The stuff they've got in there makes sense and can be used. I'd imagine it's evolved now, into more of an interdisciplinary model. I think the challenge with the four corner model is that it almost suggests things sit in isolation. You've got technical, tactical, physical, psych, social, when they all impact each other. It's very difficult to be good at one thing without having good aspects of the other. A perfect example is a lad going through a growth spurt. His psychical is impacted, his touch is impacted. Going through a growth spurt means he's more tired because his energy systems are going to growing and not the brain. He lacks focus. Because he's now not playing as well, socially, he's gone down on the hierarchy so he's actually getting more stick off his mates. It's one thing impacts all of them. That is my only drawback of it. To be fair, when you chat to people at the FA, they're fully aware of that. It's an older model.

**I: Yes. I know, when you're saying about the considerations you have, a lot of people would fit in that four corner model. Do you collect objective data within all those areas?**

P: Yes. Bit difficult to objectify everything but what we have now is Opta stats for the older lads, so we can tell you pass completion, pass forward, successful dribbles, assists, goals, areas of the pitch that they've played in, regains, one v ones, interceptions. We have all of that and we measure them against each position. Each position will have a specific ten areas, let's say, that we're looking to measure. The data isn't everything. You've also got to use your eye and be able to give that data context. All it does is it challenges us but that's

from a technical, tactical aspect. Physical testing data, we have for all the players. On top of that, we also have years' worth of data. We have physical testing data that we measure chronologically and then, biologically.

**I: Like benchmarks.**

P: Yes, benchmarks. The players might look like, in this age group, that they're flying but actually, when you compare them to their biological age, Khamis-Roche method, we use but the percentage, actually they're not that physical. They're just an early maturer that, at some point, will get caught up physically. We don't really use DISC profiles, psych profiles as much for the younger lads but we do, the older ones so we have a better idea of their personality. Yes, we do. Part of it's subjective and then, there's part that's objective.

**I: Linked to that, then, how well do you feel that those objective assessments replicate what you see on match performance?**

P: Normally, pretty accurate. Not always. I suppose not always, but they're usually pretty accurate. It's different in coaching young lads because we're probably looking often, at intention rather than outcome.

**I: Yes, that's a good way to put it.**

P: The little late maturer might be consistently, trying to run behind and actually, he's going to be physical enough when he's older, to run behind but he isn't getting much success. Or sometimes, the other way around. They haven't worked out the problem but sometimes, things can be bigger than just the numbers. Might be something else going on. He's slowed down with his growth. Others in his age group around the country or most clubs are really physical. Early maturers, I'd say, in general and he plays in a particular position that's up against early maturers all the time. Well, his data is going to probably tell us that he isn't playing particularly well but actually, potential-wise, you can see something more in him, than the numbers are suggesting. Normally, they're pretty accurate but you just need to have a conversation after it, to ensure that you're adding context.

**I: Just out of curiosity. With the stuff you collect, physically, I imagine that's probably your sprints and your jumps, etcetera. Do you find that your fastest player is also, who you'd think is the fastest on the pitch?**

P: No. It's a mixed bag, really. Often, you can. There's a lot of tests. Jumps, agility. Yes, often, you can but then, there's a lot of times I can think of, where it doesn't.

I: **Why do you think that might be?**

P: Just so many football reasons. Tactically, they're not reading the game ahead, so they're always reacting too late. They struggle when they're under pressure and being pushed. It's easy, doing a test but when you've got a massive full-back trying to knock you off the ball, it's different. A mixed bag. Sometimes, like I said, every interdisciplinarian, everything impacting everything. Sometimes, it could be to do with attitude. A lad will test brilliantly but just doesn't want to run, doesn't want to push himself to those limits, scared to. A number of reasons. I'd say often, it can but then, I know plenty of players that we've had come through and you're seeing this testing data and why is that not going onto the pitch?

I: **Yes. Just to touch on that. Might a part of what you were just saying be almost, the success is easier to gather from an uncontested sprint versus the context of a game, where success might be more challenging?**

P: Yes, I think so. There's just such an impact. You're going back to your coaching philosophy a little bit but if I gave you a more complicated version. If I really simplified my coaching philosophy, it would be that if every kid leaves at the end of the season more resourceful and with a fire in their belly to keep playing football, then I've done my job, just with those two things. If they're more resourceful and they love football, you've done your job. They'll be fine when they go on. But in this same sense, if you're not doing that, then sometimes, they might be able to turn out and do a run in a dome but actually, you go into a game and they're not enjoying it, the mental aspect affects the physical aspect so much that you look slower and you don't look like you do when you're relaxed, and you haven't got everyone around. I think that one's huge.

I'm going off topic slightly here but my view, often in coaching, is people spend too much time trying to work out who's going to be good enough and who's not instead of just remembering their job. It doesn't really matter. My job at the start of the season is I get 15 players or whatever the number is, and I have to make all 15 better. That's my job. Now, every single one of them needs a slightly different programme to make them better and needs a different way that you interact with them. At the end of the season, if you've got them to that place and you've done everything you can to make them better, what will be

will be. Too many people spend all their time going, he's not good enough, he's good enough, he's not. Their opinion changes every week. It's just a waste of energy and focus.

Just focus on making the lads better. The second you don't believe in them, all of the stuff we're talking about now around data, is out the window. The second they're looking at the side and they see their coach with their hands in their air and conversations where he doesn't really give you much time or look you in the eye. Your player's gone. He's got an adult that he respects or maybe doesn't, in front of him, not believing in him. Physical stuff has gone, technically, he looks worse. Coaches just need to get on with making the players better. Leave someone else to try and predict the future.

**I: So, coaches could impact the future potential of players by their subjective opinion of them being poor when actually, they're good?**

P: Yes, 100 percent. Coaching, for me, is about building belief. I'm not the greatest at reading loads of research on stuff. I tend to listen to TED Talks more often. Probably why I didn't do as well at uni, but I just struggle with it but if you just look at the way the brain is formed. Often in life, you go through periods where people tell you that you can't do something. Then, almost that pathway in the brain shuts down. It takes time to form that again. If you think of really good coaches, they're not telling you what you can't achieve. They're building belief and making things seem possible.

Ultimately, what might come of that is that you don't actually play in the Premier League. Because of that interaction, you might play in the Championship or League One or you might have a career in football or get paid in non-league. What coaches, I think, often do is they assess a player. They're at the side of the game. I hear it all the time. He's not [inaudible 00:33:53]. That goes over to their body language and the way that they think about this player. Then, that energy or the way they look, goes across to the player. The player has less belief in himself. He believes he can achieve less and it's no coincidence, he often does.

**I: Yes. Just out of curiosity because I know you said you worked at [club]. I don't want to put words in your mouth here. Is that more about the level of academy or is that just it varies at every club? As in the understanding from coaches and shrugging off players early.**

P: Two bits there. You get top coaches everywhere. [Club] especially, I worked with some unbelievable coaches. We had a real crop of top coaches that went on to do other things,

there. That was largely down to a guy called [name], the academy manager, who was really clever. I think what happens at lower league clubs, sometimes, simply they might not have the resources that we have. I will be sat in on a CPD at least once a week, learning about these things. I didn't know some of these things when I worked at [club]. I was just fortunate that I loved coaching and didn't want to write anyone off, built within me. If you haven't got that resource and you're not resourceful, so you don't go out and try and learn about it, you just keep doing the same thing every year. Our academy manager has got a great saying. I love nicking this one. He'll often speak to people who say they've got 30 years' experience. If they've done the same thing for 30 years, they've got one year experience. I thought it was a great saying. I think that can happen.

Also, sometimes, at lower league clubs, I think they're hampered by their constraints. We can afford to give a lad a four year contract as a pro and get it wrong. In that four years the lad does, he's not ready for the first team. We can afford that opportunity for the player. If you're at [club], when you get to about 18, if you're not getting close to being ready for the first team, they can't afford to keep you on the books. They don't want to impact the first team. You tell me many players that are ready at 18. There's hardly any. There's hardly any out there that are ready at 18. You're almost writing off a huge percentage.

What I would say, is there are lower league clubs out there that are doing some unbelievable work with the resources they've got. When I was at [club], we would still have CPDs quite regularly and we just had this boot room culture where everyone just loved coaching and we'd just chat about it. The other thing that we had that was good, we had a load of students. [Name] went to [location] university and pulled over what he thought was the best on the course and playing for team [location] and got them across. You had people that were getting their CPD at uni, whilst also coaching at an academy. We coached for peanuts and we were happy because it was just some money but yet, we were getting CPD, away from the club. I do think a lot of clubs missed that trick.

**I: Yes. That question wasn't a comment against [club] because I'm actually from [location], so it's got a place in my heart.**

**P:** I lived in [location] for years. They do some great stuff. Lower league clubs do. You get the other end of the spectrum, though. You get clubs with loads of money that do some rubbish stuff at times as well.

**I: Yes, of course you do.**

- P: But clearly, like any business, isn't it? The finance and the resource you've got is going to have an impact on the work that you do.
- I: **A couple of scenario-based questions for you now. If you consider development phases, foundation, youth, PDP. If you had somebody who's excelling in the foundation phase, how does that inform you of their potential?**
- P: Well, it depends how far you go, ahead. I don't think you can assess potential too far ahead. You're just guessing. I think if someone's flying at the foundation phase, it does give you some information that they've got traits well worth working with in the future. What I wouldn't say happens too often, by the time they get to 16, I don't think we're going back to 9 years old to remember what they did then. You can only go back so far because by that period, they've changed. What you might be able to do is go back and say, at 12, this kid was scoring loads of goals. What's happened in the last two, three years that's made that stop? Then, try to work out so you can apply it to his IDP, his individual development plan but is it confidence? Is it the coaches he's worked with? Is it interest in football? Is it growth spurts? You can go back a certain distance. We were seeing all this then. Why have we stopped seeing it? Rather than just write a player off.
- I: **Similar question, then. If you've got someone that comes to you in the youth phase but they've not previously done anything in the foundation or within academies, how does that inform you of their potential?**
- P: Players that are bought in or that have just joined late?
- I: **They've joined late. They haven't done any academy prior to coming in.**
- P: Well, one started the first team yesterday, [name]. Yes, he came in at 14, had no previous grasp. Mainly, his experiences were grassroots. I think a couple of things. One, you're just trying to assess them with less go-on. I think you have to be careful, making quick decisions on those lads because you don't know enough. Him, in particular, you were trying to look a little bit closer for things around his attitude. He had an incredible attitude. Work ethic. He seemed to learn in any environment, almost. A real flexible learner and he was able to apply it very quickly. You're trying to still, use the same methods you'd use with lads that had been in the system for a long time but accept that actually, there might be more potential in there because you don't know enough about them. I think school. We use schools a lot. That's really important. You can go to a school and get a real idea of the lad's character and

his background. Yes, definitely. I think recruitment do a good job with that as well. When players come in, we tend to get a dossier giving us an idea of what they like, what they don't like, family situation. Then, we have a bit more info but yes, probably is [inaudible 00:41:26] potential.

**I: The last question of this section. I know you've mentioned maturation a few times now. How does maturation impact your decisions towards either development plans or selections?**

P: Yes, it does, a lot. In terms of decision-making, it's a big consideration. Really, you're just trying to assess their physical potential. As I said, you do testing and try and get an idea of what they're going to be like physically, when they finish growing and with all the work that we'll put into them. Understanding that when they're going through different periods of growth, it's going to impact everything else. Performance, the amount of minutes they're able to play injuries, their sitting with the team, coach's view of them, their feeling of self-worth. Yes, it impacts a lot of things.

Then, in their IDPs, you want IDPs to be challenging but in reality, if a lad's going through a huge growth spurt at that time, it's challenging enough for him. You don't need to be adding loads more things in and he really just needs large levels of support. The time to really ramp things up in the programme and give them a heavy challenge, I don't believe is right in the middle of a growth spurt, for example. Things are challenging enough.

I think probably, one thing I've learnt in my time. We often talk about late and early maturers. Actually, that has less of an impact than the growth spurt. What you really see is, when a lad is going through peak growth, that's when everything is really impacted because when you've got a late maturer that's quite steady in terms of his growth, he actually probably does better. Well, he does. He does better than when he's going through this growth spurt because he's just more coordinated. He feels better. You're probably more accepting of him but when you start to see him growing up and going through these spurts, you can't actually see them going on. So, you're just wondering why he's all over the shop.

Yes, you do need to consider it. Certainly, with your IDPs but then also, how many games they can play. You're going through a growth spurt, you're at greater risk of injury, so you can't be playing all the minutes. You need to be aware of that but if you've got a late maturer, they need opportunity and often, the late maturers will play less minutes than the

early maturers and potentially, confirm your bias. So, you need to consider it with selection for games and also, for your decision-making as to whether they get the next contract.

**I: Just out of curiosity. Is that understanding through the CPDs you've mentioned or is that just through your own development?**

P: A combination, really, of them all. It's something I was interested in anyway, just because it's the phase I enjoy working in and it probably has the biggest impact on kids in that phase. Certainly, 13s upwards to 16s, 17s maybe. Biggest impact. CPD as well but then, just seeking out conversations. We've got a guy called [name], sports science. He's a strength and conditioning coach. His understanding of growth and maturation is outstanding and picking his brains, listening to him is probably the biggest part, to be honest.

**I: Yes, okay. Moving onto the last section now. This is when you'll need your team sheet. Looking at your team sheet, if you can put a letter H next to any of the players that you would consider to be your high performers within the age group.**

P: Performers, not potential, yes?

**I: That's a great question. No, we'll do it on current. If you say yes, performance.**

P: Performance, okay. This is a top group, so there'll be a lot of them.

**I: That's fine.**

P: There is a lot in here. It's difficult. Yes.

**I: Then, same thing but now, you're going to put L next to anyone that you might consider to be a lower performer of the group.**

P: Yes.

**I: Then, obviously, the outstanding ones would be an M. They're mid-performers of the group. Would that align to what you believe?**

P: Yes.

**I: Obviously, with a knowledge of who's who now, would you make any additional changes?**

P: No.



- I:** No, okay. I might come back to [inaudible 00:46:46]. You can either go position wise, as in defence, striker, midfield or you can go exact positions. Can you just go through them so I can write them down and then, I might refer to them in later questions?
- P:** Yes. Funny enough, they wouldn't align to where I see their potential.
- I:** You know what? In this instance, it might be interesting to go after that as well. If we get those numbers, we might be able to redo it as well.
- P:** Okay. Highest performers. Left back.
- I:** Oh, have you got them numbered?
- P:** Three.
- I:** Yes, three as a high, yes.
- P:** Four, five.
- I:** What were the positions of those, sorry?
- P:** Three is a left back, four is defending midfielder. Five and six are centre backs.
- I:** Yes.
- P:** Seven, right winger. Nine, centre forward. Ten, attacking midfielder. That's it.
- I:** Then, your lowers and your mids?
- P:** Mids are right back.
- I:** What number was that, sorry?
- P:** Two.
- I:** Two, yes. Right back, mid.
- P:** Eight, centre mid. 11, left-wing. 12, I've got down here, right back. 15, centre mid.
- I:** Then, your lowers?
- P:** One, goalkeeper. 14, centre back. 16, defensive midfielder. 17, centre forward.

**I: Yes. Just out of curiosity, then, how would you have graded them if you were going to do it by potential?**

P: Do you want me just to go through the numbers?

**I: Yes. Just go one to 17.**

P: Okay. I'm going to use it A as top, D as bottom.

**I: Fine, yes.**

P: One would be C, two would be C, three would be A, four would be B, five would be B. Six would be A, seven B, nine would be B.

**I: What about eight?**

P: Oh, sorry. Eight would be A, nine would be B. 10 would be A, 11 would be A, 12 would be C, 14 would be C, 15 would be A. 16 would be C, 17 would be C.

**I: Okay, interesting. There are some slight tweaks but they're kind of similar areas.**

P: Yes, there would be some mediums that would be higher than some highs. You're not going to get massive changes because performance [inaudible 00:50:30] potential but to be honest, I would never normally give out that many As but it's just it's a really strong group.

**I: Yes. Now, we've got the groupings. How have you determined who's in what group?**

P: Performance grade, really. I've got a good idea of their performance grade. Highs are the ones that have consistently just played better and to be honest, [inaudible 00:51:19] always impact their potential to play. [Inaudible 00:51:24]. Those are players that you really miss the performance aspect, when not playing.

**I: When you say about the game impact of them, is that they understand the game better, they read the game better and they make the better decisions?**

P: That's a part but we've got in there, some mediums, that have far better decision-making skills. I would say, if you were being brutally honest, they're either top players or they're early maturers. They're the most physical at that moment, so they have a bigger impact on the game.

**I: Yes, makes sense. Your time working with those players, would they have always been in the same groups or might they change between groupings?**

P: Yes, they change. One is new. Two would have been lower for a lot of his academy career, rather than medium. Three has always been high. Four has been through all three groups.

**I: Oh brilliant, okay.**

P: Started as an L, moved into an M and has ended up high at the moment. Five has been through all three groups. Six, who's a pro contract, a lot of clubs after him, he would have been an L two years ago.

**I: Could we just pick him out, based on the fact he's got pro, so he's obviously an exceptional player? What would have been that made him go from a lower group there, to a top group?**

P: A couple of things. He played in lots of different positions, so he didn't nail down a position, which actually worked for him in the end. Playing in different positions built lots of different skillsets but it affected his performance. He's an August born and quite immature, so he just struggled with some coaches, didn't get on with them, would always be arguing back and just that impacted his performance, I think. As well, which helped him, he's got a lot of ability, but he's flew through his growth spurt.

Now, with all that ability, combined with the fact that he's really physical now, that's changed. We're seeing what he could end up being, now. His predicted height is at six two. He's quite a tall lad but he was always going through loads of growth spurts, which [inaudible 00:54:24]. Lots of different things. Eight would be in the high group for all of his academy career, bar the last two years. Basically, for him, just others have gone through their growth spurts and are really physical and he's still like a little boy. He's still got loads of potential, but they've just overtook him in terms of growth, which he's finding difficult at the moment.

**I: Hence your A grade for the potential.**

P: Yes. Ten has probably always been one of the top ones. 11 has been through all groups, recently as well. He was one that we really had to consider his growth and maturation in his IDP, confidence was affected, injuries. He had lots of things going on and they all impacted

his whole game, really. I look at most of them and they've certainly all been in another group, bar probably one of them.

**I: The way that they change, whether it's up or down, is that because if they've gone up, they've enhanced a certain attribute or a skill, where they've gone down, they might have not developed while the rest of the group has?**

P: Yes, definitely. It's so many reasons, I think. It would be difficult to say them all but it can be just that the coach prefers their style of play and liked the personality more. I think naturally, often you confirm your bias. If you've got a bias around a player, you keep giving them positive energy and they see the smiles and everything. They know that they're going to be selected. It just helps your performance. Whereas a lad can be doing really well. A great example of this one is say you've got a lad that's a fantastic dribbler. In the younger age groups, everyone loves a good dribbler. They make mistakes, [inaudible 00:56:42] doesn't matter. You get to the older ones and too many coaches take it out on them because now, they make a mistake, and they start shouting on the pitch and the lad loses the confidence or the ability to take risks and dribble. Often, it's because the coach has got more of an interest on the score line than the development. So, you see that skillset decline a little bit but yes, a number of reasons.

**I: With the scoring that you've given, if you were to take the team at the end of the season, would that scoring reflect who you're likely to select, as in the higher group but deselect as in the lower group?**

P: We've already done our selections because it's scholars, so I can tell you them. Do you want to know the select and deselect?

**I: I don't necessarily need to know who has been selected and deselected. Would anyone in the lowers have been selected?**

P: No.

**I: Anyone in the highers not been selected?**

P: No.

**I: Okay and so, it's just the medium group. In honesty, we know the medium group is going to be a group that you're not sure about, so they could go either way. So, that's not so much an issue.**

P: One medium wasn't selected. The rest were.

**I: Okay. What number was he?**

P: 12.

**I: 12, okay. One in the C. So, why was that?**

P: He was really close, really close. We just felt two bits, really or three bits. One, you can't take too many players in one position or they don't get the opportunity to play. Two, the other lad that he was up against really, we feel, has a better attitude. Then, what was the third one? Oh, third one was probably a little bit based on some of the data. The other lad outperformed him. Well, massively outperformed him in assists and quite a few other things.

**I: Yes, that's quite common theme that I hear a lot of, is not that they're a bad player. Just that someone else is in the same position and they're just better than them.**

P: Yes and to be honest, that was so close between them, it doesn't mean we've got it right.

**I: Yes, exactly. Okay. Now, just referring to the groups. Obviously, there's a lot of high performers but that's not a problem. Just referring to the higher group, is there anything that they consistently all have that the other groups don't have, that places them as a higher group?**

P: That's a great one, good question. No, no. I'm trying to find one. It's hard. I'm thinking even just thinking of aspects of football, they're not. They're different players. They haven't all got an amazing attitude. Yes.

**I: I know you said they're typically more consistent and the game impact is more prevalent. Would you say that is one of the defining factors from them to the medium and the lower?**

P: Yes but this is where it's hard because we're talking about performance in this, aren't we?

**I: Yes.**

P: Well, obviously there'll be a common theme in performance that you impact the game. That's why you get a performance grade. You don't get graded on being good, technically. You get graded on your impact on the game. That would be a common theme but that's, I suppose, obvious because it's a performance grade. A harder conversation would be if you looked at all of the players we've taken as scholars and looked at potential grade because then, there should be some common traits there but with this group, I can't find loads. I suppose the biggest common trait I could give you, is their attitude.

They've all got aspects of their character that's elite. They're not all amazing, physically. They're not all amazing technicians. Tactically, they're not amazing. I'd say most of them are pretty strong tactically, but one has still got work to do and his physical attributes took over but every single one of them has got an elite characteristic in their personality. Even the lad I'm thinking of, which actually is six, hasn't got what you'd call a great character, the pro. He's got really elite parts of his character, so he doesn't care. He could train with the first team tomorrow. He thinks he's better than them, he doesn't care. That, in itself, is an elite characteristic. He's really just so relaxed. That would be the one common theme.

**I: Is there anything that they have which is unique, which makes them outstanding and if there is, you don't have to give all of them, but would there be examples of how they differ?**

P: Yes. Ten, most people would consider as the top player, potential-wise in this group. His unique trait, I suppose is he's got an incredible aptitude to practise, more than anyone. Just unbelievable drive. A story about him. He's on the full-time training model. He goes to school and lives in host families, away from us. We had a phone call from the school to say that we needed to speak to him because he's setting his alarm at 5:30 every morning. Before school, he's breaking into their AstroTurf and he was practising for two hours before school started. He practised six until eight and then, he'd start school. He did that every morning and the school asked us to tell him to stop and we said, no. No. We want him to. But yes, that would be his. I'd say their unique characteristic is they've got belief. They believe they're good players, they're confident players.

**I: Are there some that, if they have an outstanding attribute, might that level something out if they're lacking in another area?**

P: Yes, definitely.

**I: And are they consistent or are they different? If somebody has a physical outstanding one, they might lack tactically, for example.**

P: No. It's a really good point. It's different, yes. Definitely, that's the case. If you're amazing tactically, it makes you look better, technically. If you're amazing physically, it makes you look better tactically. You're able to make up for things that you've not read. I tell you what I would say, though. I've been thinking about this for years, with assessing potential. We always say that you can be different levels on different ones, and nothing is more important. I actually don't believe that. It's a club. Doesn't matter if you're great, physically. Then, that's an outstanding attribute. There are two areas, I think, that you cannot play professional football at the top level if you haven't got.

I think it's enthusiasm, curiosity. So, attitude. Doesn't mean that you have the best character in the world, but it means you've got incredible drive and you're resilient. There's certain characteristics I think you need to have and the other one is I think you have to understand the game. That doesn't mean you have to be a great coach or anything like that, but you need to understand how to get the most from your body, onto the pitch. You need to recognise space and you need to have a really good awareness of the game. That will impact your decision-making, your game impact, types of runs you make. I think, without those two things, I've not seen anyone come through.

**I: Just to clarify. Would you say it was almost understanding your game? For example, if you're a small player but you're trying to play a six-foot player, it's not going to work for you.**

P: Yes, you're spot on. I've probably not worded it brilliantly but it's not understanding the game, it's understanding your game. You have to understand how you get the most out of yourself, onto the pitch. I say that. You need to understand your game and how it fits into the manager's ideas. For example, you can't just go, I'm going to play my own way, no matter what because the manager won't pick you. You need to be able to take those instructions and apply it to make it work for you.

**I: Would you say that's what makes the higher group stand out from the lower group? Maybe more so than the medium.**

P: Not all of them, no. Sorry, not all of them performance-wise but yes, potential-wise. Obviously, I've got eight here as an M, but I'd give him A. He has those things. He does the

best with what he's got. 15, the same. They give the best with what they've got but performance-wise, if you were a late maturer or you're going through a growth spurt, there's nothing you can do. You're not going to play at your best for a period, until it's over.

**I: Last question in the highers. Is there anything that they have, which they're really good or outstanding at but it doesn't impact their performance at all?**

P: Yes, all of them.

**I: What might be examples?**

P: 17 is an incredible athlete but his game understanding of how to use what he's got and apply it, is pretty low, which means all the physical attributes he's got, he can't always get them across on the pitch. 16 is an outstanding technical player but physically, he's low and then, probably his game understanding again, isn't high enough to counter it. 14 is probably excellent in a lot of areas but his ability to cope under pressure is pretty low. That's the thing that's pulled him down.

**I: Yes, and is there anything the lower group, consistently have that again, same question as from the higher but consistently puts them in the lower group?**

P: Yes. Lack of belief.

**I: Lack of belief.**

P: I'd say, in part, we've failed them as well, in part. We've not found a way to build that belief.

**I: Okay, yes. Is it that they lack complete abilities compared to the medium group and the higher group or is that they have those abilities, they're just not as well developed?**

P: No because some of them are higher than the other ones in some areas. This is just my opinion, really, rather than the club's but I would say they lack in those two things I've spoken about. They don't understand how to get their qualities across onto the pitch.

**I: Yes. The last set of questions now and it's just analysis considering the middle performers. How have you distinguished a line between the players that have been in the lower group and are being in the top group?**



P: Probably consistency, I'd say would be the main one. I'd say every single one of the players on that list has had a game where they've been excellent, just not consistently. The highs have been consistent, the middles have been a bit of a mixed bag and the lows have more consistently struggled.

I: **Yes. The medium group, similar question as I just asked a minute ago. Do they possess the same abilities as the lower, just better at them but not as good as the top?**

P: Not really because they've got some areas that are high, some areas that are low. I'd look at five, for example. Five is pretty good, physically. He's not great, technically. I wouldn't say he's great physically, either. He's all right. Tactically, he's decent. His impact on the game is massive. Largely just around he's an incredible leader and he does things really simply. He understands his game better than anyone else on there. He just knows that he's quite a simple player and he just gets the job done in all aspects. He hasn't got loads of really high attributes, whereas... This is based on performance, but number 12 is outstanding, physically, absolutely incredible and is pretty good at most of the pillars, really. Pretty good tactically, pretty good understanding. Just for whatever reason, this season, he's struggled to be consistent, he gets nervous in big games. He started missing more training sessions because he was nervous.

I: **It impacted it all.**

P: It's not one thing in particular. Right back to the start. It's just remembering that one thing can have an impact on everything.

I: **Yes, domino effect.**

P: Yes, and the highs have just managed to balance that better.

I: **There's five medium players. Within those five, you just gave a great example there. They might just need something that would put them into the higher group.**

P: Yes. Some of them will just end up in the higher group because they'll grow, physically. I can already see two that will overtake people, for definite. That's a huge thing because right now, you're looking at probably, all the highs, pretty much, are fully done physically. Where the Ms, pretty much aren't. They just need to be given time and patience and they'll grow, physically.

**I: With the Ls, how would maturation impact on the Ls?**

P: 17 is fully done, early maturer. 14 is an early maturer. 16 is in a growth spurt, which you worry about releasing anyone in a growth spurt. I suppose we may have to make the decision. I don't know if we've got it right but he's in a growth spurt. Whenever you release someone at that point, your alarm is going off in your head and to be honest, obviously no names will be used but one just isn't good enough. The age group didn't have a goalkeeper, so we had to take someone on that was probably, below the level but has potential. To be honest, he's done fine. He's doing the best he can.

#### **8.10.10 Participant 10**

**I: To start off, what's your current job title?**

P: So I'm full time within the community, and then I'm part time within the foundation phase.

**I: Yep.**

P: So with the foundation phase coach, for the academy, for the community it's international coordinator.

**I: Okay, okay, and what category status is the academy?**

P: Category one.

**I: Cat one, and what league do they play in the first team?**

P: Championship.

**I: And how long have you worked in football?**

P: I've worked in football for 14 years.

**I: Okay and how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Three years.

**I: And which age group would you be discussing today?**

P: Under 10's.

I: **Under 10's. So the most interesting stuff now, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah so I've worked for [club], which is now a combined eleven years I think that would be, maybe, yeah. In between then I've had a year where I've worked in China, on behalf of [club], working at an international school, and then left the company and worked for a private soccer academy in Canada, when I took the technical directors role for two and a half years, and then I moved back to take up the current roles that I have now. I'm a UEFA b coach, I gained that when I was 22, I'm a youth ... youth award, not advanced just Youth award. I'm talent ID level two, so not just down the coaching route I'm now looking at scouting as well.

I: **Okay.**

P: Going ... maybe going into that side of the game a little bit more, so.

I: **Yeah. So how would you describe your current role?**

P: So current role, as I say is a mixed role, I've got the community side, which is more about participation but also spreading the brand of [club] and it's easy for me to do with being from Stoke, being a supporter of the club, it's a natural thing for me to do to provide opportunities, people to get to know our club. But within the academy obviously our job is to develop players, develop players for the next year round, can they get another contract? Or you know, if we're looking further into the future can we develop players that are getting into the first team?

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. So do you have any beliefs or philosophy towards player development?**

P: Not ... not specifically, you know over the years I've changed my ways, different things. The main thing for me is just the enjoyment, that's the first thing, it's got to be at every session, the kids have got to enjoy coming to the session, got to have a smile on their face, and once the enjoyment is there I think then the hard work can follow. If they're not enjoying what they're doing, whether it's a fun session or whether it is just literally a physical session for instance, they've got to enjoy it. So once they're enjoying it everything else will follow. So yeah, mainly for me is just creating ... I guess what they say is creating the environment.

I: Yeah, yeah.

P: You know, for players to really want to progress in.

**I: So do you have expectations of player capabilities at all?**

P: There is some element of expectations when they first come in.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Obviously recruiting players, we will recruit them down from many different backgrounds, many different areas, obviously within the EPPP rules, and there is sort of requirements that we ask for, the minimum, you know sort of can they play a little bit, have they got some technical aspects, do they have a small understanding of the game? Because we think at foundation phase especially, they don't really need to have a massive understanding of positions and so on, and tactics. But one of the big aspects at the minute, and it's the hardest one, is the psychology of the players you know, are they willing to run around and put 100 percent effort in? That's something that we're trying to now, when we recruit the players, look more into, because we're finding it you know, yes they might be technically gifted and understand the game, but if they're not willing to run round and put the physical effort in then unfortunately they're not going to progress to the level that we want them to. So that's one of the main things at the minute where we're sort of really having a little bit of a focus on now we're recruiting players to go down the psychology if you like, what ... the way they play their game and their grass routes, would that move into academy football.

**I: So is that almost like how much ambition they have or desire?**

P: Yeah, and again you know, how do you measure them kinds of things, you know it is a little bit ... it's an element of guess work, but again, I guess any scouting is an element of guess work because you know, they could be great on one game and then come into your training session and be half the player that you saw the other day, you know, so. Yeah, it's the guess work of will they be able to meet the psychology of football that's required to get to the level that we want them to.

**I: So moving to the next section now, so a bit of strategy is employed as well, when you consider ... I'll talk about ... sorry, I'll talk about deselection selection throughout this, when I'm referring to that I'm referring to retention release as opposed to [inaudible]**

**0:06:18] selection or trialists, so in regards to player developments and deselection selection processes, who would be involved in such decision making?**

P: So it ... there's a lot of people who would come into this, so for example I'm a part time member of staff, and the other coach for the age group is a part time member of staff as well, but then you have the lead foundation phase coach, who is a full time member of staff ...

I: **Yeah.**

P: That's three already. You would then have the head of coaching that would be involved in it, and sometimes the second full time foundation phase coach will be involved as well. So that's up to five so far. The academy director, our direct is quite hands on with the coaching, he literally likes to get out and put sessions on and get to know the players, you know, I know that's not every academy director's role, some much prefer the other side of it, but he's really hands on so he will probably have an element of ... a degree to have a hand in it as well. And then obviously the player and the parents, they have to be involved in the conversation, the conversation doesn't just go down the route of deselecting straight away, it's normally a six week ... you've got six weeks now to prove us why you want to stay, why this is the right environment for you, so and so forth. So it's not just straight away right you're going, they are made fully aware of how this is ... where they're playing at the minute and how they're going, and that conversation, as I said, we'll have seven or eight people having that conversation.

I: **To your knowledge is that consistent as you go up ages as well?**

P: Yeah, yeah so as soon as you jump into sort of the next phase to the youth development it's same again, pretty much all the coaches in there ... yeah there's three full time in there, head of coaching, but then also some from the next phase up as well, the pro phase also dip in to help with the youth, because obviously coming from 15 to 16 it's a big gap. So they might get involved a little bit in it as well, so yeah. Sometimes even there's ... as it might be as the recruitment as well, our head of recruitment can get involved when it gets that high up, because they can ... you know, they may have seen these players before or you know, there's no players out there to take his place for example, so why would we be trying to remove a player if we don't have anything else to replace him with.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So when you go through those sorts of processes how do you determine who gets selected and who gets released?**

P: So every six weeks there's a review basis and this will then go through ... it actually goes through every foundation phase coach, so regardless of which team I'm coaching, though I am coaching the under 10's, I can still have my input on coaching ... now it's a bit difficult at the current times because we can't mix over into other age groups, but normally an example would be I would coach under 9's and under 10's at the same time in some of the training sessions. So I would see the under 9's, so I can then have an element of review on them players as well, so we can give them a grading system and then obviously if everybody is in the same boat and saying that this player is not at the level that we want then the conversations would start.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Is that a similar process that occurs for the development plans as well?**

P: Yeah, yes.

**I: And what are your ... I mean I kind of can predict the answer to this one, just based on the ages, do you do anything towards position or demand?**

P: Not really, there's ... they sort of play the same positions the majority of the time, but we don't tell them that their position, you know we don't say you are a defender, because the following week that defender might play in midfield and you know, and there's some players especially in our group, we have two or three that you're still at the minute can't tell which position they're going to play, they can play all three positions, defence midfield and attack, at the minute, so you know, why would you try to nail them down a position too early.

**I: Yeah, yeah, I get that. So are you ... I mean well, I imagine you're familiar with the FA four corner model?**

P: Yep.

**I: What are your thoughts on the model?**

P: Yeah, very good, now let me get this right, so it's the technical and tactical together?

**I: Yeah.**

P: And then you have the physical and social psychological yeah?

**I: Yeah that's right.**

P: So obviously you see the ... because ... you see it different everywhere right, so I always like ... I like the technical and the tactical separate.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Especially at foundation phase, I think that them two should be separate, and then you can have your physical, which is obviously separate again, but then your social psychological can be together in my eyes, that's the stuff that's ... it's a bit different. So yeah I'm familiar with it, we use elements of it within our actually philosophies as well, so.

**I: Slightly different question, when you do development plans or selection processes do you utilise objective assessments at all to aid that?**

P: Yes, yeah, there is a ... when we're recruiting players there's a review document if you like, and you know, a grading system if you want as well. But as I've said, again it's quite ... there's a lot of luck involved in it, you might watch them one week and think they're the best player, and the next week ... yeah, then they're nowhere to be seen. So yeah it's ... but I think they're good, I think they're good, especially when we're ... we get to review a player more than once and then maybe by different people as well, to see actually what comes back, rather than just ... I think conversations about players can be very easily led, if you've got somebody who's quite dominant and the way they speak about a player, a lot of people will just follow what they say straight away, so if you know if they say oh that player is not very good because of this, x, y and z, the person who is standing in that group will go ooh yeah, yeah I agree with you actually, yeah. So they very quickly can jump on it, whereas if he's had to write it down and he disagrees with it, but then somebody completely writes down the opposite, you can then get them in the room and go why, why are you seeing opposite things? You know, and it creates that discussion and a better opportunity to develop the players, or recruit them players, and why we should be recruiting them.

**I: Does that ... what about ... do you do stuff that might assess other corners of the four corner model as well?**

P: Yeah, so we have club identity as well, so we use an acronym of [club] [inaudible 0:14:13] who we are. You said you'd remove that didn't you! But yeah ...

**I: That's fine.**

- P: Yeah, so the letters will mean ... they'll have different words attached to them, not always the start of the ... when you might be intelligence, physique, so and so forth, so you know that, they can be graded on them as well.
- I: **So with ... in consideration of those wider ... as well as the technical tactical stuff, so like all the four corners, how well do you feel like those assessments actually replicate a match performance?**
- P: Yeah, I think it does, it gives the ... it explains why we're recruiting that player a little bit more, you know because we saw ... I think creativity is one of them as well, you know so, without it in front of me I can't remember exactly which one is which. The creativity, you know that falls under what, technical, tactical? Does it fall under psychological? You know, what's creativity?
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: And if you've only got your four corners you know how do you get that in there and write it down. So I think it gives an opportunity to explain a few different things that you might see from a player.
- I: **So would you say that you ... have you ever been in an instance where you might see data that looks good on paper but then when you see them in the pitch they're not the same player?**
- P: Yeah, both way rounds actually, both ways, and again that can be ... there was something I did on one of the courses where they talk about an unconscious bias, and I didn't realise you know how unconscious bias I probably am as a coach as well as a recruiter. You wouldn't know it from me sitting down but I'm a smaller person, so I can very quickly be bias to look at the smaller players and see the best in them, rather than always looking for the bigger players and so on. So yeah there's a ... I think that's why it's good to then, as I say, have these different people watching them, putting the information together and see what actually comes out of it, because then hopefully it removes the bias.
- I: **Yeah, definitely. So when you're considering the development phases, this will be a great question for you actually because you work in the foundation phase, if somebody is excelling how does that inform you towards like the success for them in the future?**



P: Yeah so you have players that will obviously be succeeding at different times in their journey, from other players in their group for example, so they may have a big physical growth spurt and be the best playing in their group, but not necessarily does that mean that he needs the then challenge of moving up an age group.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Maybe he just needs more of a challenge within his own age group on, okay less touches, whatever it may be, the tactical and technical stuff that he needs the challenge in. So I think it's a tough one because it's a case to case way of dealing with it and each player will need different things, you'll probably have a lot of parents always saying that they should be training up an age group, whereas, as we all know that's not ... yeah, it does work, but it's not always the best one, and one of my hardest conversations, I've done it here in England, I've done it in different countries, is asking players to play down an age group, and some players' parents really find it hard to understand why you would want that for a player, you know. Then you start to try and pull up some information about professional players that have done it actually.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

P: And you know, they go oh wow, you know, why did they play down for that long, you know, and now he's a professional player. It creates confidence, it gives them you know, the chance to shine, more chance to be on the ball, so on and so forth. So you know that's one of the best ones I think, you know in a development plan, an individual development plan, I always ... maybe that's me being a little bit bias again, moving that player down a group and letting them dominate if you like, so.

I: **Is there instances where you might have a late developing player, so he is smaller for the group, but you might not want to play them down?**

P: Yeah, yeah that is that as well, because again on the individual basis it will knock some players, they won't move down an age group and then think I'm still the best player, they'll move down an age group thinking oh, I was the worst player in that group, you know, I don't want to be training here, I just want to be back in my team. So it can have the negative affect as well, so again on that case, the case, you have to take it as it is, maybe it's a conversation that you wouldn't ... at foundation phase, you wouldn't have straight away

with the player, you might actually have it with the parents first of all. Because again, you know the player as well as you think you do but the parents will know them a lot more.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So you know they will have a sort ... or should have a good understanding of how that player would take moving down of an age group.

**I: So more of a hypothetical question for yourself now, if you had somebody that joined the academy in the youth development phase and they hadn't had any academy experience with you or elsewhere, at foundation, how would that indicate future success for you?**

P: I think we have this scenario play out a few times ... excuse me ... where players are either missed for whatever reason in recruitment at foundation age, or they just develop very quickly when they get to a certain age, I think the one thing we always find is either their tactical understanding isn't quite there, because they haven't played to the level that you know, everybody else around them has, or their technical ability isn't quite there, because they haven't trained as much as all the players around them. It's one thing that I ... when I deliver CPD events or coaching seminars to other clubs and other countries, they ask me you know, how do we get a player to develop and so on and so forth, and I always ask about what their training schedule looks like for a week, you know how many hours are they actually training? Because if they aren't doing the same as an academy player is in our club, how are they going to be expected to be at the same level? You know, it's ... you know what I'm trying to say here, if you had a piano player who's only playing ten hours a week and the other one is playing 100 hours a week, we know which one is going to be better.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: You know, you've got to give yourself that opportunity to be able to catch these people.

**I: Yeah. So obviously you've got a good ... you have an understanding of maturation and biological age ...**

P: Yeah.

**I: What ... how does that impact decisions when it comes to development plans and selection strategies?**

P: Yeah it's something that's come up a lot more over the last three years probably for me, you know we're looking at birth dates and talking about you know, this child has been ... he's got ten months more experience than this child, and I understand it but I also then sometimes look at it and go well you know, that player there he's got ten months more experience because he was born when he was, but this guy here, he's a foot bigger than him, or whatever he may be, he might be ten months younger than him but he's actually bigger than him. You know, all these things, there's so many different variants of it that have to be taken into consideration. I find it intriguing that a lot of them are always seem to be born in the first quarter of the year as they say, and then I also find it interesting, with working in different countries, that they obviously do it from January to January, we go September to September. So you know, when you go to tournaments and you're playing against different age groups, that's always a different challenge as well, between the birth dates and so on. Then we sometimes try to change it round and help ourselves and bring different players in and we couldn't really be doing that so. Yeah, it's an interesting one, not really ... I don't really have a full opinion on it yet, I like looking at it and thinking about it but yeah, there's no real full opinion on that as of yet.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So moving into the last part now actually, so actually we've been flying through this, which is good. Well, it's neither good nor bad! So you need ... yeah, you need the team ... a team sheet now, so even if it's just you know, a bit of paper ...**

P: Yeah I've got just a pen and paper here if that's going to work.

I: **So if you write down your players from one to whatever number you've got.**

P: Yeah.

I: **It'll be more for your notes than for me.**

P: Okay, so explain it further for me, so you want me to write down starting ... so we would play seven aside?

I: **Yeah I mean don't ... it doesn't mean to be ... it just needs to be everyone on the age group, so if you're talking about the under 10's, it'll just be all the players, and just put maybe just initials, so you know who you're talking about, and just put down so one to 15 or whatever it is. Have you ... have you got that down now?**

P: I'm just going to pull up on ... a register for me, one second.

- I:** Oh yeah of course, yeah, and I'll give you ... I'll give you the next stage to do following that, so just let me know when you've got a list.
- P:** Okay, yep.
- I:** Okay so with that list, if you put a letter H next to any of the players that you would consider to be higher performers within that group, or within that age.
- P:** Yep.
- I:** You can put as many of them as you like or as little as you like.
- P:** Yep.
- I:** And then the same thing, you're going to be an L next to the ones that you might consider to be the lower performers of the group.
- P:** Yeah.
- I:** And then that would ultimately mean that anyone that doesn't have a letter would be somebody who's mid performing.
- P:** Yep.
- I:** So obviously you're welcome to make any changes now that you know what the groups are.
- P:** Yep.
- I:** So first question, how have you determined who is in what group?
- P:** Little bit on current ... or just before Christmas, how they were looking, in terms of how they've developed so far. I've had the fortunate thing of coaching these from last season as well, so I knew them at 9's and obviously you know, some of them surpass others in the group, become you know, more outstanding players and then fall off again, just through to the ... obviously the way that they're developing, growth, whatever it may be. So at the minute it's a little bit of how they're doing currently, but also taking into consideration where they've come from if you like.

**I: So when you say the ones that are performing better though, how would ... what does that look like to you?**

P: So they'll be set individual targets at the start of the year, key areas that they are working on, so you know, if they are starting to hit them key areas more in matches and training sessions on a more consistent basis, then that's how we look at sort of ... that's then performing to the level that we want, you know, and that's ... basically you're obviously going to put them to the top of their group comparing them to everybody else within their group.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it's just that ... I guess almost another question on that point would be if somebody is a better football player, as in he scores more goals or whatever, if he hasn't necessarily advanced over the course of the year, where would that place him?**

P: Yeah for me that's ... it's a middle or a low thing, because you know, he might be scoring lots of goals, which yeah is a key thing, but you know, is that really helping him to develop?

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: Just as an example, you know, I'm actually picking a goalkeeper here as a high achiever, and it's under 10's football, we can see a lot of goals, but some of the saves that he makes, some of the plays that he can already play at under 10's, the vision he's got to play out from the back, the confidence he has as well, you know, if you watched him play, if you were just a neutral and watched him play you wouldn't say he's a stand out player, but in terms of his pathway at the minute, he is one of the ones where we think maybe he will get all the way.

**I: That's good to hear. So since your time working with these players, the whole age group, would you have said that they'll be fixed to the groupings or would they move from lower to medium, or higher to medium, or other ways?**

P: Yeah there's been a lot of movement up and down actually, yeah, a lot of movement between some of these players. Some that are ... were top of the group if you like, top five players, at the end of last season ...

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: And now we're what, we're half way through this one, and they're now middle, maybe even falling towards the bottom. And as obviously from the previous discussions, that can be for a

number of different reasons, and the biggest one at the minute being the uncertainty in the world, you know, they don't know when they're training next, some of them are stuck in homes where they haven't got much outside space so they're not training as much as they would like to be, so on and so forth, so.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So are the top players, are they exhibiting the same abilities as all the others in the group but are just better at them?**

P: Not necessarily better at them, probably more consistent in terms of doing it over and over again, producing it. Not always getting it right.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So for example, one ... lets take an example and say one might be finishing, because it's the easiest one right, even if he's getting into the position and he's finishing isn't great, he's hitting it to the keeper or he's off target, I would still look at it as right, the development is that he's doing the tactical thing right, he's getting into the right positions to score the goals, we like that, lets take it away and work on his finishing technical side.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: You know, and get him to really think about that kind of stuff. And then when you set your training sessions up you might not put as much pressure on him in terms of a defender, and give him the chance to build his confidence, hit the back of the net a few times, and then see if that plays out in the next game as well. So yeah it's ... it's not always marked on a are they doing it to the best, are they scoring the goal if you like if finishing is the one, or are they actually getting there, are they keep doing it. You know, because if he wasn't getting there at all or he was only getting one chance a game and taking it, does that make him a good finisher? You know, the numbers would say yes, but he's only getting one chance a game, he probably needs your strikers to be getting more than that.

**I: So would you say just based on what you've just said then, that tactical understanding, game understanding, decision making, are they kind of more prominent measures that you would measure a player against more so than just outright scoring and you know, saves or whatever?**

P: Yeah, I would, but again I don't ... we don't really overly coach tactics.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So it's something that they are demonstrating themselves, which is coming from their decision making, which ultimately will make them the players, we can give them you know, this is how you could have done it and so on and so forth, but when they actually go out onto the pitch it's completely up to them to do it.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: And it will be the same next year when they're with a different coach, you know, different coach might ask them to do different things from what I'm saying, but ultimately when they're out there they've got to do it themselves, regardless of what coach is saying to them.

I: So when you've grouped these into the higher, lower and mid group, if you just consider the higher and the lower, would they represent the people that you ... if, you know hypothetically, you might be more likely to select or release?

P: Yes, yeah, yeah they're the ones at the minute where we would be looking to have a conversation maybe with the player, parents, so on, to say we're getting to a point where we need to see an improvement and we're not seeing it as we expected and you know, maybe they can give us a reason why it's not happening, sometimes you know straight away they can give you a reasoning, sometimes not. So yeah, the ones who are at the lower ... and again it might not be the straight into the conversation, so it might be right let's design practises to really focus on this player, and give them the chance to produce. Because sometimes you know, you can ... coaches will put players in a group and say right they're the lower player in my group. But I've seen it before, they play minimal minutes of a match, they don't ... when they put training practises on, they don't focus on that player at all, the practises, focus around other players or so on. You know, so you're not actually giving that player the opportunity to shine and show what he can do.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: And again going back to that bias, sometimes it's the coach really just doesn't like that player for whatever reason, you know so. Yeah, I've seen it in the past; you've got to make sure you give everybody the equal opportunities to show what they can do.

**I: Why do you ... what ... why do you think that might happen, you know that focus away from them?**

P: Many different reasons again, but you know if they really don't like the player for ... I'll choose an example of ... some coaches really like to have a passing style of football, you know some coaches will like players to get on the ball, stay on it, show some skills, and that will obviously ... if that player who stays on the ball goes to a team that passes the ball, that coach isn't going to like that player. It's naturally going to happen, unfortunately, and I'm not just saying at under 10's level, you know I've seen this at under 15's, 16's, so on, higher, the players come from a certain philosophy or a style of playing to another team where you think yeah, yeah, they're going to be good, but because the coach doesn't really fancy them, you know I've seen it at first team level for example, you know you spend a lot of money on a player thinking yeah he did well at that club, why didn't he work at our club? And then you look at the contrasting styles of play and management as well, you know, and so on, so.

I: **So it's almost like a philosophical ... a philosophy of the game as opposed to philosophy of development, and they don't necessarily fit into that philosophy?**

P: Yeah, yeah you've got it. Not necessarily does that happen in academy football, I'm not drawing on this as a current experience, I'm just drawing on it as an experience that I've seen over the years. But yeah, I think that's how a coach could take a disliking to a player, definitely, through different ideas and the game and not producing what they want to see, and then as I say just sort of pushing them to the side and forgetting about them.

I: **That makes sense, I'm just ... I'm writing this stuff down in case you wonder why I keep looking down so!**

P: Yeah, no, no, that's fine.

I: **So just referring to your higher performers now, is there anything that they consistently all do that basically makes them higher and not others?**

P: One of them yes, which going back to what I said much earlier, was about the desire to run around and work hard. I'm not saying that others in the group don't do that but this individual seems to be doing it a lot more, a lot more frequent, and getting success from it as well. You know, if you're getting success from it you're going to do it more.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

P: If the others in the group are not getting as much success from it, so they look at it as ah I'm not going to keep running round because I don't succeed when I do that, it's a difficult one.



So yeah I would say there's one at the minute that's probably producing to a different level than all the others, but again, is that due to his physical attributes at the minute, he's growing, he's getting bigger, he's getting stronger, he's getting faster.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So then is the game becoming easier for him because of that? At that point we have to obviously monitor and make sure that his technical side is not lacking. So again, it's all that balancing act as we go through these developments of each player.

**I: How many were there in your higher group, just out of curiosity?**

P: Three.

**I: Three? And then how many were in your lower?**

P: Three.

**I: Three, and what was in the middle?**

P: So that would be one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.

**I: Nine? Okay, so with those three higher players, was there anything that they have unique, that they're outstanding at?**

P: No, nothing that's real stand out that's part of their game, no.

**I: What about maturation wise, would you say that they're advanced compared to the rest? Are they bigger or?**

P: Yes, the two ... as I've said, one's a goalkeeper; the two outfield players are bigger, which if I draw on some information, give me a second ... I've got the birth dates, because I think I'm going to amaze myself on this one and say that they're all younger birth dates and ... but obviously physically ...

**I: Just more dominant?**

P: Yeah, one second ... I hope you don't mind me just trying to find this?

**I: No, it's fine.**

- P: I think it'll be interesting to know for yourself, and for me, I'll try and remember ... trying to remember the birth dates and stuff like that. I couldn't be wrong I don't think, so yeah one's October, one is November, and one's in January, so he falls into the second does he?
- I: **Yeah, [inaudible 0:41:27].**
- P: Yeah, so there you go.
- I: **So ...**
- P: Interesting to recall that one actually.
- I: **What do you ... do you collect their maturational status?**
- P: The sport science do, they ... they're monitoring height and weight every ... I don't remember off the top of my head, I think it's 12 weeks maybe.
- I: **But you were saying that you ... correct me if I'm wrong, I don't want to lead you, are they ... would you say they're the bigger ones within the group then?**
- P: Yes, yeah, yeah.
- I: **Okay so is there anything ... strange question, is there anything that they're really, really good at, or maybe just good at but it doesn't affect their performance at all?**
- P: One of them currently at the minute is probably ... yeah, they're excelling as I say at pretty much everything, in terms looking at everybody else in the group, you know, I'm not sure whether that is down to his hard work away from the pitch as well, you know when ... when you look at all the different things we do, we have online review system, he's one of the ones who's on there doing it all the time, when we have the physical activities online he's the one who's posting his videos, he's the one who's outside full kit on ready to go. He's the one who might be just that little bit more eager than everybody else at the minute, you know, so that's maybe one thing where you go oh, is that why he's gaining his advantage over everybody else.
- I: **Yeah. Okay so now looking at the lower performers only, is there anything that is consistent with the lowers that they all maybe don't do that puts them in that group?**

P: No they're all in there for different reasons. One maybe because of work rate and attitude, you know something that we've spoke about already, and conversation may have to be had with them regarding is this what they want? You know, they came out of [club] 18 months ago, something like that, maybe a little bit more, where they were probably dominating, scoring lots of goals, and now they've come into academy football where they find it a little bit more difficult to really show what they can do. So yeah, it's ... yeah they're all in there for different reasons.

**I: What would be the other reasons for the other players?**

P: One of them is coming down to decision making more than anything at the minute. Just constantly you know, making decisions that you think well why has he made that decision?

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah.**

P: You know and it makes you ... if it was the same decision always being made and different outcomes that's fine, because you know that they're making the same decision, but you're getting all different decisions with all different outcomes and you sort of go, do they understand when you're trying to then coach them in that position, do they actually understand what you're saying to them, do they want to get better, do they just want to play the game their way? You know, which again that might come down to position. So the other one is a goalkeeper, so you know, decision making for a goalkeeper is a very important thing, whereas if I was looking to the strikers decision making it wouldn't probably matter at under 10's football, whereas a goalkeeper it's going to influence a lot more and we're going to have to make a decision, because the decisions that he does make will ultimately affect him and his team, so. I know that might sound very cruel to say for an under 10 goalkeeper but I think you know, we're in the business to produce players; we have to try and get it right as early as possible.

**I: I agree. So within the same group of lowers, is there anything that they are really good at but actually it doesn't make any difference to their performance?**

P: Yes, yeah, there's one who's really, really good at dribbling, and I mean like he's the best dribbler in the team, so you know that's where you sort of look at and you go why is he a lower for other aspects of his game, but he would be the best ... you would rate him as probably the best dribbler in the team. So why would you not think to yourself okay, so he's got to be in the middle somewhere. But if he can only dribble with the ball and the dribble

goes nowhere then unfortunately that's ... you know, he's not ... and again, decision making, is he listening to us saying about getting his head up and picking the right time to release it? When he comes up against players that he can't always dribble past, okay they're a little bit bigger and stronger than him, how does he now change his game, does he change his game and so on. So you know, it's ... again I guess it comes back to that consistency, are they listening to what's being said and can they change and produce things on a little bit more consistent basis.

**I: So in some of the ... in the instances of those three, if they developed on those weaknesses, it sounds like the decision making being quite a critical one, might they then move up to the medium group?**

P: Yeah, yeah, and not necessarily would they need to improve dramatically, a small improvement and then a drop from some other players might change it again, in the next six weeks. This as I say is a constant review, constantly reviewed every six weeks, and if three players, or two players, now start to drop off that means two of them might move back up to the middle.

**I: Yeah, yeah,**

P: So you know it ... just because they're at the bottom ... and I think ... excuse me ... I think it was another club that used to always rate their players after every training session, and they would have to pick who were the bottom three and who were the top three, and every time, every training session, every training session, to see who was consistently where, you know, and that way they would be able to gauge where these players are developing and where they're at, so. Yeah, they haven't ... the other people around them could affect how they move up.

**I: Of course. So within that group, last question on the lower group, are they ... maturation wise, are they the smaller of the group or just average?**

P: They are the smaller of the group actually, yeah.

**I: So would you ... would you always ...**

P: Then again sorry, there's probably three or four of those that are in the middle there that are similar size and build to them, I'm just pulling up date of births again to really have a think about that ... one's September, one's a ... what am I looking for ... one's an April, one's

... another April. So there you go, it's something again, like you say, to really take into consideration.

**I: I guess it's just ... a point I'm trying to maybe establish is that the medium group is probably most likely to have a combination of big and small ...**

P: Yeah.

**I: So it's not like is it only the small ones in the lower, because you'd expect there to be a variation, but it's almost just trying to work out are the lowers associated to be smaller and the higher associated to be bigger, whilst the medium is going to be like kind of a combination?**

P: Yeah, yeah I guess so, you know for example, one of our biggest players physically wise, is ... and this is the one I was thinking about, he's a ... the eighth, which is August.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So you know physically you would not go oh he was born in August, there's no chance compared to some of the others that I've been talking about.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So yeah that's where I ... that's when ... when I say I don't really have a full opinion on it yet, but now I've ... after this con ... and that's why I like these conversations, it's not the first one I've done as you can probably tell, but it gets me thinking again about certain things and you know, I'm probably going to draw more of an opinion on this sort of aging now as it is, so.

**I: So the last set of questions now, is on the mid ... just the middle group, how have you distinguished the line between these players not being in the bottom but also not being in the top?**

P: My favourite word, consistency, they can do things at certain times and then maybe they're excelling in one position, that's something that I probably haven't touched on enough for you, but the players that are put in the higher would play in a number of different positions and still be able to succeed. The ones who play who were in the lower, we look at as probably only playing one position, maybe two if we're lucky, but still they're very inconsistent when they're playing that second position.

**I: Yeah.**

P: The middle ones probably playing in a couple of positions, one where they really excel, the other one they're not so much. They can produce certain aspects of the game tactically, whereas they technically might let themselves down, or vice versa. So you know, the ones in the middle are normally the ones who can do certain elements but not match it up with the others at the minute.

**I: Might it be that they're good in ... they're good in areas but that doesn't seem to ... the areas they're weaker in doesn't actually seem to impact the game as much?**

P: Yeah, yeah, that's definitely the case, I'm just trying to look at it in terms of what positions they would play, yeah, there's some that would obviously impact in terms of goals conceded or that there's ... there's one instance that I'm thinking about here, about somebody not having the confidence to get on the ball at the minute, but is that because he's not playing enough, not training enough? So when he does get out there and he's playing and he's getting put under pressure he doesn't like it as much. So yeah, there's ... as we say yeah, there's certain things they can definitely do, there's certain things that they're struggling with, but does that really impact that game? Probably not at the minute.

**I: And the last question, the players in the middle group, do they have the same abilities as the guys in the top and the bottom but they're just better than the lower group but not as good as the higher group?**

P: Yes, yeah ... lets look at it another way, if I was to take this lower player out of this group and put him into a different team, another team, a category two academy team, a category three, [club], you would expect him to be at the highest.

**I: Okay.**

P: You know, in that team. That is what I'm ... I'm comparing these all against each other, and I'm comparing them sort of on the last 12 weeks, I'm not thinking about what they were doing 12 months ago, or what they're going to do in 12 months time. So there's ... there's room for movement here all the time, and if you move them from one ... and again, if we moved some of these higher players from our team into maybe another category one academy, maybe they wouldn't like them as much as we do, because of the philosophies, the ideas, the style of play and so on. Yeah, it's something that I'm just ... I'm putting to you

sort of a question really or a thought process of you've asked me to rank them but now I'm thinking I've ranked them, but I've ranked them only against each other, I've ranked them only against the last 12 weeks, this could change tomorrow if you put them in a different team, so on and so forth, so yeah.

#### **8.10.11 Participant 11**

**I: What's your current job title?**

P: So my actual job title is Head of School Boy Coaching which is 9s to 16s.

**I: And what is the Academy category status?**

P: Category two.

**I: What league does the first team play in?**

P: In the Championship.

**I: And how long have you worked in football?**

P: I've worked in football for twelve years ...

**I: Twelve years.**

P: ... and in Academy football for eight.

**I: Okay, yeah. And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: This current role started in 2016, so coming up to five years.

**I: And then last one of the real basic stuff, which age group will you be discussing later on?**

P: 15s, under 15s.

**I: More interesting stuff for you now. Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, so I haven't taken the traditional, I'm not a traditional, what you'd consider a traditional Academy coach, I've got a different story and a different route. So like everybody played football to a relatively decent standard in junior football, had a serious knee injury,

got married, had children, sort of fell into coaching early because of the injury and having kids, but I worked in retail as a senior manager in retail for twenty-three years, so a completely different background, but I started to do more coaching, started to get more qualified around not just football but associated around football and that sort of piqued my interest more than my, what I was doing in my current work.

And then there came a tipping point where I just decided, I saved up money, just left my current job, and then got a sports science degree, started working sort of in local football and schools, et cetera, holiday clubs, and then, yeah, just carried on with my academic qualifications and my football qualifications, started working for [club name], well I went to [club name] very briefly at their Academy, then [club name] part-time, and then went full-time, so my journey's not a traditional one which I think actually is a benefit to me personally.

**I: It sounds like it, I mean it is interesting, some of the coaches I've spoken to have been like ex-pros but it's probably, the majority of them more have, in their words, the majority of the time, they've had failed careers so they've not really made it so instead they've gone into coaching, so I wouldn't say it was massively dissimilar but, you know.**

P: Right, okay.

**I: But it's interesting how people do get into it.**

P: Yeah, I used to, when I first got into football I used to be a bit embarrassed to say that I used to work at Tesco's, I used to be embarrassed to say I used to work there, because people they was quite egotistical and people would judge you on that, whereas actually now I kind of puff my chest out because actually Tesco taught me a load of transferable skills that perhaps people on another route might not have had, so yeah, it's not such a bad thing.

**I: Separate from this interview stuff, I shouldn't deviate too much, but I also think it's a blessing when you're talking to the players so that they know actually it's okay because they're going to have to do that sort of ...**

P: Absolutely, yeah, I totally agree.

**I: So how would you describe your current role?**



P: It's, yeah, it's one, because it's not part of EPPP structure, normally you'd have a Lead Foundation Phase, a Lead YDP Coach, another full-time in the YDP and then the Head of Coaching from 9s to 23s, we introduced this role outside of those bands and that structure and, if I'm being honest, when I took the role on, the Academy Manager was new, I was new to that role, we didn't really know what the role was, all we knew was that our opinion was that clubs almost worked in silos, so you had one set way of doing things nine to eleven or nine to twelve depending on what the foundation phase was, you'd have the pre-Academy doing something one way, you'd have the YDP doing something some way, the 18s doing it another way, and the 23s another.

So the idea behind it was to try and bring some consistency and continuity, originally just operationally and the way we coached, but it's really grown, it's become, we've started to understand there's way more benefits to it than just the coaching. So for example the group I'll talk about today, the under 15s, I've known them since they were under eight, so them and their parents have got this, as in with me and a couple of other coaches, this real constant connection with the club who knows what they were like at eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, all the way through, because that's the other thing sometimes, when a player goes from the FP to the YDP you've got a whole set of new coaches judging them on that moment in time rather than the big picture.

So I haven't been very brief with that, it's to ensure consistency and continuity and how we coach operationally and the standards we set for coaches, but it's also to facilitate the long term development that we all talk about in football but I'm not sure we all actually follow, so I'm there to oversee the long term development of every individual player, and we think it works, we think, you know, we would never not have this role anymore, I've got no interest in doing any other role, I actually love doing it.

**I: So is that on top of, I know you're saying this is how it started at EPPP, is that on top of like Head of Coaching and Lead ...?**

P: Yes, yeah, sorry, I didn't clarify that, yeah, so we've still got a Lead FP, still got a Lead YDP, still got full-time in the YDP, and then what we've done is we've done the same with the PDP now, so we've got an 18s Manager, a 23s Manager, and then someone that sits above them. Now we don't have a Head of Coaching at the moment, and actually in my time in the role we've only had one for two years, but the idea is that the Head of PDP and the Head of Schoolboys we sort of, we connect with the Head of Coaching.

**I: Yeah, oh brilliant, it sounds like quite a good move as well.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So from your own, so don't worry about like club strategy, et cetera, so much to this question, when you're considering player development what are your beliefs or philosophies?**

P: Cor, that's really broad, I could go on forever around that one, I'll try and be succinct in it. I'll start with as coaches I don't think we have as much effect as we think we do, I think some people believe they have far more impact on skill acquisition than they actually do, I think we can aid it and assist it but I think we're more facilitators of environment and culture and good habits for players, I think that's what we try and instil.

So in terms of development of a player, there's loads of buzzwords in football, like holistic's one of them, but I'll try and avoid that one. We do look at them as people first, not players, and from the moment they come in to the Academy we kind of impress upon them you're not little professionals, you're not superstars, and I think we teach good traditional values around, you know, understanding and appreciating hard work, that football isn't fair, life's not fair, there are bumps that are going to come in the road for you, and if you haven't had any for a while then we'll manufacture some for you.

So we put a lot of stock in like the psychological quarter I guess you'd say in the FA model, our brains, building resilience, dealing with setbacks and failure, giving them emotional control, making them really reflective in their learning, but also helping them be risk takers and make their own decisions, and to do that we've employed someone called [name of doctor] who's like quite at the forefront of the adolescent brain in football, so that's embedded in all of our practices that we do, you know, we try and create an environment that allow them to make risky decisions without there being too much of a consequence from us.

So, yeah, I think the personality traits and the work ethic traits are something that we look for quite predominantly, we don't profile players in terms of a centre-back has to look like this, that's not what we do, we look for players and then we let them find their position as they get older. That's quite brief that, I could go on for more, but that would sum us up I think.

**I: So it sounds like the psychology aspect's quite a key, quite a prominent feature within that model?**

P: Yes, yeah, 100%.

**I: Why do you think that one is more so than, let's say if you used the FA corner model, why would you say that might be more important than the other quadrants?**

P: I think from my own experiences in football I just think, this is how I think it happens traditionally, and I wouldn't say any specific club, but traditionally in football we recruit on the technical and tactical abilities so when you go out on the pitches, on the grassroots pitches it's really easy to pick out the best players on the pitch, it's the easiest thing in the world, because, you know, on the eye the people that are technically and tactically good stand out, so they're the two we usually recruit on and then we usually release some of the athleticism and the psychological corner because traditionally they might not have been the things that we've been very good at.

I just think if you take the FA model where you've got four corners, you have to give them equal attention otherwise you're failing, I just think it's really easy through lack of knowledge or lack of understanding or a bit of fear around not knowing around the psychological corner, the people avoid it.

And actually I think what, again this is just my opinion, when you get to the top end of any sport, the elite end of any sport what separates the great from good players or the good from average players isn't the technical and tactical ability because they're all technically and tactically good, it starts to be lifestyle choices, their psychological approach, you know, how motivated they are, so I think they're the bits that made separation at the top end.

And I just think it's something that, again I've seen players released because they've got a bad attitude or, you know, a poor work ethic, but at sixteen I kind of like rewind and say what did we do with them at twelve, or what did we do with them at ten, you know, to start addressing that because if they can't receive it on the back foot, we've got a tonne of practices to do that, what do we actually do to help people that, you know, might not be able to deal with, you know, a referee's decision, and we've all seen the kids that do it, so yeah, so it is quite embedded in what we do.

**I: Right, it sounds like it's well rationalised, put it that way.**

P: Yeah, okay, cheers.

**I: So when you are working with players do you have any expectations on their player capabilities, and this is more for you than the club?**

P: Yeah, no, not so much their capabilities, it's more about their application, we call them 'the five key principles', and very few of them are like technically based, so it's high intensive running, so we expect them to run hard; do your job for the team, and that's deliberately written quite broad because that is, you know, it can be as simple as defending a set piece; compete for everything, again quite broad, it's just we want to see you compete all the time; try to play forwards; and execute your USP.

So we think every player needs to know, or should be able to articulate what they're good at and what they're trying to work on and how they're perceived as a person. So when we do reviews we've got, like all the clubs, we've got really detailed review forms and IEPs, et cetera, but I think that can confuse kids and a lot of the key information can get lost in the noise, so on the bottom of their review form it's a summary and it's those three key points, so it's they're good at this, they're working on this, and this is how they're perceived as a person, so it could be, you know, they've got good leadership skills and they've got good communication skills or they've got good emotional control, so I know if someone from the Academy or the club calls out a player and says, you know, tell me about yourself, they would talk about one of those three things, so they're the five key expectations for me and the club.

I'd also, for me again in terms of my personal expectations it's about being honest and that again can sound a bit cliché, but I think we've got to role model that, so when I ask players to be honest I need them to be honest in their reflections about themselves and the team on that moment in time, and then we'll do a performance analysis session on the next session after the game, I'll code the game on a Sunday, and again on the coding it'll be this was good or this could've been better, but I'll include myself on it.

So if I, if you can see me reacting on the side to a decision by the referee, I'd throw my arms up or interact with an official, I'll put that on there, because that honesty is important about this is something we've done that's not very good, and to get their trust I think you have to make yourself vulnerable and that means sometimes showing us failing as well, and it's okay to fail, it's okay to get it wrong.

So, yeah, I think the five key, and I think you can see those five key principles are all sort of based on application and effort rather than ability and, yeah, the honesty thing around, you know, when we're reflecting in the moment.

**I: So it's almost like a, rather than praise, it's almost like they're, the, oh, I'm trying to think of the word now, the growth ...**

P: Is that the growth, yeah, [00:14:29 inaudible] that's what it's kind of based on really about we reward the effort and the intent rather than the outcome, and that's something, we're fortunate, like there's quite, we've probably got three master's degrees in the coaching, we've got a doctor, I'm on my doctorate, so there is, a lot of what we do is linked to research or, you know, linked to some kind of, it's anchored in something by this point, and some evidence around what we do, so yeah, absolutely, that's what it's based on is reward and effort, not necessarily outcome.

**I: Right, that sounds good. So the next section now, this is going to be talking about some of the strategies employed, again you're not giving away your club secrets ...**

P: I know.

**I: ... it's [00:15:11 inaudible] sort of stuff. So in regards to when you're creating development plans or even selection processes, and I'll just say now when I talk about the selection process it's always retention/release, as opposed to game or trialist.**

P: Yeah.

**I: When you're going through those processes, who would be included in the decision making?**

P: Wow, it is really multi-disciplinary. So in terms of, if I do the trialist registration first, we meet every Monday, and when I say we that will be all the full-time coaches, Head of Recruitment, the Schoolboy Physio, Schoolboy S&C, and the Safeguarding Officer or the club welfare, well he's called the Player Care Manager, we'll meet every Monday, so we'll talk about the week that's just gone operationally, the week that's up and coming operationally, and then we go through the players and we talk about players that are struggling, players that are doing well, you know, on that week, so we'll talk about these dips in form, and then we'll talk about the players that are on our radar that aren't doing so well, and then the last bit we'd be talking about trialists.

So the Age Group Manager will produce clips for them, so when we're talking about it we sort of evidence it through clips, and then in terms of saying yes or no to a trialist it really does kind of come from that committee of people and coming to a consensus of an opinion, and there's rarely too much disruption or dispute around that, you won't get everybody 100% in agreeance but ...

**I: Yes, of course.**

**P:** ... you might get two or three dissenting voices, but it's normally quite an easy model to follow. It becomes more complicated when we're talking about de-registration because there's obviously more of an emotional attachment and more of an investment and you can get that bias of thinking around people not wanting to let a player go.

So again the same thing will happen, we meet every Monday, and players that are on their struggling or at risk radar will get discussed. Ultimately it would, it doesn't come to this, but ultimately if it came to it it would be me going to the Academy Manager saying we've got ten coaches or ten people in the room, it's split five and five, but I'm absolutely adamant we need to keep this kid, I think he'd go with me.

If I said it's split five and five, I'm absolutely adamant this kid needs to go, which I've never actually, I can't even think of a scenario where that has happened, I was going to say he'd do this, I don't actually know what he'd do because we've never been in that scenario. It tends to be a consensus that would lead to it. The joy of my role is it allows us to err on the side of caution, and that for me would always be to retain and see what happens.

But, I don't know if this is the appropriate time to say or not, but our release process is something that we've evolved significantly over five years, and I'm really proud of it, it used to be we'd wait till May and then the player would find out, and it was just horrible, there's never a nice way of doing it, I'm not suggesting everything we do is good and it's fluffy, but it's really transparent and it's really clear.

So the three face to face interviews we do, or reviews we do of players in November, February and May I would be, before we even got to the November one if we thought there was a player at risk I would be phoning the parents, or pre-COVID I'd take them for a coffee in our restaurant and say, I'd just have that chat, I'd just say look, nothing to worry about at this stage, but you need to be aware this is where Johnny is at at the moment, there's a few concerns, and it's only right that you know that. Do you want me to discuss that with

Johnny at next week's review, or do you want to have that conversation, or do you not want to talk at all.

And then that will evolve by the February one, again if the situation's getting worse or staying the same January again I'd be meeting the parent, either face to face or over the phone or online, and I would start to become a little bit more explicit saying look, I'm going to be honest with you, it's looking likely now that come May we are going to be releasing Johnny, how do you want us to do this, do you want us to start looking for a club with you now, do you want us to help look for a club now, do you want us to talk to Johnny, do you want to talk to Johnny, so everything at all times is in agreement, and then following the February one we'll have another conversation with the parents.

I did something similar to this last year and we had to work out some figures, but over 90% of our players that are on the at risk sort of voluntarily leave or transition back into grassroots football between February and May so we don't ever get to that, very few get to that point of receiving a letter saying we're not re-registering you, and I think it's definitely something that we'll just need to look at because it's really, it's brutal, it's absolutely brutal the way they do it.

And I think, you know, like somebody who's under 15s, well this year's under 16s, I've known them since they were nine, it's absolutely vital that we look after them properly, and so, yeah, I'm really proud of the process we use. I'm not saying it's good because there's no such thing as a good release process, but it feels quite safe and player centred.

**I: Yeah. Just while we're on the topic, because we're slightly jumping ahead but it's not a problem, would that process be similar when you're talking about like making development plans as well?**

P: Are you talking like individual plans for players?

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, so we're in the middle of transitioning this at the moment. What we do at the moment, it's a bit 50:50, based on the review that we do, and those three things that we talk about, we will recommend some areas to work on for them in their IEP, and then try and get them to take some ownership. It's something I think we could be quite weak on and we need to be better at.

So we've put a pack together and it's, well we're trying to make it child friendly and age appropriate, so it's linked to FIFA and it's linked to FIFA Career Mode, and I've literally, we have a group within the schoolboys that, it hasn't got an official name, but in school it would be 'gifted and talented', it's the boys that we know are going to be here longer, they're trialling it for us at the moment.

So they've got this twelve page Power-Point and it's literally them owning it, so it's about them working on it saying these are my key strengths, these are what I'm good at, this is how they, so they've got a FIFA card, they rate themselves, there's no input from staff, to me it's kind of, it's irrelevant whether I think he's good at tackling or good, I might be able to steer him or guide him or give him some thoughts, but if he thinks he needs to work on his weaker foot more and he wants to come up with an action, you know, a session for it, and he wants to film himself doing it, and so that's perfect, so we're trying to hand over total ownership to the player.

So I'm trialling it with twelve players, and the idea is that when we get to review they're saying to me here's where I'm at rather than it being the other way round where we're saying here's where we think you're at. We use Huddle, I don't know if, do you know Huddle?

**I: Yeah.**

P: At the moment the reviews look like, we meet with a player and they show us their strengths and weaknesses through Huddle, so that kind of works, I just want there to be more depth to it, I want them to take a bit more ownership around the objective setting and the goal setting.

**I: Yeah. And would that be for all age groups?**

P: Yeah, but obviously there'd be a lot more assistance with an FP player than there would be in a YDP player. So even things like running workshops on what objective setting is, and what goal setting is, it's something that we're starting to do, just to help them understand what writing an objective looks like. There's life skills in that as well.

**I: As you say it sounds like there's a lot of responsibility sharing which, you know, from a life skills perspective is quite a big one so.**

P: That's it, yeah, yeah, massive.



**I: So when it comes to actually developing your plan or creating a development plan, and obviously I know you're talking about the discussion with the players and getting their input, is there any additional processes that you might undergo to fulfil an individual's needs?**

P: Yeah, so I guess again thinking a bit left field, so I'm trying to think of live examples without giving too much away, so if we've got somebody with maybe some behavioural issues, they might have problems at school or at home, they might be something that we can incorporate into certain development plans, and it might be a bit, it might be disguised, or it might be, I'm trying to think of an example.

So we've got a boy with ADHD and we, again it's somebody in fact I've known for a long time and we've got this constant tussle where when he's heavily medicated he's brilliant at school, really bad at football, and I don't mean technically bad, I just mean, you know, his energies are low, and then versus when he's not on his medication he's, you know, bright as a button at football, but obviously causes a problem at school, so that might be something we, you know, we discuss with the family or third parties, you know, club doctor or healthcare specialist or social workers that we kind of build something into the development plan to help him as a person which in turn will help him as a player. So, yeah, there are other discussions.

We use a psychologist a lot around, you know, maybe behaviour stuff or emotional control stuff, sports scientists if we think, you know, people need help with nutrition or power or, et cetera, so yeah, it's not just, we don't just come at it from a football perspective. I think the multi-disciplinary meetings we do on a Monday are a key part to it because that's where some of these issues will surface and then we can get the right stakeholder involved and say oh look, okay, well I'll do this or I'll do that, and it definitely works.

And again I think that's a benefit of my role, and if the club didn't have me in my role you'll always have people, different factions wanting their bit, whereas I kind of chair the meeting and will decide, well no that's definitely the physio needs to, I'm sorry to the coach, I'm sorry you want him out on the grass for this amount of time but the physio, so that's kind of again another benefit to my role, I can oversee that longer term development again when it's right at that time. Did that make sense?

**I: Yeah, 100%. And when you're going through this, even if it's development or selection when you go through this, do you have consideration of positional demands?**

P: The older they are, yeah. So we, yeah, something that sits a little bit uncomfortably with me, but we do ahead of the twelve week review we do, we call it 'a player audit', and we will put together, this is more, we do it for all the age groups, but it's more detailed with the YDP for obvious reasons.

We'll put the 16s and 15s together, that's what would be a scholarship group, then we put the 15s and 14s together, 14s and 13s, all the way through, and we put 'em on like a PowerPoint or a keynote actually, so we'll put people into their primary positions so you start to get a map of where you're over-subscribed, where you're under-subscribed, and so that could, when we get to fourteen and sixteen that does start to influence decisions on re-registration.

So at fourteen if you've got, if you put the 14s and 15s together, I'm trying to think of a live example, if we put the 14s and 15s together and you've got twelve central midfielders, clearly that's not going to be a scholarship group, so that could influence players going on a, being at risk of release, not through any performance measures, purely on positional measures, that sits a little bit uncomfortably with me.

Because there's so many people, we've got, I mean we've got, you know, regular five or six on the first team sheet at the moment, we've had eight and ten in recent weeks, I can think of, you know, three or four of them that are in the first team, not in the position they were in at fourteen or fifteen, so kind of it does sit uncomfortably with me, but the brief answer to your question is yeah we do, position does sometimes play a part in that process.

**I: And I know you've mentioned the four corner model throughout, what are your thoughts on the actual, the FA's model?**

P: There's a lot of what we do that we kind of deviate from the norms, so we've got six tools, we don't use four, we use six, and I guess where we come from is we don't just want to be told by people here's a model, it works, use it, we will need to look at it and think well does it work, is there an alternate model out there, because with respect the FA isn't always the most up-to-date and, you know, at the cutting edge of coaching evidence based research, et cetera, so we definitely, so we've spliced ours up quite a bit, so we've got technical, tactical, physical application, athletic ability because we think they're different, you can be athletic but if you don't apply it properly then it's useless, so tech, tac, physical application, athletic ability, professional lifestyle and, oh what's the last one, professional lifestyle, oh god, I'm

going to have to test myself now, professional lifestyle, well this is embarrassing, I'm going to have to have a look on my screen for the last one ...

**I: It might be psych sociologist.**

P: Yeah, it is, yeah, we link those, we link that, here you go, professional lifestyle, psych social mindset, that's it, psych social mindset, and that will be about again, you know, how we apply ourselves, et cetera, and so that's our six.

And again we have to try and make sure as often as we can that they're all given equal attention so, you know, the professional lifestyle, again the wording of that I'm not, when I talk about it I don't talk about professional lifestyle, I just talk about lifestyle with the boys because I'm not sure, again I'm not comfortable talking to a ten year old about their professional lifestyle because it's, you know, they're not going to have a professional lifestyle, but they can have a good lifestyle.

So, you know, we start talking to them early about good sleeping habits, good resting habits, good eating habits, you know, the importance of doing well at school, you know, the importance of, you know, showing respect to people, so they're the sort of lifestyle stuff we'd talk about, the psych social would be, you know, the emotional control, communication, you know.

Just a little thing that springs to mind is we talk about concentration a lot, but how often in, again we used to do it, we'd have a squad of fourteen/fifteen under 9s and they might play forty/sixty minutes of an eighty minute match every week, when do they ever learn to concentrate for eighty minutes for a game because we keep taking 'em off, rather than letting 'em run around for a bit and then putting 'em back on.

So we try and factor things like that in and make sure boys stay on the pitch for eighty minutes because how else are they going to learn to concentrate and make decisions when fatigued because they're all important traits to have. So they're the kind of things and considerations that we use, yeah.

**I: I was just trying to say it's not really a corner model anymore, you've got bits in the middle as well.**

P: No, yeah, I don't even know what it is, yeah, we just, we call them the six tools.

**I: No, yeah, it makes a lot of sense from what you're saying there. And I guess just, I just wrote these down so I can almost look at how it lays out, with your, it's interesting how your physical one almost plays two roles, and I kind of get why, but would that suggest that the physical side of the game's also quite a key part within the squad or the team?**

P: Yeah it is, 100%. And again we try and get it, so we've been, during this lockdown we've been getting first team players to do webinars and we don't pre-position 'em, we genuinely don't pre-position 'em because we think that the kids would sniff that out, they would just be repeating what we say, and we get first team staff to do CPD anyway regardless of being in a lockdown.

But for us the key messages that constantly come out are you have to work hard, you have to be aggressive, you have to be on the front foot, you have to compete, so they kind of link with our five key principles of do your job for the team, compete for everything, high intensive running, so that's something that we're constantly reinforcing hence we've split the physical one in two because you can get boys that look at their ten metre, twenty metre sprint test times or their 505 agility times and think oh I'm doing brilliantly, but you never see it in a game.

So we try and talk about it twofold, this is your actual athletic ability, this is what you're capable of, but let's have a look at your GPS data from the game, we never see it, so you can do a twenty metre sprint really quickly, sub-three seconds, but I never see you get into high speed running in the game, so that's where you can put the two together.

And to answer your question, yeah, we place a lot of emphasis on that hard work and, yeah, I mean we use words like be aggressive, be on the front foot, winning first contact, do your job for the team, compete for everything, yeah, we put a lot of, I guess they're kind of like traditional values, we put a lot of stock in that, that will get you further than being, you know, having great ball mastery alone is not going to be enough, I'd take the boy who's going to run rather than the boy who's got great ball mastery but doesn't want to run, and I think most managers would.

**I: And is that something like a philosophy embedded within [club name] more so than, or would you say that's like typically across clubs?**

P: I don't want to say about other clubs because I do, I do, here's what I, okay, I'll be really honest about how I feel about it, I think about ten years ago/eleven years ago I think the

footballing world got giddy eyed with the Barcelona and the Spanish model, and I think everybody was doing rondos in small-sided practices and wanting everybody to play off quick one and two touches, and it was brilliant, because obviously technically they were outstanding.

But again this is my opinion, I think football runs much deeper than that, I think it is linked to how you are as a society socially, you know, we are an industrious, hard-working nation, that's what we are, and I think that's reflected in our sports, we are suspicious of creativity, there isn't a great deal of creative people to flourish, and we should challenge that 100%, but our football model is very different to the Spanish model, it's completely different, and I think for a while I think football got itself confused here, and EPPP facilitated that a little bit.

So when I first came into Academy football, every team looked exactly the same, every team looked the same, tried to play the same, it didn't look like real football, it was very possession based and I think very false.

I mean our boys now when they go out on loan and are playing non-league football they talk about playing the real game, and I think that's a fundamental problem that they leave the Academy on loan to go on what they perceive is the real game, well we should be teaching them the real game.

So I think increasingly, as clubs like we have, start to deviate slightly from the EPPP, like it was quite a narrow corridor they wanted us to work with them, and as clubs have started to deviate and find their own path with it, and I have to say led by some of the bigger clubs, I won't name them, but I think some of the bigger clubs five or six years ago started saying to EPPP, no, actually no we're doing this, we're not interested in that we're doing this, and I think there's quite a few clubs doing that now, I think increasingly those traditional values are coming back.

So I've seen really recently an article from Everton, you know, they've started talking about being a little bit more direct, starting to get the boys challenging for second balls, starting to get 'em to be more aggressive, and we've been doing that, you know, for five or six years, so I think some things we're slightly ahead of the curve on.

I think people, nobody wanted to see a team that played direct or have big players at centre-back or big players, and it was almost like it had become a, it had almost become like

a dirty word in football, and I think nobody wanted to be that team that would be prepared to go direct.

Our whole football philosophy is to play forward and play forward quickly, that's not so we don't try and teach them to be able to retain possession and show control and patience, but we try and mirror the Championship first team football which is quite combative and quite, yeah, quite adversarial and, you know, we're getting quite a few players in the first team, so I think we're doing it right.

So that's, I can't even remember the question and how I've ended up here but, it was about the physical application, 100% we think it's reflected in our football philosophy, yeah, and I got comfortable there, I got comfortable with saying well we're going to come and compete against you and if you don't like us being aggressive well that's unlucky because that's us.

**I: The other thing I wanted to ask, which is a point you made earlier, is sometimes you see them physically performing in a test but they don't necessarily perform on the pitch, why might you think that is?**

P: Well there could be a load of reasons. And again, when you're dealing with, you know, I'll stick with YDP players, I'll think about the age group that I've said, you know, 15s, there could be a whole raft of reasons there, it could be they're in growth, you know, they're just pre their PHV where historically they could be really low of energy, if they're in their growth their coordination's all over the place.

Kids that age suddenly become very self-aware and they might not want to, we know that kids are risk takers in terms of not being able to assess risk like from physical harm, but the peer pressure becomes enormous so they may not do things that could put the spotlight on them. So it could be, yeah, that they're in their growth and they don't want to be seen to be running awkwardly or funnily or not getting there, it could be that they've played two school matches that week and they're knackered.

There's a whole raft of reasons that, on the surface, this is why I keep going back to people not players, on the surface, if you judge 'em as a player it would be very easy to get frustrated or have a negative opinion about someone, but this is fourteen/fifteen year old boys and they've got, life gets in the way for them, there's so much going on in their lives.

We've got, I've got, I've experienced boys that live at home with one parent and then we find out that at a given moment in time that mum's gone off on holiday or gone back to another country, left the kids at home on their own, and the neighbours are looking after 'em, and so that single event will 100% affect their performance on the pitch, so part of my role is trying to understand each and every one of 'em's individual lifestyle that could affect that. One second because I've got a dog squeaking at the door a second.

**I: Okay, yeah.**

P: Sorry, so yeah, there are a whole range of reasons why it could be, from lifestyle, you know, physical reasons, being knackered, being in growth, being injured, being ill, there could be psychological reasons, that they're under pressure, not doing well at school, yeah, it's really, really complex and I think that's part of the, you know, that part of my role is to spot things when they don't seem right.

Yeah, I'm trying to think of examples where it could be, so and listen, it could be as simple as they're lazy people, I can't beat around the bush, it could just be that they don't have that absolute will and desire to match. I've got boys with low physical athletic ability but absolute maximise what they've got and still fall short of the boy who's lazy but can perform at a high level. So, you know, it can be as simple as that, that they're just lazy and don't want to work hard.

**I: So just on that as a beautiful turn of phrase, the idea of them maximising what they've got, could it be that some of the individuals who have great athletic abilities, maybe they don't know how to utilise what they have on a pitch?**

P: Yeah, that's a great point, yeah, that's a good point. I think, listen we're always going to have to reflect in the moment to see if we're doing the best for every player of course. We periodise our week where we try and make sure that (a) you know, their loading's right anyway, but (b) that different types of player get to showcase their different types of ability so, you know, we do small-sided stuff followed by a large-sided night, and we're explicit with that, we tell 'em tonight is high speed running night, you know, it could be a crossing session and [00:41:08 inaudible] players this is your chance to get up to maximum speed, and, again, if we look at the GPS afterwards and we're seeing they're not, the first thing we'd look at is the session design, did it allow 'em to get up to full speed.

Then back to the question, it's a good question, yeah, it could be that they don't know how to, I'd like to think we were helping them and understand why, but absolutely it could be a factor.

**I: Yeah. The next question actually was on objective assessments, do you use many objective assessments with your players?**

P: In terms of measuring them?

**I: Yeah, in any of those corners as well, you know, it could be tactically, it could be physically, psychologically?**

P: Again, how can I say it, officially yes, so we've got principles of play that we would expect to see certain, so I can think of a really easy one, so crosses in the box, an objective measured in the 11-a-side game we'd expect there to be three people in the box when the cross arrives, and we do do that, but I think in youth development football those stats can get really lost in the noise because you could get one or two people doing their job absolutely spot on every time, and another person not, like for all the reasons we've just talked about, and it can skew those results.

So for me I try and look more, if I see a right winger coming and the nine and ten are arriving in the box and the eleven's behind 'em, I'm only interested in why the eleven's not, and you can see if a player's sprinting or not, and that would, that again linking it back to what I said earlier, that would appear on our needs to be better, and in our honest conversations we try and get boys being comfortable talking about themselves positively and negatively, and their teammates positively and negatively, and equally be comfortable receiving that feedback, that would be an example where it goes on the big screen, it will show up and I'll say what's the problem here, and they'd say there's three people not in the box, why is there not three people in the box, because Johnny on the left wing's not sprinting, Johnny why weren't you sprinting, so that's kind of, that's where we're at, that would be a really typical example of that.

I guess that objective measure may lead to that conversation but we try not to, other than physical, and even there we, you know like we do all the usual tests that everyone does, we do the counter movement jumps, ten/twenty metre sprints, the 505, the yo-yo, and of course there will be markers in there, and we use it against, we've got ten years' worth of our own historical data by position, and we use the PMA for the national data although that



is less reliable, so that will give us some indicators, but it's not as simple as he hasn't hit that threshold therefore we're not taking him, it would go into that committee of discussion of if someone's at risk one of the factors are look at his twenty metre time, it would help form a decision rather than be the reason for a decision, if that makes sense.

**I: Yeah. A couple of scenario based stuff for you now. If you were considering the development phases, and you had a player that excels in the foundation phase, how would that inform you for their future success?**

P: Yeah, so it's, yeah, the foundation phase, it's the phase I absolutely love working with, it's like my favourite phase. There are three parts to my job I think, I love working with the FP players, working with the older players challenges me, and then like twelve/thirteen is probably where I'm best, I think that's where I'm really good at, I'm best at my job.

But going back to your point, it's interesting because that whole potential measurement is just, it's so, so difficult, it's so, so difficult to do, and I think all we can really do is use our experience, our knowledge and our imagination with each and every individual case, and I think I referenced earlier we've got this, we don't have a name for it, school would call them gifted and talented or the elite squad or the gold star squad, it hasn't really, it's got so many different titles.

It's just less than 10% of our whole schoolboys go into this more individual programme where they get more individual support and attention, and that looks like having a mentor coach, a player mentor, they get more performance analysis, they get more bespoke S&C, it's just, obviously we can't invest all of our time in all of the players, we've got a programme that is individual, that takes care of en masse, and then there's a select few that we feel like we can invest a little bit more time in, and that would obviously be the boys that we think are going to be around longest.

We've currently got twelve players, we've got one under ten and one under eleven, so we're really reluctant to put FP players in there because obviously it's less reliable around, you know, from our own experience a brilliant under nine may reach his, you know, his potential window at under twelve/under thirteen.

But to answer your question, my job is to ensure the long term development so we don't get too giddy with 'em, we still think it's important that, to go back to again trying to link up what I've said before, every player needs to know what it's like to be dropped.

So we have certain games we call performance games and obviously it might be against a local club or if we're playing a Cat 1, probably about six times a year, the parents will know it, the players will know it, we'll say this is a performance game, not everybody's getting selected, if you do get selected you're not guaranteed to start, even if you're on the bench you're not guaranteed to get on, even if you do get on it might be for two minutes at the end. So we almost make it like a first team game, and we'll say to them this is about winning today, the tactics are going to be, now as a coach that's not how we approach it, we still approach it with development at the forefront, but from the player's perception this is the big cup game that we have to perform in.

So we can have an unbelievable under nine, under ten, under eleven, we will still drop them from one of those or some of those games, we will put them on the bench and put them, because how else do they build that resilience and understanding until they get put through it.

So my job is, I'm trying to answer your question as best I can, we do get excited when we, obviously, you know, every year or every two years you get a player that's like oh wow, this boy's going to be with us a long time, he's unbelievable, we can't get too giddy and carried away with 'em because, going back to that, you know, that growth mindset, it's really important that we keep them grounded, we keep the goals, whilst we want them to be long term goals we've got to make sure we've got those short term objectives within that.

I'm not really answering your question. The simple answer is we never stop it being a long term development, we try and imagine where they're going to be and what we need to do now to help them where they're going to be at some point in the future, and that might be the other side of the game where they don't necessarily like what we're doing, that we're doing, and that might mean not getting selected this week, and obviously the parents are obviously the worst, as soon as you drop a player it's like the end of the world, he's the best player in the team, why is he not playing, but we do try and be transparent about what we do and why we do it.

**I: So a similar question then, but the other end of the scenario, so it might get you thinking again, if you had a youth phase player who's had no Academy experience, you know, before that, how does that inform you?**

**P:** Yeah, these are the ones that I get drawn, I love these kids, I love these players. So we've got, in this age group now we've got, that we're talking about, I've got one who came in at

under thirteen, he only started playing, in fact there's two in that age group, he only started playing organised football under twelve so he'd had just a year out in grassroots football, came in to us, technically miles behind the rest of the boys, tactically, with respect, clueless to the game, just knows about, you know, structurally he knows the game, unbelievable athletic ability, unbelievable physical application, and his attitude to learn and his desire to learn is through the roof.

So that type of player, his learning plan will look very different to the rest, so we will try and, like on the large-sided nights we'll leave him in that as much as we can, and then on the small-sided stuff, or even on the large-sided nights, when the group might be doing a phase of play or something, we might take him off and do twenty minutes ball striking or twenty minutes heading, not twenty minutes heading but we'll try like ten minutes heading, and then we'll do extra, we do arrivals where they've got time to do some extras, and then they always get ten/fifteen minutes at the end of the session to do extras, but we'll send him action plans.

So for me even though he's come in at under thirteen he's roughly just more than halfway through his Academy life if you take that it's up to twenty-three, I still think I need to be thinking long term for him although it probably needs to be a little bit more accelerated, I need to probably try and catch him up, but it doesn't, again I'm trying to link conversations, when you go back to the conversations about release and that we can be emotionally invested, we could have one boy who's a centre-back who's been with us since under eight, this boy that's come in at under thirteen, this boy at the moment is ahead of him because he's in the Academy for five years so, you know, he's got football rich experience and environment, a family that takes him to games and plays with him in the back garden and, you know, his dad played football, but he could be reaching his ceiling, whereas this boy that's come in at under thirteen has got not a football family, has only played, you know, in the garden with his brother, gone into grassroots football, come into an Academy, so his footballing catalogue is tiny, but I think his potential might be more than this one, does that make sense?

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** So I probably need to start thinking about the investment of time might be in the one who's come in late rather than the one that's been here for five or six years. Does that answer that one around the late ones that come in?

**I: It does, yeah, because interestingly the next question which I choose not to ask some because it seems not to be understood well but I think you would, it actually asks about whether you consider training age, and what I mean by that I think people get, they take it the wrong way but I'll explain it to you because I think you just explained it to me, is a sense of somebody who comes in with only one year's background but is demonstrating the lowest standard that you'd expect, versus somebody who's been in the game for five years like you said, and who might be doing well but they're not a million miles ahead of that other person, that might demonstrate the one in one year has a much greater future ahead of them.**

**P:** Potential, yeah. So again it'll kind of lead me on to something else that I've not touched on, but this is where we don't do things in the standard norms. So, yeah, so the quick answer is 100% we don't look at players, we try not to look at players' chronological age, biological age in isolation, I think, and they're the football age, you know, we can't look at them in isolation because I think it's too, they're so multi-faceted.

So one of the first things we did about six years ago, we've got the FP now which is nine to twelve, on a Monday night, our small-sided night, I'll try and summarise this quicker, we don't train every night under nine, under ten, under eleven, under twelve, on a Monday night it's completely mixed, it will be small-sided nights with nine's to eleven's, on a Tuesday night the thirteen's and fourteen's train together, and then on a Thursday night the fifteen's and sixteen's train together for their large-sided games, and then on the opposites we'll do a night where all of YDP will train together, so you'll get thirteen's playing against sixteen's.

So our logic behind that is we will do some groups that will just be random where it will just be eight boys, you go over there and play 4v4 and it will be completely random, but we obviously take anthropometrics every month and we've got a spreadsheet that tells us where they're at in terms of their growth, where they're at in terms of their predicted adult height, and that might, so we might, it might inform us one week to do a bio-banded night where we've got all the 94% boys training together, it might be one night we've got all the quick boys together, it might be one night that actually we're going to put, we might use psychological factors, we might have all the aggressive people on this team and all the more passive players on this team and we'll go on and go and deal with that.

So we do an awful lot of mixing up, and even on match days we will pick squads where players play across the age groups, sometimes players play as, when I might have an under

thirteen go and play in the under fifteen's, not just because he's physically ready but because he might be so good in his own age group that he starts to take liberties or start to do disrespectful stuff, so we might go and put him up a couple of age groups to almost put him back in his place, like this is what's going to happen, you take too many touches against a bigger full-back he's going to put you over the fence.

So we factor all that in and again sometimes it can look a bit random and a bit unstructured but it's not, and if you're born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September in the traditional football model that kid only knows what it's like to be the oldest player in the group, if you're born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August he'll only ever know what it's like to be the youngest, and that can't be right, that can't be good for them socially or psychologically to, you know, constantly be stuck in that. So we will put, we'll play year of age birth games, we'll put two year bands together, so we've got clubs around us that will, you know, we'll play under twelve's and under thirteen's together, or we'll play, you know, like say year 2007 birth.

About six years ago there was a real appetite to do bio-banded games and that seems to have petered off, people seem to have, again it was another funky phase that people went through and they've lost it, and I don't know if it's because they don't understand it or it's too difficult to manage.

But, yeah, so we, I can't even remember the original question, about football age, that, yeah, 100% that we look at people individually, so on a game day what do they need, and again we're not embarrassed sometimes to put that under fifteen that has got a really low football knowledge, no, maybe I'll take it back a bit, an under twelve or an under thirteen we might play him in a nine-a-side game because tactically he's got no idea how to play 11-a-side, so we might just bring him back a little bit and let him catch up.

But, yeah, I could talk about the mixed phase stuff for ages because not many do it, and we've been to the FA three times now on the Advanced Youth Award to sort of showcase what we do, and some coaches just don't have it, their heads wobble, when they see an under nine playing against an under eleven, an under twelve, they just point blank refuse to accept that it's good for the under nine, but it absolutely is, because when the kids were playing on the streets that's exactly what they'd do, they won't think twice about it, and they will reorganise themselves so that the game will become fair, you know, if they think the sides are unequal the kids will reorganise themselves to make it equal, if there's an

under twelve kicking an under nine up in the air the group will slowly but surely reorganise itself so they stop kicking him up in the air, again it's like giving them a bit of responsibility.

And I think, we do a lot of 1v1 and 2v2, if you call an under twelve over and an under ten over the under ten's looking up at the under twelve thinking oh my goodness, this is going to be a real struggle, and the under twelve's looking at the under ten thinking psychologically this could be horrible here, if I get nutmegged by an under ten, you know, so there's two different types of pressure going on.

So we do consider, yeah, we do consider the football age, and like I think you saw I got quite excited when you talked about the people [00:57:48 inaudible] I get really excited by them because I think even though I'm in Academy football I don't think Academy football is structured great, and I think fourteen is really a good age to start seeing players for what they are, so yeah, I think you can identify potential easier at fourteen than you can at nine or ten, that's my personal view.

**I: Yeah. So you answered the next two questions of that section actually which was around maturation which is great. I guess one of the things I would ask is how do you consider, and I think this is, there's not an answer per se but within bio-banding if you have a player, there's two ways on this, that's early developing so he's well ahead of the curve but his technical ability is not ahead of the age group, likewise you might have a late developer who's ahead of his age in regards technically, what do you do then, do you keep them in the relative age or do you then?**

**P:** No, I think, again I don't, the whole age thing like kind of just frustrates me, it's so arbitrary innit, September to August we just lump a load of kids together and assume that that's going to, we've got more control in our own environment about the challenges that we can set than we've got in the games programme because we can manufacture.

So if you've got, I'm trying to think of a live example, so we had someone who's a scholar now, when he was under twelve he was like 94/95% grown but his adult height was only going to be five foot six, he was a giant at under twelve, and in the traditional model that's just, I think that's catastrophic for him because all the skill acquisition that's going on is wrong, he's learning how to bully people, not protect and shield and be bullied.

So in our environment with that data, if we've got a late developer who's going to be six foot two, I mean they don't normally go like that, but let's say they're going to be six foot two/six

foot three and they're a late developer, it's easier for us to manufacture it where he is the tallest, you know, where he is a bit bigger, or if somebody, so we've got one who's going to be five foot six, he's a late developer, he's technically unbelievable, like if you think of a really good futsal or five-a-side player, he's that kid, and we've played him down one age group or two age groups his entire time in the Academy, but he's now at that point where his maturational status is catching up with his age group, he's actually in this group I was going to talk about.

So this year is the year, we need to kind of expose him now to his own maturational status and, you know, it's fair to say he's struggling, it's kind of we now need to reflect back and say we failed him by allowing him to play down, but sometimes you can't do right for doing wrong, you can only do what you're informed with.

I've meandered off from the question, but yeah, I think we can control the challenges we set for people, so if they're technically good or behind maturationally we can pick the challenge for them in our training programme and our training games better than what we can in the games programme because, you know, even the Premier League [01:01:09 inaudible] and like the Premier League [01:01:10 inaudible] and even though other clubs get so, so suspicious of why you're playing a player down an age group, and it's never ever to win the game, it's never to win the game, it's all about what's good for him individually.

They never, you know, teams never bother moaning when you play four players up and they beat you five nil, they're never concerned then, but the minute you play one player down there's this ultra-suspicion, why are you playing him down, well sometimes it's pretty evident why because they're, you know, they're tiny, you know, technical, or they're, yeah, they're technically [01:01:46 inaudible].

But, yeah, so the quick answer, yeah, there are strategies we can use, I just find it easier to do in our training programme than I do in the games programme as we control the challenge for them.

**I: Okay. So moving into the next section, now you need your team sheet, a couple of things I need you to do before we go into any questions, if you can, have you got like a pen, can you write on it?**

**P:** Yeah.

**I:** Yeah, so if you can place a letter H next to any of the players that you would consider to be top performing so a higher performer in the group.

**P:** Yeah.

**I:** And then just let me know when you, you can put as many or as little as you want.

**P:** Yeah, that's fine. ... Yeah, that's done.

**I:** And then the same thing for, you're going to be putting a letter L against who you might consider to be the lower performers of the group.

**P:** ... The game I've taken it from is one of those performance groups, so its actually a really, really strong squad, that's okay, I can do this, yeah. Yeah, that's done, yeah.

**I:** Include your bench players as well within that so.

**P:** Okay, yeah. ... Yeah, that's done.

**I:** Okay, and then anyone else I'm assuming would be a mid-performing player.

**P:** Yeah.

**I:** Okay. How many H's have you written so I can write down the quantities, so how many H's have you got?

**P:** Four.

**I:** And then how many L's have you got?

**P:** Two.

**I:** And then how many would be in the M?

**P:** Seven.

**I:** Brilliant.

**P:** Is that right? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven ... six, seven, eight, sorry, eight.

**I:** Eight, okay, fine. Okay, so in regards to the groupings, how have you determined who's in what group?



P: So the high performing players, two of them are in that what we would call our gifted and talented group, so they are, they would be seen as players that we would be offering an early registration period to, so they're people that we've already discussed and are sort of already being, when we do that player audit they're already categorised as players that are going to be re-offered registration, even under fifteen, they're going to be offered scholarships, so just through our processes that we've gone through, they've already been determined as high performing.

I: **Yeah. What about the low performers, how have you put them in there?**

P: So there's two different sorts here, so out of the two players one is somebody who we've discussed in that same process at being at risk on our radar as may not be up for re-registration and someone that we're, you know, we're looking to support to get him through it.

The other one is one of the players that I got excited about and we talked just now, he's someone who's come into the Academy late, who I think has got an absolute tonne of potential, but right now in this group would be one of the lower performers, so technically and tactically he's behind, but I think he's going to be with us through scholarship, in fact I'll be honest with you I've already told him and his family he will be here as a scholar, of course we haven't formally offered it, I've told him put your mind at rest, stop panicking about re-registration, you'll get a scholarship, let's just concentrate on the here and now, so whilst his performances are low his potential's really high.

I: **Yeah. So since your time working with this group, would they have changed from maybe medium to high or a higher to medium and obviously lower to medium, et cetera?**

P: Yeah, so again that's a really, because this is a group I know, I've known them since they were eight so I know them really, really well, I've been on about eight tours with 'em so as people and players I know them really well, and we had this, funnily enough we had this discussion about six weeks ago about this group, so a new coach in asked me what was this player like at nine and was he any different to now, not as a player, he was asking what was he like as a person because like the kid's got quite cheeky, got good banter, comfortable around adults.

I think, and this is going to probably link to my own philosophy, I think their performances will obviously peak and trough because it's youth football, you're going to get performances

that go up and performances that go down, the ones that are high ... they've not always been high performers, but we've always, they've been in that category of high potential all the way through the foundation phase.

And there's one who in his, whilst he was identified as a high performer, this is going to be the beauty of my job, under ten and under eleven there was a, this is one of these rare examples where there was a consensus to release him, they just couldn't see the longer term picture that, you know, his personality was quite poor, he couldn't concentrate, and he made lots of gaffes technically, but there was me and one other who just saw a trait in him that we've seen before and were adamant we need to wait, we need to wait, we need to wait, and I'm glad we did because he's now going to be one of those high performers.

To answer your question, I think you see peaks and troughs in performance. Has my opinion of 'em in terms of their potential changed? Not really, no, I think they're all kind of where they were ... with the odd exception, yeah, with the odd exception. There's one in the medium now that maybe at nine/ten we thought had really high potential, but in the main I think they've stayed the same.

**I: Just out of curiosity, what was it that you saw in that player that you wanted to retain him, when you say he had potential?**

P: Yeah, okay, this is going to, I'm going to contradict myself now, football's full of contradictions, so I'm about to contradict myself so I'll apologise in advance. We seem to have a knack of producing naff sided centre-backs, it's quite a bespoke position, he's going to be six foot four, he's left footed, he's athletically sound, I just, when they're young they can, you've got players that were playing from like three, four or five, they've been to soccer tots and all of that, look technically really good, but I think that can get plateaued quite quickly.

So he might have looked a little bit scruffy, I just, I'll be honest with you, a lot of it were physical markers and prediction markers in terms of what he was going to be, just, it's hard to describe, we just saw things in him that we've seen in two or three players older that ended up, and, you know, in the foundation phase he was playing as a striker which is why, we play players in lots of positions, but I always had in the back of my mind if we were to profile him he could be, you know, a left-back, left-centre-back or ideally left-centre-back three, yeah.

And again we've got one in two age groups above him, exactly the same profile, and at under thirteen we got right to the February review and we were saying we are going to be releasing you because you need to change your attitude and application towards a game, and he's flying now, I think he'll play in our first team, but, yeah, I just saw in [name of footballer] what we've seen before, just how he plays the game.

**I: Almost experience of previous success.**

P: Yes, yeah.

**I: Yeah. So just in consideration of the groupings you have placed them into, would they at present this is, would they at present represent more so in the higher, the ones that you're likely to select for, you know, maybe a scholar in the eyes of a fifteen, and de-select in regards to the ones who are lowers?**

P: No, I think all of them ... all of them, so the mediums and high are almost certainly going to get a scholarship, the two that we've got low, one will still definitely get a scholarship, and one will be in consideration, we've not ruled him out yet at all, but the other one will definitely get a scholarship even though he's low.

**I: Yeah. So ... you've covered a few of these questions, I'm having to read them to sort of jump ahead at parts. High performing only now, so just the high performing group, is there anything that they do consistently amongst the whole group that places them above the medium and the lower?**

P: ... Yeah. Right, just over-simplifying it, they do the five key principles consistently better than everybody else. They show high intensive running, they always try and do their best in terms of doing their job, they compete for everything, they try and play forward, and execute their USP, I know that's over-simplifying it.

And again, you know, I have to be honest, you know, we've gotta be honest here, all of them have got the physical traits that will enable 'em to go and play league football, there'd be no point in somebody being a high performer now if they're not going to be able to compete.

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: And these have got it all, technically they're all sound, but it's their character traits I guess that put 'em above, like the way they train, the way they apply themselves, the way they review themselves, the way they reflect themselves.

I know it can be daft stuff but just, if I say to a group in these COVID times arrive at the gates ready to play, I'll notice the ones that arrive at the gates ready to play, and those that arrive with their £200 trainers on and £100 tracksuit and all the other bits to make sure everyone can see all of that, because I think they're important, I'm not saying that should rule 'em out, but I just think that we notice.

A first team gaffer needs to trust a player, so if he says arrive ready to play then they need to arrive ready to play, and they're the sort of things we'd pick up on, and we, you know, we do put some stock in that, I think it's important, we're educating 'em as well, we're not telling 'em off, we're educating 'em.

**I: Yeah. So is there anything that, so you've got four in the higher group, do they have unique things that they are outstanding at?**

P: Yeah.

**I: What would they be?**

P: So I can look through 'em. So one of them his pass, selection pass execution, like a very, very good technical player, one is his athletic, physical application and his competing, he's a centre midfielder and he just literally if you say, his stats are through the roof and he just wins every battle, he's just an old fashioned midfield general, one is dribbling, he's a dribbler, and then one is, he's the one I was talking about that people wanted to release, he's a centre-back so really good at long distance passing, really good at 1v1s [01:13:17 inaudible] USPs.

**I: With those players, would you argue that they understand what they excel in and understand how to apply that within the game maybe more so than the other groups?**

P: No, I would say, again trying to link to what I've said earlier, out of these players here I think you could, if we picked one at random and brought him on the screen and you said to him what are you good at, what do you need to be better at, I think they could articulate it, I think they could say to you this is what my USP is, and this is how it affects the game, and this is what I need to do better at and this is why, I'm really confident on that, so no I don't

think they're more aware of their attributes than the lower performers or medium performers.

**I: Okay. It's interesting how the stuff they're good at puts them into that top group, but then it's not necessarily them knowing that they're good at it, does that make sense, so it's an interesting point. Is there anything that they're, so same sort of question now, is there anything they're outstanding at, or just good at, that actually doesn't affect their performance at all?**

P: ... Yeah ,I just, that, again I'm being like cliché and I'm repeating myself, but just that mindset of being able to practice and have that appetite and that desire to get better, you do need to, you know I've read recently somewhere you know that, again there's not a tonne around this, but science suggests that that appetite or that capacity to practice could be, it could be genetic, you know, you could be born pre-disposed to have that trait of wanting to practice, but yeah, so 100%.

When I talk about doing extras this whole group actually is very good at doing extras, but those four will take it more seriously and I'll have to say to 'em right that's it now, enough now lads, whereas the rest they might end up playing two touch or, do you know what I mean, and it might end up being a bit of a just whacking the ball into the back of the net, so yeah like that is something I'd [01:15:38 inaudible] the importance they place on practice, and if I say to them this would be a really good practice for you, the next time I go out and watch the extras I'll probably see them doing that practice, but I can't be sure the rest of them would all do that.

**I: So if you removed any trait at all, would they still be the same player?**

P: No, I don't think they would, no.

**I: So now just talking about the lower performing players, is there anything, the same sort of question, is there anything consistent that places them in the lower?**

P: No, so only that both came into Academy football later than the rest, but like I said one of them I'm really excited about, and I think he'll be here a long time, and he actually has the best attitude to learning than anyone in the group, so that's why I'm excited by him.

**I: So I think I kind of know the answer because you said it in that play you were talking about, do these players lack complete abilities to be in higher groups, or do they possess the required abilities but at poorer standard?**

P: Yeah, except they're poorer standards, so they've got work to do that we'll assist them with, yeah definitely, and that's that, we're back to that long term model, I've potentially got six/seven years to work with this one, you know, we end when they're twenty-three, and I think that's a long time, particularly at that age.

**I: And then likewise is there anything that's uniquely individual to them that they're really, you know, good at, or maybe they're really missing?**

P: So there's two in there, one is, I've already said, like unbelievable appetite to learn, the other one completely lacks self-confidence and is really self-critical, so when, I'll tell you now, he's a goalkeeper so goalkeepers historically in Academy football tend to play a half each, whether he plays the first half or the second, he will choose to play the first half not the second half because the pressure of the game obviously and the outcome of the game increases in the second half because that's where the game's ending.

So we'll have to try, yeah, so he's very self-critical and it affects his self-confidence, he's someone who came into the Academy late so again it's work in progress. Even though he's a low performer he's not written off by any stretch, it's just he needs a different type of support.

**I: Yeah. Is there anything that they're really good at in the low performance, but that doesn't affect how they play so it's almost a wasted trait?**

P: ... No, no, I don't think there is, I think, because all the traits I can think about, I wouldn't say any of them was wasted because one of them's an unbelievable leader, a really good communicator, yeah, no, they're all good traits, I wouldn't say they're wasted traits.

**I: No problem.**

P: And he can rap, he rapped for the school in a school talent competition, that could be a wasted talent.

**I: Not quite the same sort of thing.**

P: No.

**I: So now just looking at the middle performers, the last few questions now as well, how did you distinguish the line between not putting them in the lowers and not putting them in the higher?**

P: Just, it's something I'm loathe to do full stop, but it's an audit, we go through this audit process where we do exactly this, we call it A, B and C, and then there's gold star, so I kind of knew where they were anyway, it wasn't me sat here doing it myself, there's a process that we've arrived at, there's a consensus that this person's a higher performer and this person's not.

And I guess again what, we don't talk, we try not to talk about performance, we try to talk about potential, so how long are they going to be here. So the ones that I've put a H to are ones we know are going to be here a long time, the ones we've, well that's not strictly true because the other two are lower performers but are going to be here a long time so, yeah, it's a difficult one to answer that if I'm being truthful.

The process we go through categorises 'em in these, of where they're at I guess technically and tactically, I'm talking about where I see them in the future which again is kind of my role I guess, but it was fairly straightforward because we don't have too many low performers, and the ones we do are people that we might think are good anyway, particularly, yeah, you've got me thinking now because I've contradicted myself a little bit there, so you've got me thinking about that now.

The process we go through should determine where they're at, but like, again I keep using this one as an example, on the pitch if you turned up and watched him you'd be like he's a car crash, he's going to cost you gold, but I can see beyond that, it doesn't bother me if we lose games because of him because I can see what's going to happen in the future, and that's the danger of again working in silos like we used to, he might've gone in the traditional model, if that makes sense.

**I: Yeah.**

P: I haven't answered your question because I'm not very sure actually.

**I: Oh no, that's fine, that's fine, you answered the next one within that though so. Is there anything that there are that's exceptional within that middle group but it still doesn't**

**place them within the top? It doesn't mean you have to go through all of them per se but**  
...

P: No, I think all of them possess good character traits and all of them are hard-working, I think when we get to fifteen/sixteen there's not going to be too many that don't display the traits that we need to see because they'd have been rooted out before, so, yeah, they've all got good character traits, you know, we're talking about fine margins now at this age group, it's almost, you know, who we see has got the best potential, not necessarily the best performer.

I: **So almost like your middle group are demonstrating at least the lowest expected standard across the board, whereas maybe your high performing group are showing more than that.**

P: Yeah, that's, yeah, that would be a nice way of putting it, yeah.

#### **8.10.12 Participant 12**

I: **Okay, so starting off with the basic easy stuff. What's your current job title?**

P: So I'm a lead nines and tens coach at [club] at the moment.

I: **And your category status for the academy?**

P: It's one.

I: **And what league does the first team play in?**

P: Premier League.

I: **How long have you worked in football for?**

P: Me personally for...probably 14 years, give or take now, in some capacity so.

I: **Good time length. And how long has that been in your current position?**

P: Eighteen months.

I: **Eighteen months, okay. And what age group are you going to discuss later on today?**



P: Yeah, I'll do the nines and the tens.

I: **Nines and tens, brilliant.**

P: Yeah.

I: **Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah. Erm, so I've always been into football and played up to a decent level, sort of semi-professionally and I got into sort of the reserve team and sort of in around the first team at my local club called [club], who are based in [town]. But probably at that time I started to realise that I wasn't really going to go on and play at the level that I wanted, so when I was 14 I started taking on some voluntary opportunities with [club] football club to do some support with them. This was kind of before the playing stuff. But I enjoy coaching and, you know, I used to leave school early and jump on a bus to go down to [club location] and go and help out and coach and probably when ...after finishing my GCSEs I looked at the A levels that would help support me but that was when I started to get a little bit more serious with my coaching and started getting some part-time based work with [club] and I sort of decided from there that actually I wanted to pursue coaching as a career path and I didn't feel university was sort of appropriate at the time. I just felt getting work experience was really important. So yeah, so I went from [club] then I went to America for a year, had some experience out there. Then I came back and worked at a company called [company name] for four years and worked at an organisation with [company name] alongside that. Those roles really gave me an opportunity to work with the broadest range of environments you could think of, you know, in terms of working with disability, females, street football, primary school delivery, secondary school delivery, working with elderly people. I kind of got a real broad base of working with lots of different people through sport and through football. Then I came back America, really because I wanted to gain sort of more academic qualifications so I went and did my UEFA B and my youth awards and that's when I really sort of wanted to go and pursue an academy role. So I joined [club], whilst I was working at [company name] I had two jobs and I've typically had two jobs for a lot of my time, probably not until lately. And then I worked two roles; I was running a Futsal programme for [club] as well as working in the academy, that kind of was the next step when I moved to [club]. Then I didn't the role I wanted at [club] then I went to move to [club], well I didn't move to [club] I joined [club] which was obviously quite a way from [club] and became the foundation phase lead there so I oversaw the under sevens to under twelves.

**I: That's brilliant.**

P: And now I've joined [club] in the capacity that I have. So in my 14 years I've had probably ...four years I would say I've had full time doing an academy role.

**I: Oh wow, okay.**

P: And ten years of merging roles or really grafting. So yeah, so it's been quite a journey.

**I: It sounds impressive. How would you describe your current role then?**

P: I'm responsible for the under nines and tens players and staff and parents, so obviously I've got a responsibility to support the club in introducing the young children into academy football and, you know, giving them the best experience that I possibly can, you know, as young children that are playing football.

**I: So when you're considering player development, do you have personal beliefs or a personal philosophy?**

P: The philosophy thing I always find quite difficult to answer if I'm being honest, which is just because I feel it evolves. I think also when you work at a professional football club often your football club kind of, not dictates, but you kind of conform to their philosophy. And I'm quite fortunate probably, particularly at this club, I feel it's pretty aligned to my way of working by the way in which our senior management team sort of probably ask for me to do my role but also for how we're approaching stuff, player development and all the rest of it from that perspective. So, yeah, I always find that question quite difficult to answer. I feel that I have a duty of care to give children and parents the best experience as possible. I have a responsibility to give them, you know, as much support in them being the best that they can be and making sure that they're having lots of fun and they're feeling really safe would probably be my purest answer in that sense. But in terms of like a style of play, no, I just want to make kids feel risk adverse. I want to minimise the amount of pressure that they're under. Naturally kids will feel under pressure because they're in a professional academy and you can't remove pressure or fear but you can reduce it through the environment that you create. And I want kids to be independent decision makers that are willing to take risks and be really creative and excite everyone that watches them.

**I: So would you say decision making's quite a confounding attribute from your perspective? Or an important one for a better way to phrase it?**

P: I like them making loads and loads of mistakes. I don't mind them making wrong decisions. I think decision making is something that develops over time. My job as a coach is to give them problems rather than give them answers and as a result of that, by giving them problems, they're more likely to make wrong decisions but through those wrong decisions and those experiences hopefully it will lead onto them making the right decisions as we know.

I: **Yeah, learning.**

P: Yeah.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So when you're considering the players, do you have expectations on certain capacities of ability as they're progressing?**

P: Sorry, can you ask that again sorry?

I: **So to rephrase it, do you have expectations on a player's capabilities, it could be across different domains?**

P: No, not, obviously with the level that we're working at, the children have got to be able to cope to some extent with just playing at the level that they are. There's obviously got to be some mental, physical capacity to cope with the level. I think cope is an important word because you'll get kids at all different levels and they've got to be able to cope in their own way and their own way may be different to others because it may be that they can cope really well emotionally and actually therefore they can deal with the challenges that face them likewise, you know, they may be able to cope with really physically and do really well physically and that may give them enough to deal with the environment too. So yeah, I think coping is an important thing. And obviously they've got to show some long term potential. No one knows at the age groups that I'm working with who's going to be a professional footballer but I think from experience you can probably gauge kind of what types of kids you want. You want children that have a willingness to learn. You want children that are enthusiastic. You want children that are creative. You want children that really, really love playing football and then show, I suppose, the ability to pick up information and improve as time goes on and I think there's obviously a... just the nature of being in London, there's a physical challenge, not necessarily in terms of being big and strong but just children that can move well and have an ability to be robust and resilient just because being at a cat one club

like [club] when you're playing our games programme and being in London, it's a very hustle and bustle sort of environment.

**I: Yeah. Yeah I lived in [location] for a few years myself. So with a consideration now towards strategies that might be employed in the club as well, obviously it's not like, we're not trying to pick out secrets etc., when you're thinking about the development plans or even deselection and when I mean deselection it's release retention so at their, probably what their key phase is, who would be involved in those decision making processes?**

P: Yeah, so at our club we meet quarterly as a group of staff. The recruitment staff, which consists of at our club four lead members of staff that are sort of responsible for different age groups. So we kind of have one member of staff per, well like my... we have like the sevens to tens recruitment staff so he oversees that. So they have a succession plan and basically what that does is they quarterly will assess the players based on potential so they kind of come up with a score for that and we as coaches will assess them on performance and then those performance and potential scores enable us to kind of understand where the player's at at that time, subjectively of course, and then that helps frame kind of any decisions that we're going to take with them by and large. At [club] the club typically don't release any players that are under nines and under tens so, and more often not under elevens so pretty much if a boy signs for under nines they'll be with us for three years.

**I: Yeah.**

P: We do a technical match report on a weekly basis and we assess the players against our player profiles. So we have a player profile for the foundation phase in terms of physical, technical, social and psychological, so we kind of broaden that down and then we assess them against that and that generates an average score and that average score is what helps us put towards the performance score. So there's a regular assessment on match days on that. And what that's done is it's enabled us to have conversations where needed. If a player we notice is struggling lots from a performance perspective there may be something that we need to do to support them or a way we can step in. The other thing we consider when we're doing the performance scores as well is, actually that helps us guide creating a bespoke programme for them too. So we actually red, amber, green our games for the team and also for each individual. Red being a stress game, amber being a level game and green being a cope game or comfort fixture and we'll try and tailor the games programme for each individual. So if we notice a boy's having loads and loads of green games over the course of a

year then it may be we put them in an age group above where they're going to have more stress games to give them the right balance. So actually that helps us, I suppose almost put more problems in front of them knowing that's going to have an adverse effect on performance. But that's again spoken with the parents and the kids and kind of there's a real understanding of why that's happening. So that's that.

But then post 13 that succession planning becomes more important because then we're starting to get more position specific and we start delving deeper into okay if we've got two right backs in the age group above and one right back who's really prominent in the age group below, what do we need to do to try and make sure those kids have a pathway as they progress through and also as the club has more resource, what types of players do we need to recruit from other academies or from grassroots to support the players that we've got.

**I: So it almost becomes that idea of, you become aware of there being too many players in one position early so that you don't release somebody based on somebody else being better whilst they're still good.**

P: Yeah, yeah, in effect, yeah, and it may be that we have, you know, as kids start maturing and we start sensing that they're maybe starting to gravitate towards a particular position or area of sorts, when we've got lots of them doing it, maybe we'll be like let's try them in this area because that may be his best chance of succeeding or getting game time and all the rest of it. But yeah, that typically doesn't happen until sort of under 13. At nines to twelves we get the kids playing lots of different positions and it's more on their profile which is across lots of areas whereas from 13s up they have like position specific player profiles that the club have in terms of what does a right back look like at [club], what does a centre back... and that's kind of then what's used to measure the players.

**I: So within that you sort of mentioned about the four corner model by the FA. What do you think of the four corner model yourself?**

P: Yeah, I think it's been useful from a way of looking at the players. I think it just helps, again as long as it's not making the decision for you, I think it just helps create conversations round the place really. Yeah, I think there's still probably more...there's more emphasis on the technical and physical from a provision perspective and maybe less of the psychological and social stuff. I'd argue the psych social stuff is the most important areas but at the moment I don't feel the clubs probably put as much resource in those areas.

**I: So why do you think that they might be more important?**

P: When you speak to a lot of people that have worked in the industry, a lot of the people that said the ones that have gone through often refer to their mental strength, toughness, resilience, all the more psychological characteristics, they work great. That character being probably the thing which helped them get through because I suppose in a world of football it's about how you're perceived, relationships, how you manage up with the manager and how you get on with your teammates, all those sorts of things are going to be things that help you get into the team and obviously if you then are a good person and come across in the right way that's probably going to give you an opportunity to get ahead of other players that maybe are more talented than you and likewise if you've got real good mental characteristics you're more likely to be trusted at the higher level. So yeah, I think that's probably why. And I think when you look at younger children obviously their brains, well their brains all the way through the academy journey are still growing and still very young, and their brains at the younger age groups are very different, you know, to what they are at teenagers or young adolescents.

**I: Yeah, very malleable at that age aren't they?**

P: Yeah.

**I: I know you said about it being quite subjective when you're talking about, I find it really interesting about their potential versus performance stuff and you said it's quite subjective when you look at performance. Do you use any objective stuff? It might not necessarily be game stuff?**

P: Well we use the data. So the data is objective in the sense of it gives us a score against our player profiles but there's an element of subjectivity within that because how I may score one player may be different to how another coach scores another player. So I think that's as close as it can be. I have yet to come across a system that would be able to provide you factual data that assesses development or performance at those younger age groups. I think that would be really difficult to erm...that probably is pass my level of expertise. I think there's, there will be an element in subjectivity in anything that you do but as long as you know the reasons why you're doing it and it's against what your club believes in is what's going to help develop players then I think that's as good as it can be. So yeah, so that objective, subjective scoring system that we have in place will lead our conversations around the players and that performance score obviously helps support that. And there's criteria for

those scoring systems so there's a definition for what like an A1 player would look like compared to a C4 player and obviously there's some definitions around that, so yeah.

**I: Do you utilise things like physical objective data because I imagine you probably get like your sprint tests etc.?**

P: Yeah, yeah, particularly in the older age groups, not so much in the age groups I'm working with just because the data isn't as relevant just because pre maturation you're not really going to, you're not really noticing much on physiological age. Really it's more around footballing age will probably have the biggest influence of them in the foundation phase, which kids have had the longest amount of time playing football will probably have the biggest impact on performance, so that's probably something I think we should consider more. I don't think we always do enough on the documentation that I've [referred to] to cater for that, however that is something that the new recruitment guys are going to be looking at. They're looking at academy age because obviously what they're finding sometimes from their previous experience going into club you might bring in a boy that's never played in academy before and obviously compared to a kid that's been in academy for five years, naturally they're going to be finding it more of a challenge to adjust to the structure or the institution that they're joining, you know so... Yeah I think that would be the thing. But no we don't tend to look at sprint speed or the physical testing with the younger one just because I'm more interested in the process of how they move rather than the outcome.

**I: Yeah. You answered a question quite ahead of itself but you're one of the only people that has known about it. I've got a question about training age and everyone I've asked seems to not sort of, it almost seems to go over their head so I was quite impressed that you mentioned that because that was something I feel is very underused but apparently not at [club ] so that's good.**

P: Yeah well I mean it's used, I'm aware of it. We have on all of their IDPs how long they've been in the academy for, so we're aware of them in that sense. I just- I don't feel when we have our quarterly meetings that area's spoken about as much whereas with the older ones they will touch base on what quartile they are, how far they are off of their PHV, those different things you know, and these are all considered, but footballing age is isn't as much. And I suppose maybe as they're getting older that doesn't matter as much and more often than not by the time we get to 13s, 14s there's not as many kids being recruited, you know,

[not] many kids have been in the academy for a certain amount of time so maybe that doesn't have as much of an impact, I don't know.

**I: Is that, just out of curiosity, does that football age come into your potential criteria?**

P: Yeah definitely. Yeah from the recruitment guys they'll definitely be interested in that. That's certainly facted. And that is factored into when we make decisions too because obviously everyone's trying to find the silver medallists. So yeah, it's kind of looking at the, I kind of look at shouting talent and whispering talent. I don't know if you've come across that?

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I think we're trying to find the whispering talent but obviously we, I tend to, the age groups I'm working with you get a lot of shouting talents, lots of high potential, high performance kids. I haven't worked at one club for long enough to know whether that's, those kids still go on. From speaking to people that have there's been examples of kids that have and there's been examples where kind of the ones that have been towards the bottom end of the group and just haven't done enough have gone through, so yeah.

**I: Yeah it varies quite a lot doesn't it? There's a couple of bits that aren't really related to you so I'm just sort of trying to find the next question for you.**

P: That's okay, that's fine.

**I: So some scenario based stuff. This will be interesting for you to answer especially because you're in the foundation phase now, if you had a player that's really excelling in the foundation phase, how would that inform you about their future success?**

P: I think that's a really hard question to answer. I think it would create some bias in some way and a level of expectation which may either help them to prevail or hinder them from those that are assessing or judging. So sometimes you can create a sense of...what's the word, you can build up a sense of hype I guess around players you know and that may help them in securing a pathway or time. Likewise if they then have a significant dip it's kind of like they're meant to be really good but they're not duh duh duh. But then I think clubs now are much better at judging players on their tail so what I mean by that, it's kind of judging them on what's happened previously rather than what's happening now so if a kid is really, really good at under nines and under tens, under 11s but maybe gets to 13 and is maybe not



performing so well, then they were really, really good then so maybe it's just a case of they've grown duh, duh, duh. But yeah, I wouldn't be able to answer that probably, that would just be probably my thing in terms of performing biases and that may be helping or stopping them from going on. But there's loads of reasons why a kid may be performing brilliantly in those younger age groups. One thing I will say is it probably gives them a better opportunity to join another club if they're released from ours.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** You know, if they're a top player and they've been released at under 12s and, you know, they've had maybe a bad season it's more likely that one of those kids will go and find another club to join and potentially go in and be the best player again at that club and I think that adversity and creating adversity is really important in development and in sport. Did that answer your question okay?

**I: Yeah, yeah definitely. So a similar question and it would be obviously hypothetical, if you had a player that was to join in the youth development phase and he hadn't had any academy background at all prior to that, how would that influence your decisions on their future?**

**P:** It would depend on the level that they came in I suppose. I think, I like to think that if a decision has been made the coach or the phase lead or the person responsible for their age groups alongside the recruitment have collectively agreed upon that and I think if there's a collective agreement I think that will create a sense of patience because ultimately it's their decisions, so they won't go back on that quickly and they'll give kids time because they've got rationale for that.

I think if it's not done collectively and the boy's joined and perhaps the coach or the phase led don't agree with it I think that's where it may prevent the kid from having as much time or people being as patient. But yeah, obviously if they've not had any academy experience, providing they're able to perform to the minimum level, you know, and not be completely out of their depth, I think there'd be certainly reasons for patience on that point. Obviously I think at under 13 they're given a two year contract 13 and 14s and then 15 and 16s and typically clubs will kind of give them two years on either side around that.

**I: Yeah. I know you obviously mentioned about the decision making that happens with the recruitment guys, when you come to the end of the season is it the same people involved or do you get inputs from the wider sort of MDT?**

P: Yeah well the MDT are involved in all the decisions. So as I said they're not so much in the younger age groups just because the physical stuff and the other bits aren't as important. Not that - sorry that's probably the wrong phrasing, it's not that they're not important, they don't inform decisions as much as what they would in the older age groups but those guys are involved in those recruitment meetings and stuff that I eluded to. But yeah, the decisions at the end of the season, we tend to do it actually differently. A lot of those conversations are had with the academy manager and the assistant academy manager, they tend to be the ones that have those conversations. So we give a coaching, erm... we give like coaching feedback but any decisions on whether a kid's going to get a contract or not is kind of passed on, not passed on, is taken on by the academy manager and the assistant academy manager and the senior management team so we kind of, it allows us as coaches to kind of focus on the development of football stuff and then they deal with more of the operational stuff.

**I: Is that sort of to remove any biases that might be prevalent?**

P: Yeah, yeah to some extent. And also to protect the coach in other ways as well because if I've got a really strong relationship with you as a parent or as a player, you can look at it two ways. It either helps with informing of those decisions, likewise, I think actually by not coming from that person it may help in other ways too. Obviously if the coach is needed, the coach is needed and he'll be involved in those conversations and annual feedback and stuff but I think because we do everything so collectively with the conversations around the players, the academy manager or assistant academy manager or head of coaching or whatever would be pretty well informed based on all the data that we collate, all the conversations that we've had and any conversations will be pre, sort of, discussed before any meetings take place so I feel it's pretty... it's done as a collective whereas sometimes I think if it's just you as a coach it's seen as your opinion whereas if it's not it's kind of more the club which I think is a good way of doing it.

**I: Yeah. And how does that strategy, how does that vary to a development plan being created for a player as opposed to a selection?**

P: That's the key because it then prevents the IDP being the thing that dictates the decision because ultimately you want ...kids actually, well how we work we tend to give kids like

something to work on they're really good at and then something that they need to improve but if they're doing really badly on something that they've needed to improve, it may be because actually that needs to take lots of time but that doesn't necessarily affect their overall performance. Like maybe one of your best players who's terrible at using their left foot but actually has performed really, really well in the games, he's been really good in training but he's been terrible with his left foot so if you see like a red light or he's a bit below performance on his IDP you can't use that then to release the kid, so I think that's why it's kind of done on a lot more stuff rather than the IDP and the IDP really is for the kids to kind of focus on. We try and alleviate that from putting them under pressure to perform on those things. We don't want it to be about performance; we want it to be about more the process of how they get better on that stuff.

**I: Yeah. Okay so that leads us quite nicely onto the last part actually. So timewise we're going pretty well and we've not missed anything so it's good. Do you have a team sheet available, even if it's on your computer?**

P: Yeah. I saw that, so when you say a team sheet, what would you- can you give us an example of what you mean?

**I: It would just be one of the teams that you want to use, either the nines or the tens, don't worry about doing both, and all you need to do is you need to see it, I don't need to see it at all, and I'm just going to ask you to put a couple of letters next to their names. So if it's in like an Excel form that should work for you.**

P: Yeah I did see that...Let me see if I can... I know I did see that in your pre thing...Both age groups or is one age group okay?

**I: Yeah one age group should be fine.**

P: If I go with the under tens. What I'll do is if I bring up their technical match report which has all their names and then their scores from their games and stuff which is then used for their reviews is that okay?

**I: Yeah, yeah, should be fine. I would say you might have to write stuff down but as long as you're good at remembering, I imagine you'll be fine. Somebody did it previously off the top of their head.**

P: Well I'm on an Excel spreadsheet. How can I...? Yeah, what I'll do is I'll type in one of the cells next to their name.

I: **Brilliant. Right so, is that ready?**

P: Yeah, yeah good to go.

I: **Yeah, cool. So the task is with your team and obviously includes any sub players etc. so core squad, if you can place the letter H next to any players that you would consider to be high performers of the team.**

P: Two secs, sorry I'm going to get a better document up.

I: **It's alright.**

P: Sorry, I'm just trying to find the best document for it. Yeah okay I'll do it from here. H next to best like top performing players?

I: **Yeah, yeah. You can always colour them if need be RAG rating, green, red because when you've done the Hs you'll need to do Ls as well for the lowest performers.**

P: That's fine.

I: **So have you done the Hs and the Ls?**

P: I haven't done the Ls no.

I: **Yeah if you can do the Ls so they'd just be who you would consider to be the lowest performers.**

P: And then I've got some blank ones.

I: **Yes so they should be your, whoever you consider to be the middle performers of the group.**

P: I just put M next to them yeah?

I: **Yeah, yeah. And obviously knowing what the groupings are if you want to make any changes feel free to do so.**

P: Yeah. Yeah I'm happy with that.

**I: Okay. So a couple of questions now. Just first of all I just need to know how many you've got in the groups. So how many high performers did you have?**

P: One, two, three, four....five.

**I: And then how many medium performers?**

P: One, two, three, four, five. Six.

**I: And the low?**

P: Five.

**I: Five, brilliant. A nice split there. So how do you determine who's in what group?**

P: I've looked at our TMR report which is where we assess the performance of how they're doing in games and then I've used that and taken into consideration stuff I know about the player and across the four corners, across how long they've been at the club in... dates of birth etc. so I've kind of used that as kind of to help support me putting that together. Does that answer your question okay?

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I might unpick some of that a bit later on, but yeah.**

P: That's fine.

**I: Since your time working with those players have they always been in the same group or might they have gone from a medium to a low or a low to a high etc.?**

P: Yeah definitely. There's some of the high performing players, that I put as high performing players that haven't performed as well lately erm...and I think some of the low performers probably I've still got them as low performers but you could argue have been medium performers, so yeah, there's definitely been some changes in performance across them.

**I: So they're not fixed?**

P: No.

**I: Yeah. So going through the top group, are they exhibiting abilities that are the same as the others but they're just at a superior level?**

P: I wouldn't say they've got the same - they're performing the same things.

**I: Yeah. So more unique.**

P: I feel they're unique but there's obviously some, there's some similarities in them, and there's some things that they do which are in common with all the other kids but they're that bit better at but looking at those players that I've high [unclear 0:35:09] they've got some stuff which makes them unique with what they're good at. But then so do some of the kids that are low performers, they've got some really good stuff that makes them good too so that's quite a hard thing for me to answer.

**I: Sorry I'll come back to some of these points, so don't worry. In consideration of the higher group and the lower group, might they be, and again hypothetically because I know you said you wouldn't do this at this age, but if you were going to deselect the players might that represent the deselection in the lower and the definite selections in the higher?**

P: Yeah, I think there's a bias against a couple of the players perhaps because I don't think the recruitment guys felt they should have been signed in the first place and they've probably consistently found things more difficult or haven't been as effective in training and games against their own teammates and their oppositions but have still some really good attributes because obviously they're playing at [club name] so they're still really good players. There's more conversations around being patient for them than probably some of the other kids. I don't feel that how we're grading them or how I'm grading them now will necessarily lead to the batting order of selection or deselection. I think that's really important. I don't think this is the black and white process.

**I: Yeah. So when you talk about game effectiveness, what does that mean to you?**

P: So one of the things in our technical match report is that we look at have we got two of the three best players on the pitch from under nines all the way through. I suppose when we're looking at all the clubs that we play against these kids are always being assessed against other players playing at those clubs of similar age groups, so I think if they're able to (a) work on the things that they need to work on to improve and develop in the games and obviously in order to do that they've got to be able to perform those skills effectively or at least show a willingness to try performing those skills, there's an element to that and likewise obviously if kids are performing well and scoring goals, winning lots of [unclear 00:37:39] being really, you know, team players, making loads of defensive clearances, all the facets, if they're doing all the things that enable them to help the team do well as well as themselves obviously that will help them to perform better which, I hate the word 'performance' but there certainly

has to be an element of performance in anything that you're doing because otherwise you would recruit and take anybody and obviously at an academy you're limited by how many players you can take and actually the kids are really, really good. So within the talent pool there's an element of, you know, there's a...I suppose what you're trying to do is you're trying to, there's a gap between your best players and your lowest players but that gap is...

**I: Marginal.**

P: Marginal compared to if you just made it an open access programme. And there's obviously lots of research and indications that mixed age group learning, disability learning is really beneficial but I think even within the academy environment the difference in level still means they get that and the stuff that you can manage and organise within your programme you can do that. The kids improve and get better because of the level of the environment and the level that the kids are playing at, their speed in which they develop and improve I think increases and that leads onto the biggest gap, I feel, between grassroots players and academy players as time goes on is just because the kids are used to doing things and processing information, making decisions, performing actions at a much quicker speed than what they would if they've come from a more grassroots environment where perhaps the level wasn't as high. Sorry that was pretty long winded.

**I: No that's a great answer. So just referring to the high performing players only now in the group. Is there anything that they consistently all have that puts them in that group? What they all do?**

P: They're all creative. I would say they're all athletic, not necessarily big and strong but all move well and they've all got an excellent attitude to learn and a really good mindset to improve their own way.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, yeah, I think they're all unique as well. I think they've all got some super strengths in a particular area which allows them to be in that group as well.

**I: That's actually my next question, within those outstanding attributes what would they vary from like what might be examples?**

P: One v ones, running with a ball at speed, goal scoring, finishing, creativity, ball manipulation, dribbling, one v ones, dribbling so that's probably again my advice as a coach is I quite like

the creative dribblers. Maybe if you asked another coach who has more of a bias on passing or defending they would see it differently.

**I: And if you removed that from those players, would they still be a high performing player?**

P: I don't know - I don't know. I don't think... Erm... I'm just trying to envision it. [name] wasn't... I don't know but I think they do stuff which makes them so unique with the way in which they play I couldn't imagine them not doing that stuff, so I find that question quite hard to answer.

**I: Yeah, that's fine.**

P: Because it's so closely linked to why they're here.

**I: Yeah, 100 percent. So now similar questions but now you're just talking to the lower groups.**

P: Yep.

**I: So is there anything in the lower groups that they all have that puts them in that group?**

P: Puts them in that group or why they're lower in a negative way or things that they're still good at that makes them...

**I: In a negative way. We will go onto positives though.**

P: Yeah, definitely, yeah. Yeah there's reasons why obviously, yeah.

**I: What would they be?**

P: If I go through them one by one. One of them's a goalkeeper, it would be concentration, athleticism. I don't think that we should be having goalkeepers at under tens anyway but yeah, I don't think he's a particularly... We've got one boy that physically finds things really difficult so therefore probably doesn't always get an opportunity to show his dribbling and his speed. So yeah, but he's very new to joining so he's come in a lot later so he's not one that we'd be looking to release. He's just at the moment he's quite new to the programme and he's the youngest in the group by some distance too. Robustness, dribbling, shielding the ball, more ball manipulation stuff, kind of all things with the ball probably a little bit behind technically. Emotional. One of the next players, dealing with emotions. Is it the right



environment? Too hard sometimes has a really negative affect on whether they're enjoying it. Physicality. Concerns around physicality and movement feels for the next kid and again same really for the next kid, concerns around movement skills which are probably having an impact on how they play.

**I: So is there anything that they do really, really well though?**

P: Yeah of course, yeah, yeah. There's lots. There's a lot more stuff positive than there are negative. It's just as I said, that margin's so fine so...

**I: So slightly difficult question, is there anything that they do really well but it does not affect their performance at all?**

P: In a negative way, sorry?

**I: Not a negative way, it could be something that they're exceptional at but effectively you could remove it and they'd still be the player they are.**

P: I see what you're saying.

**I: It doesn't mean that they're a bad player either.**

P: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Erm... I think the goalkeeper, I think if you removed his shot stopping he'd still be decent with his feet. With [name] if you removed his dribbling he'd still be really quick and be able to get around the pitch well. With the next player if you removed their willingness to learn and taking information on board I still think they would cope. Yeah, I think will all of them yeah definitely, yeah there would be.

**I: So now we're just going to refer to the middle group.**

P: Yep.

**I: How did you distinguish a line between not being in the lower and not being in the higher for the middle group?**

P: Again same answer really for how I distinguished the others, looked at their performance score, looked at what I've known of them over the past two years, looked at the age group, and how long they've been at the club, what they're like as kids.

- I: And is there anything that again they sort of have consistently as a group that they all do well? They may not do quite as well as the higher group but they may be better than the lower group for example.**
- P: What each individually?
- I: No it could be just a theme that runs across that group themselves?**
- P: Yeah, a few of them it's more around emotional stuff, just more inconsistencies in their personality which impacts performance.
- I: Okay.**
- P: As they're nine so as you would have. And then one that's joined the building within the space of the last couple of months we haven't seen as much on but he came in and did really well so we've probably been a bit more reserved in terms of his score. And then one more he gets loads of success because of his size but concerns around maybe how technically good he is and his movement skills and then another one that's really, really small but is really good at decision making, really bright, but doesn't always have as much impact upon games just because of his size. So yeah, there's a few more but it's take hours to answer that.
- I: So just out of curiosity then, you've mentioned more on the performance aspect, may that imply that the higher guys are more consistent at being effective on a pitch whereas the lowers might be less consistent?**
- P: No because the potential stuff has also been a consideration of mine in that. There's definitely some of the better performing players that have been given the higher scores but some of the medium, not so much the lower ones, yeah, I suppose there is in some ways. Yes, in answer to your question, yes there would be.
- I: And then the final question actually.**
- P: But again that doesn't inform decisions. That's probably just me if I had to say where I think they're at at this moment in time and that's really, I can't stress that enough, that at no point will I use that to make decisions around the kids.
- I: Yeah, don't worry this is around now so you said the right thing.**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah the final question. Do you see any maturation related, are the groups related by maturation? So are there smaller kids in the lower group and bigger kids in the higher group?**

P: No, there is a mix still. There's definitely a lean probably, there's more physical players in the higher group but there are still some boys that maybe struggle physically still in the higher group but there's probably more of a lean towards that. When I look at the lowest group erm... it's not necessarily down to height, it would be more down to movement and robustness not necessarily height. So I think that that doesn't necessarily correlate because some of these kids are fairly tall but don't move as well, aren't as robust, aren't as strong which has an impact upon their ability to I suppose cope and be effective within the games and training with their peers and as a result has an impact on how well they can show the stuff that they're really good at with the ball.

#### **8.10.13 Participant 13**

**I: So starting off, what is your current job title?**

P: Lead Youth Development Phase Coach.

**I: And what is the academy category status?**

P: One.

**I: And what does the first team play in?**

P: Premier League.

**I: How long have you been in football, how long have you worked in football would you say?**

P: Fifteen years.

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: Current position two, same company or [club] ten years.

**I: And which age group you are going to discuss later on?**

P: Sixteen.

**I: So the more interesting questions now. Can you give a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, so from sort of community coaching, community vice coaching [0:01:05 unclear] set up an organisation that run a local authority coaching programme, turned that into a registered charity, worked part time within elite football as well at different ... so at [club] and then at [club]. Then that developed in about 2011, developed into a full time role within ... obviously within the academy and then...so originally my part time roles at [club] were foundation phase, and then foundation phase at [club] and then in about 2012 into the youth development phase, and then when that became full time, so since then it's gone sort of under 12s to under 16s across the board for sort of like last eight to nine years really. And then the last four years at 15 and 16, and then the last two years at lead phase and at 16 as well.

**I: So quite a journey across the ages.**

P: Yes, it's fair to say, yeah.

**I: Did you have any coaching initially?**

P: It's just originally, ironically it was through [name] I am sure who you know well. So obviously the community coaching that he did, I sort of followed the pathway so I sort of worked with him like in community football, sort of in that area. And then obviously when he went to [club] and obviously became assistant academy manager there, then I went part time in the foundation phase there. Then it obviously then just sort of started to develop from there, obviously [person] left [club] not after long, then obviously he went through to [club] as you know, and then I sort of obviously carried on at [club] went to [club] and continued with obviously my full time organisation if you like. And then when this opportunity came to go full time at [club], then I sold the company and then, erm... sort of moved on a little bit.

**I: Did you [0:03:14 audio breaking] as well?**

P: Say it again sorry?

**I: Did you have [0:03:18 unclear]?**

P: Any [0:03:22 unclear], yeah, just sort of like amateur, so not professional. Just sort of amateur local and then obviously sort of coach and develop sort of took over really so I sort of playing about 17, 18, and then er, yeah, so it went from there.

**I: So how would you describe your current role?**

P: In what sense?

**I: In regards to the responsibilities you have?**

P: So my responsibility is to manage the under 12s to under 16 programme. I've got a sort of primary focus on the higher end, so at 15 and 16, and then I have got an assistant that kind of manages and supports me managing the sort of under 12 to under 14 programme. So managing a group of staff, obviously coaching staff, multidisciplinary staff and also obviously managing the group, managing the players across the board, day to day management of the coaching programme and games programme. Sort of forward planning logistics of the programme individual plans, and the whole sort of circle of the sort of youth development programme really, player development programme.

**I: And when you consider like player development, do you have your own personal beliefs or philosophies towards their development?**

P: Yeah, I think there's a ... it's difficult to sort of put like a philosophy sort of into sort of a caption, I think, ultimately to create sort of independent thinking, decision making technical players that are able to cope with the demands put upon them. So I am kind of more of a believer of, sort of probing ... putting ideas into players, rather than necessarily saying this is the way, and this is the only way. So I'm probably more of a sort of problem setting person as opposed to solving for them. However, that probably has changed over the course of obviously time, sort of more of the older age groups you work with, the more you can do that. Whereas as you know, the younger you go it's kind of, you solve a lot of things for them and you teach fundamental things and then later down the line you can explore different avenues and different ways and approaches to doing things. In terms of sort of style, it wouldn't be dissimilar to what you see, what you see sort of at [club] and at the academies, you know, through the thirds, from the back third, through the mid third, possession based with clever and creative attacking play in the final third really.

**I: Yeah. So there is a big emphasis as well on that athletes into development, by the sounds of it?**

P: Yeah, yeah.

**I: Okay. When you're developing players, do you have expectations on capabilities?**

P: Erm...I think you naturally do, because you are always like assessing, and you're always sort of making judgements on players. And I suppose it's ... you base those judgements on your own experiences and what you think and know that that person is capable of doing. You obviously ... your baseline sort of levels of what you expect are kind of dictated by the natural ability if you like, the technical ability. But then probably more so now, is your kind of what's in the head in terms of whether you believe are they capable of gaining a career in an elite sport at whatever level. If your experience tells you that psychologically they're not capable of doing it, then probably your expectations are lower. Whereas the ones that maybe have, is probably the ones that you can probably see a little bit more potential in sort of longer term if you like.

**I: So are there certain psychological things that you feel are quite critical for that [success?]**

P: Yeah, I think...I don't know whether ....the sort of premise I sort of work on, have you seen the PCDE breakdown?

**I: No.**

P: So it's like psychological characteristics of developing excellence. So in a sort of nutshell things like confidence, motivation, reflection, awareness, motivation, sort of self driven, reflective and things like that really are kind of ... are probably like the key areas to sort of focus on. I think erm...looking ahead at sort of players that have probably come through the system, it's maybe some of the characteristics they show. And obviously you've got an idea then over time as the ones that do show those, the ones that make it, the ones that don't make it which then probably helps you align sort of the next players that come through with previous ones, I think.

**I: Yeah. So moving into the next section now. This is going to be still about you, but also the strategies employ at the club. When you have [unclear 0:09:18] or de-selection processes, and with de-selection I mean, release retention of contracts at the end of the season, who would be included in those decision making processes?**

P: So, across ... for example if I give ... across the board really, so like for at 16 for example a decision on whether you get a scholarship or whether you don't, so it would obviously be myself, there would be the [unclear 0:09:46] manager, head of coaching, the coach, the coaches and the support team in the professional development phase. So by that I mean, coaches, performance psychologists, and analysts. It's pretty much the whole sort of team if you like, and then the same across sort of youth development phase. So again performance psychologists, analysts, education, sports science, physical so you have got a full sort of understanding and sort of feedback on the whole player moving forward I think a little bit. So pretty much in a nutshell it's the whole sort of ... the whole team of staff really.

I: **So when you go to the development [0:10:42 unclear audio] like ILPs or IDPs, is that the same people involved?**

P: Erm...Not really, it's probably watered down to sort of ... say for example an under 16 ILP would be sort of led by me, and then supported by obviously the sport scientists, the physical team, the performance psychologist for that area and that would probably be it, so we'd have a technical and tactical from me, a physical from them, and then a psychological from them really. And then that would be kind of brought together and sort of put together in a format and a process by me to be able to teach that to ... to teach that, and support that and share that with the player. You probably wouldn't get ... you might get sort of the academy manager who might support with some observations on, specifically obviously some of the better ones, but really that would be kind of a little bit more sort of decentralised and led by, sort of like a smaller sort of support team for that particular player.

I: **Do they reflect into a selection at the end of the season as well?**

P: Not really for us, no. I think they're kind of ... it's something I'm looking at at the minute, so in a way it's kind of like your formal, your formal sort of report and your own observations, and your own feedback over the course of a year would probably determine whether they get released or stay. Kind of the ILP really is almost like an add on, I wouldn't say we sort of release a player or keep a player whether they've succeeded or failed at that particular area. It's probably more of an overall sort of holistic sort of observation of that particular player. I think the ILP is probably a sort of an individual sort of like support for the player really, rather than a judgement tool.

I: **Yeah. And how do sort of positional demands come into affect for both development and selection?**

P: Quite a lot. So obviously as you know the younger age group is more generic, it's more technical across the board key skills based. At 12 sort of our youth development phase goes from 12 to 16, so at 12 we start to identify positions and we start to identify, you know, maybe one or two key positions. Obviously there's going to be certain players that, you know, he is a nailed on centre forward or whatever. But you generally find it might be a right back, a right mid fielder or a central mid field player and a centre forward, that type of thing. They're a little bit fluid, but then I think as you go ... by the end, if you go through the sort of lower part of the phase at 14, you probably identify probably what their position is. At 12 is when we start to have like position specific programmes, coaching programmes, the ILPs are based around some of their like positional and sort of must have needs for their particular area of the pitch. So for example, a centre back is going to be heading the ball isn't he, or a wide player is going to be one v one attacking ... full back is going to be one v one defending for example. So it kind of ... we kind of put positional profiles in a position specific programme around that player, because obviously there are players that will maybe go from one to another, that could just be ... it could be from ... we've got one at the moment who was centre forward, but growth has dictated that he's probably going to be a centre back or nothing. And then we sort of really, by the end of it, we've kind of got an idea on profiling as to what that player is likely to be based on their physical output, their technical and tactical output, and their sort of psychological profile as well. So an example of that might be if they've got high levels of determination for example, and they're quite tenacious, you know, it might be a centre back or a defender for example, rather than a wide player. So we kind of profile and track around that really.

I: **You obviously mentioned the four corner model in your own way, what is your opinion of the FA four corner model?**

P: I think obviously the FA has changed over the years hasn't it? And my observations of it is that it went from ... like through courses and programmes that I've been on obviously through [A] licences and then into like youth development, sorry, youth awards, obviously youth award was the first time that they really considered all four corners, whereas previously it was kind of very tactical, very little technical and that was it. So I think the youth award has definitely brought all sides into focus, and sort of like the new, sort of the younger generation of coaches have probably gone through a process where they've never had anything different, and they probably have more of an understanding of all components.



So I think their education programme is a lot better now than it was. As I say it's been a few years since I've done an FA [0:16:27 unclear] course, but from what a lot of the other guys say, it's not dissimilar and it's tweaked a little bit. I think it's relevant, there's a lot more detail in which they can go into than what they do on the courses, and I understand that's to do with the time constraints and the audience that they've got. But I think it does give people a basic understanding of, you know, the individual rather than the right winger as opposed to the individual within it, I think.

**I: Yeah. And with that consideration of the four corners, what objective assessments do you guys collect around the players?**

P: We have obviously a six week review programme like most. So that is ... We have a six week review programme, then we have a twice yearly formal written report. It's changed slightly over like the last year, so it used to be sort of score based so it was a lot more... it was more objective. So, a six week review would be almost like position specific, individual target, red, green and amber if you like, so that you could track that. And then the six monthly report was position specific based at 12 to 16, obviously it was a more generic technical programme at foundation phase and it was effectively a score, you know, 1 to 4 and then it built an objective path over the course of the year. Obviously [person] kind of wanted to go more of a sort of subjective ... like a subjective way of doing it, so more written based which I get because it's more personal, rather than players and parents being fixated by 'I got a 4' ... 'You got a 3' which I do get, however I think you do lose a little bit of being able to track the progress of the player over the course of their timeline.

On the flip side of that is then it's difficult to then track, you know, difficult to track and make sure that it's accurately measured because my perception of a score of three for example might be different to yours. So it actually, although it's an objective tracking it's kind of not, it's more subjective as well, so it kind of defeats the object of doing that. I suppose the only way you could measure that properly is if I scored a particular player all the way through from 12 to 16, that's probably the only way you could do it, so we kind of tended to go a little bit more sort of text based over like the last year. Then obviously we feedback twice yearly to parents meetings, and then six weekly reviews with the players that's recorded and monitored. But the older age groups so 15 and 16 we ask them ... and the PDP players as well, we ask them to produce evidence on what they've been working on specifically around their ILP stuff.

**I: And does the [unclear audio 0:19:47] psychological stuff come into that, I'm assuming they do sort of objective testing within that as well?**

P: Yeah, so as, you know, probably similar to what you do. So three premier league testings a year, the usual stuff 5, 10 and 30 metres, 505s, et cetera, yo yo test. So that obviously then produces measurable physical data over the course of the year.

Psychologically we profile the players and then we also do like behavioural maps as well, so like we map players and we map the staff as well so where does kind of my personality lie with a particular player, is it completely contradictory, is it not. And then also I can get an understanding as to maybe what kind of interventions and strategies you might use with that particular player who demonstrates certain psychological attributes.

**I: That's an interesting point. Do you find that there has been instances where a player and a staff member have collided for a negative output or conversely actually you've had a real constant output from putting specific staff with specific players?**

P: Yeah, there has been. I mean the usual kind of examples of myself is I've conflicted with a number of players because they ... their sort of personality is completely opposite to what mine is. You have then ... You then look at is that player then willing and able to learn and adapt and come more towards the centre, towards what my perceptions of what they should be, and what they can be. Some do, some don't, but I suppose across the board now you've got like coaches that would be more understanding of different psychological traits than probably what they were in the past. And on the flip side we've had some really good ones of players that have been kind of ... particularly at one end, and we've been able to sort of turn them ... not just me, but other people as well, we've been able to sort of turn them and align them into improving in that particular area. So we've had some good examples, we've had some bad examples mainly more positive than bad I would say, although there are obviously ones that some things that are out of your control that manipulate the psychology of a teenager, if you like.

**I: With those objective measures, probably more so the physical and the psychological ones, but how well do they represent actual performance that you see on the pitch?**

P: Erm...I think they do, I don't think they always do because I suppose if you look physically you have got ... so you might have like a really high achieving physical player that uses that to aid their performance if you like. You then might say, well the reason they're doing that is

because they're an early developer, so it becomes comfortable. So age performance, maybe short term, but maybe long term it doesn't. Obviously then on the flip side you have like ... maybe have extreme late developers, we've got a couple that you have got to find ways to support them physically within that. Obviously within our programme whether that be playing down age groups, and on the flip side playing up the age groups and things like that, training different groups, managing load obviously growth and maturation is one as well, so high achievers that maybe go through a particular growth spurt at 13, for example, now don't become the high achievers. But then obviously psychological knock on affects as well, so that potentially affects performance and it might be the first time since they were nine that they've not experienced being a high achiever, and then obviously the support networks in and around that are really... I kind of think it does but there's probably more of an awareness now as to...as to it doesn't have to be ... it's not the be all and end all now at 13, there's kind of like a longer term process. And I guess that kind of like comes with the experience of the staff as well, and their understanding of that particular person.

**I: Do you find the fastest person in testing is always looks like the fastest person on the pitch as well?**

P: Erm...No, it depends really, I suppose if you ... probably positional profiles help and where they play, so for example, one of our groups is the two full backs are the two quickest players, but because of the way we play at the style allows the full backs to demonstrate those physical attributes. Whereas we've got a central mid field player that's not necessarily the fastest sprinter, but he probably ... his output is better than what it looks, if that kind of makes sense. And then obviously the other side of the physical side is ... so his high intensity distance for example is always three times higher than somebody else, or the level of player. So you kind of get what you know, you do see some little spikes here and there and you do get a few surprises, but I think generally your observation, the sort of ...the numbers will probably back up your observations I think really. You might get the odd little surprise, but generally speaking I think that's the case, certainly in terms of like success, especially post growth as well.

**I: If you did have somebody who was either really bad on the physical testing or good, but then he displayed the opposite on the pitch. Why might that be in your opinion?**

P: It would probably be due to one of the other three areas I would say. So they're very efficient or deficient technically, tactically or psychologically obviously. I would say you'd

identify that there would be a deficiency in one, or probably two particular areas, generally speaking it would be two other areas if they're not getting the physical output that they probably can and should.

**I: So a couple of scenario based questions for you now. If you had a player who excelled in the foundation phase, how would that [0:27:09 impact] their success for the future?**

**P:** I think you would look at them...if they were successful, so when they come out the foundation phase and they're a high achiever, I think you have to ... at 12 onwards then, obviously the big step is into 11 a side football. So are they ... you'd then give them time to adjust and adapt to 11 a side football, because as you know across all corners the vast difference between small sided football and 11 a side, if they continue to be a high achiever then you probably ... you'd look at areas in which they do, so is he an early physical developer, that's fine but then you'd need to be careful then, if he is a physical early developer and you push him on, I don't know say to the under 13s age group or whatever, then he might not be psychologically an early achiever as well, and I find a lot of people don't understand or see that. So players will often play up age groups because they're the biggest, they're the strongest and the fastest runner but there is no ...and there like an assumption that, 'oh you will get technically better', or 'you'll get tactically better'. But actually is he psychologically mature enough in which to cope with that, and often they're not but... and I don't think people really see like how they need to identify and support that.

On the flip side how many players do you see play up an age group because they're psychologically ahead of their years. I don't see it, I don't think I've ever seen a player that plays up an age group because psychologically he's an outstanding psychological centre back, it never happens. But actually when you look at it, he's ... we then starting talking about, well the psychological attributes to become a professional footballer are even more ...even more sort of evident, and even more important as you go up but we never stretch a player psychologically ever, and it's always...very rarely we have a player that will play up an age group because they're technically outstanding, or tactically outstanding either, it's always physical, which is fine but like, for example, we've had a couple of like early physical developers play up an age group, and then three years down the line we say, well they're technically not good enough. They've been put in an environment for two years where they technically and tactically can't cope because they're not mature enough, and able to deal with it. But because they're taller and quicker and stronger than everybody, you know, maybe because of their genetics, and then we kind of wonder why they don't make it.

**I: Yeah. I like that idea of the psyche stretching, that's quite a nice idea that one. That's kind of the point of these questions, but yeah, I get what you are saying there. So a similar question, if you had a player that came to you in the youth phase, but they've done no academy football before that, how would that inform you for their potential success?**

P: I think you've always got a mindset of what their ... I mean they call it, like coaching age don't they? But you understand what their background might be, what level of information they've had...erm, and I think it definitely ...there's definitely a leniency towards being more patient with those particular individuals. The chances are they come into the programme because they're physically elite, I would say. Certainly it's sort of like the middle, you know, coming in at say 12 or 13, you do get occasional sort of outstanding technicians, and outstanding tactical players, but that probably then goes back to like scouting. Are scouts is capable of identifying a technician? Probably not. But are they able to see who is the quickest runner and the one that can run through everybody, well it's obvious isn't it? So their skill set allows that. But I think you are more patient towards their sort of technical and tactical side of things and probably players that come in later are given more time in which to develop I would say.

**I: Yeah. And is training age or coaching age something that you consider?**

P: Yeah, I think you do, you can make a pretty quick assessment on where they're at in terms of their understanding of the game, and their understanding of themselves within that. I think it then ... if they're not ...the sort of...kind of like support that they have in and around, do they need to be accelerated tactically? Well there is obviously ways in which to do that analysis, and individual profile and things like that. But then I think you're then very mindful of that, but I think certainly during the mid range of the phase, but even then when you come towards sort of like the end of the phase, it's pretty much an even keel. So if a player has been in for 18 months, or eight years you kind of have to make a judgement on are they able to earn a career or are they able to earn a scholarship regardless of whether they've been in pre academy or whether they've been in 18 months. I don't think you get too many allowances going from 16 into the professional development phase to be honest but certainly across like the mid range of the phase.

**I: And how does maturation become involved in sort of decision making towards selection?**

P: It does, yeah, so the growth and maturation reports on top of your own observations, especially predictive [rate], predictive height, predictive values, predictive ... what their

physical profile is going to be, that plays a part, that plays a part in, you know especially across 12, 13 and 14 I would say more so. As you know generally at 15 they're probably out the other side of it, or certainly coming towards it. It does definitely play a part. And again it comes down to experience you know players that don't have it, players that do have it and you know, we've had a couple that have had it for two years and are probably still coming out of it now, so you are mindful for that 100 per cent, yeah.

**I: Okay. So moving into the last part now. You'll need your team sheet for this now. The first thing I need you to do is, with your team sheet if you place a letter H next to any of the players that you would consider to be a high performer of the group.**

P: Okay. When you say high performer, would you say current high performer or would you say high potential?

**I: If you want to do both, so you can mark one column as a high performer now, and then one high performer potential.**

P: Yeah, okay.

**I: And then doing the same thing but for your lower group, and obviously you will have a medium [mid-performing] group as well.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So how many highs do you have in the performance?**

P: I've got four.

**I: And then how many would be as a potential?**

P: Yeah, they're within it, four, the same four.

**I: And then medium or mid performing?**

P: It would be four.

**I: And potential?**

P: One.

**I: And then the lower group as well?**

P: Four.

I: **Yeah. And the potential?**

P: Erm...None.

I: **So the questioning around this, how have you determined who is in what group?**

P: Well, on that the first thing would be if me doing this now at 16, you've got ... sorry you've got five lows there, sorry. You would have ... My perception of potential at 16 would be different to what someone's might be ... if I was doing this for the under 13s, I'd have a different score and I'd class potential more there, than [what I am now]. What did you say, sorry, how did I make that judgement?

I: **Yeah. How did you group them?**

P: I grouped them by performance and learning.

I: **How does that differentiate across the group to what ... are the just better performers and better learners in the top, and not so good at the bottom?**

P: Yeah. I'd say that performance and learning would be matched up pretty well.

I: **And [unclear 00:38:50] would they have always been in the same grouping, or might they have changed?**

P: Changed.

I: **Would any of the highest been in the lower group?**

P: There's one here, yeah there's one here.

I: **The guys in the top, do they exhibit the same abilities as the other groups that are just better, or are they more unique?**

P: Generally the same, but there are some unique attributes, yeah.

I: **I will go into the groups in a minute, a couple more generic questions though. Would those groupings, might they reflect to who you are likely to select in the higher group, and deselect in the lower group?**

P: Yeah.

**I: And obviously the mid performers would be [questionable]?**

P: Yeah, the mid performers, then you would look at learning and potential on the middle ones.

**I: Okay. So now just referring to the high performing ones. Is there anything that is consistent amongst all of them that places them in a group?**

P: Erm...The reason this particular group, in previous groups probably not, but in this group I would group them by attitude.

**I: Okay. And are there things that they will do that they are exceptional at, but it might be unique by the individual?**

P: Yeah, I would say so, yeah.

**I: What might they be?**

P: Performance under pressure, I would say, consistency ...consistency of performance under pressure.

**I: Would you say that the top group will be more consistent at that than the others groups?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Is there anything ... strange question I know - is there anything in the high performing groups that they're really good at, but actually it doesn't impact their performance?**

P: Erm...Probably not, because I think all their [0:41:29 unclear] is what they do, I would say.

**I: So they're effectively efficient athletes with what they've got?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So now similar questions in the lower performers. Is there anything consistent in the lowers that makes them there?**

P: Erm...I would say deficiencies in at least two of the four areas.



**I: Yeah. And would they be unique by the individual, like, where those deficiencies might be?**

P: Unique in terms of position based, so I've got a centre forward here who would be on the lower, because his finishing is poor whereas that would be unique to him, to the experiences he's had. But I think generally speaking you would say ability to take in and transfer information and consistently I think is also what you look for.

**I: And is there anything that they're really good at, maybe uniquely, but it doesn't affect their performance?**

P: Not in ... I would say so, for example, again there's one player who is very very quick. So you would argue that it does aid his performance, because it's better than having it in his position than not but it probably doesn't benefit his performance because technically he's not able to cope with the demands of what he needs to.

**I: So, he's almost really good in one area, but because he is lacking in too many other areas it puts him in the lower performance?**

P: Yeah, I think previous probably not ... probably not on this list of five, but previously you might have a player that's got an outstanding attribute but he just isn't good enough, I would say, he isn't technically and tactically or physically able to cope. Certainly the physical ones, we've had in the past, and we've got outstanding technical, tactical understanding players, we've even got one in the lower group ... the group below who just physically, he won't ... so we'll release him because physically he's got no chance of earning a career, no chance of playing at a level that will almost get him through to under 18s football, technically and tactically he's excellent, but it won't be enough.

**I: So it's almost like they need to have a minimal threshold of ability in all of those areas to succeed.**

P: Yeah.

**I: And then just talking ...oh sorry one last question for the low group again, if they developed some of those weaknesses, would that then move them into the mid performing groups?**

P: Yeah, it would do, yeah.

- I: Yeah. So now just referring to the mid performing. How have you distinguished the line between not being in the bottom and not being in the top?**
- P: Erm...I would say based on again based on, again based on consistency of performance and ability to learn, and potential. So I would say there you might see a late physical developer as a potential, or someone that's got outstanding psychological attributes that just needs to grow a little bit if you like or outstanding technical and tactical that might just need to go through his growth a little bit later.
- I: And that consistency of game effectiveness, what does game effectiveness sort of mean to you?**
- P: Oh, good question. It is ... I'm going to say the ability to affect a game which is no different but I think within... the ability to affect the game, but within their own parameters. So, an example, we've got, in this group so he's currently ... he's a first year, we didn't give him a scholarship we gave him extended schoolboy because he is an extreme late developer, so he plays under 16 football but will probably not be with us much longer, because although we've given him another year, physically he just can't ... he needs to play under 13s football to be effective, he's that extreme. And although he's ... but then ... so you've then got an understanding so actually physically he might need to go and play under 13 football and make debut when he's 26, which is fine but then I look at it and say, well technically he's very very good in short distances, short areas, fine no problem, is he technically outstanding to make up for those deficiencies at the minute, possibly not. But then probably what will kill him is the fact that tactically he's not able to affect the game with his understanding based within his own parameters. So we know he can't run and beat a full back for example, he physically can't do that. But within his parameters he's then ... does he make the right movements and understanding in order, or does he find another way to cope with the physical differential if you like and he probably doesn't, and because actually he's a year older than everybody else as well, then you'd probably look at, is he going to make it. However just going on that one, it's then going back to your question is, he is later into the programme, a lot later, so he came in at 15, so very late, so there is an allowance for that, however he's still 17 years old and he should understand a bit more about ... understand more about the game than your peers around you I would say. So that's probably one example there.

**I: So would you say that the high performing players maybe understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and can use that better on the pitch then?**

P: Yes, the high performing elite players have a better understanding of their strengths and their weakness, because they're better learners and they reflect more, they want to reflect more, they're more critically ... have a critical appraisal of themselves because they know that they probably can do it and they've probably got the ... because they're an elite, an elite sort of characteristic is they've got an understanding of what they want to achieve, so they kind of want to find a way, hence being more reflective, hence wanting to get better. Then because the more they subject themselves to those sorts of things, they're better learners from that.

**I: So last question. The mid performers still, do they demonstrate outstanding abilities as well as the top performers do, but they're just not as affective or do they just not have an outstanding attribute?**

P: Yeah, they demonstrate unique attributes, yeah.

**I: Are they as affective in using them though?**

P: Yes, they can be, yeah. You might have ... they might be affective at using a particular attribute, but then they be inconsistent in other areas, which obviously brings their overall performance down, I would say.

#### ***8.10.14 Participant 14***

**I: Okay, it should be good now. So really basic stuff to begin with. What's your current job title?**

P: I'm head of coaching at [football club/academy] and [club] as well, so bridging that gap, so head of coaching.

**I: And what's the Academy category status?**

P: It's a Category 2 Academy.

**I: And what league does your first team play in?**

- P: It was league 2.
- I: **And how long have you worked in football?**
- P: In football, in terms of professional football clubs?
- I: **Any of it to be honest.**
- P: Oh any, so grass roots ...erm, it would be 1990 so what's that? It'll be my 31<sup>st</sup> year then.
- I: **Yeah, a good stint.**
- P: And without a break, yeah.
- I: **And how long have you been in your current position?**
- P: Er...I suppose, the title only came around about four years ago when the premiere league sort of invented a head of coaching as part of the Academy, triple P sort of work force, so I think I've been ...I've been at [club], this is my 11<sup>th</sup> year at [club], I've been sort of a centre of excellence manager when I first went in which then became academy assistant manager and then I was academy manager for a while before taking the head of coaching which is about ... I think this is my ... I've done four years now as head of coaching.
- I: **Brilliant. So which age group are you going to discuss later on?**
- P: I can discuss anything really. Is there...have you got, I mean what sort of thing would you be looking for without giving everything now, what sort of thing are you looking at?
- I: **No, no it would be the one... I guess it would be, ideally it's an age group of the YDP or the PDP but it would be the one that you're most familiar with to be honest with you?**
- P: Okay, so if I go with our under 16s then because that's the group that there's a lot of focus on at the moment because they're about to get decisions or decisions are due on some of them so yeah, that would probably be ...
- I: **Cool that's not a problem. We'll back to that later on anyway so just to get some other stuff about you. So a bit more interesting stuff now. Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Er... So I played to a reasonable level as a kid and had trials and didn't get taken at a club so just played at a lower league level, erm, broke into senior football and then suffered the ACL injury back in sort of 1989, I think it was 1989, there was no coming back from it and so I was rehabbing for a long time and trying to even just play with my mates just wasn't happening.

So, I started coaching to sort of fill that void if you like. That would have been about 1990, yeah, 1989 I was doing it sort of just as a hobby if you like, but then started to sort of take it a little bit more seriously myself and then did my first coaching badge in 1992. Erm...I started working in a professional club er...which was [club] in 1995 as a part time football in the community sort of coach, er...became closer to a full time job until it did go full time in 1998 ...erm combined bits with the academy as well because the academy had started in 1998 so I was linking in a little bit there erm, left [town] to go and work as a director of sport in a public school, but still carried on top of that... was able to work sort of academy more evenings and weekends. So I was working there until I got offered a sort of like a, again, it was kind of the existing academy wasn't a full time post, it was like 20 hours, er, and it just so happened they'd started up a football college, I know they're everywhere now but they weren't at the time in [town] and it was sort of like part time as well. So the two jobs were able to sort of fit in nicely erm, so I had two sort of good part time jobs all in football so I was coaching all the time. And then the change of ownership at [town] meant quite a few sort of redundancies were made, I was one of them, being part time, they wanted only full time sort of jobs at the time, and then the college was losing funding about a year down the line, so I knew there was going to be a natural end to that programme and so it was then sort of making sure that I was speaking to the right people and then fortunately one of...well my previous academy manager at [club] got the job at [club] as well, so he sort of took me about a year later.

Eleven years on, I've sort of done pretty much, well most roles if you like, now and sort of seen pretty much every player come through the club, you know, boys that were 9 when I got there and are now in their first team and then coaches as well who came as an under 10 coach and now are working with the under 18s and it's like that.

I: **That's quite an impressive journey.**

P: Yeah, I like to think so.

I: **So, in your current role how would you describe what you do and your responsibilities?**

P: I mean, I have to work primarily with all the coaches on coach development erm, and it's every coach from under ... the academy starts at under 9 but I also work with the guy who does the under 8s bringing the first batch in, if you like. So I work with every coach, it depends on how, if we've seen them as potential, erm, full time coaches because we're a club that has a reputation of sort of developing our own coaches as well as players.

I: **Right.**

P: So if we see the potential then I put more effort into those. There are other coaches that they do a good job but they're never going to be probably full time, so I'm really just making sure they're giving the players the right support in the right way but also fitting into the club philosophy. So the full time lead phase coaches and I'm guessing you're aware of the sort of workforce set up?

I: **Yeah.**

P: Yeah, so the lead phase coaches are a priority for me to work with them sort of pretty much throughout the week. The best part time coaches that we see as future lead phases and then the PDP coaches, under 18s, under 23s and because, I think I'm the most experienced coach in our club, I also and again, I've known him for years, I also support the first team manager.

I: **Ah brilliant.**

P: So...and that's through chats during the week, at the moment it's ...I would have been out there occasionally with him but we're in split sites now and my focus has to be on erm...sort of the PDPs and the YDPs etc. through the week but then I'm with the first team on match days and I'm linked to the bench and I'm in conversation with the manager before the game, either the day before or the morning before.

So yesterday it was sort of, it was yesterday afternoon after the under 23 game, so we both spoke as we drove to Stevenage and then I spoke with him before kick-off, just to get one or two bits, was in touch with the goal keeper coach throughout on the walkie-talkie and then we've had a catch up this morning just to go through certain bits and discuss what he might be thinking for the next game. So that's probably the best part of it, if you like, because you really have to have your tactical head switched on all the time and you've gotta sort of live in a role that is not one I've ever coached before, so that's great for me as well, but yeah. So I've got to deal with sometimes an emotional manager and a frustrated manager and

whatever else and be consistent but I've also then got to work with the new coach and we've got two or three who have, you know, they're only young and they've not got the experience yet but you can see there's real potential in there in the way they relate to their players.

So they need a completely different set of advice, some need help and more variety or how to communicate and others need a little bit more on practice design or, you know, not stepping in too often. So there's lots of different stages, some want to get a little bit more knowledge around, you know, playing out from the back, so we look and see what it is they feel they need and also where we think they've got to get slightly better as well from a club point of view.

**I: So is that quite unique...is that unique or is that normal for the head of coaching to have that greater link to the first team as well as the ...?**

P: Erm ...It's not unique, there aren't that many. I speak to a lot of the heads of the coaching, the vast majority don't have any access at all, some can have chats, the two that I know, I mean there's [name] at [town] but he's gone more round the first team now and sort of puts some of the head of coach stuff on hold because it's so ...He was sort of like a third man, if you like, in their staff.

**I: Okay yeah.**

P: But I think he was doing such a good job, they wanted him to do full time, he wanted to have a go at it, so he's part, some is head of coaching stuff but he still makes sure that he goes out a couple of nights a week with the youth team and where he can...er...with the youth squad, he goes out with the youth team once a week and he tries to have a look at some home games on a Sunday if they haven't been too far the previous day.

The other one would be [name] at [club] who literally is working with every squad going and he would do the same job as me. [Name] was doing little bits as well, again, a little...a voice in the stand if you like on match days. So I think it's more the fact that we're a club that really wants to develop, the owner is massively on to sort of developing players but he's equally sort of, erm, focused on developing the staff.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: Hence if you look, I don't know how much you know about [team] but if you look at the last five or six first team managers only one of them has been an outside appointment, he wants it to be people ...so as you get the consistent messages.

I: **Okay.**

P: So yeah, so that's sort of how we try and do that.

I: **Yeah that makes sense. So do you have any personal beliefs or personal philosophies towards, more to player development but I guess it will link into coach development?**

P: Yeah I mean, the players, it's a little bit you sort of started off with going against the club, it's not massively but when I was running my own football college and my own sort of grass roots teams and working all the way through, I was only ever...I was doing it for enjoyment so I wanted to play, probably over expansive and, you know, it was stay on the ball, dominate position, take risks. I say that but then I didn't go with dribblers, I wanted possession until I got into the final third and then they could pretty much do what they want but we moved the ball quickly, that's what it always ...My specials were always possession practices or final third practices, never really did defending, never did set pieces, never worked on pressing, all that, just that's how...that's how I always sort of used to do it and it was usually to just see how good the players could be without constraints put on them, if that's the right word.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Cos I'd seen it before, you know, I had one coach who was exactly like me, I was a bit of a pretty free spirit as a player, not good enough I admit but he pretty much encouraged me to do what I was good at which was, you know, ball striking and trying to beat people one v one and it was ... If it went wrong he was pretty supportive because he was that type, whereas I think the other managers I played with didn't want me to give the ball away and probably, without me knowing it at the time, probably stifled a little bit.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So I think as I started coaching, I wanted, I just wanted to sort of be excited when I watched people and I didn't want to be- I didn't want to be the one who put the handbrake on players or teams. Of course along the way there were times when I got sucked into a result but I'm going back a number of years, you know, but generally, as long as they played freely,



that's all I really wanted to do. I wanted to be known as a coach that was exciting or his teams were exciting to watch, who had good technical players. I was also...you know, it sounds silly but I valued a sort of fair play award as much I valued a sort of like a cup final appearance.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** I felt it had to, everything had to be done properly and we did that and we won the fair play because I wouldn't tolerate anything either from referees or opposition benches or anything like that and that's, you know, that's just how I was.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

**P:** As a result, better players tended to come to us because they knew they wouldn't be stifled by a coach. So, when you start getting more of the better players, you start getting the results anyway, so it fell in hand but I was never trying to get them a career.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** You know, there were a few that got taken into clubs but they didn't ... no one got signed from that, so there wasn't really a pressure on me. I didn't have a board sort of like telling me that I had to go and do this. The first time I did, I went to ... we took a lot of those boys into a sort of... its [club] which is in Ipswich, and I don't know what step it is now, it's probably about five leagues below the conference or something like that but, and we took all these young players up and we did well initially but then when we hit a run, as you do with 19 and 20 year old boys, you know, the ball got itchy and I think we had, at that time, we had eight players under 21 in the team and three older ones and I was doing the same things, but as a coach, not the manager by the way erm ...but the manager knew what I was doing and was trusting, but then as soon as we sort of got into a rut, you know, it was a case of you've got an 8 – 3 balance, it needs to be the other way round, it needs to be 3 and 8, you need to go and get five and then I refused to do it. Then the moans got a little bit louder and in the end, I just went, you know, what I'm about, you brought me in because of this, I'll take it elsewhere and that's what I did. I took it to another club and let them go for now. I wasn't the manager, I was just really someone who just stood on the side and gave the manager a little bit of advice, did the odd session for 'em and let them go and be whatever they were.

Then you go into the [team] and it's great because we have to produce players.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** Erm ...But that becomes ...because they can't do all those things in front of a crowd with a manager's job at stake, you know, you've got to get them in there and they've got to be ready to cope with league one initially and league two football. So I've got to put a little bit of my erm... what's the right word, cosmic sort of things that I perhaps used to do to the side and they've got to play with more common sense at times. Decision making became a watch word which it wasn't for too many years for me. Game management had to come in at times. I still bite my tongue a little bit around it, for me. Again I had a row with the first team manager a few years back because he was taking the ball into the corner with ten minutes to go and we ended up drawing again, we were leading, and my bit is they started blocking off the corner flag and there were opportunities to switch a player and potentially go and get the second goal and mine is ... I see teams doing that but I've also seen good teams back themselves by keeping the ball and winding the clock down, you know, and if they do it for long enough, they'll over press, the wrong one will press and you'll create an opening so, you know... but I understand when I'm sitting there now if we were one nil up last night with two minutes to go, I'd be expecting it and I'd also sort of like be understanding why, so that's just parking a little bit of my sort of ego to the side.

**I: Yeah, yeah. I get that. So when you're working with the youth players, probably, maybe a consideration of the 16s here, do you have expectations on the player capabilities?**

**P:** Er...I think you have to because you're looking at what they've got to be next year and going into the full term...sorry, full time every day training, so I think you have to look at do they love football, can they learn, I think you have to look at that. I think you've also got to try and look three and four years ahead as to when they're going to be challenging to train with our first team, and the intensity that that would bring and can they adapt to that. So I think you have to look at their capabilities. I do think- I do think the fact that I was very technical, you know, when I was sort of half doing the recruitment for all the kind of players, I think I only looked at technical players as a first. If they couldn't do the basic receiving and ball striking, and you know, one v one work in the final, I didn't really consider the physical, you know. And as I've been pulled away from that, I see a lot of players come in now that I see physical being the number one attribute and I'd never...I'd never have considered a player in that way in the past but, you know, so again, as you say the player ability, yeah, it's

sometimes difficult to watch a player that people are talking well about and I'm sitting there thinking, I would never have taken him at my college programme and you want to put him in our scholarship but, again, actually, it might be what we need at league two level or whatever else and until we know whether they can learn and get better at the technical part, you know, you've got to keep an open mind on it.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So yeah it definitely is and yeah, we've got one age group that are really, really weak and I don't see... I don't see a player with the right technical habits. We do have some physical specimens in there, competitive, and all that, but I only think that gets you so far.

**I: Yeah.**

P: You know, you've got to get, if you're going to get with some competitors and some powerful boys in there, you need to have people to give the ball that can hurt people and these can't really when it comes to coaches that will sit off and block holes and whatever, you know. So yeah, it's something that I consider a lot but there's only so much now that I have a say in on the recruitment.

**I: Yes, yeah, yeah. And actually in regards to that ...So when I mentioned selection throughout, it would always be in regards to like release retention with the contracts as opposed to games.**

P: Okay. I get asked my opinion on every player whether it's a trialist coming in erm...sorry this is officially, so this is part of our, as you say retain, release and sort of trialist programme. So erm, I'm one of those who gets a say and gets a vote but it doesn't necessarily mean that if I say yes that everyone else will, you know, it's the majority rules and then the majority then is the players that are going to be...the coaches or the staff that are going to be working with them the most. So I get a say on every trialist that comes in, every player that's signed and whether I think they should be released or retained. Unless I'm one way or the other, I pretty much let the coaches go first because I think it's important that they are opinionated for the right way and I think they might not be if I jump in too early...Erm, I like the ones where there's probably more saying no and I'm saying yes because I think that brings out great conversations.

**I: Yes, yeah.**

P: It goes as far for the 18s, 23s, we've just... well it hasn't been released yet, we've just made decisions on a few under 23s who won't be offered contracts at the end of the year, to give them a chance. The names won't come out yet so I'm not going to name any now.

I: **Yeah, yeah that's fine yeah.**

P: We were asked, there were two of them, I would have at least kept until the end of the season, I'm not saying I would have given them...but that hasn't ...you know, the overall decision and the key decision makers around the first team and the directors, if you like, are that they're not going to get there, so those decisions are made early. So it doesn't always go but at the same time, there's been one or two where I've pushed hard. There was an under 18, left side centre half who missed the majority of his scholarship through a knee injury and maybe my empathy's coming out and whatever else kicks in there, but great trainer, fantastic attitude, has some mobility issues. I was the strong person that sort of like said he's only had like nine games in years, I don't think you can get rid of a left side centre half with that attitude, particularly in league two where he's probably more of an old fashioned type which isn't my, necessarily my best sort of centre half, but he can pass it and I think you've got to teach him to be a little bit better and step out with it.

I: **Yeah.**

P: And I think that's our jobs as coaching staff, to help him do that and the sport site staff to work with him on, you know, the agility work and the recovery work.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So again when we, I think we broke up around about February/March because of the pandemic and whatever so, at that stage he was not going to get offered another contract but it was through doing this and me actually getting a little bit passionate about this boy that they actually gave him until Christmas.

I: **Okay.**

P: And he's actually, you know, at that stage he was like the 7<sup>th</sup> centre half in the under between 23s and second year scholars, we didn't count the first years, and he was the 7<sup>th</sup> but then the 23s played [team] yesterday, we had one travel with the first team squad so he didn't play but he was...he was one of the two and he's jumped over three others that

people didn't think was possible and you know, and we actually talked about it and they literally said I'm actually coming round to him.

**I: Yeah.**

P: He's far from perfect and I'm not saying I would give him another year yet, but I definitely want him till the end of the season. So some of my say does carry a little bit. I certainly get asked by the first team manager my thoughts on players, that can cause a little bit because he's got a centre half that is absolutely not my type and he's picked him two or three times lately and when he's asked me, I've said no but, it's clear it's not a fallout and not a criticism here, it's just I'm not having him but that's, yeah, that's just the way that it is.

He's asked me today about we need a centre forward, I don't know whether you follow our results, I think we scored one in five games, that was an own goal. We're desperately in need of a front player and he's asked me to sort of look at this. Over the Christmas period we thought we might get a bid for our left back, so he gave me six left backs to watch through [club] and go through clips and do a report. So my opinion counts on things like that but at the same time, the one I put forward or the order I have might not be taken into account but it's listened to at least, before a decision is made.

**I: How does that work with the ... if you're given scholarships from the 16s who else would be involved in that?**

P: We have quite ... everyone gets one vote. So it would be, it has to be people that's watched them. So we may call...All the four lead phases watch the 16s and work with the 16s at different times, obviously the main one looks after them. You've then got the part time 15s and 16s coaches would get a say because they see them and train them and then there would be two academy managers, one who does everything, one who focuses on school boys. You would then have myself as the head of coaching, you would have the two under 18s coaches. 23 coaches have to look as well ...Erm...The first team if they've seen them, they can have a say, the same with the director of football, if he's seen them, he'll have a say but if he hasn't seen them he'll refrain from it and then we get people like analysts to have a look as well because I think it's important that we get analysts, sport scientists to also give their opinions and then the recruitment department, so anyone who is recruiting at the top end would get a say as well.

So I think it works out around ...I think it's around 22 when we did it once before because we had a 14/8 yes/no split but there were so many arguments that in the end, you looked at the eight and erm...the eight that were nos were generally people above that were going to be working with them. So the manager stepped in and overruled it which is, someone has to have that sort of role in the end. So, I think there's probably a couple less than that now because, you know, they can't...they can't all sort of find time to go and look at, and we've lost a couple of analysts on the way, so let's say there'll be 18 to 20 people that will vote on the current 16s.

We did it a month ago and three got offered and seven were told they wouldn't be getting anything and I think that leaves us, I think that five of the initial group are still there and we've got another four on trial at the minute, I think.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So when you're actually going through that process of the discussion, how does that, like how do you determine who gets selected and who doesn't?**

P: Er...So we all sit in a room, literally it is as much as that and the player comes up and someone opens up and talks about them erm... and it could be the lead phase or it could be anyone and then anyone can talk on it. We're encouraged to challenge each other's opinions and it then gets thrown at us from the sort of like, from above that if you're saying that, you know, he isn't good enough, you know, one v one defending, it'll be a case of what have you put in place for him, have you had him doing enough one v one working training sessions because don't just let him go with that if we don't know if he can be better.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So you know, those conversations have been going on since probably Christmas if they're under 15 year. So they're sort of taught in that way, not that we offer too many in the under 15s. We have one or two in the past but generally we don't do until after they've come in and trained in the pre-season, sort of pretty close to the under 18s and their staff have had a good look as well. So yeah...and yeah, it can be quite argumentative but in a positive way, if that makes sense.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm...If there is a massive difference of opinion then sport science data will be used, er, analysts will be on hand to provide sort of clips and footage...erm, and if someone's got a

real strong yes, again they're asked to present a case for why they're using the analysis clips and whatever. So I think it's a very thorough process, while I won't necessarily agree with everyone that gets one or doesn't get one, I can't argue that they haven't sort of gone to a lot of sort of discussion and depth to sort of get to that decision.

**I: Is that a similar process if you're considering like development plans for the individual players, so ILPs or IDPs, would that be the same sort of process?**

P: Yeah very much. You probably wouldn't have- we wouldn't have, let's say the 23s coaches in there so if we're talking about the school boys, we'll do that at different stages. The PDPs will probably be separated and so it would go probably 15s, 16s, maybe 15s, 18s, 23s, if it's working down all of them well we'll only have the school boy staff involved. I'll sit across both meetings and yeah, the ILP, it's pretty much a case of we have pathway players, so our key players are focus players and we build the sessions and we build the team selections around them for a six week period. So if we've got a central mid-fielder that needs to work on receiving under pressure, he will stay there, we won't shift him to full back or centre...we'll let him ...the only difference is if he gets called up above, we don't insist that they have to ... we'll maybe put him in his best position and give him his best chance to flourish but then we'll also try and make sure that the formation might suit them. So we might turn round, you know, and make sure we've got another mid-fielder who's working on passing, playing at full back so as he's constantly looking for him within a game and that will cost us results against certain teams because he won't be such a good defender but we will do that for a handful of players in each squad and those discussions are based around ILPs what they need and how are you going to achieve that within your sessions and with your game formations and styles over the next six weeks and then lead phases have to report on that as to what they've done and how it's worked.

**I: So I know you mentioned sort of branches outside of technical/tactical so obviously consideration of the four corner model that the FA delivers, what are your thoughts on the four corner model?**

P: Erm ...I think, originally, I was always a technical coach, so I was very, very much leaning in that corner. I always felt tactical needed to be within there as well. I think some people do tag it onto technical now or some people put the little tactical box in the middle. I think probably the technical would be my main one.

Social, I think the more we're finding out the social and psychological through unfortunately bad stories and people that perhaps have fallen out, I think it's more of a consideration. What I would say now without having to pick teams and not that I was massively affected by results or whatever else, what I can do and players, because they don't see me as someone who's going to be shouting at them on match days, they'll more likely open up around how they're feeling, and that doesn't necessarily mean stuff from home but, you know, if they feel that a coach has been a little bit harsh or they feel there's something missing, they'll more likely come to us on that. So I think- I think I've got better at that one myself. I've also got one of my lead phases is massively into psychology as well so I lean on him a little bit around that and you know. While they're doing their sort of [prehab] before 18s, 23s sessions, I'll go around and I'll just have a little look at one or two and I know which ones who have perhaps not been selected the previous weekend or haven't trained well because I've either seen it or I've heard it and I'll just try and engage them in a chat more than anything else.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** And if there's anything that I'm thinking there's more to it, then I talk to the lead phase who I think is good there and we've obviously got a sport psychologist as well that works in there and I'll relay those bits on.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** Physical, I leave it to the experts. It's something that I really never considered outside of pre-season, and maybe I'm old school on that, you know, where I did used to work the players hard but there was also ball related work within there but they did their runs, they did their sort of core programmes and things like that but I also did lots of short, sharp, high intensity possessions with forfeits and different things in there. That's how I would have done it in the past, it's only since I've sort of been in clubs and seen them working, it's taken a while to win me over, maybe because I've seen one or two that want to pull them out too quickly of sessions just because they feel this. They've probably lasted less time because the football club environment, the pressures are that they need to be fit and they can't keep wrapping them up because when you get to the first team, our schedules at the moment are ridiculous, you know, it's... we don't have the chance to probably do a lot of coaching, it is, you know, prepare for the match, play the match recover from the match, prepare for the next one.



**I: Yeah.**

P: And your Christmas and New Year periods where you can play five times in 18 days or whatever else, I think we have to get them ready for that, so I've always been a little bit cynical of them trying to pull them out and worrying about what they ...For me, we've got to know where their breaking point is and they've got to also find out what more is needed if they're going to have an established career in the football league which is what we've got to look at first. So, to be fair, the two or three that we've got in now are far more understanding of that which has made me sort of lean a little bit more towards them and to find out more about them, but it's something I don't want to know too much about, I want to know just enough, but I'm really looking at how are they engaging with the players as well but also, are they going to push themselves. For example, we had a first team boy who's been ill, nothing COVID related fortunately, but he'd been ill but he was put back training on Monday with us. He played in the 23s yesterday, he started to cramp up with about 15 to go, I'm thinking we should take him off, others are saying no, let's see if he can get through it. I'm thinking he could be here, we've got a transfer window not far away, if the left back gets sold, he's the next one in. I don't need, you know if we sell him and he suddenly pulls a hamstring or something and he's out for you know...so I then just looked at our sports science guy and say come on then, what are you saying and it's like I think he can get through it but I'll watch him for the next few minutes but I think he can do that because they can track their data live and whatever. He's over, he's high speed running but he's nowhere near what his capabilities are in the first team game, so let's have a look at him and that's where that trust comes in because I think some in the past would have gone, no he can only play ...and I don't get that, for me they've got to hit a workload rather than a minute, a minute deadline.

So yeah, so I'm a little bit more trusting and understanding of, I don't think I'll ever be one that wants to take core sessions and really wants to look at it, I'm just interested in how they engage in it.

**I: Yeah, yeah makes sense. And I'm assuming that these other domains, very more so, would take some objective measures, like physical data and psychological...?**

P: Yeah our erm... he's got a performance title, I'm not sure exactly what it is but he massively is into the data. Erm...I'm more linked into what I see with my eyes, what I hear with my ears and then I can check into the data off the ...I'm more into the football side of it in terms of

completed passes and, you know, the number of times we've made this ...I'll use that to back up my opinion or to be, to rethink, if you know what I mean by that?

**I: Yeah.**

P: So, whereas he will be very much, they're trying to hit this, they're trying to make a set number of final third entries and whatever and I'm not quite sure on that because I think if you find a low, you know a low block defence, I think you do have to drag them out and if that means that our possession is in less threatening areas for a little while, I'm okay with it. You know, I am okay with it, whereas I think if we put it into a very tall defence, centre backs are both playing full backs as well, trying to hit the final ...I think that can affect our overall game. So, I don't like to have definite targets in terms of that, I'd rather see it for myself. Decision making would be the one that again, that I talked about and then have that back up, have the stats at hand later on to back up what I think I saw with my eyes.

**I: So with that, if you consider, if you did like sprint testing for example which I'm assuming you will because pretty much everyone does, do you find that the players who are the fastest also are the fastest on the pitch or does it not represent that so much?**

P: That's a good question. I know who the quickest ones are in each group, I can't say that I ...if you asked me the times I couldn't tell you what they were. I think pretty much the ones that would be in the top three in most groups would also be the ones that, in my head, were the most dangerous, if you like, in terms or better at recovering. So full backs and wide players or a centre player that plays on the shoulder, I don't think our defenders are that quick. I think we've got one in the under 14s who's really quick but I think they're more aggressive than anything else.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm... Yeah it's a good question. I'm trying to think of an opposite example but if I look at [name] who is our left back, I mean, and when he wants to run in a first team game you know he's going to take some catching but then I'm trying to think when we had [name] with us, he didn't want to use it up in training but he was really, really quick in a game. I mean I remember him going against [name] when [name] played for [team] in pre-season friendly and he rinsed him and maybe it was because [name] two weeks behind in pre-season or whatever else but when you see that, you stand back because you haven't seen him really do that in training. But when you ask him, he's never wanted to use that sort of ...

So yeah I'm trying to think if there are any others, there's probably a mid-fielder, two years ago that we used to moan like anything that he didn't open his legs as a, I suppose a box to box mid-fielder or an eight or whatever you want to call it now, but he would be top of a lot of the fitness but he never, he almost wanted to be a better player. It was almost like his ego kicking in, he didn't just want to be just a box to box energy, he wanted to be as good as this one or that one who could manipulate the ball and receiving. So yeah there might be one, yeah I could think of another 23 who's a little bit like that when we're saying, just go and run them from the eight, don't worry about going and getting it off there, we've got other people who do that and he wants to still be involved in the build-up. So yeah, there might be...there might be some that are good in the testing that don't necessarily use it in the games but I think generally, the ones that win the testing or are at the top of the testing, if you like would also be the ones that look the quickest if you came and watched them in a game, I would think, yeah.

**I: Yeah. So a couple of scenario questions for you now. If you had a player that came to you at the foundation phase and they were like, they were excellent, they were outstanding for their group, how does that inform you of their future?**

P: Ooh... if they're coming in, it's really difficult, we've been asked a question about who we think will go ... I think it's a really difficult one to say until they go through the change from small sided games to ... through the 9 by 9s and the 11 by 11s full size pitches and then the high score on puberty and all the things. So I think, I always think it's a really tough one to know. The best ones in our foundation phase now, we've lost the best one to [club] erm... so that's a bit of a ... but we've got two or three others. We have to make them focus, we have to make them feel wanted, we have to build sessions around them. We also have to make sure they train against other good players. So the lad who's gone to [club], one of the things they used to moan about, him and his parents used to moan about and they're not bad parents to be fair, is that he was the best player by a long way but there was also the bottom end of that group, there were three and four that we probably took late because we needed to get enough bodies up to get two 6s out on a Sunday which I'm never for that, I'd rather keep the trialists coming in and out to do that and he'd get frustrated and you could see it in him but we put it down to him being oh look at him, he's getting ...because he's the best player, it's frustrating because they can't get him the ball how he needs it.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I think you have to be aware of them, you have to look after them and build sessions around them and do the extra bits for them, you've got to put them with at least one other good player around them for me that can get the ball. Yeah, we actually made the joke, when the boy had met [club] and was still considering whether to go or not, you know, and he was coming to the session that night and, you know, it's one of the things that went to the coaches, do not put him on the same team as this boy, he can't stand him, you know, make sure this boy is on the opposite team because we don't need ... you know, and it's... should you be thinking like that? I don't know, but I think you have to have those bits ...erm, we certainly wouldn't be looking at any other untoward way of doing it, so, in terms of finances or looking after parents or anything like that, I've heard of it, we wouldn't do that at all.

I: **Yeah.**

P: We've pushed them up to make them feel special but other times some boys at times don't want to go up, they want to stay and be the best player and so I think you have to listen a little bit on that. Erm...I'm just trying to think, I mean there's a guy that scores goals, under 10 at the moment, I think we've just got to keep him scoring goals. So there's no point, at the moment, in learning another position because I don't think he's going to be a winger, he literally is just an instinctive, he's not protecting the best holder... he just instinctively hits things cleanly off one and two touch, so I think we'll keep him there. I think if we started playing with him, we might lose certain bits of him, I don't think he'd get the goals going up, so we'll keep him where he is. There are others that I think you probably could, that might have a better mentality to go up. I think it has to be an individual... looking at it as an individual.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So a really similar question now but the other way round, if you had a player that came into the youth phase but they'd done no academy prior to that, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: Well I think, it's actually one ... We had a big thing around two years ago about performance v potential, it was something we got off one of the England cricket selectors. An example, we've got [name] nephew in our first year scholar for us. When he came in at 15, you know, he was mature and he was this and he was that but then he's- he's lived football all his life. His dad was a ... [name] who played at lower league level, you know, his uncle is [name] you know. So his football years and education would have been, you know, 10 out of 10, but

then we've also picked up boys that have got no brothers ...erm, have got no parental support, so literally have been playing almost on the street with their mates, boys that are perhaps older or younger or both and to get them in a sort of structured environment, their learning could go off the scale, we don't know whereas how much higher is [name] boy going to go.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: He will get better at everything that he's done and he'll learn about being in the environment but I don't think his potential, you know, is going to get much more than perhaps we think.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: You know, and he's doing well, he's doing really well at that and I think he'll do well at 18s and if he gets a contract, I think he'll do well and if he goes in the ... I think he'll fit into that one because he's got all that experience around him as well as in the club that can help him. This boy's got ... but he's starting from very, very low down, he could improve dramatically. So there's another boy called [name] who you know, I remember two years ago on day release, me and another coach standing there and literally teaching him non-kicking foot side of the ball, as you strike, head over the ball, you know, knee over the ball, you know, just increasing because he was striking, it was, the sound was off and you're now looking at him from centre half, he's now able to clip things and you know, and we joke about him because he couldn't get it off the ground. But because he hadn't had that background, as soon as we put him in that environment and gave him the practice hours, his improvement was dramatic as opposed to gradual. So yeah, I think the coaches have to be aware of what their backgrounds are.

Our head of recruitment for school boys was fantastic for that, he didn't just talk about you know, oh this is what he is, this is what he's good at, this is why I'm signing him, you know and then if someone would say he didn't do it, he'd say I haven't brought him in for that, I've brought him in for this. You need to know that his is the club he's played for and he does the family background and he puts it all in and then the coaches ... the coaches can't, they've got no excuse because it's like you know everything about that boy, how many brothers he's got, how long he's been playing, what clubs he's been at so you've got to consider those bits because he wouldn't have been exposed to playing out from the back in the team that he plays for on a Sunday morning, they're never going to play out from the back, you know, so

don't question him on his passing range, his short passing or whatever, you know, that's for us to sort of see if we can add to what you've brought him in for which was, you know, recovery defending, you know. So I think all of us have to be aware of what their journey's been so far to know who's already had a lot of opportunity to learn and practice and who hasn't.

**I: Yeah, yeah, it's a great point. And how does, this is the last question actually of this section but how does maturation influence decisions?**

P: We did something five or six years ago where we, again I've never looked at the actual birth months, erm, and again it was someone ... I sat at a conference somewhere or other and they talked about this England squad and this and that and so we came back and did it as an exercise and I think in the whole academy, we had 3 July and August birthdays and that was from 9s ...it was 21s then so that's how far I'm going back. So from 9s to 21s. And then we did the under 8 trial, you know, basically anyone from any of the centres got put forward and they all came in and spent an afternoon with us and played in games and did sessions and whatever and then we all had to sort of secretly put our list of boys that we rated and ranked and whatever, and unbeknown ... I did it as a little bit of a secret one, I did it as, I went and got everyone's birth month beforehand and pretty much all of the coaches or the eyes that were looking at them had picked a majority of September/October Birthdays. Erm and again there was nobody ... I think that year there was no one after February or it might have been one after February of something like that and this was like for 25 boys and, you know, I'm sitting there thinking this can't be, so now I'm throwing these stats out and making everyone feel bad, it's like no, I've been there myself. So I think the head of recruitment took that on, it's very much about birth quarters. And it's really, it's really good now. I suppose it's linked a little bit to the social corner erm, [name] a few years back put it on the lead phase coaches to send a birthday message to every boy, so they knew when every player in the squad had a ... and then what that coach would do, he would put it in the coaches group so that all the coaches ... So if they saw such and such a boy from the under 12s, it's his birthday today, and then what that did, they did it automatically. So when someone says go on, you know, is he a young under 12 but most people can go, they might be a month or two months out but they'd go oh no he's second half of the year, I think he's just after Christmas or... So I think it's something that's fell our way to learn and to actually look at, you know, whether they're a young or an older or a middle or whatever, to take that in.

The maturation, we've done a few sessions over the years where we have turned round and tried to link the ages together but like I was sort of saying about the data being, the amount of, you know, the amount of high speed running rather than time, we'd turn around and say okay, we've got an under 14 who's, you know, is an August birthday, well not August, a May birthday but he's still one of the biggest in the group, don't penalise him, you know. Now start looking at the height, start looking at the, you gave us all the sport science testing and you gave us all this one, this is coming up towards their PHV is that right, have I said it right?

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

**P:** Yeah so I put them in a little group together. So we've tried things, it's a little, I can't say we've done it for any length of time to see any benefit, sort of definitely come out of it but I think it's just that little thing. Again [name] who does...he's one of the lead phases who does the psychology, he's more likely to come up with little bits so let's say there's been two under 13 teams playing because you've got a Cat1 side, he'll turn round and put, you know, the natural footballers than the more physical side in one team and just see what sort of differences he'll get. He'll put the bigger and the you know ... So he has tried those bits, the attitudes and the ... We try and have a tournament night every erm... it used to be every month, the last Thursday of every month, I think that's a bit too often and literally all the coaches- the coaches just sort of look after the team but the boys pick their own team generally and you tend to get ... but they also have to pick from each age group so it actually goes across, I think we go across three or four ages, I can't remember now, but yeah it might be about four ages, so you would get a 12 playing up and you have to pick so many but it's interesting because you then put little rewards in but, you know, you can easily make a 12 captain but you know that the 15s are going to be there pulling the strings. So we try and throw those little things in, we try and position them against each other at times. If we pick the team the team with the under 12s would have a 12 at the centre back and a 12 centre forward or, you know, we might look and go well actually he's a big 13, let's put him up against, you know, an average 15 and see how he ...

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** So we'll throw little bits out there. There are ideas that are all floating round in the coaches and lead phase coaches' heads. We probably don't plan it that far in advance, it's sort of something that might just come to us, you know, next time we'll try this or next time we'll do it on different size pitches and we'll put the more physical side on the tight pitch and, you

know, and just see if that has a different effect or we'll turn it into a round pitch so they can't, you can't get them running down the outsides, you know. So we'll have little, not fads but just little bits around practice design just to sort of bring something out. That's probably as much organised as we have around maturation.

**I: Yeah that's fine. Okay, so moving into the last part, this is where you need your team sheet.**

P: Yeah.

**I: All I need you to do...can you write on your ...?**

P: Yeah, I've just got that and I've got some bits on the side so yeah either way.

**I: Yeah so, if you can put a letter 'H' next to anyone that you would consider a higher performer and then I'll give you some more to do afterwards.**

P: So am I picking my best under 16 team or?

**I: Just consider all of your 16s you've got, so don't worry about a team so much, if it's like 15...**

P: And I'm not putting them in position?

**I: No.**

P: No so it's literally a list of names and a 'H' on what is higher and when you say higher am I thinking they're going to have a career in the game or I'm giving them a scholarship or?

**I: That's completely up to you, how you pick them out is up to you and there can be as many or as little as you want. So it could be 1, it could be 10.**

P: What I'm going to do is I'm going to list all of our under 16s.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: And I'll put the ones that I think erm...yeah that I think are high potential or high performer?

**I: You can do both if you want.**

P: Okay, yeah okay. Give me a couple of minutes, are keepers included yeah?



- I: You can do, I'm not as worried because I know they're a bit of an anomaly but you can include it if it makes life easier.**
- P: Yeah no worries. Okay, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16 yeah, so I've got 16 pure trialists. So I may not know so much about them and I've got other boys that's I've known since under 9. I've got, out of those 16, I've 6 Hs.
- I: Yeah.**
- P: That doesn't mean I'm ruling out the other 10 but I've put H's, do you want to know why I've put H against them or?
- I: Not yet. If you can do the same thing now but you're going to put 'L' next to anyone that you consider the lowest, you're welcome to, you can ignore the trialists if you want because you'd be less inclined to know about them, so they might be a bit redundant for this.**
- P: Okay yeah I've got another six to be fair.
- I: How many don't have anything at all?**
- P: There should be four, yeah.
- I: So they'd be considered mid-performing?**
- P: Yeah. Yeah I would say. Erm actually to be fair, one I haven't gone high on but other people definitely would. I, maybe it's luck, I just haven't seen him perform to the level that others have, I've seen flashes but not ... yeah so other people would put him high but I haven't yet.
- I: So how would, how did you determine the groupings?**
- P: Okay. So my high profiles, I've got the goalkeeper, I think he's the best goalkeeper we've had come through our school boy programme for a while, I do have a doubt whether he'll be tall enough to play in the end, I think he, all the signs are saying he's going to just top six foot I think, we've already talked about sort of work on him in terms of developing spring as he goes but he's quite a mature one, trains with the 18s a lot really, so I've put him as one.
- I've put in one and I don't even know that he'll get a scholarship, he's only been in, he's a trialist. He's an elegant looking centre half, he steps out with it, my question mark is I don't

see him want to compete and put himself into challenges where he might get hurt, he backs off too much, that's for the coaches to work on, so I see potential. If he gets the other bit right and like you talked about, he's been in grass roots football as a right back and basically they don't play him centre back because he doesn't head it and I can see that, but if we can get him to head it and if we can get there, I see the ball playing stuff as being very, very interesting.

The third one is a defensive mid-fielder but he's one of them little rats and I can see him being really effective in our first team manager really liking him. He's not necessarily going to be easy on the eye but I think he might be one that comes through, I know what the manager likes.

My wildcard for the 16s is a boy that plays anywhere across the front, he just seems to effect games, I can't read him, I don't always know what he's going to do but that's part of his impact. Others don't necessarily like him because he's not secure enough on the ball. He'll be one that I'd argue for a scholarship, I might not have enough support but he'll be one.

We've got an enigma of a left-winger who is as moody as...doesn't want to run but we went to [club] and he scored four against them, and caught everyone's eye but the week after, he's dragging at half-time because he doesn't want to run at all and that's where he is. He's got learning difficulties. There's all sorts of issues in his background. You've got to take someone like that but he's going to need a hell of a lot of support so he will be very much high potential.

The last one is a different front player than what we normally have. He's one that naturally looks to, makes two movements, comes short and shows early, whether he gets it or not, he just makes then a next movement directly between defenders towards goal and I haven't seen us have that one. We try and talk ... But he makes two movements and because of that, I think he's different to what we come up against, so that would be my six high performers. They've got all different things.

**I: Yeah very much so, what about the lowers, what made you want to pick them out?**

P: Yeah, I mean, I talked about them but there's an athletic right back for me, technically is very short.

There's a centre back, we've picked up from grass roots who does everything that that elegant looking defender doesn't, he wants to attack things, he's front foot, I think he's done all his growing. Erm...I think as he steps up he'll get played around. So I think he has a low ceiling, if that's the right one, you can see why people would have a look at him now but I personally wouldn't.

There's a mid-field for me who when the going is good will get on the ball all day, as soon as he's up against a physical, he'll go hiding, he'll pull out into [full] back areas rather than go and compete in tackles, he'll actually almost let them have the ball and then foul them, so again I can't have that type.

We've got another one who again, pretty much the opposite, he rats around but doesn't have enough quality, gets too emotional as well. I don't think that will help him day in day out.

Erm ...A left back who's just not going to be either quick enough or strong enough. He's got a short range of passing, he's good over short distances, I don't think that's going to be ... he will be a late developer, he's been like that for three or four years now and he still isn't, you know, if he's standing sort of 10 yards outside his area, he's barely reaching the halfway line and, you know, as nice a kid as he is, that isn't going to get you sort of the scholarship so I think he's struggling.

The final one is a street kid, another winger but doesn't want to learn, knows what his strengths are which is getting the ball out of his feet and run, doesn't do it often enough, as soon as he meets his physical match hasn't got the mentality to find another way and will sulk, just doesn't really listen to what the coaches are trying to help him with in terms of different runs and mixing it up. So, I would say they've all got...I would say they're all low performers or low potential.

**I: Yeah. That's quite interesting because it sounds like the lower group have a lot of psychological sort of related issues but if they don't, it almost sounds like there's just, they've got a gap in like one of the corners at least, so that they can't be excellent whereas the others seem to be, it sounded like the higher group seem to be excellent but they might be okay in other areas but they're not missing it.**

**P:** Erm... I would say the trialist defender would be missing, he would be missing the competitive. I'm just looking back down my list again... erm, the mid-fielder that I said the

first team manager liked, for me he's technically short but I think they will build other stuff around him and the two wingers, one that I go for that others won't, I think because he's not consistent and tidy enough and then one is the learning difficulty. So yeah, there's a few bits they haven't got but of the lower ones ...if I'm looking at how I've done it, I would say most, I think, apart from the little left back, I would think that's my bias about them not being good enough technically. That's probably how I've done that, I've not done that from a club point of view, I think that's how I'm looking.

**I: Yeah that's fine.**

P: And I probably don't see them as good enough players.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So with that, are they likely to be ... Oh actually, sorry, another question, would they have been the same group? So could they have gone from a lower group to a middle group or lower to higher?**

P: Erm... Has anyone moved?

**I: It doesn't have to be this year, it could be three years ago if you knew them that long ago.**

P: I would say the left back when we took ... the boy I said who doesn't kick it, I saw him playing for [team] indoors as an under 12 I think it was, I think we played 6 by 6 and they had a whole group of just little technicians and when they said they were releasing him, we took him straight away. It's not just my advice, that was others... and I think at that stage, if you'd have asked me, I would have said yeah definitely he would be one but time's caught him up, you know and he just hasn't been able to do that. So he would be one that at one stage would have been in the higher performers.

I'm just having a look through. I wouldn't say any of the highs would have been a low performer. The lows have certainly been middle. Erm...The mid-fielder I talked about who when the going is good yeah, there'll be times when he'll really catch your eye. If you're lucky enough to watch him that day, you would potentially put him into the high performer. I've seen it too long so that's why I don't think it will change now. I think at times I might have gone middle. Again, the rat mid-fielder who rats around but is technically short and a little bit emotional, when we picked him up, I loved his intensity but I always questioned whether he would be good enough with the ball.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, it's not a massive difference.

**I: So with the high group only, is there anything that they all have similar which is what puts them in the high group?**

P: Take the goalkeeper out... so forgetting the goalkeeper, so there's four of the five are again, technical or potentially very technical. Erm the 5<sup>th</sup> one is the one that I know the first team manager will like because I know that's the type of mid-fielder he wants, he wouldn't have got into my college sort of side a great deal because he's probably not good enough on the ball yet but I can see his benefit without a doubt. Er...What else have they all got?

**I: I don't want to put words in your mouth but when you were saying about the lowers being, or the middle group being less consistent, would that have made the higher group more consistent?**

P: No, I wouldn't have said so at all.

**I: Okay.**

P: Maybe the mid-fielder, erm, I think, the front player is to be fair as well, the front player with the movements. The two wingers definitely not, definitely not for them. The trialist defender, it's probably too early to say. The goalkeeper is yeah, the goalkeeper would be consistent. Erm... I think it's what I think the front, the wingers can do on their best days, that's probably why I've put them in there as opposed to ...

**I: What they are doing ...**

P: Yeah which again, they could be...the next game they could be anything, I don't know whether they'll be the best player on the pitch or dragged off or whatever. But on their good days, for me, they're as good as scholars we've taken in other years and I could see them but I have a question mark on one attitude, the other guy's attitude is terrific, he'll run through a brick wall for everyone but he's probably not tidy enough, he's not so pleasing on the eye which goes a little bit against my thing.

**I: Yeah.**

P: His technical stuff will be in the final third and all of a sudden he'll drop a shoulder and go and get a strike off but if you ask him to bring a ball down, that touch could bounce [up] easily.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: You know, and that's what some people may look at.

**I: Interesting. So I'm just trying to think...I was going to ask, is there anything that's unique about each one of the high performers, I think you've actually touched on some of it already but maybe you can go through that again just in case I missed it?**

P: Yeah, so I mean the goalkeeper, maybe because we haven't done that well off goalkeepers... not bad but there's one that's been the best goalkeeper that I've seen come through for a long while, maybe that's a bit of a bias that I've been frustrated in recent years that we haven't had one of our own.

The centre back who again, on the ball looks a very elegant, steps out with it, passes it, that would be unique, I think he would be good for that erm ... I actually said exactly this but I haven't seen anyone do that since we had [name] as an under 16.

**I: Okay.**

P: My big thing is that he doesn't want to defend and that's not going to go down with all ... We've got quite a defensive, not defensive, but a lot of our staff are defenders from when they played whereas I was a winger. So I'm biased a little bit, but we've got centre halves mainly sort of within our staff. So I don't ... Yeah we need to see that so he'd be unique in terms of he's really, really good with the ball.

I've picked the, I say the mid-fielder who gets about because basically I've gone on that because I know the first team manager will like him. We've got one just like him in the youth team and he's been up with the first team all season because he gets his foot in and he doesn't stop when chasing, you know, you can rely on him to set the standard, to press and so I know the manager will really like him.

My bias kicks in with the attacking winger with the good attitude who's inconsistent and maybe not all the staff will.

The uniqueness of the other winger who, the boy who scored four against [club], he could be anything on his day, unfortunately those days come around but on his day he could do ... If the right clubs watched him they would bid for him and sign him on the spot.

**I: Yeah.**

P: But again on another day, you'd walk away after two minutes because he would literally just stand there and just do nothing, that's where he is but again there are deep rooted issues in that so, you know, I'm not going to kill him on that.

And as I said the forward who has got the double movements, again they're just ... I see a lot of people wanting to be 10s and whatever else and this one can be a 10 but whether he gets it or not, his second movement is quick and it's got a real purpose to it and again I haven't seen that for a while in an academy centre forward. So I suppose that's unique as well.

**I: So within the lower group only, is there anything that is consistent that puts them in the lower group?**

P: I think it's just the technical limitations. Erm...I'm just looking through. Technical, technical, yeah, so athletic full back for me, it's technical limitations. Centre half, I don't think he's gonna, I don't think he's going to be good enough, I think his ceiling is slow.

**I: Just a ...**

P: [Cross talk 01:15:03] standards.

**I: Sorry, not to interrupt, but when you're saying about the technical, is that like passing and receiving ball manipulation or would you say decision making skills as well?**

P: No, I would say it's on the ball.

**I: Okay.**

P: I'd very much say on the ball, so the full back, I don't trust that he's got enough range of passing, I'm not sure that you can play out from the back into him and know that he's going to receive and you know...The other centre half I think could do that to a level but when teams start to set presses and then let that ball go to him, I don't know that he can stay on it and stay composed. Maybe that's being unfair, I just don't think there's any growing in him, I think he's got to change his game too much.

The mid-fielder, he's technical when he wants to get on the ball and knows he's got space, the consistency, not really. Out of possession he doesn't want to put himself where he might get hurt but he's quite happy to make the fouls himself afterwards, you know, I spot them a mile off.

The other mid-fielder who does that, again it's technical. The little lad is because his technical range is going to be limited and the final one is the winger that doesn't want to learn.

**I: So within that group, is there anything that they're really outstanding, maybe not outstanding at but they're good at that actually doesn't impact their performance?**

P: The mid-fielder I said when he's not pressed, when I say, we've got a three mid-field against a two and he's the spare man, he does have a good range of passing. He can hit longer passes, he'll do them. So yeah, I would say that is outstanding when he does that but again if you're an opposition against him or you drop ... whether you're a two, and you drop coming round him, he won't do it, he'll go and ...he won't do it. And I would say the front player that didn't want to learn, if they don't solve the issue about him getting the ball out of his feet and running, he will run. Again, we have seen him do that, it's when teams get their left back and stand off him and don't give him space, he's got nothing different and he doesn't want to learn nothing different either.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm...He doesn't want the coach to try and talk to him about going inside, but again if they don't solve the problem, there's times when he's massively caught the eye because, you know, you can't not see a powerful winger knock the ball out of his feet and keep going then drive into the box. I would say them two are the closest.

**I: So the last question really actually. In the middle performing group, so you've only got four of them, how have you distinguished the line between not being in the lower and not being in the higher?**

P: Yeah okay, so I've got another right back who's steady, who doesn't get beat much to be fair, will join in attacks, he's okay technically in terms of deep crosses. If I look at our full backs that we've had come through from recent years, both sides, they are dynamic erm, but they're not ...maybe they're not as steady defensively. But, you know, we want them to really be able to go and be that winger and I don't see him having the physical capability or the quality when he gets in there but he's not bad physically and he's not bad technically. I just think he's middle. He might actually still get one, you know, because of where he is, people do like the fact that he doesn't really get beat much but again, if you look at the full



backs that we've got in our youth ... Again I'm looking at the 23s ones yesterday, I mean they're all game, they are going at any opportunity.

**I: Yeah.**

P: But they want to go and I'm not sure that he wants to go. He's been in a long time as well so that's ... Again, I've not seen nothing different.

The other one is a centre half who again, low maintenance front foot defender, okay on the ball. I think again, if we took him, I think he would be good for the youth team but I'm not sure he's going to get beyond that. But again, you would put him in now and I think he would give you a steady performance but I think as and when he comes up against the real quality centre forwards, I think he would have his hands full, not sure he's got enough acuteness about him to defend a different, more of a mobile striker or a quicker striker, I think he'll be the one that doesn't move. I'm not sure he'll ... Again, maybe that's not fair either but I just, again, I potentially would offer him a scholar but I think in the back of my mind I'm thinking I'm not sure you'll be here in two years because I think, again it comes back to your conversation earlier, he's been at [club] for a number years so he's had that training, that exposure and he's okay, he's not ...

**I: Yeah, you'd expect more maybe.**

P: How much better is going to get? I don't know, I don't mind him but, you know, I think he'll do the job for now, I'm not sure he'll do the job in two or three years' time when the standards are higher.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Third one was the boy, he's already been offered to be fair... I've heard days when he's been very, very good and they've probably gone on the fact that there's been staff around those games and I've not ... when I've been there, he hasn't, he's been okay, I can see flashes but I haven't seen him put a strong performance together, can be a little bit lazy and I think, just for me, I need to see what others have seen so far.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm ...You see bits in training, I think sometimes he goes through the motions, so I've put him in the middle for now. If you had this chat with quite a few of our staff, I think they

would definitely have him in the higher performer, he's one of only three that has been offered so far. So that's where they'd put him. He's played up in the 18s a couple of times, not really done it in there yet.

**I: Okay good.**

P: And the fourth one is this boy who's versatile, I think he could play three positions ...erm, I probably would give him the benefit of the doubt if we had space. I think he can play full back and he can do what the first full back I told you can do. I think he can be a box to box mid-fielder and I also think he's aggressive enough to be a centre half if needed. Erm... we ...I mean the Chairman ... we get so many funded places, I think it's 16 or 18 I can't remember and the Chairman normally buys two, you know, he just says I'll pay for two extras if you can justify it. If he wasn't going to give us the two, I'm not sure I would go for him. But then to be fair I might talk myself out of it because he can cover three positions as well. So I don't know, I think he's middle ground. I just think a club like us, if we had someone like that in our first team that could play full back, centre back and centre mid-fielder, the first team manager would have him around him all of the time.

**I: Yeah.**

P: I don't think he's exceptional at one. I think he brings strength to all three positions, I think that's probably why I would go with him if a decision was today yes or no.

**I: What does he lack that doesn't make him in the top?**

P: I don't think he's exceptional on the ball, I think he's okay. I probably haven't seen, more probably as a mid-fielder, I haven't seen intelligence in terms of readjusting his position or you know, recognising where the next ball is before it comes in, prepping to receive. I haven't seen it. I think I've more seen him when he's been able to get the ball or pick up a loose ball, be first to a second ball and drive with it, his passing is okay, not exceptional. I don't think he's going to play split passes into people's path but I think he can punch a pass in at a wide player and hit his back foot. So I think intelligence if he's going to be a mid-fielder. I think he's okay on the ball as a winger, I think he'll give you that energy from the outside erm... will he give you enough quality with the final ball, not sure, yeah.

### **8.10.15 Participant 15**

**I: Easy one to start off with, quite easy in fact, what's your current job title?**

P: Lead professional development coach.

**I: And what academy category status is the academy?**

P: Two.

**I: And what league do the first team play in?**

P: Championship.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: In football, as a participant or as a coach, in its entirety or...?

**I: Great question, both.**

P: How old am I now, 46 now, I must have been in football 30 years.

**I: Okay, good length.**

P: Been in football for 30 years and as a coach 11, 10 to 11 years as a coach.

**I: How long have you been in your current position?**

P: 16-17 months.

**I: And which age group are you going to talk about later on?**

P: Under-18's.

**I: Under-18's, brilliant. So the more interesting stuff now, can you give me a brief overview of your background.**

P: I'm from [district/area] represented my school there and represented my district. I went along, got a contract at [club] as a 2nd year scholar. I then became the youngest captain in a first team in the country. I spent two or three years at [club] and then I got bought by [club], [club] bought me and I spent seven years at [club], good years, [club] was a good year, all

clubs, [club] a very good club. Got promoted a couple of times at [club] which was great, went to the Prem. After that I moved on to [club] in the Championship, three years that was good, another great experience, alright there as well. Then from then I moved onto [club], again won a couple of promotions again which was good, so went to promotion again, so I've been promoted four times in my career, so that was good. Then my last destination when I was about 35-36 was [club], I had a year in [club]. So yeah, that's my journey really.

Then after that, after I retired, I finished playing football, I went into an education programme, Director of Football of like a college programme. There's lots of them now, but when I did it there wasn't many, there was a good school in [district] it was a good school, I learnt things there, so yeah that's been my journey. That's my football journey.

**I: How did you get into coaching then, what made you take that additional turn?**

P: I taught my son's school team, he was in Year 7, I enjoyed it. From there... I enjoyed empowering people really, I enjoyed giving people information and seeing them succeed really, I kind of – not fell into coaching but I suppose it was something that was pulling me after I'd done a bit with my sons... because I was play professional, I was still playing when I did my son's school team. I enjoyed it, go and play and then after I retired I kind of went into it. But before I went into actual coaching, I went to learn to do other things as well like KPIs and stuff like that, I got to do all that when I retired, and I went into the school and did the Director of Football. So I got to learn reports and gathering, KPIs and all the other bits that you need to know when you're an academy coach, there's a PMA that we've got to do, so yeah literate. It's good to be literate on using a computer.

**I: Yeah. That sounds like an incredible journey as well, lots of promotions and lots of fantastic teams, so I'm quite impressed with your background. So when you're considering your player development now, do you have personal beliefs or philosophies around how to develop players?**

P: Hundred percent yeah of course.

**I: What would they be?**

P: First of all it's not generic, first of all it's understanding the player, that's the first thing. So the first thing is more the player than what the player can do, so it's more [4:34 inaudible] than a player, that's the first thing. My approach is really a holistic approach really. I forgot

to say that when I finished retiring and I did the Director of Football at the school, I also got a job as an under-15 coach simultaneously, at the same time as I got that job, I did the 15's at a club, and I stayed with that club and transpired into becoming a lead development coach, I then became the Head of Coaching, then I became the Academy manager. This is over a nine-year period, so all the things that I thought would be beneficial for players, as a player I was able to do that and I saw that.

**I: Being in all those positions I imagine would be quite an eye-opening experience as well.**

P: Sure yeah, good learning.

**I: Yeah, definitely. So within that would your philosophy have changed at all.**

P: No, that's the thing, my philosophy hasn't changed. What can change is obviously the manager, so the club I was with previously before the club I'm at now, the manager's actual philosophy on how he wants to play, they will vary all the time. So if you're in that academy for example and your first team manager plays 4 – 4 – 2, he might want to play 4 – 4 – 2, but I don't think that's the correct way because managers come and go, so if you develop your players within an academy under a particular manager at that particular time, and you're following the philosophy of the manager, you can only do what that manager wants you to do.

I always felt that the best thing is to develop footballer, so develop footballers that can do it, have the holistic understanding and game understanding, an independent learner to be able to play any formation. I've always believed that, so I always try to develop players the same way wherever I'm at.

**I: Do you have expectations on player capabilities?**

P: No, I have no expectation of capabilities, what I'm saying is, I think our players are capable of doing anything personally, I have no ceiling of, 'Well, he's not good enough to do that,' or, 'Ah, look he's brilliant, he can dribble,' I don't believe there's any capabilities on any players – putting capabilities on them, it restricts them mentally, so I don't believe in any capabilities of telling players that you can't, or they're unable, I don't, no, I don't, I disagree with putting any capabilities on players.

**I: Is that a sort of believe that these things can be developed, but it's almost will the player develop it?**

P: Yes, I believe if you're asking a player to do something, I think he can do it, he can succeed if he's given the right information, the trust, the communication is correct, and support. I've seen it, I've seen players that one will say not very good I suppose, and become very good, so players are capable. It's just coaching is teaching, and everyone learns in different ways, so you've got to find a way that that person can take on the information and you can communicate within him the right way.

I: **Yes, it makes a lot of sense. So, moving into the second part, this is going to have a bit about strategy employed within the actual club as well, but it's still about you. I will say about some selections stuff, what I mean by that is it's not team selection, it's like player release retention so ends of contract stuff effectively.**

**So when you go through development plans or player selection as a club, who's involved in those decision-making processes?**

P: The Head of Coaching, and the Academy Director, yeah, they're the ones who are involved in that process, for sure.

I: **Then when you're going through a development plan, is it the same people involved?**

P: Staff-wise do you mean?

I: **Yes.**

P: Oh, yes, yeah same staff involved.

I: **So what would be the typical process for either the selection or the development plan?**

P: Are you talking about a plan assigned to then see if you can progress and get and get another contract do you mean? So, for example...

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

P: ... say like under-16's, so we've got under 16's scholars in the country that are all going to get decisions whether they're going to get a scholarship and become paid footballers, to become professional footballers. So the process we will go is, each position there's rules and responsibilities, and each player has got an individual learning plan – so every single player has got an individual learning plan. So, you implement that individual learning plan at the beginning of the year, if they're under-15's it's [9:16 inaudible] you implement an individual

learning plan and then you see at the end of the time when it comes to decide whether that person's going to get a scholarship or not, you look at the reports that he's had over the period, you look at the games, and you look at how he's developed in his IPs. If he's doing successfully well in his ILPs then he's going to get a contract.

If he's not, if his ILPs for example, I'll give you an example, his ILPs as a midfielder, now at our club and how I see we develop the players is technical first, we do a technical ability first, so enhanced technical ability and we bang on about technical ability. So if you've got a midfield player, one of his ILPs for us would be to play forward for example, it's not a hard [9:56 overspeaking], the ILPs aren't massive things, he might take it on the back foot, play forward, scan, have a range of passing, so if that player hasn't ticked them boxes enough, he's not going to get a scholarship. So that's how we will measure if the player is developing in the right way to go and get another.

**I: They're quite inter-related then the two processes, development and selection.**

P: Hundred percent yeah, they're definitely interlinked, they should be if you've still got a plan, a programme, and make sure you've got players that understand the programme and can fit into. So, both selection and retention they should be interlinked.

**I: Yes, hundred percent. And I imagine I know the answer already, especially given you're in the PDP phase; is that all considering positional demands as well?**

P: Absolutely, yeah. So we're allowed individual position demands as well, yes. So, if a guy is playing left back, he's got seven passes he has to make in our programme, for an individual learning plan, to be able to defend correctly and move his feet and stuff like that, so movement and positioning and game understanding becomes important. But I must reiterate that the game understanding where we are, we really start the game understanding probably from when they get a scholar; before that we want them to be technically capable of doing things on a par with the ball, and we'll give them a game understanding.

**I: Yeah. I'm assuming you're familiar with the FA four corner model, what's your thoughts on the model?**

P: It's the biggest part... it's good, for the technical... the four-corner model every day is good. The biggest part of that model for me, the one I embrace the most, the ones that I use most

is the psychology one, like I said I'm into the psychology part of it first. So yeah, I think it's good yeah, the four corners cover everything that a footballer needs to be able to be capable of doing successfully, tactically, technically, psychologically, those psychological social skills.

**I: Why is psychology so important in your mind?**

P: Because from my experience as a professional footballer, my experience as a grassroots player, because all professional footballers start at grassroots.

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: But from my experience going from grassroots into professional football, playing at the highest level internationally, and then transcending into coaching, that's the common theme across the whole of my career that I've seen, and being the most powerful tool is the psychological side of it. If you can understand and master the psychological side then you're robust, you're resilient, you do a fail and success the same way, so you have to try and develop the players to understand that. So that's why I think the psychological part is the most important part. There's no point in just letting the player be technically brilliant, and then he thinks he's technical brilliant and he breaks down if something wrong happens, you've got to make that person psychologically strong enough to overcome feelings with his ability. That's why I think psychology is the most important part.

**I: Just within that, are there specific traits that you might value more than others within the psychological one, or are they all equal?**

P: Determination, determination, that's the one I value of psychological; if you've got players that are determined to succeed when they're failing, and you look at that player and think he's got a great chance, fantastic chance. So you've got a player that's brilliant but doesn't train, if your player is really-really good and thinks [13:14 background noise] and doesn't apply himself, doesn't have that determination and that resilience [13:18 overspeaking]. So that what I look for, I look for the players that want to fail to become better, then I'll help them because we have to make mistakes to become better, so I look for the determined ones, that's the trait I like.



**I: I like that. Obviously talking about the psychological stuff, do you use objective measures to measure obviously the psychology stuff, but also may the physiological, maybe even tactical, do you use objective stuff for that?**

P: Like tools do you mean?

**I: Yeah, an obvious example is sprint test will give you an evidence of a time, so stuff like that maybe for psychology, maybe for your physical...**

P: Yeah, we do. At our club are brilliant like that, we've got lots of different departments that do lots of different things, so we've got this that deal with that, we've also got psychologist workshops, psychologists in our department, we've got video analysis so we [14:14 inaudible]. Obviously, we've got the tactics board we use as a tool, so yeah we've a variety of tools to try and enhance their learning basically and get the information over to them.

**I: And when you get those outcomes, so the physiological stuff is generally the easiest if I'm honest with you, so I'll use it as an example. If you're getting somebody who is really fast on a sprint test or changes direction really fast, do you find those outcomes always replicate what you see in performance?**

P: Sometimes not. If we've got a player for example who is really-really quick but doesn't seem to use his pace enough, so no it doesn't, it doesn't reflect on performance. Our job is to teach that player where and when to use his pace, and how he can be effective with his pace. Because like you said, sometimes you don't see it in performance and that can...

**I: Why do you think that might be, what is it that's lacking that they can't then apply that?**

P: I think the knowledge, this is why I always draw back to the game, the actual game itself. We don't run away from the actual game of football, so why are you not able to perform what you're doing? You're not getting in position right, you're not demanding the ball, you're not finding [13:18 inaudible] space, whether that's coming short or going behind. So you try and teach this player with his tools. Once you teach the player everything and he has all the information, and if he fails, he doesn't fail because he hasn't that information, he fails because he probably ain't good enough, and some people just aren't good enough.

So that's how we will help. So if someone is not performing – because they've all got super skills, every academy player really should have a super-strength, [15:41 overspeaking] weakness, because they're in an academy they should be good at dribbling, good at passing,

good at defending, good at heading, if they've not got that in a game, as coaches you've got to try and get that in the game and make that player understand it, because sometimes they don't, and they fail because of that.

**I: Yes. So, just a couple of scenario-based stuff for you now. If you had a player who was excelling in the foundation phase, how would that inform you for their future success?**

**P:** Well if you've got a player excelling you know that you've got a good player on your hands. It should inform you in a future sense because you need that player to keep developing in the same way. That player's learning plan has to be modified to an extent than another player, because he has to be challenged – the player has to be challenged. If he's really good at foundation you've got to keep challenging that player until he gets an academy – professional development phase should I say.

If you don't push him or her, if you don't push that child, they will more than likely fail because they're good at that. And they will have a dip, and also as an academy we are aware that players have dips, so that foundation player when he goes to the next phase, he might have a dip and play poorly, that's normal. So then there's got to be support and guidance, help and stuff like that. So you're not putting too much pressure on a child, you challenge every single player but also psychologically we're aware that this player may have a different form, so we support him with that, so he doesn't get down. We let him know this, 'It's alright, it's not a problem, we're aware that things like this will happen.' So that's how I think it's the best way to develop the talented players.

**I: Yes definitely. I guess a similar question now, if you had a player that joined the youth but had absolutely no experience in academy before going into the youth development phase, how would that inform you of the potential?**

**P:** We've got one. We took a lad as a scholar who was only with us, I think six months prior to sixteen, at grassroots he played against us and was terrific, and we signed him. So when we divide rules and that we can see that he lacks the game understanding of the other academy boys. I'm not saying the game understanding, it's rules, because an academy it's kind of repetitive, so if you're an academy player and you've been in academy say for four years you understand how the academy works, the drills, it's kind of professional, and so a kid coming from grassroots it will take them time to adjust, so that's what you have to give them. So, this lad needs your time, just give them time, and you don't give them time to adjust to what we're doing, you just give them time to adjust to the understanding.

What you don't want to do is make that player into an academy player, that's what you don't want to do, you want that player that's got signed... he's got signed because he's... they use the word 'raw' which I don't like, but he might have been raw in his natural ability and his fearlessness because he hasn't been in an academy, retainer – I think they come in. So with this lad he's a bit of a maverick, I want him to keep being a maverick. It's not too much really, you ain't got to think outside the box and try and be ingenious with your methods or what you're doing, if you've got a good player just psychologically keep him, keep him on side and make him know he's a good player, when he fails doing the drills, pick him up.

**I: Yeah. So do you actively consider coaching age/training age with these players?**

P: Say that again, repeat that?

**I: Do you consider training age, and what I mean by training age is, effectively how long they've been in football for; and that's a case example, you just explained where he might have only been in the academy system for six months, but he isn't lacking, so is that something you'd consider when you go through maybe trial lists?**

P: Yeah absolutely, you'll find that at our academy or a lot of academies they will only be in there to take the cat 1 release players. Our academy, we're not really so much like that so we'll take players from anywhere, grassroots, everywhere, and if they're good and we see potential in them then they've got a chance. So we take all these things into consideration. Just like the one we've just signed, we took that into consideration, we know he hasn't got the game understanding of the academy boys yet, because they drill and they don't understand it, but you know he's got the ability, so we'll sign him. We take all these things into consideration.

Then in the same token, if someone's been in the academy for nine years and then you're getting to the point where he's still not doing... you take that into consideration, well he's been there long enough, he's not getting any better, so. If that makes sense?

**I: Is that almost like the idea of performance versus potential?**

P: Absolutely. Performance versus potential, yeah for sure.

**I: And what about maturation, how does maturation impact decisions?**

P: Again, we're a unique club, we are we're really unique because we don't consider maturation too much. So we've got some little dots in our team, they will just play down, we'll play down and develop them that way, so they won't play with the 18's just yet, maybe next... because they're under-matured. Next year we'll let them play with the 18's, but we need them to enhance their technical skills, so we play them down a year, so they may not play for the under 16's for a year, because they can, physically they're capable of playing for under-16's and then hopefully we give them time. Then we've got the 21's and we've got B-team in our club, so there's various levels to get in.

**I: Is that so that they get a bit more time on the ball, more so than anything else?**

P: Absolutely that's it, that is it in a nutshell so they can get time on the ball, absolutely. Because you don't want a player that under-maturation, that's really [21:18 inaudible] but is really small, and in my experience they get lost.

**I: Yes, because they're going to get physically outmuscled aren't they? Yeah.**

P: And there's some coaches that the managers don't want that, they don't want to develop this younger player, they ain't got time, they want a physically ready player. But we're not like that, and it shouldn't be like that, because if we want to create creative players in this country we need to adapt to the players.

**I: Out of curiosity, I'm not sure in your instance, are you quite good at taking on bigger numbers so that you have that resource available? Or are you quite limited in how many numbers you can take on?**

P: No, we can take big numbers, we ran a big squad last season. Finances dictate really to be honest with you, the finances of the club dictate how many players we can really take, in a cat 1 club they can take loads, because they can [22:05 overspeaking] for example, like [club] they can take loads and loads because they're financially capable. So finance does play a part, but I'm not restricted by the number, but again you wouldn't want 30-35 scholars. Some academies do have that, they do have that.

**I: So, moving onto the last part, you'll need your team sheet for this part now.**

P: I've got that.

- I:** All I need you to do initially, is if you can put a letter H, as many as you want, against players that you would consider to be high performers of your group.
- P:** I put their name next to it, yeah?
- I:** Yeah, so just put whoever you think is a high performer, and obviously that's not just your starting 11, that's the whole squad.
- P:** The squad that's at my disposal, yeah?
- I:** Yeah.
- P:** Done that.
- I:** And then, after you've done that you do the same thing, you're going to put an L next to anyone that you consider the lower performers.
- P:** [Pause] Done that.
- I:** And then I'm kind of guessing here, so you can change stuff if you need it, anyone that doesn't have a group they would be mid-performing players.
- P:** Sure.
- I:** So, now you know what the groupings are, if you wanted to make any changes feel free to make any additional ones.
- P:** Okay.
- I:** All I need to know from you is, how many players you've got in each group, so how many are in high, how many are in medium, and then how many in the lower.
- P:** Okay in the H's I've got one – question mark, so possibly not a one so one question mark. In the low I've got three, so that will leave about 16 in the middle.
- I:** Brilliant. How have you determined who is which group?
- P:** Their ILPs, so all these players have got ILPs. So consistently are they doing it in training? One, good, so that's good they get a tick, if they're then doing it in the game then they are a high performer, because that's how I judge the high performer. So in training you get to manipulate training, do stops-start, get the player to do what you want. 'Do you

understand?’ Yeah, so you train, train, train. For me, the actual evidence of you can do it is the game, so yeah train. The high performer is the one that can do what he does in training, and then go and perform and do it in the game. If they can do it consistently... so I’ve got this guy as a question mark because he’s doing it at the minute, but he’s only started getting consistency. If he gets consistent, he becomes a higher performer. For a lot of performers it’s opposite to that, players that are not doing what they’re meant to be doing in training, and their IRPs, and failing too many times within a game – because mistakes are fine, mistakes are perfectly fine, it’s just if you’re not doing enough of what you’re meant to be doing in the game, and the three that I’ve got here are the three that need to do more.

**I: So since your time working with these players would they have always been in the same grouping, or would they be dynamic by changing across different groups?**

P: Their dynamic changes across different groups. It’s good that you said that, at our club we had meetings and we called them league tables. So we meet every four months, and we have a league table, and me and the Head of Coaching and other senior staff will discuss the players. This is a continually changing table, so the group that I’ve got now in front of me now, in three months’ time I hope it’s different, it continually changes, and it should do. So one person should be able to move hopefully up the ladder instead of the other way round, but. So every three or four months we sit down to see where these people are now, they’ve seen them do our league tables, people moving across different places.

**I: So you’ve got one guy who is in the top at the minute, is he just better than the others, or does he have a unique ability that puts him above everyone else?**

P: He’s just taking on the information better, he’s not better, I wouldn’t say he’s better, there will be other players at the end of the season that will be up with him. He’s just taking in the information better and projected it on the pitch. He’s not an outstanding player, it’s just like I said, he’s one that’s doing what he’s meant to be doing in the week, and then performing and doing the same thing on the Saturday. There are others that are as capable as him for sure.

**I: So just referring to your high performer now, obviously I know you said about consistency, is there anything that he’s uniquely really good at, that maybe that put his ahead of the middle group?**

P: Yeah, his game understanding really, he can play with both feet it's just his game understanding in and out of position which is putting him above the group. I've got a group of players that are good on the ball, technical, a really technical group which is good, so we're really good on the ball, really good on the ball – not so great off the ball. He's a midfielder this lad that I've put up, and he's good off the ball so he's starting to learn both sides, that is why he's head and shoulder above these guys at the minute. He understands about the other side of the game as well, winning the ball back and stuff like that, and getting in positions.

**I: Is that decision-making and the game understanding, would you say that's quite a critical part of the game?**

P: Massive, massive-massive-massive part of the game for me. It's everything for me, it's everything. My coaching is all about it's got to be game related, it has to be realistic, every drill we do has got to be game related to the game so that you can understand the game, and positions to come in and stuff like that. Yeah, it's massive for me game understanding.

**I: Do you find you get some players that they might try to make – let's say like a high-risk play which in some instances it might come off, but they didn't play at the right time. So although they're trying to make the decision, they just can't make the decision, is that more common or is that something that you find people shy away from taking that decision?**

P: Repeat that again.

**I: So this is more of a broader question for the whole group. If you get a high-risk decision that is a low chance it might come off, but if it does come off it could be a goal, do you find that the players – maybe the non-high performing player, are they less likely to take that opportunity to have the risk? Or will they go for it and maybe it doesn't come off?**

P: No, I'd be up for it, if they've got the confidence and trust to go for it, what I try to teach them is where and when. So what you're saying, that's why I asked you to repeat the question, because we've got a player that likes to take risks in areas that we don't want him to take risks, so I'm trying to teach him. The risk he wants to take is in an area you've just mentioned, so if we've got chance to score a goal that's where you take a risk, because that's fine. So it's teaching them that, so we've got a player and he's a number... you know like a number four basically?

**I: Yeah.**

P: So you're a number four, the ball's coming to you, you're going to flick – you can't flick, so we're trying to teach that now where and when to do it. But they're not afraid or fearful to try things, which is fantastic, and this is the psychology thing, I want my group to be like that anyway, fearless, just teaching them where and when. The first thing you've got to do is remove fear, with any young player you've got to remove fear, you've got to remove fear. You have to remove fear of them thinking that they can't, won't, the coach is going to scream, de-de-de, remove that, once they've removed that – that's when you can get the real learning in.

So with this player that I'm talking about, all I've got to tell him is 'Not there.' Every time he does it in training I stop, 'not there.' I teach him 'up there,' 'Go and do it up there, go and do it up there.'

**I: That player, what grouping were they in, were they medium or the lower group?**

P: Yeah, medium, because of that.

**I: I was going to say, and that's why effectively is it?**

P: One hundred percent, that's the reason why he will be in the middle group, and that's exactly what I will be saying today, the coach should be talking [30:06 inaudible] exactly the same things, that's how we're talking, this is why he's in the middle group. When he learns not to do that, then he can [30:12 inaudible] up the pyramid and be consistent. Now, I'm enhancing his game understanding, I learn he just understands quicker than the rest of them, more often than the rest of them. The rest of them sporadically, they're still learning, they're still learning the game understanding.

**I: So basically, it's the idea of knowing when the right time to do the right thing, as opposed to doing what you want to do because you think it's the right thing.**

P: Absolutely, exactly, this is not schoolboys no more, so you can't be flicking them around corners, you're not under-13's anymore, and that's when you become a professional, you won't if you don't understand that. Your game understanding is not good enough, I have to improve that – you have to improve the game understanding, and then if they understand, they understand. So that is what I'm saying, he can't be flicking things and doing all of that, there's a structure to what we're trying to do, putting it into that structure and not



freestyling. Unless you're in the final third, and then you can do it. Then you can do what you want.

**I: So, your one high performer again, is there anything that he does which... he might be quite good at doing it but actually it doesn't affect his performance, so in essence you could probably remove it and he'd still be a high performer.**

P: Yeah, why become a high performer? Because he's studious. He'll be out and he asks me questions, and he'll ask this, and he asks me that, and he'll ask me this, and he'll ask me that. I think if he removed asking the questions, he'd still be a good player. If he wasn't so studious, I think he'd still be a good player, he's just a better player because he wants to be a better player, he asks all these questions. But if he didn't and if he came into the arena, he would still be a good player if that makes sense?

**I: Yeah, definitely**

P: He's got natural qualities about him, he's just better because he wants to be better, he asks questions, and he loves his game understanding.

**I: So now, if you just refer to your lower performing players, do they consistently all have... is there like a theme of something that puts them in a lower group?**

P: Yeah, their lack of consistency and game understanding. So, I will put it down to the game understanding, decision-making is the word I'm looking for. Decision-making is why they're in the lower group, because they're not making the right decision enough basically, so they're making the wrong decision too often. So yeah, there'll be some bright decisions and stuff but it's not enough for them to really have an impact in the game, how they would want to have an impact in the game and how I want them to have an impact on the game.

**I: Just to unpick that a little bit, is that almost like [pause] it's not like you made a decision that it didn't necessarily have a negative output, so therefore it's not the worst decision but it's not the best decision, versus you made a decision that was just the wrong decision at that time. Is that what they're more bracketed as?**

P: Yeah, they will be bracketed with the first one. Some of them they make decisions, they try to do the right thing, but the decision is wrong. So for example, if the ball does come to you and you don't get hold of it, and you flick it and it pays off, okay the game carries on it's good, but that's not the decision you should be making as a player that goes forward. You

know yourself that really, it might come off, it might not. [33:30 overspeaking] and try and pass it, no-one will say anything, the coaches don't, you're trying to make the right decision at the right time.

They need to understand the risks and reward in what you're saying. There's no risk or reward... if you flick it and they lose it they might not score, but we've given possession away, therefore you're not going to be good enough because you're making a wrong decision, you've given away possession to cheaply. Most of the stuff that you judge players on, me – all we do is judge unopposed. So, what you're doing unopposed first, and then when you add the opposed stuff now, then you see what decisions they're making; if they're generally making the right decision unopposed, they'll generally make the right decisions opposed, sort of thing.

But our players, sometimes players they don't seem to understand when they're playing, everything they do is important to their own development, sometimes they're not thinking and that's why game understanding is important.

**I: I'm just thinking back, if you consider your 16's now, it might not be the reason that some won't get selected is just because they just don't know the right decision at all. I guess just to give you some clarity, I'm asking because I have an expectation as everyone would, that the PDP players are going to be quite a lot better than your worst under-16 player.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So I guess I'm just trying to unpick, maybe from your experience of last year or the current cohort, what might be the difference between the worst YDP 16 versus your worst scholar, because there's probably quite a range there.**

P: Attitude. When you say 'the worst' I [35:10 inaudible] where they did, someone shouldn't really be so far behind someone else really, [35:14 inaudible] should actually be massive. So what will determine how you put someone down as a... because we've got some really low players, and that's their attitude that has got them really low. Attitude is the one that will determine where someone is compared to someone else in a different group, it's their attitude. If their attitude is not right and they're not... our job is not to scream and shout at people so we can only do [35:37 overspeaking] if they want to click on the information, fantastic, is someone is showing relaxant or avoidance, avoidant behaviour to do what we're

asking them to do then... 'You're going to be one of the worst players because of your attitude, not your ability...' it's not their ability, it will always be their negative attitude.

**I: Yes, definitely. Then just going back to the lower group in your score list now, is there anything that they do really well that is actually unique, but it doesn't seem to affect their performance so much?**

P: Mm, not really to be honest, nothing they do really unique that doesn't really... no, not really.

**I: So they're good at everything, but they might lack that kind of feature of being amazing at one area.**

P: Yeah, they're generally good at... they're technically very good, they're technically amazing because our programme is built on core skills and techniques, so they're technically amazing which is... But then like I said, because of that they haven't got the game understanding yet, and they're physically not there yet so they physically can't compete. So, when we were playing games early-on in the season they wanted to do this technical stuff, and the team was just running over them basically, running over them. So now I've got to teach them... this is what I was saying about the game, so now you've got these young players and these technical players, where and when how can you... now they're starting to get it slowly, slowly. They are definitely. When we play teams the teams don't let us play out, because we want to play out all the time because that's what we do, so it's teaching them how do you overcome that. Good at passing it but everything else they need to learn basically.

**I: So now just referring to the mid-performing group, which is obviously the bulk of your players, how have you distinguished that line between not being in the lower, and not being in the higher?**

P: It's forever changing. So after training when I do my reflections on a session, I always write notes, who did what and who didn't do what, and what someone did well and what someone didn't. You keep notes, and I will be able to look at them notes as well as visually seeing them playing and performing weekly to see how they're performing. The groups can move weekly, well they should hopefully, but definitely they should be moving monthly, players should hopefully be moving up into maybe a H instead of being an M, and the L's should definitely be moving up to the M's and going towards... So that's how I'll determine.

- I: And then the groups who aren't M, do they offer anything which is uniquely exceptional, or is that lacking from them as well?**
- P: That's lacking from them as well, yeah, and nothing uniquely exceptional to be fair. It's starting to come now, they come out early now and everything, which is starting to be good, which is unique, which is good, so we start at 10:30 and everybody will be at 10 o'clock the whole group, so I'm starting to see a really good attitude within the group.
- I: That is a quite impressive feat to be honest.**
- P: Yeah, it's normally hard, but yeah it is impressive, it's good.
- I: Actually the last question on that. Is there anything that may be individual by player, but is there anything that they lack that's going to maybe prevent them from going into the higher?**
- P: Communication skills I would say sometimes. They're young players and it's not just from my group, I think I could say that for most teenagers nowadays, communication, being able to communicate how they feel, communicate what they say, be able to communicate basically with adults as well as communicate with themselves. So the communication skills could be better.
- I: Yeah, I completely agree on that one. Actually, sorry, one last question because it's not actually on this but I'm curious. From your position what do the 16's do well that gives them a scholar versus what do the 16's don't do well which doesn't give them a scholar?**
- P: Confidence in what they're meant to be doing. So we've got 16's that we released that have done okay but scared to make a mistake, we can't have that. You're playing from a position where you have to let it go, play, play your mistakes, do all the things that we're asking you to do so that we can make a judgement. Don't just do enough and think that's going to get you by, because you're going to get released, and they do get released. That's the difference between a 16's getting released and a 16 getting signed, a confident 16 will probably get signed, even if he's not as good at the 16 that is lacking confidence. If you're good but you're holding back we will never be able to see how good you're going to be, but if there's a kid that's confident and running around doing everything and having fun, you're going to sign that kid there – I would. 'I haven't seen enough of what you're doing, and you look like you're holding back,' so that's what I would judge players on.

**I: If you had a player who played safe but retained the ball, versus a player that did more forward movements but maybe lost the ball more, are you more likely to then take the player who played forward because they're more confident to do so?**

P: I would yes, for sure. They're the ones who's going to make decisions. Who wants a person that can play the ball sideways all the time? I don't want that, none of us want that, get the ball [40:51 cross speaking] because it will be safe all the time but can't make a forward pass, and doesn't want to do the... That's what I'm saying, so when you're 16 and you're getting to the time where you're... and you start playing that way, that's not the way you want to be playing, that's not. You don't want to start playing safe and making safe passes, just in case you make a mistake, and you don't get what you really want. The best thing to do is go out and get what you really want. Go out there and play. So yeah, I would be more inclined to sign a player who wants to be more creative and wants to make risks to get rewards, I'd be more inclined to sign that player.

#### **8.10.16 Participant 16**

**I: I had a few problems earlier on so it should be fine now, I hope. Starting off with the really, really basic stuff then, what's your current job title?**

P: Within the football environment or overall, generally?

**I: Do both.**

P: So my main role, I'm a primary school teacher, so that's my kind of role within the week and then my, from the coaching side of it, I'm academy coach at [club].

**I: Yeah.**

P: I'm working with the under 12s group this season.

**I: Okay and what category status is the academy?**

P: Three.

**I: And what league does the first team play in?**

P: They're in league one.

**I: And how long have you worked in football?**

P: Ooh good question, erm ...I would say, it's now 13, no 12 years.

**I: And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Erm... I've been in this, well on and off, I joined the [club] in 2015, erm but then I went away, I was working in a school in Italy for two years, so had a two year break from the [club] and I only went back last August, so in this exact position, nearly what's that... nearly six months.

**I: Yeah, and which age group did you say you worked with - 12s?**

P: Yeah 12s, yeah.

**I: Okay brilliant. So the more interesting stuff now, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, in the football side?

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah so I erm...I started off, I've always been one of these people that's kind of ...you watch a game and then you're criticising this and you're criticising that and then I think my wife said to me, or my mum, somebody in the family said to me, you're always moaning about it, why don't you go and kind of give it a go yourself, so I've always been obsessed with the game really. So I started doing my coaching badges and started coaching locally. Erm... I coached a little bit at Uni when I was there because I picked up a knee injury, so my last year there, I did a bit of coaching at uni. And then did my, did my level 1 and 2 and then, they're quite ... there's nothing in it that you don't already know kind of thing so I thought I'd push myself on a bit and did my B licence about 2009 and that just changed everything because I don't know, kind of, are you at a similar, have you done your B as well or is it ...?

**I: I work in a different department, so I've got different accreditations but I understand the B licence. I understand how it works.**

P: Yeah so it's very much, obviously you're kind of then learning the game. Level 1 and level 2 are very much about the player on the ball whereas the B licence is great because you just learn so much about what's going on, off the ball. And I was quite lucky because I knew a guy who was starting some coaching at [club] and he emailed me and said ... I met him on

my level 2 actually and he said that there were some jobs coming up with their pre-academy which is kind of like the year before the academy starts, like under 7, under 8, so I spent about five years at [club] doing that which was straight after getting my B licence which was great and the lead coach there was really, really good. He kind of ... He was the assistant academy manager and he coached at a really good level, so I learnt a lot from him. And then from about 2014 I, kind of, didn't stop coaching but I kind of took a back seat because that's when we started our family and I retrained to become a teacher. So I kind of took two/three years just doing the local district side.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm...And then when I got back into it in 20... No, it would have been 2016 that I went to [club], sorry, that would have been when I kind of got back into it again and I was working there as an assistant manager across three or four age groups. And then when we were in Italy I did some coaching out there at a local side and that was interesting because obviously it gave me a different perspective on how things are done out there.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And we were lucky because we were living in Milan, we had really, we were really close to both training grounds on the Milan side so ...

**I: Very nice.**

P: Yeah it was good, we managed to go and watch a few sessions for their academies and, yeah, when we came back, obviously, in the summer just gone, I obviously had a few links still [club] and one of them got in touch with me saying we're looking for someone, yeah, and that's kind of how it's come around.

**I: Quite an interesting journey that.**

P: Yeah, there's been some, yeah, different environments I've worked in and different places but I think what I found was that if you don't kind of, when you're just kind of starting out, when I'd done my B licence, I think a lot of people that I did it with thought that once they'd done it, they were going to fall into like really good like coaching roles but I think you have to kind of realise and I'm sure you've done this as well, where you kind of have to go and volunteer and kind of get yourself in there and show you're capable first.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And that's what really helped at [club] because although I was there, I think for four of five years, they then gave me roles in recruitment and I was out looking for players for them and then that's kind of how I got the [club] job because somebody who had been at [club], you know, how the game works, someone puts a word in. Yeah, so it kind of went from there.

**I: Yeah so how would you describe your current role then?**

P: So it's a difficult question in a sense, you know, the score at the moment with the COVID, it's just been so difficult this season because they're a really talented group, really good bunch of lads and it's been really frustrating because obviously every time we go back it gets stopped again. So essentially, its two training sessions a week which in normal times would be two hours on a Tuesday, two on a Thursday and then you have your matches on a Sunday, usually one week at home, one week away. So yeah, Tuesdays are sometimes split with the sport science guys, so they might do half an hour with the boys and I'll do the rest, and then Thursday is straight through the two hours with me. And then as I say match days, if it's a home match, I'll do it on my own - sorry, if it's a home match I'll do it with an assistant and if it's an away match, I travel up on my own, so yeah.

**I: So when you consider player developments, do you have sort of personal beliefs or philosophies on how to achieve that?**

P: Yeah very much so. I think the latest course that I've done and you would know this as well from working where you are, I don't know how much you know about the youth awards that the FA have started doing?

**I: Yeah.**

P: I think they're brilliant because I suppose my teaching comes into it a little bit as well because it's not just about making sure that you're winning games and being successful, as you've just touched on there, it's about the development of the player and ultimately the development of the player then leads to the development of the team, and from a teaching perspective, it's very, very much around differentiating things and developing individuals in their own style and at their own pace, and it's very much similar, in a coaching environment, as I'm sure you're aware, in terms of you've got different individuals in the group with different qualities and different personalities. I think one thing, the, which one was it, I think



it was the youth mod 2, it might be the youth mod 3 is probably the best course I've done because you learnt so many techniques around developing the individual, things like, if you know all this stuff anyway I apologise...but things like they talk about drive-bys where, I don't know when you played the game, I'm like in my late 30s now so I played youth level a long time ago. When you were playing, if something happened in the session that you...that the coach wasn't happy with the whole session stopped, it got broken down, you're standing there waiting for information ...

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: And now, as you know, it's very much around can you keep the session going as much as you can and things like drive-bys are brilliant because you can just obviously grab a player, pull him out of the session for a minute, have a word and then the session continues. So back to your original question, yeah, I think development is hugely important and I think since doing a lot of these courses with the FA and CPD things, it's got a lot, a lot better and a lot easier to kind of integrate into my sessions.

**I: So I'm assuming your focus is more around keeping the game sort of going as long as you can but also providing information when it's required as opposed to just stopping it because you can do?**

P: Absolutely yeah, and I think a lot of coaches, I probably was as well at the time where you feel that you must say something all the time, and yeah you're right, it's now a case of actually, let it flow and I think the FA ... When I did this which was two or three years ago, it was before I went to Italy, so it's probably three years ago, they had I think it was 75% the ball rolling time they wanted. So if you're doing a session, you should aim to have the ball in play with no disruptions for 75% of the time. So yeah, as you're saying there, if you're working to that kind of parameter, you've really got to make sure your interventions are precise and quick.

**I: Yeah, I know so many licensed coaches who do 75% of talking, so I know exactly what you're meaning there. Do you have expect ... I know this is funny to ask but do you have expectations on player capabilities?**

P: Yes, we do quite a lot of erm ...They've got their own targets that they're set throughout the season. They do a my week session on the PMA where they go in and say how the week's kind of gone for them. Again it's been frustrating because they would normally have, over

the course of a season, lots and lots of individual targets. So we'd sit down early on in the season, maybe September time, go through with them, what would you like to improve on, how do you think you're getting on etc., all those kind of review things and then we'd kind of review them every, I think it's probably once a school term, so three times over the course of the season but again, it's gone a little bit by the wayside with what's going on at the moment. Everything's being done virtually...

**I: Of course.**

P: ...and you can't quite get those same messages across. The parents haven't actually been ... I'm sure this is the same for most academies, the parents can't actually get near to what's going on at the moment. So obviously, I've got this new group of players but I've only ever seen the parents from like 100 yards away really. So erm...but yeah in a normal regulation season, the expectation would be that they're set challenges with their own inputs so it's not just me saying right, I want you to be better at that, they give a lot of input into that and the parents get involved a little bit again, yeah, and we review those, as I say, throughout the season.

**I: So in regards to, sorry, this is more strategies of the club now and I'll just make a point to say, I'll ask a lot about selection, deselection stuff and I'm not talking about games, I'm talking about release, retention so the end of the season stuff, and I know it doesn't happen with every age group but maybe think hypothetically. So when you're talking about player development plans or deselection processes, who would be involved in those processes?**

I: So obviously the lead coach for the age groups, so if it was the under 12s it would be obviously myself, you would have the head of phase. So we've split ... I mean most academies are split this way but we've got the foundation phase which is 9s to 11s and then the youth development phase which is 12s to 16s.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So we've got a head of foundation, we've got a head of YDP and so the head of YDP would be involved, the academy manager would be involved, the head of recruitment as well usually has a little bit of a say but we've not really, the structure's gone a little bit by the way side since September. Obviously people were furloughed and whatnot and, yeah, ordinarily it would be me, the head of the phase and the academy manager.

**I: And when you're going through ... if you were going for like a deselection process, how would you determine who gets picked and who doesn't get picked?**

P: That's a very good question actually because ...because last season, I wasn't there obviously and the season got cut short etc., we'd already discussed ... They had in mind before I came in, two or three players within the group that they thought might not be at the standard. So it's been a case of obviously keeping an eye on those players as the season's worn on and from that, very much a case of keeping on them, how are they fitting in with the group and I suppose in answer to your question, it's kind of comparing them to the top players in the group because if you think about an academy, you've got what, eight or nine age groups there, you might get maybe two or three of those, at the moment...at this moment in time, maybe two or three of the players in the academy might make the first team. So to be the top two or three in the group probably isn't going to be enough anyway. So, if you're struggling within that group and you're at the bottom end then the chances are you're probably not going to cut the mustard. So it's very much a case of comparing to the boys at the top of the group and we also send them up to play older age groups as well. So if you can't maybe cope with that year difference then our better players can go up comfortably to the age group above and the feedback is always yeah, he did well, he did this, he did that, whereas the ones that struggle the feedback's not quite there. But it's tough, you know the score, like there are players out there in the Premiere League at the moment that didn't make it at academy level and have gone to non-league and then come back again, so there's no kind of right or wrong answer to it but that's kind of the way that we would do it.

**I: What's your, just out of curiosity, what's your normal rationale for playing a player up?**

P: It's a very good question, we had this actually at the CPD the other day and this exact same thing came up and a lot of coaches made the point that actually it was a ...We tended to do it on physically like 'oh he can cope with the bigger lads, he'll hold his own' and one of the coaches made the point and actually afterwards everyone reflected on it and thought he'd got a point, why do we never say 'he's the best technical player in the group?' You know what I mean? So if he's technical and can handle himself technically, he can probably move the ball quick enough to get away with things in that environment. So I think we might see a slight change now towards that kind of way of thinking a bit more.

**I: Yeah, yeah definitely. Going back to my previous question, but if you're talking about development plans, are they similar to when you're talking about like, so that**

**conversation of selection / deselection, are they related when you talk about your development plans?**

P: Yeah definitely. So as I say, when we set them their individual targets and challenges, it will be very much, and again this season's been tough, because normally you'd get into the changing room, they have their targets up on the wall, everyone knows what they're doing, whereas this season there's no changing room, everything's done ...you turn up in your kit so it's been a little more sketchy. But yeah, normally we would look at those challenges throughout the course of the season, is he meeting the target we're looking for there, no his target is to, I don't know, receive on the back foot when the ball goes to whoever...he's still not quite capable of doing it erm ...and yeah, you would kind of track their progress based around their challenges and targets that you'd set earlier in the season.

**I: Yeah, yeah. Are there positional demands that are accounted for?**

P: Not so much yet, it kind of kicks in at under 13, under 14 at our place. So, under 12 is a key year actually because you're starting to realise, actually he's more of a left back, he's more of a centre forward or whatever but we still don't pigeonhole them this early.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Erm... I can tell you now, there are players in that group who I could pretty much 99.9% say he will be a this when he goes on to play but we're still not obliged...we've got a lad who's definitely going to be, in my opinion, a centre back, he's huge, he wins everything in the air, he's strong but we played him in central mid-field just before the lockdown kicked in, just to kind of ...because yeah, it's great if we win six nil and he keeps [unclear 0:15:34] but ultimately, that doesn't tell us much about him as a player. So we stuck him in there to see how he got on and we are quite big on that actually until, as I say under 14, we kind of keep them floating around a little bit.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So I'm making a big assumption but I think it's an obvious one that you're going to be familiar with the FA four corner model.**

P: Yeah.

**I: What are your thoughts on it?**

P: Erm ...yeah it's ... I like the way that it kind of, there's a lot in it obviously and I think sometimes a lot of these reviews and these systems that are thought up and you don't always have, like time is precious obviously, and when you get two hours a session or whatever, it's difficult sometimes to squeeze absolutely everything into that session. I think the idea behind it is great because it covers obviously the whole person as opposed to just them as a footballer. And ideally, in any normal season it would be working a lot better I think, because as I say it is important and the key for me is the social side in terms of knowing what they're doing outside of ... because I coach under 12s, and that for them is a massive year erm, they've just changed school, there are so many different things going on in their lives, they're kind of hitting that age of puberty and some start to drift away from the game a little bit. So I think the FA have done, that's one area of it where I think they've been really good actually because there was nothing ...because, as I say I didn't play great standard but I played districts and I was pretty handy but there was nothing like this when I played at all, so I think, yeah, it's useful.

**I: So do you take any objective assessments and obviously think about the four corners so it's not just tactical based, do you take objective measurements for your players that might inform you for development or selection?**

P: Not...I would say not specifically no. As an academy, it's not something that's really been anything I've ever ... As I say I've only been back six months but thinking back to when I was there before, it wasn't anything that I remember us doing particularly. We obviously do, as coaches, CPD workshops and things like that which kind of keeps us in touch with kind of the latest innovations in coaching and what not but no I wouldn't say we do particularly much specifically based for the four corner model.

**I: Do you do...I mean I'm assuming you do because [0:17:53 unclear] will want you to do physical testing, so you'd probably do like your sprints, change direction etc.**

P: Yes absolutely.

**I: Do you utilise any of that at all?**

P: Yes so as I said at the start, I think, when we do...I know I keep saying this phrase but obviously it's not the season that ...it's slightly different. Normally they would get, as I say, about half an hour, three quarters of an hour every Tuesday with the sport science guys. They would do their kind of physical testing and speed tests and things like that but then,

when we get the feedback from them, we do try and feed it into the session, again on a more individual basis. So it might be that the feedback is 'oh so and so, he needs to be a little bit sharper over shorter distances', so in the session, I might say to him 'right, you go and play over there' and then 'your individual challenges, can you like break into space behind him' and yeah, so we do work quite closely with the sport science guys ordinarily.

**I: Yeah of course.**

P: Yeah, so that is something that we probably ... yeah and to answer your first question about the four corners, when I think more about the structure of the academy, there are different things catered for by different people actually.

**I: Did you have anything for the psychological?**

P: Yeah, we've got a sports psychologist with us at the moment, who, yeah, she does a really good job actually but again everything is virtual at the moment. But the idea, ultimately is ... in fact it's funny you say that, we had a talk the other day with the parents in, so it was very much around how to help your child during lockdown and being away from football. And she's only been with us, I think, five or six months but she's, yeah, she's really good at what she does and the parents are really kind of on board with it and she sends out the presentation, she delivers and they fire back questions and yeah that's really good.

**I: That's brilliant.**

P: Yeah. it's really good. I think she went to University in Canterbury which is where our academy is based so I think she kind of linked up with us there.

**I: So when you're considering these objective measures, maybe the physical ones are the best ones to utilise, do you think you see that when you see match performance, do you see the fastest person in the test being the fastest person on the pitch?**

P: That's a good question. I don't... it depends over what distance, for example, we've got a lad, I'd say yes, for one particular player who is physically strong, faster than everyone else, always gets the fastest speeds in the speeding tests, would beat anybody probably at any academy we've played this season, he's been faster than anyone else on the pitch and what he's really clever at is he conserves his energy. So he'll press at the right time, he recovery runs at the right time, he goes in behind at the right time, whereas others within the group who do really well in the, not all, but there are two or three that in the sprints, do very well

but in matches ... I suppose another thing, running with the ball and running without the ball, they're very good tracking back but actually going the other way with the ball at their feet, they're not always considered...we've got some that are quite nimble and quick footed who probably don't do as well in the sprints. So I'd say our top player yes, but I'd say there's a kind of variation within the group based on the tests.

**I: So within that, why do you think that they might do well in the test but they might not do as well on the pitch?**

P: Erm...I suppose...I don't think our group in particular ... This was a question that came up, as I say, the other day when we did a workshop about nerves in players and do they get nervous before matches and I don't think my group do particularly, but it could be that the situation of the game is very different. If you said to me right now run to the other end of the room, I could do it but suddenly, when you put into that, there's less space and you've got decision making...when you're told to run, you know exactly what to do, whereas there are so many other factors, when you pick the ball up, right run forward, hang on there's a player there, I've got to ... So yeah, I'd just say it's a completely different environment for them.

**I: Yeah, and just on the final sort of point on what you said, the player who is exceptional, is he quite physically advanced for his age group as well?**

P: Massively, massively yeah. He's one of the ones that always up a group and yeah, he can hold his own there and it's ... sometimes you think it's ... When we're doing a session, we've got some of the lads who are a little bit smaller, in terms of physique and he just knocks them off the ball for fun and it's like men against boys sometimes because he's that physically strong. The area of his game he needs to improve on, he's a little bit raw. I think he only started playing football maybe two years ago. He'd never been coached so he's learnt what he's learnt from kind of playing in the school playground and things like that. So we're still trying to finetune parts of his game without kind of taking that quality away from him.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So a couple of scenario based questions for you now. If you, so this will be interesting for you because of the age group you cope with, if you had a player who is excelling in the foundation phase, how does that inform you of their future success?**

P: Again, what we would do in that situation, he would probably be, if he was excelling above others within the group, he would probably be the one that got moved up to play up a year

probably. So that would be useful to inform on, actually is he ... because sometimes you get a really good player who's in a quite a weak group, so they stand out but actually they're standing out amongst weak players, so it's always a good test to send them up and see how they cope with kind of their older, the older boys. Again it's something we've talked about recently, it's a case of, what we're trying to do is communicate better as an academy. So if we've got a player under 10 who's the stand-up player in the group and then by the time he gets to under 14 he's dropped off massively, we've got to take a bit more responsibility for that ourselves because it's all very well saying oh yeah he was brilliant three years ago but ultimately, we're his coaches, so if he has dropped off then we're partly responsible for that. So, in answer to your question, I think it's key that as a group we communicate closely. So, for example, if it's an under 11, we'll say well keep an eye on so and so, if he's good in that group then we can, as I say if he goes up to play for the 12s, I can keep an eye on him and then as he makes his way through, we've got that kind of information within us as a group around how he's getting on.

**I: So why do you think erm a player might do really well and then they might drop off, I mean what might be the reason for that?**

P: I suppose it comes back to your question about the four corner model, there can be so many things going on, it could be stuff going on at home, you could have a player that's completely...it could be a breakup with the parents that's affected him, it could be a change of school, it could be best friend moving away so you've got that side of it off the pitch if you like which can affect them mentally. On the pitch it could be, like you just said there about the physicality of a player, it could be that at one stage he's the biggest player in the group, he's the strongest and then when the others kind of catch up, maybe at puberty two or three years down the line, he suddenly gets other quicker, faster players around him so it could be that.

**I: Yeah.**

P: I don't know, it could be that the motivation goes. These are academy players, you know the score, they come in at under 9, it's hard to keep that motivation and that kind of intensity game after game, week after week and some just maybe aren't cut out for it and so it could be that, I don't know, that's lacking.



**I: Yea. So, a similar scenario then, but kind of the opposite, if you had a player that came to you and he hadn't done any Foundation phase at all, he'd done not academy development but he joined in the YDP how would that inform you of their future potential?**

P: Well it's a good question because we've got a trialist in at the moment actually and when I did, because I've done quite a bit of recruitment for the club and for [club] over the years and the first thing that both academy managers said to me, sorry, recruitment managers said to me when I brought a player in was, before you bring anyone in, think, can he match the player that he's potentially going in to displace in the academy. So for example, if I'm looking at the kid and saying yeah he's handy, straight away I need to think, well actually he is but is he better than so and so that we've already got, so I think that's important. That's one thing that we would look at because coming in from grass roots, you know this, you can get a good player at grass roots level but it's a massive, massive step up, there's kind of, there are development centres and we've got one ourselves but it's very difficult to, there's no kind of midway, I don't think between grass roots and academy football, I don't think they're particularly effective. So ultimately what you've got, if you jump straight from grass roots to academy, it is a massive step up. So what I would do ... what I've done with our trialist, you try and integrate them into the group as quickly as you can and everyone that's come in, since I've been at the club, when you get feedback from the parents, they say that the biggest challenge for the kid is the speed of the session, the speed the ball moves, the speed everything goes on and it takes a few weeks to get used to and the lad that's come in has actually done really well because the first two or three weeks you could tell he was completely overawed by it but as we got towards Christmas, just before we broke up and then obviously we've not been back, but he was making really good progress, so yeah.

**I: Obviously there's a few conversations around maturation. How does that impact your decisions when it comes to either development plans or selection strategies?**

P: Well it is a factor because we, there's a lot, not just at our place but I'm sure at academies across the country where there's a big emphasis on the month of the year that the boy is born in and it is something that we focus on, you can't get away from that. There is a big thing around actually he's born in the first four months, five months of the season, he's got more of a chance. And we also look at the ... We sometimes compare the kind of physique of the family. So if it's a goalkeeper for example, if the dad comes in and he's only five foot six, then they might say hang on a minute, if the dad's five foot six is he going to grow to be ...and these are decisions that, they sound harsh, but they're made really kind of early. The

kid might be the best shot stopper you've ever seen but sometimes the decision doesn't get made around that. So yeah that's one thing that's, yeah, I suppose the month and the year they're born and the kind of genetics are two things that we do look at.

**I: Do you consider the - how can I word it, do you consider the impact of now versus the impact of the future and what I mean by that is, you might, let's say you have the goalkeeper as a scenario because that's obviously the easiest one, if you know he's not going to grow into above six foot, he might not be great for the future but he might be quite handy now, so do you consider those aspects?**

P: Yeah, that is a very good question and it's causing a bit of a debate at the academy at the moment actually because there are some, basically just what you said there, some are saying well actually he's the best shot stopper in the group, we've got to keep him and others are saying well actually, he's great at this but...So in answer to your question yes and no, some do some don't, and there's an example four or five years ago. We had two keepers in a group and in my opinion one was superior and the other one was retained and the one that was better was released based on size and physicality, so yeah.

**I: So why would you go one way or another, I guess it's to sort of turn my own question against you a little bit?**

P: Well I think the powers that be prefer the ... they obviously get the ultimate say, so in answer to your question earlier, there are three or four of us that discuss it but ultimately I don't make the final decision and I think there is a big emphasis at the moment around the size argument tends to win out at our place at the moment which is...that's the way it is, that's not my job, I can only give my input and obviously go from there but I think, yeah, the kind of message from the academy is, regarding goalkeepers, if they're not big enough, then don't worry about what's happening today, we're trying to build a team for scholarships and youth teams further down the line and potentially the first team.

**I: Is that the same for outfielders as well though?**

P: No, I don't think it is because we've got ... When I was at [club], I think the emphasis back then, I'm not sure it is now but it was very much on physical players. My friend worked at [club] at the time and he said it was completely different there, their emphasis was on quick players who, this was kind of the time when [club] were at their peak with [name] and [name] small players like that and that's what [club] kind of moved towards. They wanted

short, kind of smaller players, low central gravity, can move the ball quickly, whereas I think we've got a good balance actually. There's no, it's a very interesting question but I don't think we've got a particular kind of blueprint for that. In my group, there's a really good mixture, I've got some really strong physical lads and other kind of smaller ones. So yeah, I honestly don't know to be honest.

**I: Okay so just moving onto the last part now. So you'll need your team sheet view. So the first thing I need you to do is ...**

P: Sorry did you want this in a formation or just 1 to 11?

**I: No just the sheet, I won't need the names or anything, make sure you include the whole squad, so it's not just the starting 11 as it were, you've got your subs and everyone else as well.**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah if you can put the letter H next to anyone that you would consider to be a high performer. You can do as many or as little as you want.**

P: Just bear with me a sec because I don't think I've included my subs so I'm a couple down here so ...

**I: Yeah no worries.**

P: So these would be the elite players in the group yeah?

**I: Yeah, yeah. It could be one, it could be none, it could be ten, it could be as many as you choose.**

P: Okay. Yeah go on, okay.

**I: Okay. And the same thing now but you're putting an L for your lower performers in the group.**

P: Okay, yeah.

**I: And then obviously that would sort of leave, the outstanding ones would be mid performing player. Is that about right?**

- P: Yeah, yeah definitely, yeah, shall I do the same with them?
- I: **Yes you can put an M next to them, yeah.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **And obviously if you want to make any alterations with the knowledge of the groupings, feel free to do so.**
- P: Yeah, no, that's fine.
- I: **Okay, so all I need to know is how many are in each group?**
- P: Yeah, so actually I've missed one out there so bear with me one second, so he would go ...  
Yeah so I've got five in the higher.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: Three in the lower.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: And seven in the middle.
- I: **Brilliant. Okay, so how have you determined who is in what group?**
- P: Erm...Again it would come back to what we talked about earlier with those that have been sent on to, well there's a few factors actually, that would be one ... The boys that had been sent up to play for the older age group and the feedback that's come back from them, their coach...it's interesting because the ones that have been sent up are players that I would consider boys that can handle that step up at the moment. And when I've spoken to the coach, they've said yeah I think they were the right ones to come up. So that's one thing around the fact they've been able to handle that quality of football. Another would be how they fared in our games programme because one the lads that I've put down here in the lower group is probably the kid that trains the hardest and works the hardest in the sessions but he's just slightly off in terms of match day quality. Another determining fact would be how they get on with their own age group on a Sunday.
- I: **So would that be like how effective they are or like how would you describe that?**

P: Yeah definitely. I think up against, you can gauge usually because we play four 20 minute periods so you can gauge pretty much early doors who the opposition's best players are and I think a good way of gauging it is how well they do in their individual battles and how well they do up against the other team's better players, and so the ones that I would say that are in my kind of lower category would be ones that if they ... and you can see it, when you make your changes during a game, if things suddenly swap over in terms of they're on top, we're suddenly under the cosh a bit, (a) it could be because the opposition have made changes of their own but it could be, obviously we've made changes that have weakened us slightly. So it's kind of a bit of a trade-off between the two. So that's one area where you can look and say that's why he's in kind of maybe the group that would struggle a bit more.

I: **And with your time working with those players, would they have always been in the same group, or is it dynamics, and might they change groups?**

P: What, since they've come into the academy?

I: **Yeah.**

P: Yeah, no, they'd be one group together because we have one age group obviously per year.

I: **Sorry, what I meant was in the lower middle and higher groupings, would somebody have previously been medium and now be a higher or...?**

P: Ah I see what you mean sorry. Right, based on my six months with them?

I: **Yeah or as long a time as you've known them.**

P: Okay. Erm...Yeah, see when I was last at [club], this group wasn't one I worked with, so it would purely be based on my six months with them but I would say there's definitely, yeah, there's one lad here who when I took the squad on was kind of a player that they thought was top end of the group and he's done well but I wouldn't, they've said that since he's been there, he's kind of in the top two or three, but I'm not particularly convinced. He's not in my lowers but he's in the middle I think.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So if you were to be, again hypothetical talking about selection / deselection here for end of season, would those highers represent the ones that you're most likely going to take versus your lowers, most likely the ones you're not going to take?**

P: Yeah, I would think so, yeah. The two or three lowers are probably ones with question marks next to them at the moment.

I: **And obviously the mediums would just be ones you're not sure of and they might go either way?**

P: Yeah totally. I wouldn't think...and I suppose there's a couple in that medium list who, it comes back to your last question actually, who at the start of the season, I would have thought they're struggling but then as the season has gone on ... I suppose it's I'm a new coach to them, the environment is completely new, we're in a completely disrupted season, so I think it's taken maybe three or four of them a while to adapt to that so yeah there are some in that middle. If we'd done this conversation in October / November, there would have definitely been a couple more Ls in there I think, so yeah.

I: **So now, just considering the high performers only, so that's five of them, is there anything consistent that all of the higher performers have or do that places them in the high performing group above the others?**

P: Yeah I would say decision making is a big one there. So when they receive the ball, invariably they are ... they find and pass to one of their team mates straight away or they keep possession well. They kind of, mentally, they're always thinking one step ahead, so when the ball is played in, they're like hang on, if it comes to me they're prepared for it whereas those that are slightly lower down, it's a little bit more hesitant, especially as you know, when you get to academy level, you don't get that time on the ball so if you can receive it and keep it and move it on quickly, then I think that marks you out as one of the... well possession is massive isn't it so I think I would say yeah, looking at the five that I've got down, yeah, decision making would definitely be a key thing that makes them stand out.

I: **So within that same group, is there anything that they have, it might be unique, so is there anything they do that's outstanding, which might be by player?**

P: Yeah so one of them is a keeper. Distribution is out of this world. If you look at [name] in the Premiere League, he's obviously not on that level but you can tell that's who he bases his game on. Every time the ball comes into him, we've played on some dodgy pitches this season as well and he just never loses the ball, so yeah he would be...that would be for me his biggest thing.

**I: Yeah.**

P: The lad we talked about at the start, obviously he's physically very, very strong, that marks him out. There are different qualities within, obviously he's got a bit of an all-round game but actually in possession he's probably not as good as the keeper but he's just got pace to burn and does things very, very quickly, sometimes too quickly. The other one I've gone for, one of the other five, is a lad who's just got really good leadership skills. He's very intelligent, communicates very well and very, very good mental, even though he's only 12 years old, mentally very, very good. So if we're ever behind in a game, you can see he's trying to gee the other players up, you know what it's like, heads tend to go down in some situations, he's always positive. He's the kind of player, if you said to me right, who do you see as being the captain of a team in five or six years' time, the first name would be his because he's just.. yeah, and that marks him out a little bit because when the going gets tough in games, I don't know he's just, yeah, he keeps going.

**I: And is there anything, strange question I know, is there anything that is unique that you could remove from them and they'd still be a high performing player?**

P: Erm ...It could be the lad I've kind of talked about a bit tonight, where he, as I just said then, he's so eager, he's got so much energy and as I said earlier he knows when to use it properly but I think sometimes, running with the ball at feet he ... the weakness in his game is that he overruns the ball sometimes because his feet are just so fast. So it might be actually, he's kind of, I don't know what time he's done the 100m in but he told me his last year at school he was in the county finals and came second, he's really, really quick.

**I: He's fast.**

P: Yeah absolutely, and I don't want to take that away because you know as well as I do, that pace in a forward player is like brilliant, it's fantastic. But it's just using it in those forward runs a little bit more wisely I think.

**I: Yeah. So let me just make sure I've not missed anything. So now just looking at the lower performing players, similar questions, is there anything that they all do or don't do that brings them into being a lower group?**

P: Two of them definitely, two of them on the ball, that is where they struggle. As I said earlier, because the ball moves at such pace, the better players can do one touch, two touch play,

whereas invariably these two in particular, the first touch, well you know what it's like even at pro level, it's so important, their first touch isn't particularly good. So that obviously then makes the second touch much more difficult and then if you close down quickly, we lose possession. So I would say that is one area where two of them in particular need to be a little bit sharper.

**I: What about the other one, the outstanding one?**

P: I think, it's a tough one with him because he's ... I toyed over putting him in the mediums but he's got quite a difficult...a difficult situation outside of the club and he is someone we have to tread a little bit carefully with because it's not good what's going on so we've got to, he's probably in that lower group based upon the issues he's got outside of the club.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Now when you talked about release earlier, he's probably not one we will release because (a) it will damage him psychologically and (b) he has dropped off in the last couple of years coinciding with the stuff he's got going on. So erm... I think, yeah, he's a tough one. I think in any ... If he had the home life or the kind of stuff going on outside of the club that some of the others have, I think he'd be quite a safe middle option.

**I: Yeah, yeah that makes a lot of sense. And is there anything that they all do that they're really good at?**

P: As a group?

**I: Individual, so like unique that they're actually really good at but they're still in the lowers.**

P: Yeah so one of them, he's a bit like an old fashioned centre forward and like physically, I know I talked about the other lad being physically good but this lad he's very much ... I'd say his touch isn't particularly good but one of the other coaches said to me, I've seen a lot of players like that make a career out of the game at kind of non-league because they're physical, they get stuck in. He's brilliant in the air as well, you put it in the air, he wins every header. But it comes back to your question earlier about what are they looking for as an academy and I don't think he's quite got the all round game to be retained long term but as I say, physically and airily very, very good, very good.



**I: So just out of curiosity, the lower group, would you say that they are, maturation wise, would they be late maturing, average maturing or mixed or obviously early maturing?**

P: The one I just mentioned who's very strong physically, I think he's quite an early birthday and maturation, he'd be at the front of the group I think, so I don't think for him that's a particular issue. No I don't think, looking at those three... erm, no not particularly actually.

**I: And with the higherers are they the bigger ones or are they again a mixed bag?**

P: Yeah there's the lad again that I've talked about, he's very big, he's much bigger than everyone else. You've got, as I said there's two or three in those higherers that are very ... they're quite intelligent boys so they learn very, very quickly whether that's in the classroom or on the football pitch, so I think that helps them as well. Like the example I gave of the guy that could be a captain, you say something and straight away he's ... whereas other boys are still working out what to do, where to be, he's done it and he's moved onto the next thing. So I think intelligence of the group kind of stands two or three of them out ahead of the rest.

**I: Yeah, yeah. Then the middle group now, how have you distinguished the line that stops them being in the lower but not quite in the higher?**

P: That's a very good question actually. I suppose I've compared them to the higherers ... If we're looking at the top end first, those in the middle that didn't quite get into that, I think again, on a match day, I've kind of looked at what a higher might give on a match day and I've looked at what a medium might give and kind of thought actually he's on the way but he's not quite affecting games as much as he is. And again, the difficulty I found and this was my own fault completely, when I came into the squad, one of the lads that's down as a middle, he didn't really, in training, seem ... So you get a kind of formation and a structure that you want to play based on the players within the squad and I don't think I gave this lad enough of a chance because he was always kind of fitting in in different positions because he didn't really look comfortable anywhere and then towards the second half of the first part of the season, so kind of just before Christmas, I played him on the wing and he was brilliant and he's played there ever since. Again, if we have this conversation in a couple of months' time, he might be in that top group because he's now found a bit of a niche that he's comfortable with. So yeah, I would say match days have been my kind of idea to look at to make these decisions and they're probably just not quite affecting the games enough at the moment.

**I: So might that be another way to phrase it, that the top ones are much more consistent in performance?**

P: Hundred percent yeah definitely. You know...So when the boys get called up to the team above, we will obviously have a drop off because it tends to be my better performers and as you've said the more consistent performers that go and then the ones that play, you're not always a hundred percent sure that they're going to give as much as those that have left have given. So yeah, consistency would be a massive point.

**I: And another point to touch on with that is I guess, you sort of said earlier that decision making is really good in the higher group, so would that also be true to be the opposite in the lower group?**

P: Yeah I'd say so, definitely, yeah. The lad I talked about, the lad that's good in the air, very physical, I think sometimes he's...I think he's probably one of the early birthdays in the group because I think, as I said, under 12s, they're getting towards teenage years, they can be quite sullen. So when the ball ... For example, if we're trying to play out from the back, he might do that really effectively and then if he gets on the ball, he might ... and it's very much around the individual, it's not about me saying do this, do that, but things might break down a little bit because he's not quite on the same wave length as they are. So he's a bit more kind of, a bit more kind of a solo, not solo in the fact he wants to take everyone on but he does his own thing a little bit more.

**I: So it's almost this idea... and I've heard this a few times now, it's almost this idea of playing your own game versus playing the game that's required or being asked of you?**

P: Yeah, I would say so and as I said at the start we're not an academy where oh I'm the coach and I'm saying right you're doing that today, you're doing that today. We try to build a philosophy that the players can get on board with but ultimately if you've got a player that's ... you've got a system in play and ten of the players are doing it and one isn't, and that's not the case, he's not going against what we're trying to do but if the ball comes into him and other boys have made runs based on what we've looked at in the week and then he plays a different ball, then things can break down a little bit.

**I: Yeah I guess another question I might ask which is similar but slightly different is, would you say that the higher group understands what's needed from them within the situation, so if they're playing an opposition that they realise is quicker than them, they can adjust**

**whereas your lower players probably don't recognise it and they still play the game that they want to play or feel that their strength is this so they're going to do it regardless?**

P: Absolutely. We played a game, it probably would have been October, November time and three of these higher players that we've talked about here were, one played at right back, we played a 4-3-3, one played at right back, one played on the right of the three mid-field and one played on the right of the three attackers and from the first two or three minutes of the game, they could see that the opposition's left hand side was really, really weak and they just tore them apart for the first two periods until we made changes and they kind of ... they basically targeted them and it's a horrible thing to say but they noticed that was the weakness and they just yeah ...

**I: Went for it ...**

P: Yeah, and as you said there, the lower players in the group might not have. It was a great link up, the three of them were playing triangles around them and it was really good to watch but as you say, the lower players might not have cottoned on to that, I don't think.

**I: Yeah. So the last question actually, I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear. Is there anything in the middle group that effectively they could develop but at the minute is lacking, that stops them from going into the top group?**

P: Erm... I suppose, one of the things that I'm always conscious about and I've talked about this tonight already is I think all managers, and it's very different in the academy level than it is in the pro game but you've got a ... As I said at the start, we're starting to get an idea of where they play, now we're not position orientated but we're starting to think about where they can play and I think probably some of these middle players and it's my fault as much as theirs, were probably guilty of the fact that actually, your higher ability players, I know as a coach, if I play my higher ability players in their favourite position, they will be effective.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Now if one of my medium players in the medium group, his favourite position is the same as one of my higher players, I've got to then make sure that he plays there as well and in the heat of a game where so much is going on, sometimes he might be the one, if I said well I know he's my best player I'm going to leave him there for now, those middles might miss out now and again because actually, in the heat of a game when you've got so many things to think about

and they might be the ones that don't get to play where they want to. Whereas if they're given a little bit of an extended run from the start maybe in that position, they can, I don't know, maybe develop from there and that is something I'm going to be looking at after we go back, kind of a little bit more variation.

**I: That makes sense.**

P: Yeah.

#### **8.10.17 Participant 17**

**I: It's really basic stuff at the beginning, a little bit about you and then a bit like strategy stuff from maybe more so from the club, and then into the task that you'll need the team sheet. So you won't need it immediately.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So starting off then, what is your current job title?**

P: So I'm the lead under 15's coach and the assistant under 16's coach.

**I: Brilliant and what category status is the academy?**

P: Cat three.

**I: And what league does your first team play in?**

P: League one.

**I: How long have you been in football?**

P: Oh blimey, probably ... so I started my first role in about 2002.

**I: Okay, yeah, yeah, so what's that, 19 years?**

P: Yeah something like that, yeah, yeah 19 years, yeah.

**I: And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: So I've been at the club four years, this is my first year as the lead 15's coach.

**I: And, well, the next question is which age group will you be discussing, I'm assuming it'll be the 15's then?**

P: Yeah, yeah 15's or 16's, yeah.

**I: So more interesting questions now, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yep so I started working in the community scheme ... so what is it, you want my background or football background or ... what would you want to know?

**I: Any of it, even if ... I mean yeah, even if you played beforehand, like how you got into coaching, that's all useful.**

P: Okay so yeah, I mean I grew up playing football and wanting to be a footballer, I wasn't very good so it was a bit of a problem! So I sort of stopped playing in my mid 20's and sort of discovered coaching, and then I just did a little bit of coaching, grassroots football around where I lived, and then I started working at a club's community scheme, just, well about two or three nights a week, just doing afterschool clubs, holiday courses, you know, evening centres, things like that, and then a job come up to become their assistant community officer. So I went for that and was lucky I got that, and stayed at the club for about ten years. So yeah, and it was a great experience, I mean just working in the community side, it just was a great introduction to coaching and ...

**I: Yeah.**

P: Real great introduction. But it also ... because I was there for quite a while they give me an opportunity to go and work with the academy, so I was in the academy for probably about nine years.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And then ... I was at the club a long time and I thought I need to probably move on, so I got a job at a school, an upper school, where I worked ... I still work now, so I've been there ... this is my ninth year ... blimey, ninth year, yeah, so ... and then whilst doing that I've continued to coach at various football league clubs, just in the academy system. Mostly youth development phase, have done the odd couple of years as the under 10's and under 11's coach, but mostly it's been 13's, 14's and 15's, 16's.

**I: So you're starting to climb that ladder almost?**

- P: Yeah I guess so. I guess ... do you know what, it's more ... rather than climbing the ladder I guess it's probably just getting experience.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **Do you have ambitions to go into PDP phase or 23's?**
- P: So I really enjoyed working with development and I would like to work in that PDP phase, but I quite enjoy anything from the YDP up to 23's, so if I could have a job where I could coach and then maybe be involved in that development ... that job probably doesn't exist by the way, but if it did, that would be a great job, yeah.
- I: **Brilliant, so in your current role how would you describe what that ... what it is, maybe also what the responsibilities are?**
- P: Well I guess the responsibilities, my responsibility ... I guess there's two ways of looking at it, I think my responsibility is to make sure that I look after the players, and then ... I remember somebody saying this to me once, that as an academy coach, if you make sure you don't make them any worse you've done your job! I don't know if he was just saying that specifically to me, I don't know but! But I think that ... yeah I think the responsibility is just to make them that little bit better over the year you're with them.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: So that's what I see my responsibility as, and I guess it's not just as a footballer, but you're kind of trying ... you know, we see them quite a bit during the week but we don't see that much if you know what I mean?
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: But ... so you try and ... you try and build those relationships and kind of help them become ... it's a bit of a cliché I guess, but you try and help them to become better people don't you?
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: But ... you do, but first and foremost ... yeah, I guess I try and make them a little bit better as a player.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And when you consider player development do you have personal beliefs or a personal philosophy?**

P: Yes and no, I think that ... I think the main thing is that we're not playing the game, it's not about us as coaches, and I guess ... I think that sessions and games should be all about them and their decisions, but I'm also mindful of the fact that we are there for a reason, it's not let the game be the teacher, I don't think that's ... that could be a thing in ... when you set certain challenges within the game, but I think we're there to facilitate a little bit, and just to stop of give them ... give them a helping hand when they need it.

**I: Yeah, yeah, so it's almost like you're ... it's like the athlete centred approach but you might have to direct them occasionally?**

P: Yeah, yeah, yeah I ... yeah, it's no ... it's not a case of one size fits all, sometimes you know, I can just have a quick chat with somebody and off they go and the football pitch is their little playground, but other people, it might be that they need talking through things, just for a short while, whilst they're working things out in their brain. So yeah, I guess ... but it is all about them, it is all about them becoming a footballer rather than me showing them what a great coach I am.

**I: Is that something you think is a current issue within coaching, in academies or just coaching in football sort of in general?**

P: I think it used to be.

**I: Yeah.**

P: I think it used to be. I think coaching has evolved quite a lot now.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And I think that ... but I do think ... I do think ... and maybe it's starting to come out of it a little bit, I do think there was a problem with coaching, and do you know what I'm not above this myself, I mean I include myself in this, is that this thing about the game being a teacher, we see a lot of coaches just putting the session on and just sitting back and watching, and actually I think that's probably more of a problem than coaches in there talking and telling them how good they are.

- I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So when you have players that aren't developing, do you have expectations on their capabilities?**
- P: Yeah, yeah I guess it's based on what I know about them and what I see, but I do ... yeah I do ... there are certain things that I would expect them to be doing, or certain things they should be working towards, and goals they should be hitting. [Audio cut 0:09:12] human beings and there's reasons they might not hit them.
- I: Yeah, yeah.**
- P: So I guess you have to re-evaluate that all the time, so it's never set in stone.
- I: Yeah, is there any sort of examples of what those things might be that you might want to see, maybe more than other things?**
- P: Yeah I mean so, you know, no different to anyone else, the baseline, for instance I would expect 15's, you know, players to be able to ... for instance, in transition, they've lost possession, to be able to quickly change their mindset and work hard to regain or to reshape for instance.
- I: Yeah, so with that, is that also ... there's a couple of components within that right? So there's obviously this idea of working hard as a physiological requirement, but also this understanding of the game, to acknowledge what to do next. So would those be like two sort of key components for you that you think, it is critical to have that mindset of working hard but also the game knowledge to know what to do and when to do it?**
- P: Yeah, do you know what it's funny you say because I was having this discussion the other day, and actually I was sort of saying, is it working hard or is it working smart? And I guess ... I guess the working hard bit is that they've got it ... they're motivated to run, if they need to, but the working smart is, is actually recognising when they need to run and when they need to do this, and when they need to do that. So I think it goes hand in hand.
- I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, 100 percent. So moving into the next part now, which is more around like club strategies kind of, but it's still a bit about you, throughout this I'll talk about deselection, as well as development, when I talk about deselection I'm referring to player releases or retentions, more so at the end of the year, so I appreciate in under 15's that might not necessarily happen at your club, but some people do, some people don't, but maybe be hypothetical with it, almost a case of if it were to happen you know what ...**



**obviously I know you're saying you're assistant to 16's, so maybe it's worth sort of thinking about them more so.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So in regards to player development plans or the deselection processes, who would be involved in that decision making?**

P: Yeah so the lead phase and the lead age group coach are obviously heavily involved, and then I guess the under 16's it's quite interesting because then we have various, because we have the academy managers involved, we have the 18's coaches involved, and potentially, although probably not so much at our club at the minute, the head of coaching as well.

**I: Yeah.**

P: They will also ... you know, so they're the people that are involved at our club. Now I have been at other clubs where the head of recruitment is also been involved.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: Yeah. But certainly I mean, throughout the age groups the crucial ones, or the ones that are pivotal to those decisions, are the lead coach and the lead phase coach really.

**I: Do you utilise sort of wider MDT people within that as well?**

P: Yeah, yeah, so with, you know, the sport scientists, we get people to ... with the analysis does that ... they probably wouldn't be involved in the decision process but they would certainly help with the decision process, because they could help clip things and things like that, so yeah absolutely, yeah.

**I: So when you're going through a ... when you're going through a selection deselection process, what is that process, like how would you determine who gets selected and who doesn't get selected?**

P: Oh do you know what it does on so many factors, but I guess the need is going to be one of them, especially you know at 16's, because not only are you looking ... because there's not a ... there's not an unlimited amount of space for players.

**I: Yeah of course.**

P: So I guess there's ... if we've already got two right backs in the 18's already we probably wouldn't take a right back on. So there definitely has to be a need and an opportunity, but also we have a look at the players that are coming up behind them as well, so the year group below, and possibly below that as well. So we're not ... yeah, so we're not clogging up opportunities. And then ... then we look about ... we look at them as individuals, you know, how have they performed, what's their ... you know, what's their mindset like, what type of humans are they, what ... you know, physically, how do they cope with the game?

I: **Yep.**

P: Or tactically how ... you know. So lots and lots of things but ... it's an interesting one because you know ... so for instance we've had a player who is gone through the system and at every step of the way people have gone not sure, not sure, yet he's gone right the way through and might actually get a contract, with the first team.

I: **Yeah!**

P: So although we make all these sort of decisions on well is he the right person, is he physically able to do what we need him to do, is it opportunity? It is that opportunity I think is the best thing, the need for that player.

I: **And interesting that sort of choice of words, not a negative way either, was the idea of that ... you say how they cope with the game.**

P: Yeah, yeah.

I: **Is that something that you ... is it ... is this sort of this ... not measure, but is that process of how well does a player cope, is that more important than how well somebody succeeds in it?**

P: It depends on ... it depends on the player, for me, and where they're at in their development.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So for instance, I might talk about a player coping, because they're technically very, very good, tactically really switched on, really good person, but they're tiny, so they might think ... you know, so unfortunately, like it or lump it, physicality has a part to play in cat three clubs because we've only got under 23's.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So it is a little bit of a consideration, but if that person who is physically not as mature as other ... sorry ... yeah, physically not as mature as other players, if they cope, if they learn to deal with that, that for me is success.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.**

P: You know, so ... yeah so I ... I think ... but then if I'm looking at a player who has the physical attributes and is only coping with the game, then I would question that. So I think it does come down to the individual.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, no that's ... that makes complete sense. And when you're making development plans, are they the same ... are they the same processes, or are they different processes, to a selection?**

P: In terms of what, looking at the player and how we say well I think they'll develop in this way?

**I: Maybe ... maybe that but also maybe creating like ILP's or IDP's for players to ... it might be a case of I need to see you do this to ... for you to improve, like how does that ... how do you go through that process to determine what they need?**

P: Yeah, see again that's ... I think that we're quite subjective on that. We do ... we do have a discussion, discussions between the staff and discussions between the player and staff, and a lot of it is ... some of it is analysis, but if I'm honest with you, probably haven't got time to analyse players that much in ... you know, as they go through. So it is subjective, in terms of I think you need to do this, but I guess that's based on maybe player profiling, or where we think that player ... you know, what we think those skills that that player possesses. But ... and how we think they can affect the game.

**I: So are those interlinked then, so would your development plan come into the deselection process at all?**

P: Yes in terms of this is ... yeah, because I guess that's evidence isn't it?

**I: Yeah.**

P: I guess ... and ... so you know, we can look back at ... see the problem with things that are written down is, it's like you say, it is evidence, but actually ... you know, sometimes it's just like a, okay well we're going to deselect you, unfortunately, we're not going to offer you a registration for next year because of this, this and this. And I guess, I guess the development plans are two fold in the sense of this is where we saw you going, but we don't think you've quite ... you know, we don't think you've developed in this way, blah, blah, blah. But ... so I guess, I guess we do use it in the sense that it helps with that conversation, it helps with us explaining where we're coming from, but I guess the other side of it is that it's evidence so when people go well I'm not happy that you've released us, we'll go okay well here you go, this is what we've done, this is what we've said all along the way, this is what you've been included in, so you knew ... you know, you understood the path, you understood the journey we was going on.

I: **Yeah exactly.**

P: So ... yeah, so I think that they're important, but I think, if I'm honest with you, I think the real importance is the discussions you have in the meantime.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah I get that. So do you consider positional demands when you are doing development or selection?**

P: In terms of we've got a right back he needs to be good at one, be one defending do you mean?

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

P: Yeah, yeah, yeah 100 percent, it's ... we'll look at ... we'll look at players and where we think their skill sets lie, and then we'll try and you know, development the things that they're really good at whilst adding the things that they'll possible need to survive in that position.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, that makes a lot of sense.**

P: Or thrive rather than survive.

I: **Yeah, yeah! So are you familiar with the four corner model from the FA?**

P: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: **What are your thoughts on it?**

P: Well I ... I guess it's a good thing because it gets people thinking about different things, in terms of if you want to be a footballer most ... when you put a session on, you know, in truth we all think about tactical and technical don't we?

I: **Yeah.**

P: But actually with that four corner model you do think about the psychological side, you do think about the physical side of it. So in that sense, it's got to be a good thing because it makes you think.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah definitely, and do you collect objective assessments which might cover those ... each one of those corners, so it might be your technical tactical, your physical, your psychological?**

P: So the club does as a whole, so they'll do ... so for instance, physiological they'll do testing, for instance, and then the technical and tactical I guess through the, like the development plans for the players. The psychological stuff is interesting, we've just ... we've just started ... well I say just started, in the last couple of years, we've sort of looked at that, I don't think that ... well I guess it's budgetary rather than ... and having staff members, or having people to come in. But you know ... but things like wellbeing and things like that are quite high up on the club's, you know, agenda, and ... you know, so yeah we do in a sense, but I guess we don't do it ... we don't do it collectively, we probably do it within departments.

I: **So do you get given that ... so let's say ... because I know all clubs will do physical data testing for each of which are key purposes, do you get given that data afterwards and do you ever look at it/use it?**

P: I have to say, we don't always get given it, but we do get given it sometimes. The other side of it I guess, we ... do you know what, we look at that sort of stuff when we're making decisions, but the reality with training sessions for instance is we get a core of a full size pitch on a ... you know, two nights a week. So actually you know ... so acceleration and deceleration, it ... I'm not sure how ... because we don't have that bigger space, you know a lot of it isn't something that we could probably ... we probably need, because it won't be something that we will base our sessions round.

I: **Yeah.**

- P: Having said that they do do sport science stuff before sessions, so the sports scientists will probably work on a lot of that stuff anyway.
- I: **So if you did get the results back and lets ... I've always used [inaudible 0:24:59] as probably the easiest one to utilise, and you get someone who's really quick in the assessments, are they always the one that's really quick in the game?**
- P: No not always, most ... probably mostly, probably mostly. But it's different isn't it I guess because it's easy to be good at tests, where in games it's slightly different because you've got other things that you're reacting to, to make decisions on whether you should be doing this or that. But I guess the people that have got, say real acceleration and speed, probably show that in games more, yeah.
- I: **So if they didn't that ... you're saying that might be because they don't quite have the better understanding of the game or when to use that?**
- P: Yeah, yeah, or it might even be positionally that actually they play in a position that doesn't ... I'm not ... maybe that's not right, but maybe they don't get the chance to actually show that skill off, which you know ...
- I: **Yeah I think you were ... I think that ... yeah, you were getting at that anyway, yeah, positionally might now allow the opportunity, yeah, yeah.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **I agree. So ... I lost track of where I was then ... bit a scenario based question for you now, if you had a player that he excelled at the foundation phase, how would that inform you of their future success?**
- P: It depends on what ... it tells us at that moment in time that they're probably top of the group for instance, and it tells us that he's got specific traits as a player that he's very good at, at that moment in time. But I guess I go back to what I said originally, like right at the start, it's those players, how do we support them, how do we make sure that they're not ... that they're developing still? So I mean quite often you get players that excel at the foundation phase, for various reasons, and it could be because they're bigger for instance, or they're older for instance. But actually when things equalise and you know, players catch them, have we still maintained that distance between them and ... them and the players' next in line? So I guess it's just a snapshot in time, it doesn't really ... it doesn't tell us that

he's going to definitely be a professional footballer at all. Or it doesn't tell us that he's going to be a scholar at all. So I guess that's just a snapshot and someone to ... someone to be aware of.

I: So similar question, but it's now sort of flipping it around, if you had a player who joined you in the found ... in the youth phase, and he had no prior experience of academies and no foundation phase, nothing, how would that then inform you of their future success?

P: Do you know what this actually happens quite a lot at our club, we get a lot of players coming in, especially about 14, we get a lot of players coming in from grass roots that have, either had like one year as an under 11 at a club, or literally been nowhere before ... well I say nowhere, they've been at grass roots clubs before. And ... so I guess what ... whether that tells us ... where that tells us he's going to end up, it doesn't. But it does ... it doesn't even make us look at them any differently when they're on trial if I'm honest with you. Although what I would say is, we might forgive them ... I don't know if I've worded this properly, but a few shortcomings. So for instance, they've come to us because they're the best in their group, at grass roots football in ... you know, in a ... for in a ... you know, for that season, but you know, to say you're a winger and you're extremely ... you got loads [inaudible 0:30:02], you score loads of goals, you know, you don't lose possession of the ball, but actually you don't chase back and regain it either, because you don't have to, because you're manager is not asking you to do that. So we might understand that their mindset might be a little bit different to what we'd expect in under 15 wide player and their expectation levels out of possession, for instance. So we might forgive them that over short term.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.**

P: But yeah, in terms of ... in terms of somebody coming into us from a grass roots background, it doesn't ... it doesn't really ... it's how do they fit in, where do we see them ... where do we see them developing?

I: **Yeah, and do you ... do you actively consider playing age or training age of the player?**

P: In terms of ... in terms ... I'll tell you what we do think about a lot, is not necessarily training age, we think a lot about how they are as individuals, so say at ... they're 13 years old but in reality they're 15, or they might be ten, you know, they might be very immature for their age. So we do take that onboard, because that does have an effect on how they learn and

how they deal with things. But in terms of training age and playing age, we don't ... that wouldn't be a barrier for instance to ... if they're doing really well at their age group that we would encourage them to go and play at an older age group for instance, we do that quite actively.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that makes sense, and you actually answered my next question within that, which was around maturation, so I won't bother going into that because you've clearly answered that. So moving onto the last part now, so this is when you'll need your team sheet for now.**

P: Yep.

**I: So all I need you to do ... so activity first, all I need you to do is if you put a letter H next to any players that you would consider to be high performing within the group.**

P: Okay. Yep.

**I: And then do the same thing but you're putting a letter L next to anyone that you'd consider to be low performing in the group, or lower performing.**

P: Yeah. Yeah.

**I: And then anyone who hasn't got a letter next to them they would be assumed to be a mid performing player.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So with that knowledge of the different ... the three groups, would you make any additional changes?**

P: No.

**I: Okay. All I need to know from you is how many you've got per group, so how many are in your higher, how many in your mid and how many in your lower?**

P: Okay, so it's just 11 players isn't it you need, is that right?

**I: You can include the bench as well.**

P: Oh okay, alright.



- I: So you're welcome to change that all now if you need to.**
- P: Okay yeah, hang on; I'll just put a couple of players on the bench then as well then.
- I: It should be your whole ... the whole of the age group.**
- P: Okay. So ... is that right ... yep that's right so ... right okay, so I've got ... so for the high performing, I've got one, two, three, four.
- I: Four, yep.**
- P: And for the low I've got one, two, three, four, five.
- I: Yep.**
- P: And for the in between I've got one, two ... or the mid range, one, two, three, four.
- I: Four of them, brilliant. Okay so digging into the questions then, out of curiosity, just because you did it on the first 11 initially, did that change at all when you did it with the wider group?**
- P: It ... do you know what it did actually, I changed a couple of players when I looked at ... when I brought other players into it, yeah the benchmark changed a little bit.
- I: So the first question really is, how have you determined who's in what group?**
- P: So I ... so for me, I looked ... the high performing players are the ones that are ... that are able, or have been able to consistently perform at high standards, in training and in games.
- I: Yeah.**
- P: And I guess the converse to that, for the lower performing, is exactly the same, they've not been consistently performing to high levels.
- I: Yeah, yeah, yeah I know what you're saying there, and when you say about the consistency in the training and game, what would you ... how would you unpick that, like what does it look like?**
- P: Yeah so I guess some of that would be expectation levels of the individual, and some of it is expectation levels of how they affect the game as a ... positionally. So forget the player, it's

that position, how's that winger for instance performing? Are they hitting the profile that we want, are they affecting the game in the way that we see they should be?

**I: And within game effectiveness, would that be mostly focused around correct decisions?**

P: Yeah, yeah I think so, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah 100 percent actually.

**I: Okay so since working with the group, might the players have changed? So they might have ... so a lower might have been a medium, or a medium might have been a higher, or a higher might have been a medium, etc.?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So they're quite dynamic across how they develop?**

P: Yeah, there's one or two that have been consistent ... well, one, two ... I'd say yeah, actually about three that are consistently in that higher bracket, and then I would say the majority of the rest of the players flip between the three. So at times they can be in that lower bracket, at times, you know, they've shown that they're capable of being in that higher bracket.

**I: What do you think it is that makes it ... what is it that has made them move, in your opinion?**

P: I think ... I think a lot of it psychological.

**I: Okay.**

P: I think things like decision making and focus is something that I ... my personal opinion is ... and also things like you know, that intrinsic motivation to be the best they can be. I think that's ... that's a big thing as well. And you know, they're all in this system, you know, so you don't get bad players in academy football, you might get players that are not as good as others, but they're all good players. So actually they're all capable of being higher performers, but I guess the consistent ones are the ones that you would ... you would describe as being good, good is a bad word but you know, they're the ones who we probably would expect to be able to comfortably go and impact the age group above.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and those groupings of the high, mid and lower, would they likely represent a selection in the higher and maybe a deselection in the lower?**

P: Sorry say ... what do you mean?

I: **So if you were going to, at the end of the season, if you were hypothetically going to deselect some players and select other players ...**

P: Oh right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: **Would they represent that, or maybe not?**

P: Yeah just because a player is in that higher performance, it's still ... there is ... there's no guarantees, so you know, if a player is consistently in the lower performance bracket and we can't ... we can't say well he's in a lower performance bracket because of H for instance, or because we think he needs to physical mature. If we can't explain it away and we can't see a reason why that is and how we can help them, yeah, they will probably be the ones that will be deselected. But again I mean I come back to this opportunity, we might have five, you know, midfield players, and you know, they're all ... they're all high performers, then it is about opportunity and timing I guess.

I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just out of curiosity, what would happen in that situation? Would you try and play that player in another position or does it ... what happens?

P: Yeah that would be something we'd be ... we'd identify that early on and definitely look for a secondary position, and to be quite honest with you, we try and do that with a few players anyway because the reality is, a club like ... you know, it's a cat three club, we're not blessed with money, so they'll probably have to go and play in a different position at some point. But definitely if there's a player who's regularly, or consistently a high performer, that would tell us he's a good player. So ... and we want ... you can't have too many good players in your football club right? So yeah, completely we try and ... we try and fit, what is it, a square peg in a round hole to a certain extent, just so we can give them opportunity, but unfortunately that doesn't always happen, and in that case I think that quite a lot would be done in terms of after care, in terms of trying to find them a club to go to.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. So now just questions around the high performers only, we'll go through each of the groups but just starting off with the high performers, is there anything within the high performing group that they all have, like a theme that they all do that places them in the high performing group?**

- P: No, you know what, see if you'd have asked me this without thinking about players, like individuals, I'd have said it would have been about motivation and that desire to be ... but just looking at the players, they're very different, there's one or two that I would say that intrinsic motivation really pushes them. But there's also one or two in that group that are very different, that's not ... that's not something I would describe them as, they're just very gifted. So yeah I think that they're ... they're different, yeah very different at some point.
- I: **So they ... have they got things that are uniquely outstanding instead?**
- P: Yeah, yeah I would say there's things about them technically and probably physically, that would ... that really does help them perform.
- I: **Just ... is there a couple of examples you can give on a couple of those individuals, like what the physical thing is or what the technical thing is?**
- P: Yeah I mean so for instance, we've got a player who is an attacking player but he uses his body particularly well, he's quite strong, and he knows how to take advantage of that. He's also got, you know, quite a good ... he's not rapid but he's quite fast, so he uses his physical attributes to his maximum. And I guess you know, another one is his balance and his agility in possession of the ball, is you know ... and he's very good. So again that lends itself to him performing well in the position that he plays.
- I: **So is there things within that you could ... within this group, is there individual things you could take away from any of those players and they would still be a high performing player?**
- P: There's ... with the ... I would say there's things that I could take away from the players that have got that intrinsic motivation and I think they would still be there and thereabouts with that high performing group. I think the lads who are ... maybe they haven't got that same, that same determination, that relentlessness to be the best. I think that if we took certain traits that makes them high performing players I think they might struggle.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah. So now just considering the lower performing players, similar sort of questions, is there anything that is consistent across them that makes them in the bottom?**
- P: Yeah you know what I think ... I think for the majority of them, it's about how they cope with mistakes, or the fear of making mistakes. I think that's a big thing, because it's already on

their mind I guess, that they're ... you know, they know where they are in the group, not because anyone has told them it's because they ... you just know. So I think that ... I think that ... or the majority of them know anyway! Yeah. But yeah I think that that ... that fear of mistakes, that confidence, is possibly not as high as others, which is completely understandable, I think that's probably a common theme.

**I: And is there anything that ... oh no sorry actually another question, do they lack complete abilities or are they just sort of poorer, so they have the same abilities as the others but they just at a lesser standard?**

P: Some of them ... a bit of both to be honest with you, some of them that maybe are similar type of players but maybe they're not as gifted, and some of them possibly lack ... they lack certain things that other players have got, but then they've got their own strengths.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, and what would ... so I'm assuming they all have their own sort of unique strengths as well, would they be classified as outstanding within those strengths, or would they just be good at those for their ability?**

P: So I would say ... so you've asked a good question there because I think if we have players that are outstanding, quite often they won't be at our club for long. So you know, so I think that the players that are in the lower group have good ability but actually they're trying to become outstanding at one or two things.

**I: Yeah, yeah, and how does that compare to the higher group, are they ... are they ... is the difference between what good looks like ... you know, are they the same or are they different?**

P: No they're the same in the sense that we have our own ... we've got to have a benchmark and we have to have demands, so you know if we was to take this group and put them into grass roots football then good for them could be ... is very different to what good from another player would look like, absolutely. But I guess the demands are the same for all of them, and the players who are really forging ahead and doing really well, well then we have to obviously look at that and think about how we challenge them. But for the players that are sort of striving to there and trying to cope, well we can't ... I don't think that we can lower what we expect from players, because the bottom line is, we're trying to support players to go through and become professionals.

- I: Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah. And then just the last question on the lowers, is there anything that they maybe individually they really excel in, or they're good at, but actually it doesn't help their performance at all?**
- P: No, I would say the things that they're good at, I think it all adds to their performance, I think it all adds to make that person. So I don't ... actually the answer to your question, in my opinion, is I'm not too sure that actually exists, because it is all part of the make up of that individual isn't it?
- I: Yeah, yeah. I think another way to think about it, and it's not ... this isn't to challenge you, it's another way to spin it, is if you have a player who might be really quick but then doesn't know how to decide when to be that, it almost like it doesn't bode well to him, it's like it's not helping him to be better because he's lacking in an area where you can't actually utilise that trend, that attribute?**
- P: Yeah okay, yeah I get that. But then I guess the other side of that is, that is ... that's a real great asset that he's got and then we need to help ... if we help him right and properly, then that will completely be a, you know, an attribute there [inaudible 0:50:34].
- I: Yeah.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: Do you see any of that within the lower performing players now? Do you see that there's anything that, if you had that bit of help maybe they can go to middle, to the top club, because they haven't got x they can't use y?**
- P: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I would say, probably in all of them, there's a reason they're here, so they're good players, but they might just be a couple of little pieces short of the jigsaw that makes up that player that we might take through to the age group, the next age group. So I think in all of them there's ... you know, there might be one, one or two major areas where we really have to help, but I think in all of them if we could twig things, you know, they'd definitely be going to that medium bracket, and then from there then ... then it is about consistency, then that's how you look at ... that's how I would look at a player, yeah.
- I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So last couple of questions for you, so just on the middle group now, how have you distinguished the line between not being in the bottom and not being in the top?**

- P: That consistency, that word consistency yeah.
- I: **So what ... obviously the guys at the top are very consistent?**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **And the guys in the middle, how are ... and obviously the lower group are not consistent, what are the middle then, are they sort of sometimes consistent?**
- P: So I would say that they ... they're able to affect games and training positively, more often than not.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, but not as often as the top?**
- P: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.
- I: **And do those guys in the middle, do they, do they have all of the abilities required but maybe not an outstanding ability, or maybe not a high level ability?**
- P: I would say that is right apart from one of them, who I think has got an exceptional ability to sort of ... his desire to be the best and to perform at high standards, I would say is very good, so I think he's got a very ... that trait is ... exceptional is quite a big word for it, but I would say that that specific player, yeah, he has one ... that trait that really sets himself above. And actually, interestingly, is one of the first thing people notice, about him, because you can see it in the way he talks, in the way he takes information on board and asks questions, and just acts. So that actually could push him to that higher bracket quite easily.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah, and is there anything that sort of prevents any of those in the middle group from moving up, like what is it they typically lack that stops them from going in the top group?**
- P: See I think, there might be technical issues, I actually think the things that stop, would stop them, would be psychologically, that it might be their belief, it might be their confidence, it might be ... you know, it might be ... I'm just going to put the light on, I just noticed I've gone all dark!
- I: **It's alright, yeah.**

P: Sorry yeah, yeah so I would say it's definitely a psychological thing and it might be, yeah it might be belief, it might be confidence, it might be they're comfortable, it might even be that they don't understand they ... what they ... yeah, they don't completely understand what they need to do to be a more consistently higher performing player. Or even that they recognise that they're not; sometimes we have that as well.

I: **And that psychology seems to be quite a continuous theme in regards to you've said ... you mentioned about this sort of self belief quite often ...**

P: Yeah.

I: **Is that quite a prevalent attribute in your mind of what makes it a successful player?**

P: In ... yeah, in my opinion, yeah absolutely, I think that, that intrinsic motivation, that determination, that self belief, that desire to be better, and certainly to be better than the people that are around you. Yeah, I think that that's ... I would say that's probably, if not the highest one of the highest areas.

I: **And then the last question actually, I just wanted to come back to a comment that you made earlier, when you talked about the high performing group you said one of the players uses their physical attributes to the maximum, do you think that ... slightly putting words in your mouth so feel free to reject it, do you think that the high performing players are able to utilise themselves to the demand of what's in front of them better than say players in the medium or lower, who might utilise their skills well but not necessarily at the right time or in the right environment where it's needed?**

P: Yeah, no I do think that, I think that ... I think the best players in our club, in the premier ... wherever; I think have a real understanding of what they're capable of and how they can best use it at that given moment. Yeah, so yeah, I do think that, yeah.

#### **8.10.18 Participant 18**

I: **Okay, so this is recording now, yeah. So a really easy start to begin with, what's your current job title?**

P: I am Lead Youth Development Phase Coach.



**I: And what category status is the Academy?**

P: Cat 3.

**I: And what league does the first team play in?**

P: Championship.

**I: And how long have you worked in football?**

P: Part-time and full-time or..?

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I have coached in football for thirteen years, prior to that I played semi-pro football for fifteen years, so it must be about twenty-eight years.

**I: A good length of time.**

P: Yeah.

**I: And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Current position is two years.

**I: And then finally which age group are you going to discuss later on?**

P: Under 16s, although we have a sprinkling of under 15s in our under 16s.

**I: No problem, no problem. Okay. So moving into the more interesting stuff, can you give me a brief overview of your background ...**

P: Sure.

**I: ... obviously include your playing experience as well?**

P: Okay. So when I was a boy I was at [football team]'s Centre of Excellence Academy which doesn't exist now because I'm ancient, and I was there from the age of ten until sixteen where I was released for being too small, then grew about a foot, I was a late developer. Went into non-league youth teams and non-league football and ended up playing

conference football for [club name] and [club name] and played a game for the [non-league team name].

And I qualified, I went to university and qualified as a PE teacher so I did a four year PE teaching degree, and then I was a PE teacher for eighteen years, so I was PE teaching and playing football for a fair while.

And then I've worked at four academies, so I've worked at [club name], [club name], [club name] and [club name], all part-time, and I'd got a phone call from [club name], it would've been about four years ago now asking me if I wanted to be Lead FP, so I then went into that, because I thought if I don't do it now I'll never do it.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I gave it a go, and so I've been full-time for four years, and in that time I've been asked to go from Lead FP to Lead YDP, so that's where I am now.

**I: Brilliant. So ...**

P: Oh sorry, I'm a tutor as well, sorry, I tutor Level 1s and Level 2s, or I did until very recently for the [name of county] ...

**I: Is that FA?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah, brilliant. So how would you describe your current role?**

P: So well I'm the Lead 16s coach, so I have that side of it, so obviously with the 16s being a pretty big year in the Academy I have to kind of prepare them for that and then be the bearer of good or bad news, and then help them afterwards whether it's good or bad, so try and get them all a scholarship somewhere and liaise with parents, et cetera, and other clubs.

As well as that I then oversee the 13s, 14s and 15s as well. We're very fortunate, although we're Cat 3 we've got almost Cat 1 staffing levels, so we've got a full-time 13s coach, we did have a full-time 14s coach, he left to become a Manager of a Conference Club, or a National League Club as it is now, and I've got a full-time 15s coach, so there's lots of coaching experience in the phase.

So essentially I manage those guys, although they kind of report to the Head of Coaching, he delegates some work to me in terms of the management of them. I'm responsible for the part-time, we've got part-time assistants in every age group, and at the moment there are two part-time coaches leading and assisting in the 14s, I'm responsible for their appraisal process which I then pass on to the Head of Coaching. So that's pretty much it, chairing MDMs every week, that sort of stuff.

**I: Yeah. So when you're considering player development, do you have personal beliefs or a personal philosophy in how to develop a player?**

P: Well I've certainly learnt over time. When I was part-time in the other clubs I've always been a YDP age group coach, although at [club name] I also doubled up as the 18s assistant, so I did a bit of PDP there.

So I've done a lot of YDP coaching, and I think what I've learnt over time and through making mistakes and seeing clubs I was at making mistakes, is just the phenomenal amount of change that happens to adolescents and therefore the fact that you need to be a bit more patient, and I probably when I first went into coaching looked more on performance and didn't really, didn't kind of get the difference between performance and potential I don't think back in those days if I'm really honest.

So the conversations I tend to have now, particularly with coaches who are less experienced, is just talking around the reasons why a player might be under-performing or not as good as he used to be, as is described quite a lot, and just urging a bit more patience than I've seen in the past, you know, I've seen players who are now professional get released from other clubs I've been at because we, we as a collective deemed them not good enough, when actually they were probably in the middle of their growth spurt.

**I: Yeah. So it sounds like the maturation side of things is quite impactful in your side of things?**

P: Yeah, I think it is in the Youth Development Phase, I think when I was, when I was the Lead FP for me it would've been more about developing them technically, just giving them all of the tools really for trying to encourage as small sided games as possible, 1v1 to 2v2s without rushing to 9v9 and 11v11, which I think does happen in academies.

But coming into the Youth Development Phase it's just a different set of scenarios and you get, I understand that academy football is essentially an elongated trial period because you always only ever have a short contract, and at the end of that contract you need to earn a new contract which is pretty brutal for kids, so it's about, in the Youth Development Phase it's about when we discuss these kids just understanding where they are in terms of their maturation because that might be, particularly at 14s, that is a crucial year for them as well in that, you know, they're at the end of their first YDP registration and whether or not they get a second one, and that's the year group where you can have a two or three year difference in terms of biological ages.

So I'm trying to understand that, I'm certainly not an expert, but by doing courses like the AYA and by having good people at my club I've learnt more, more informed, I'm certainly not an expert though.

**I: Yeah. So do you have expectations on player capabilities when they do progress through different phases?**

P: Yeah, so we call them 'player competency values', and they're probably, they're probably a wish list rather than an expectation.

**I: Okay.**

P: We're in a very different position to, the other clubs I was at were in London, there's four million people in London, there's shedloads of kids, so even if you're [club name] and we were the equivalent of Cat 3 back then on the Centre of Excellence scale, you still had really good players, a number of really good players. At [club name] a hundred and eighty degrees of our recruitment is the sea, so that's wiped out straightaway, then there's the [municipality name] which is massive which is very rural, and then [name of county] itself is very, very rural, so we're really limited in our recruitment, so we have to understand that some of our players are probably not as good as we would hope they would be when they first come in, but you need a squad.

So our competency values are probably we would want everybody to have this, but we understand given the constraints of our location that it's not quite going to be like that, plus [club name] are Cat 1 forty minutes down the road, so in theory you could be losing your best players or they could take the best players in the area anyway.

**I: Yeah, that's quite interesting, I'd not really thought of this idea of, I'm just writing some notes down, the idea of understanding your demographic to then sort of, and maybe have more of a realistic expectation of an outcome, that's quite an interesting point.**

P: Well I think that because, I think because [club name] suddenly went on that run and ended up in the Premier League and we were the, I mean [club name] were Cat 3 at the time, and then [club name] very quickly have gone Cat 2, Cat 1, and we, you know, I know we're not in the Premier League anymore, but we were the only Cat 3 Premier League Club, the ground holds 11,000, you know, we're not a big club, and it's just kind of being realistic.

It's self-awareness really, this is what we are. Can we compete with the likes of Spurs or Fulham or Chelsea? No of course we can't, so let's be realistic and understand where we are and then work from there.

**I: Yeah. No, it makes a lot of sense actually. So the next point I was just going to kind of go through the strategy stuff.**

P: Yeah.

**I: I'll talk about selection/de-selection, and I mean like release/retention as opposed to like for a game, it's more the end of the year contracts.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So in regards to player development plans or the de-section/selection processes, who would be involved in those conversations?**

P: So those conversations would be, the academy manager would be in there, head of coaching would be in there, the lead phase coach would be in there. If it wasn't the 16s we were talking about and the YDP then the lead coach and the assistant coach would be in there, the sports scientist for that age group would be in there. If it's a 16s meeting then the head of sports science as well as the under 16s sports scientist would be in there, we've got kind of phase physios so the phase physio would be in there, education and welfare would be in there, and operations would be taking the minutes. So it's a pretty big meeting.

**I: Yeah, I was going to say it sounds like there's a lot of people involved in that.**

P: Yeah. So the, go on, sorry.

- I:** I was going to ask you, and it's probably what you were going to answer, is actually when you go through these processes how do you determine?
- P:** Yeah, so the lead, basically we produce a profile wheel on the player, so we have generic skills and attributes for every single player all the way through the FP up to 23s, but from 15s up we also do position specific profiles as well.
- I:** Okay, yeah.
- P:** So essentially the lead coach introduces the player, talks through the player wheel, that's very, very good at highlighting strengths and areas of development, so in terms of if you retain them what do they need to improve upon, there's something that can inform future IDPs.
- We will, obviously with 15s and above we'll also then go into the nitty gritty of position specific stuff because as a club we do have positional profiles.
- I:** Yeah.
- P:** And then everybody who wants, oh there's a psychologist as well who'll come in from 16s up for the meetings.
- I:** Okay, yeah.
- P:** So anyone who has something to say is more than welcome to say something about that child, even if it's about their character, if you know them as a person and that's about it, so for example education, they'll talk about how they're doing at school, but they might also talk about how they are at day release.
- I:** Yeah.
- P:** So we discuss them as holistically as we can, and then ultimately if need be it will go to a vote, but generally the vast majority of the retain/release decisions are, by the end of that meeting are pretty unanimous.
- I:** Yeah, I can imagine so. And would they be similar, would that be a similar process when you're going through creating a development plan as well?

P: Yes, yeah it would, because off the back of that meeting the lead coach would get the minutes sent through which essentially gives the areas for development that have been discussed.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Now 15s down, we would encourage the kids to come up with their own IDPs, but obviously if a child doesn't, if a player doesn't come up with something that's glaringly obvious, and it's being discussed by everyone, the coach would have to work that in, and that would be the skill of the coach and how they do that.

I: **Yeah.**

P: With 16s up, I'll openly say, we're different, we will say to the players look, you want a scholarship, we want you to get a scholarship, but this is what you need to improve in.

I: **Yeah.**

P: We will also at 16s and above give them stats, so they would have, again depending on their position, so a winger might have percentage of successful dribbles, percentage of successful crosses, shots taken, shots on target, goals scored, you know, number of shots per goal, et cetera, et cetera, number of regains in your tackle, all these different metrics, so all of that stuff is also made available to us.

I: **That's impressive.**

P: And this is where we're lucky because where we were in the Premier League we got heavily invested in in the Academy, and therefore our staffing levels are, I guess kind of aligned to you guys which is a higher ranking Academy than us but, you know, we certainly know we're very lucky for a Cat 3 to have what we have.

I: **I'm sure you do looking at those stats.**

P: Yeah.

I: **So I know you said about the position stuff comes in at 15 or above, is that right?**

P: 15s, yeah, that's right, yeah.

**I: Is there a reason why it, I mean it's more out of interest, is there a reason why it comes in at 15, is that related to maturation?**

P: Well, yeah, we talked about whether or not it should come in at 13s and 14s, because for a number of players at 13s and 14s by the time they're 13 to 14s we'll be aware of what we think their best position is, but because there is that doubt and because so much might change before 15s, some are micro and extraordinary amount for example, and all of a sudden they might be more suited to somewhere else, you know, we just felt let's stick with generics for 13s and 14s, and I mean even 15s and 16s you can't say hand on heart for certain where every player will end up, you'll know some of them, but you don't know all of them, so it, yeah, we just felt that was the right time to bring it in and to start discussing it.

**I: Yeah. So I'm assuming you're familiar with the FA four corner model?**

P: Yes.

**I: I'd imagine, especially being a tutor. What are your thoughts on the four corner model?**

P: I like the four corner model, but I also wrestle with, I've had, I guess my question is does it actually, is it more of a model that sits on top of psych/social?

**I: Okay, yeah.**

P: So psych/social's kind of the base, and then the other tech/tac and physical kind of come off of that, and I think that if we're truly player centred then possibly it's slightly different to a four corner model and it's a model that's based on psych/social.

**I: So that form of foundation?**

P: Yeah.

**I: What makes you say that?**

P: Just because if you're and, you know, you know as well as I do any academy you go to will tell you they're player centred, but if you're actually player centred then you need to know that person in order to develop them as a person as well as a footballer.

So I think with that in mind, and given the fact that so many respected people in our business will tell you that, yeah, talent will take you so far but character will give you a



career to thirty-five for example, so with that in mind really for me my logic says, and who knows, I'm not saying I'm right, but just logic to me says probably psych/social then becomes the foundation, and once you've got that foundation then you build on top of that.

And I know that [name of sport psychologist] for example who has done some work with our first team and therefore done the odd bit speaking to the Academy coaches, I get he has complete bias being a sport psychologist, but he firmly believes that it is a model based on psych/social with the rest above and, you know, to my, I've got some experience but I'm not an expert in it, but I look at it and I sit back and I think you know what, I think you've probably got something there.

**I: Yeah.**

**P:** I think it's very easy with the four corner model, it's very easy for an academy coach to get carried away with tech/tac, and you can see the physical, but the unseen is the psych and the social, or the more difficult to see, and I think that a lot of less experienced coaches, and certainly speaking from my experience when I first went into coaching, you're thinking about X's and O's and you're noticing size and who can do what, but actually what you're not doing is really focusing on the person.

So I think that's probably the biggest difference in my attitude towards it, and therefore, so yeah, I happily will tutor the four corner model but I personally would probably tweak it a little bit.

**I: Yeah. And I'll say now I guess that there's no right or wrongs in any of this so, you know, go by whatever your belief is.**

**P:** Yeah.

**I: So obviously I know every Cat club, whether it's 3, 2 or 1, will do objective assessments, and it's normally in the physical stuff as the minimum, do you do any other objective assessments?**

**P:** Yeah, so we do 'big five personality' questionnaires with them so that we can get a psych profile, in fact they do from 13s up and that's when our day release starts, and so therefore they'll get a designated psych session within their day release, in a normal non-COVID year, so that's not to say that we don't cater for psych within a normal session, but they get an additional actual this is psych session.

**I: Yeah, I know what you meant.**

P: And she will do I think it's four different tests with them, and then off the back of that she produces essentially a profile sheet on every player that the coach or everyone who works in the Academy gets access to it, we don't advertise it to the players, but it essentially tells you which type of a person they are in terms of there's a colour coding scale.

And what she does that's brilliant on the back, and that's something that I was pushing for, was okay, this data's brilliant but actually break it down to me, I'm not a psychology student, so what are the best things I need to know about this kid and what are the best strategies for helping him off the back of the information that you've got, so there are kind of three top tips for coaching the player on the back.

And there's also, we've also added kind of essential family information so, for example if parents are separated that's something that the coach should know but doesn't always get told, and so we've put all that information on the psych card as well, and so that's one way of kind of looking at them.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Obviously the standard physical tests are always taken as you'd expect. Our head of coaching is also doing a PhD, and his is on genetics, something to do with, I mean way above my cognitive capacity. So with the 16s and above they have swab tests and obviously they have to agree to ...

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: ... take part, but they'll also do, we also do mood scales with the 15s and 16s and above, how they felt before a game. Now what I find interesting is I don't get the results of that until after the game, and so my question's been well surely this information would be useful to me before the game because then I would change how I coached a player. At the moment all it does is it either confirms or just informs me as to why they played how they played, or why they might have played how they played.

So we do stuff like that, and it's not perfect as I've explained but, yeah, we try and do more than just the kind of the physical testing stuff.

**I:** So with that do you find the outcomes typically inform you of what you expect to see in performance, and I guess to give a bit more background is if you're looking at the physical stuff are the faster players always the fastest on the pitch, and I guess also with the psych stuff do they align to how you believe?

**P:** Not always. So we monitor 15s and above with GPS units, and so the day after training we will generally get sent our printout of distance covered, high speed running, accels, decels, number of sprints, sprint speed.

**I:** Yeah.

**P:** Now some of that is excellent because we can set targets, so I might say to the players before training tomorrow these are your individual targets for high speed running today, I want you all to beat them, and they will all be different based on fitness and position I guess of the players that we've got, and they love that, and the sports scientist has a live feed to his phone so halfway through a session they can say to him how much have I done, and he'll tell 'em how many metres they've done, and then they crack on.

But the other one that's really, really good is when we test them for their max speed, obviously throughout the season you want them to set new speeds because then you can say the fitness programme's working, so we will always print out as part of our physical data what percentage of their max speed they hit, and every time they hit a new max speed we will, I have a little thing where we have a circle and we celebrate achievement so it might be playing in the youth team or it might be playing in the first team, that's happened with an under 16 before Christmas ...

**I:** That's brilliant.

**P:** ... or it might be setting a new top speed and we just give everyone a little ripple and then, but it makes them all really competitive with it, so there's that sort of stuff. Is the fastest, I mean we don't get the speeds of the other players ...

**I:** Yeah, of course.

**P:** ... so I could tell you who my fastest player is for pure speed from all of our testing and everything. Is he going to be the fastest player every week, not necessarily because in some games he might only hit 92% of his speed, and the lad who's second or third might hit a new top speed which might be quicker than the speed he ran in a game.

So generally yeah, I have a really good idea of who will be our, who will score the most high speed running - well it's probably going to be one of our full-backs or a centre forward, total distance covered - generally again full-backs and centre mids tend to be kind of the top four.

But, yeah, so yeah, I could give you a rough idea, I couldn't say for certain every time who was going to come first, but it also does inform you of, I had a boy, he's an under 16 now, and when he was a 15 he definitely had a period where he was coasting, and so we were able to use the evidence and go look, you're coming last in everything every week, and all of a sudden lo and behold he's in the top five, and you go well if you can be top five now then you definitely don't ever want to be down the bottom again.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So it's useful from that point of view as well, and you can actually, I put these forms in the parent group so everyone can see them, because all the boys want to see them anyway and know how far they've run, and if the parents are informed ultimately you get less grief down the line anyway, so we've got no problem with telling them all what they hit.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And I guess the other, the interesting metrics are the stats ones which we don't get very often, but funnily enough it was this morning I was giving our stats for up till Christmas.

**I: Yeah, okay, yeah.**

P: And so the individual position ones, you know, I've got a boy who we would say is a fantastic dribbler, he's got great ball manipulation, he drives with the ball really, really well, but up till Christmas his dribbling percentage it was only like a 21% success rate, but his forward passing was ridiculously high, it was like, his forward passing success rate was 87% which is really good given that he plays in the most congested third of the pitch, so that kind of opens your eyes because it makes you realise that you do have biases about players and you, you know, you might see them doing a lot of dribbling in training but it doesn't necessarily mean they're going to do it in a game.

**I: Yeah, that is quite interesting.**

P: I found that very useful because it shows that what I remember isn't necessarily always exactly how it is.

**I: Yeah. Have you ever found yourself looking at certain data, and it doesn't happen all the time, but you might find a player that does exceptionally well in a sprint test, but then you don't necessarily see that in the pitch?**

P: ... I don't think I've ever seen one where someone does exceptionally well in a test and then it doesn't translate, what I would say is, the player I'm thinking of in my head who's one of our top three, he never sets top speeds in matches, but he'll set them in training, and so I look at it and go we've had him for two years in the 15/16s so we've got quite a lot of training sessions and matches under his belt in two years, there must be something in him that makes him either more reserved in matches or he focuses on I've gotta beat my sprint speed in training and therefore runs like the clappers, and I guess there's less pressure in training so that might be the reason why, but yeah, that's something that I've noticed, whether they set new records in matches or not.

**I: What might you think that, like why would that be the reason do you think that somebody might do better in training than in a game?**

P: I think possibly, and I don't know for certain, I'm certainly not an expert, but I think there's less pressure in training, certainly for the player I'm thinking of, he will definitely wind himself up before a game and put himself under pressure to perform which is part of his psych make-up that we need to help him with.

And I think in training you, so at the end of, we follow probably what most clubs do, the sports scientists will take them off for their initial warm up, and then within that initial warm up there will always be some form of race, you know, and it might be a longer one for high speed running or it might be change of direction speed or something like that, but there's some form of race in there, and I think that's probably where the top speeds are set, in that part of it, rather than in the game or the training part of training.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And then obviously you don't have that in a match, in a match you're playing a game and it's you against your opponent, so you're probably, they probably have more opportunities in training to focus on right, this is about me being the fastest I can be.

**I: Yeah. So there's some reason, it's not like they can, they can either not apply it within a game because maybe the constraints of the game don't permit it, or maybe the decisions, I**

**mean I think, I guess one question I'm almost wondering is is it a case that their decision making's not at the level for them to know when to use that speed versus ...**

P: Yeah, it could well be ...

**I: ... you know?**

P: ... it could well be, and, you know, and in my head I keep coming back to this winger, he's one of them in terms of decision making as well where if he's got space in behind the full-back, rather than kicking it long and going and therefore utilising that top speed, he will want to do a skill and a trick to suck the player in to then go, so his speed to beat the player is a short distance bang-bang and I'm off, whereas actually if you went kick it fifteen yards and do you in a solid sprint you're more likely to hit your top speed, and I find that where it's difficult for a coach is who's to say he's going about beating his player in the wrong way, just because I might look at it and go kick it into the space and run, well actually he might draw two men across, make a yard, and cross it for someone else who's got more space who then scores, and if I tell him what to do all the time, or if he just does one thing, well where's his decision making, where's his creativity.

**I: Yeah, I agree.**

P: So we have to let them make their decisions and therefore I guess he, in particular, is going to be less likely to hit new top speeds in these situations than somebody else who's a bit more one-dimensional.

**I: Yeah. So I've got a couple of scenario based questions for you now.**

P: Okay.

**I: If you had a player that was excelling in the foundation phase, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: I don't think it does is the honest answer. I can think of any number of players who were the best performers at 9s and 10s, and by the time they got to 12s they would've been released at the end of the 12s, because they, I mean in many of the cases they're probably Q1, bigger, stronger, quicker, so at the younger ages they really stand out, but not necessarily for technical reasons, probably more for power on a small pitch, and then going to the bigger pitches it doesn't really suit them.

And there's part of me that thinks we need to be better as coaches in understanding right, this is why they're good now but actually what are they going to need when everyone else catches up with them, and so their technical toolbox probably should have been worked on more, but I guess because they were getting a lot of success at 9s and 10s maybe coaches thought well they're doing alright, I don't need to coach them this trick or that trick, or this receiving skill.

But I find at 12s, 13s, 14s, kids who were bossing FP matches suddenly hadn't got a plan B, so it might be they always ran in behind and pressed from the front and won it every time and had a powerful shot, but by the time everyone catches up with them or the pitch is much, much bigger well, you know, he's quicker than you now so how are you going to beat him, which ways are you going to use to beat him, they don't tend to have a plan B.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So unfortunately I don't think it is possible to say with your hand on your heart the ones who excel will always go all the way through. I think it is absolutely possible for someone who's the best at FP to go all the way through, but I think that would probably be a player who is excelling at FP because of how good he is technically, not just a lad at FP who runs around and everyone bounces off him and then scores all the goals.

**I: Yeah, no, definitely. And a similar question now, but the opposite way, if you had a player that they came in the youth phase but they had absolutely no academy background to them before, how would that inform you of their sort of future potential?**

P: At 16s that's the most difficult one to judge, and I find myself really rooting for that player, because they haven't had the privileges that some of these other players have had in training four times a week and playing X number of games against academies.

I think that, I don't think it's impossible for that player to get signed at our club, I think that it probably, if they come in and they perform to a decent level, I'm not saying they have to be the very best player, but if they perform to a decent level, if over the course of the eight weeks that you have them in if you can see them trying to put into action what you're asking them to do by coaching them, then you look at them and you think well the evidence is that he's not a bad learner because I can see him trying to do what I'm asking him to do, that to me would suggest potentially they might have quite a high ceiling.

**I: Yes. So would that give you the idea of, would it inform you of their sort of coaching age or their playing age might then ...?**

P: We always take that into consideration, so when we have a trialist in, at the end of the trial there's always a meeting with the lead phase coach, the lead coach, the assistant coach, if it's the 16 the head of coaching, and the under 18s coach, and the head of recruitment, and the head of recruitment will lead a presentation on the player and say what they think, and then we will all have the opportunity to add to or challenge what's being said before we then democratically make a decision.

**I: Yeah.**

P: I've had one this year who split the room almost in half, not quite, and there were more no's than yes's so unfortunately we didn't offer him anything, but I really liked the fact that everything we challenged him to go away and do he was trying to do it, you could see in the way that he played in terms of if he was under pressure, so he's a left sided player, so if he was under pressure at left-back with someone coming flying into him he would try and whack it long down the line.

Now I would completely understand why he would do that from the lack of academy training that he's had, probably in grassroots he's always been told if in doubt just clear it, so I think you have to look at it and go well that's where he's come from, that's what he's been brought up with, is there a way that we can try and get him to recognise that situation and then do something different.

And I felt that over the course of the eight weeks with this one player we were starting to see some progress, but unfortunately not everybody else felt that they saw enough to suggest that we should give him a two year scholarship, but there's an example of someone who came close in the 16s.

**I: So that training age almost informs you of their potential as opposed to their current performance?**

P: Yeah, I think so, I think yes you can judge their current performance, but I think you have to take into consideration as well that training age. We do lots of rondos as a rival activity, now I'm sure it's the same at your club, if the trialist comes in and they've only ever had a



grassroots background they have no clue what they're doing in a rondo, a rondo is just, you know, they are all over the place, but by the end of the eight weeks they'll have done ...

**I: Yeah, they're better.**

P: ... three or four rondos a week for eight weeks, and so I think if you can see a significant improvement in that situation that might indicate actually this is someone who's adapted really, really well and that must be a positive.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I think that the rondo for me is always the biggest highlight of, you know, it shows it up the most the lack of the training.

**I: It's like a subtle test almost.**

P: Yes, yes, almost, yeah, and it's always the first thing they do as well, so the poor things, they turn in and they're straight into a 4v2 or a 5v3 and go on then, deal with that son, bang.

**I: Yeah. So I know you've spoken about this a few times, and how does maturation impact your decisions when it comes to both development or selection?**

P: Yeah, so we do a bit of bio-banding, I say a bit of bio-banding because it tends to be in the school holidays so every six to eight weeks, and we try and use the bio-banding to inform decision making because, as discussed earlier, you could be a plus matured player who gets loads of success, and equally you might be an under matured player who's really nice technically but you'd get brushed off the ball all the time because you're just small, and so hopefully with the bio-banding it levels the playing field, and it shows you with those bigger players okay what else have they got because they can't rely on their size in the bio-banding as much, and the smaller players well you haven't got such a physical challenge this week so, you know, go and express yourself, so we definitely use the bio-banding weeks when we make decisions, and also in MDMs when we're just talking about general progression.

And then what we've ended up doing, Rich, is quite often in a week there'll be one session a week where for example in the 15s, the plus matured 15s will train with the 16s once a week so that you kind of take the physical element away and go well go on, have a real stretch this week, and that happens all the way through in the YDP.

I can think of a very big under 13 that we have who's a really nice player as well, and he really does need a stretch so he trains with the 14s. If we were in a normal year they'd have three sessions a week and he would train up twice, and then, you know, there's also scope for these guys to play in the matches on a Sunday or on a Saturday with the 16s, but again obviously the 16s themselves need priority at the moment so ...

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: ... a 15 would only play up if there was a spot available because generally at the start of the season I would need to give priority to the 16s, but in those other younger ages we will try and get a couple up or even, we call it across, playing across rather than up and down because of the negative connotation of being told you're playing down this week, but actually once, and you never get full buy in because there will always be that parent who says you're demoting my son, oh my god he's going to get released, but generally I think we've got enough, certainly in the two years I've been in the YDP I've seen enough evidence of kids who have played in the age group below and still got that registration for the next two years where we can turn round to the younger ones and go well X, Y and Z did what you're doing now and they're still here, so if you can point out some role models then ...

**I: It definitely helps sell it doesn't it?**

P: ... it would be powerful, but I think it will always be a difficult sell.

**I: Yeah. Okay, so I'm moving on to the last part now, so now is when you'll need your team sheet.**

P: Okay.

**I: All I need you to do, and there's a couple of things, the first thing I need you to do is put a letter H next to any of the players that you would consider to be a high performer of the group.**

P: High performer.

**I: And that would be for the whole group, so not just your starting 11, that would be everyone in the age group.**

P: Yeah. So I've listed sixteen because usually I'd have sixteen in training and, of those sixteen, five are under 15s.

**I: That's fine, yeah, that's fine.**

P: ... I've got five H's.

**I: Five H's, okay. So the same thing, but you're going to put L next to those that you consider to be the lower performers of the group.**

P: ... I've got four.

**I: And then anyone who hasn't got an H or an L they would be considered to be mid-performers.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So with the knowledge of those groupings, obviously you're welcome to make any additional changes now.**

P: Yeah.

**I: And then all I need to know is how many you've got in each group.**

P: Okay. One, two, three ... one, two, three ... I've got five H's.

**I: Yeah.**

P: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven M's.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And four L's.

**I: Okay, brilliant. So the first question then, how did you determine who was in what group?**

P: By their performances. So I was going to say of the four L's two of them are under 15s, and we would consider them to be two of our better under 15s but they're having a massive stretch, and so if you take them on under 16s standards of performance they would be lower performers.

**I: Yeah.**

P: But I think there are very clear reasons as to why those two are L's.

**I: Okay.**

P: The other two L's are players who unfortunately are not performing brilliantly, and don't have particularly high ceilings in our opinion and are not going to get scholarships, so they're training with us while they look for other opportunities.

**I: Yeah. So how would you define the ones at the top?**

P: The ones at the top are, I would say they're consistently the best performers and are the ones who are playing sufficiently well, that if I was asked could they play in the under 18s, or be in the under 18s squad, I would say yes, and I wouldn't worry that the under 18s coach would say what are you giving me here.

**I: Yeah, I get what you're saying there. So it's almost like consistency defines the groupings?**

P: Probably, because it's on performance, I wouldn't say all of the five are my long term best players ...

**I: Yeah, but right now they are.**

P: ... I would say I've got three, I've got four in the M's who might end up being the four best players in the group long term.

**I: Yeah. So if you were looking at them as a potential, those groupings could actually be quite different?**

P: Definitely, yeah, definitely.

**I: And just out of curiosity, I know you said about the two 15s in the L, if they were in their own age group where do you reckon you would've put them?**

P: They would probably be H, they'd be H's in their own group, so these two both, one of them trains with me once a week and then if I've got injuries he'll sit on the bench, but I have, he's a defender and I have five/six defenders who are under 16 so I have to prioritise them, but he's plus matured and so when he plays in his own age group he looks like a superstar, and he knows it, so he's one, and it's interesting, he has found it really difficult psychologically dealing with the bigger stronger players in the 16s, so I hope the bump in the road that we've given him has been a useful bump and that in a year's time he'll be really flying.

And then the other one, very plus maturated, looks like a twenty-four year old, so he came in as an under 14 from grassroots and had never had any academy background so he still has quite a low, he's got a year and a bit academy background, and therefore if we do anything half complicated cognitively I see him go oh my god, panic mode, and I feel with him he worries too much about is he up to the standard rather than just go and play.

And so he's one who we will regularly say do we need to put him in the 15s but, knowing him, will we kill him if we put him back in the 15s because then he'll think they don't rate me, so it's a really difficult balance, and I can't hand on heart tell you that we've got it right, Rich, but he basically under-performs when he's with the 16s.

Now I've seen him play, when we play Cat 1's like [team name] in the 15s we would put our best 15s squad together, so the lads who train with me would play with the 15s, I've seen him smash [team name]'s back four all over the place and they were really good, so it's one of those where you have to keep, he's basically a metaphorical arm around player.

**I: Yeah.**

P: But, yeah, so he's a lower performer, I actually think he's got the potential to be a middle of the group kid this year, and then next year I hope he'll be a consistent high performer in his own age.

**I: And then since your time working with the 16s obviously now, well with those 15s as well, would they have always been in the same groups or might they have been, you know, would a medium have been higher or a higher been a medium?**

P: So one of them who I'm thinking of who plays full-back he would have definitely been medium for three years, he's an interesting story, and talking about whether or not we know player's positions, he was always seen as a central midfielder or a 10, very technical, came from a futsal background, so automatically oh you must be creative, we'll put you in [00:53:28 inaudible] and then in the second game of this season our right-back got injured and our sub right-back got injured in the same game, you're very fit, you go there, so he went there and he was outstanding and we've kept him there and he's got a scholarship as a full-back.

**I: Brilliant.**

- P: And he's been, so we stumbled across potentially his best position, but he has performed outstandingly, whereas he was okay, he was alright as midfielder, he was good, you know, a nice range of passing, could be creative but didn't affect every game he played in, and I look at him at right-back and think bloody hell, you look our best player every week.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: But, you know, by pure luck we stumbled across, at the moment, the best position for him.
- I: **Yeah, that's quite an interesting one.**
- P: And he was definitely a medium. The other H's have always been H's interestingly through, one of them's been with us since he was six and has always been ...
- I: **Yeah, okay, a long time.**
- P: ... an H, but the other three all joined us in the YDP at either 13s, 14s or 15s, and have come in and been excellent since they came in.
- I: **Yeah. And would those groupings, I kind of, it may be excluding the 15s from the lower, would they represent your likeliness to release and retain, so the lower's been released and the higher's been retained? Obviously the middle would then be sometimes that you might do both but.**
- P: Yes, I would agree with that. The highers have all got scholarships, and I think that as well as being excellent performers I think they have high ceilings as well for different reasons, so I don't think it's just a case of they're the best performers under 16, I think there's a number of reasons including performance.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: In terms of the middle ones ... yeah, four of them, as I said four of them might be the best, potentially the best in the group, so I think there's four, there's four who will probably, I mean I can't, it's not my decision so I would be amazed if four of them didn't get scholars, there are two of, yeah, the other three are question marks, I could see why we would give them scholarships potential-wise, in fact probably two of them I think unanimously everyone would say their potential's quite high so they could get them as well.

There's one who splits the room, but I have a bias towards him, I think he's a brilliant character and I think he works really hard at his game, and he's middle of the group technically, he's alright, he's middle of the group, and he's middle of the group physically, and therefore the under 18s staff will say yeah but we're trying to raise the bar and middle of the group doesn't raise the bar, so although he's a really good kid ...

**I: Is it enough.**

P: ... is it enough? Now he's an interesting one because he's literally out of his growth spurt by about three months, so he was a late developer, late maturer, I look at that and go well I don't think it hurts to have him around, if we know he's a great character I would give him that opportunity, but that might say more about me being soft than anything else. So, yeah, I suspect if I'm honest I think he might struggle to get a scholarship, but I think the other guys have a strong chance of getting one because I think they have high ...

**I: Yeah. So now, if you just look at the high performing group only, is there anything that's consistent amongst the group that places them in the high performing group?**

P: ... Well it's not birth quartile, because I'm just going through, there's only one that's, two of them are Q1, one's Q2, and two are Q3, so it's not that, because initially I thought oh I wonder if it's birth quartile ... two of them were early maturers, three of them were on time.

**I: Okay.**

P: ... I can't see anything that's consistent through all of them, other than I think they're all, what's a good learner, I think they all demonstrate the ability to show that they are trying to put into practice what you ask them to do, so it might not be successful every time but you can see the intent, and I think that that cognitive ability to understand what's being asked, demanded, cajoled of them, I think that's, I think being a good learner is a marker of potential so I would say that.

Do they always do it though, no, you know, there's a lot of failure in football isn't there because if you don't make things challenging then they're not learning, so it's not that they're always successful, I'll tell you what they are, they're all psychologically extremely determined, so that's definitely, as characters I would say every single one of those five wants to be the best and wants to be the best version of them every time.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And I guess that, in a way, that might be my confirmation bias, but that comes back to my psycho/social being the base and everything else going on top, they are rock solid psychologically in my opinion.

They don't all have the same colours on the four, I can't remember the name of the scheme that [name] gave us, but they don't all have the same colour.

**I: I know what you're saying though.**

P: So slightly different personalities, but their psychology is I will always do my best and I want to get better, and you can very clearly see that in everything they do and every conversation you have with them.

**I: Yeah. Is there anything that, I'm imaging that there's going to be a unique trace about all of them, is there anything that they are outstanding at which is unique to the player?**

P: ... Unique to the player. There's two of 'em that are outstanding communicators which you don't, I don't think you normally get that at 16s in academy football, there are two of them who are like you could go to a semi-professional men's match and listen to the chat and it's like those two, and it's the way they give their information as well, it is very, very authoritative and clear and early and decisive, and even if it's the wrong information like that's what he wanted in that moment and then you can always talk to 'em about it afterwards, but you understand it and that stands out, but there are two of them so it's not unique to either one of them.

**I: No, sorry, I mean I guess it's like does each one of the players have something unique about them, but it might be the same as another player as well though, I guess it's more so the outstanding quality?**

P: ... There's one boy who we have a very high regard for, we're a high pressing team, you know, if you lose the ball win it back as quickly as possible, so reaction press we call it, and obviously some people call it counter pressing, he has an unbelievable work rate on and off the ball, and you can always see that (a) he wants the ball when we're in possession but (b) he wants to win it back, his first step will always be towards the ball when we give the ball away, whereas some players might step back he will step to the ball.

Now we would try and encourage that in all our outfield players, I would say he gives you that every single time in every training session and every game whoever he plays for,



whether it's the 16s, the 17s or the 18s, he even has been in a training session making up numbers with the 21s, and the 21s coach loves him because of that, so that's probably unique to him, just that, that desire to get on the ball and win it back in equal measure.

**I: It sounds like a lot of self-confidence within his own abilities as well.**

P: Yeah, and what I love about him, and probably the reason I have a bias towards him, is nothing ever fazes him, he's not big headed, he must know, he must know he's one of the best performers in the group and yet he never ever gives it the big one or tosses off a session or anything like that, if he's selected for the 18s he's buzzing and he's great, if he's not selected for the 18s because they've got enough players he is delighted to be playing for the 16s, like nothing fazes him, so he's just a rock solid character, and it's no surprise that if you ask, we have a captaincy programme where everybody gets a captaincy for two weeks, and it goes on a cycle because we want them all to have leadership skills, let's try and develop them.

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: If you asked them all if we had a game tomorrow that we had to win life or death who would be your captain, I would put my money that they would all back [name of player] to be the captain.

**I: Yeah. So is there anything within the same players if you took away an attribute they'd still be the same player, or do they require all their attributes to be a high performer?**

P: ... I don't think they need all of the attributes to be a high performer, but I think if you took away something around being a good learner or character I think that would have a massive negative impact.

So one of 'em's a goalkeeper and he came to us from a club where he was always just encouraged to smash long, and if it was dangerous in and around the box he would clear his lines, and we're talking a kid who plays national level, he plays for [country] under 17s, so he plays a year up for [country] and he got released by his Cat 1 club, and he came to us and we don't do that, we're very big on you play your way out, so if you go long you're going long to a player or in front of a player but it's not aimless, and he struggled to get used to playing out from the back with short passes, playing to the first line, playing to the second line, so

he's got everything else that we really, really like and he's a high performer, but he still has his struggles technically.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So yes you can take, you know, he's not the best technically and yet he's still a real high performer because he tries, he understands what we're trying to do, he just can't always do it, he's getting there, and with two years and a full-time programme I'm sure he'll be really, really, good with his attitude by the time he gets to an under 18, but it's noticeable, you can see the goalies who have been in our system for years and then you see him come in and it is very different.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So, yeah, with some attributes they could be taken away but a player could still be a high performer, I mean he's still an outstanding shot stopper, he still organises everyone around him brilliantly, he will sweep up behind us when we're wrestling in their third, all that sort of stuff, so there's enough really good stuff.

And I think the important thing is these kids are all fifteen or sixteen, so they're not going to have, our profile wheels are colour coded so if they, we score them one to seven, and a seven would be outstanding for their age group in this attribute across all academies, so it is subjective ...

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: ... but it's a good starting point. Now we don't have any player who has sevens across the board on their generics, it doesn't happen, you might get two or three, but we're a Cat 3 academy, the kids are only fifteen or sixteen, there's no way they're going to be, if it's seven out of seven across the board the coach is deluded.

**I: Yeah, I know what you're saying.**

P: What's interesting though is we asked the players to grade themselves and that was very revealing, like some of them have a massively high opinion of themselves, generally the middle performers have a really high opinion of themselves ...

**I: Oh really?**

P: ... like significantly higher than our kind of, and it is, the opinion is of about five or six people and then you take the average of our numbers and that's your thing. Now we don't show the players what we've given them, but we'll put them up on the board and then we'll put their one up to compare and, you know, you've got some where we've got lots of red and amber in there and they're all green, the other way around, and I guess that's also a marker that says they haven't quite got that self-awareness yet.

I: **Yeah. I'll share something at the end after the interview because my previous research sort of touched on bits of that.**

**Let's talk about the lower performers now, it will be similar sort of questions, is there anything that's sort of a theme amongst them that makes them in the lower performers?**

P: They are not as technically gifted as the rest.

I: **Okay.**

P: So I would say, interestingly three of the four are defenders and one is a striker, but I would say you would notice them receiving the ball under pressure differently to how the rest of the group would.

I: **Yeah. Is that decisions or is that just ability to receive the ball?**

P: I think it's probably a bit of both, so there's one who is significantly worse than the others, and his decision making is dreadful. Now his pre-frontal cortex might not be fully developed till he's twenty-three, twenty-four or twenty-five, so I think if it was just decision making I would hope that we would be informed enough that we could give him some leeway and give him time, but it's not just his decision making, it's body shape, it's the pass is coming from the left, the attacker's coming from the right, you're a centre-back so you can always see where a man's coming from and yet you decide to take your touch towards the man that's running at you, and then it's touch tackle.

Now part of that might be decision making, but part of that is also just take your touch that way and play the next pass, and if you give the ball away we'll always just say get back in credit, hopefully to try and build their confidence back up. I would say he's very, very poor at getting back in credit as well, like the weight of a pass is, I think we would always encourage the players, we'd say every, there needs to be a thought behind every pass, and so your pass might not come off but if we can understand what you were trying to do then

we've got a start point that we can work from, and also kind of, especially in the final third where it's really congested, if you don't try things you won't necessarily break a team down.

So I have no problem with players not having 100% pass success, but this lad like he might have a seven yard forward pass, he will smash it when he should drop it short, he will play it to the right foot when he should play it to the left foot, just there's so much that's, or he might just put it in an area that's near that person but not to them, there's so much to work on with this lad.

**I: Yeah, his game intelligence is effectively lacking.**

P: Yeah, there's not a lot of game intelligence there, and it's almost like you want them to, in an ideal world when they play on a Saturday you as a coach shouldn't say anything because that's your, we've done your bit in training, now you go show us, he needs regular prompting, it might be [name] get up because everybody else is up and he's fifteen yards back and not recognising that he's fifteen yards behind everyone.

It might simply be, you know, we might be playing 4-4-2, and they might be playing two upfront, so we would ask one of our centre mids to drop back to make 3v2, and if they don't I would expect my defenders to encourage the midfielders to do it, well he'll never do that because he won't recognise they're playing with two up.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So I think there's all sorts going on there that I don't think all of that can be explained by the pre-frontal cortex not being fully developed.

**I: Yeah, no, I completely get you there. Is there anything that's unique amongst the lower performing players as well that they might do well but it might actually not affect their game?**

P: So to come back to this centre-back, he's six foot six ...

**I: Okay, so physically he's there.**

P: ... and he's still growing ...

**I: Yeah, wow.**

P: ... and I just think he's going to be too big to be a centre, I think he should be a rower [01:15:39 inaudible] are unbelievable, so he has stayed in the system because he fits the profile, and I think that almost makes him a project, a gamble, because I think it's safe to say we've been aware for quite some time that technically he's very limited, but we had under the previous manager a height profile for a centre-back which is quite difficult for the average person to attain because it was big, and he fit the profile so he stayed in the system, I don't think fitting the profile is enough to warrant going through if you don't have other attributes, and if you're not strong in terms of being a learner or, I don't even think he's particularly determined as a boy, I think he turns up, he plays, and off he goes, and I love the fact that he enjoys football, I would never want a player to leave the Academy and drop out of football, I would hope that there's a love for the game there, but I don't even sense there's massive desire to be a pro, he's just there, do you know what I mean, he's one of them.

I: **Yeah.**

P: How are you doing, yeah I'm okay, just everything's okay, and I don't think that being tall is enough to make it all the way and become a professional footballer in the game.

I: **Is there anything else in the other players that they might do really well but it doesn't actually impact their performance?**

P: Yeah, so we've got a boy who, he was a centre-back but he's only going to be five foot ten, so we tried to play him right-back for the last year and a half, unbelievable athlete, unbelievable, so county sprinter, brilliant, can run up and down all day, so in terms of physically he fits the model for our type of pass and move, wide play combinations, overlapping/underlapping full-backs, fits that completely, he loves defending, so 1v1 defending absolutely lives for it, hates being beaten by a forward, so huge pluses.

First touch is terrible, passing is hit and miss. I reckon, well we got stats today and his total passing completion was 70% and his forward passing completion was about 60% I think, but to put it into context the players in his position in the youth team who admittedly have had a year or two years of extra full-time training were hitting ninety something per cent for their general passing stats, and at least 85% for their forward passing stats, so there's a massive, massive difference.

And added to that he has had any number of, I can't tell you how many sessions where for twenty minutes at the end there's been individual work and he's had, receiving on his back foot as the fall-back, and then you've got that pass, that pass or that pass towards the goal, so like repetition, repetition, repetition ...

**I: And he's still not getting it.**

P: ... and then you play a game and the touch is still terrible and therefore the pass is rushed and it doesn't always get there.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So he has outstanding physical and desire to defend, really like unbelievable desire to defend, but unfortunately he is not going to be good enough to play the way that the club wants to play.

**I: So it's almost like there's a minimal threshold of certain abilities and he doesn't fulfil those minimal thresholds in at least one area.**

P: Yeah, well I would've said with him if he fulfilled the minimum of technical he'd have got a scholarship, and I think, I honestly think on our Cat 3 circuit he'd walk into most of the teams that we play every week, so I'm very confident that he can get a scholarship, unfortunately it just won't be with us.

**I: Yeah. So the last group, the last few questions as well actually, so with the mid-performing group, how have you distinguished a line between not being in the top and not being in the lower groups?**

P: ... It was quite difficult. So I've got three players who I seriously considered for the top group, one of them is a striker who was almost released, so not quite a late developer but as late an on time developer as you could be before you're a late developer, not particularly quick but unbelievably quick up here, the most creative kid we have, the best finisher by a mile, has a range of finishing that is phenomenal, his finishing stats are the best in the club from 15s up by a million, million miles, he's scoring a goal every 1.6 shots, he's deadly, he's got thirteen goals already this season and six assists, and yet there's massive question marks over him because physically he doesn't get that many regains, and he's not that quick, and we play a press from the front game where obviously the two upfront set the tone.

Now I would still argue, for somebody whose stats are that good performance-wise he has to be there or thereabouts the high performers, and probably the fact that he's significantly worse out of possession than he is in possession I opted for middle of the group, he's definitely up towards the top of the middle of the group, so he does impact matches and he does perform pretty well, so yeah, he was one.

We've got another, the winger I was talking about earlier on who, I think his ceiling might be really high, I think he's got ball manipulation and skill that nobody else has got in our group, he's different, but because he's different, and again because I think he might be one for the game rather than for our club, and I think that maybe, maybe what's separated what I call the highest from those two is the fact that the highest, not only do they perform consistently well week in week out, but they do everything that the club wants them to do, in and out of possession, and I think that these two middle ones probably out of possession don't quite do what we would want. Now that might suit another club perfectly.

**I: Yeah, so could be a higher at another group's philosophy.**

P: Definitely. And then the other one is an under 15, and if I probably did it by the age that they are and made everything equal, he would be a high one, but because he's a 15 sometimes he gets beaten physically, particularly as an under 15 centre-back playing under 16 football, sometimes he gives the ball away because the game is quicker than he's, certainly earlier in the season the game's quicker than he was used to, so I've gone middle for him but he probably ...

**I: Probably higher in his group.**

P: ... certainly in his own group would be high. Yeah, they would be the three for me who you could consider to be high performers at the moment.

**I: And then the next question, is there a couple of things that typically prevent them from being in the top group?**

P: The middle achievers?

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, I think for four of them it's, one, two, three, yeah, probably for six of the seven it's probably that they're significantly better in or out of possession, but they're not quite as

good in the other one in the way that they perform at the moment, it doesn't mean down the line they won't be better, but they're not quite as consistent across the board, and for me performance is in and out of possession, not just one.

And then the exception to that would be this under 15 who I guess is probably just getting used to playing under 16 football. If this was a normal season and he'd been with me since July probably by now he'd be very used to it, but he obviously hasn't trained with us since December and isn't allowed to train again until schools go back, so he'll be playing catch up again for a second time in the season.

**I: Yeah. And then the last question, would you say, and I don't want to put words in your mouth so I'm trying to think of a way to word it, the top performing players are they better at recognising and maximising their own abilities given the situation presented in front of them, i.e. they play the game that's required of them per match as opposed to playing their strengths even when it doesn't make the match required?**

**P:** Good question. ... I don't know, I don't know. See I'm thinking of the lad who scored all the goals, you score loads a year ago, you score loads of goals in training, you don't score many goals in matches, you need to score more goals, he's our top scorer, you don't win the ball back enough, you need to be better out of possession, week in week out I find myself in training saying great win back over and over again, so there's progress, it's still not necessarily as good as the very best but I think he's definitely shown if you tell me what you want me to get better at I will get better at it.

Now he's not one of the high achievers so I don't think it's necessarily, I don't think it is just the high achievers that have that, I think he has shown as well as anybody has this season that he's willing to do what it takes to try and earn a scholarship.

What I will say of all the others is they're very aware of what they need to do to improve, they're very aware of what their strengths are, and consistently week in week out you can see them trying to get better across the board.

Now they're fifteen/sixteen, they're going to have crap matches along the way and, you know, my job as a coach is to make sure that they get failure as well, so sometimes, you know, so the boy I spoke about, the midfielder who's just an unbelievable character, he will quite often at the moment play under-loaded and find that I'm giving really dodgy decisions



against his team because I'm trying to find ways of putting bumps in the road for him because otherwise it's too easy.

**I: Yeah, of course, yeah.**

P: But can I hand on heart say that kid knows himself, knows his strengths and weaknesses, wants to do everything he can, yeah, definitely he is that, so I think he does have that. I think probably all of them have good self-awareness good and bad, but I can also look at the middle group and go yeah he does as well, he's just not quite as consistent with it, he definitely does, not sure about one or two, so yeah, I don't think it's just the high achievers, but they all have it.

**I: Yeah, just the consistency's more in the top ones.**

P: Yeah, but also that honesty of I need to improve this. So one of our, and he has to be a high achiever, he's played in the championship this season at sixteen years and twelve days which is unbelievable for us, his finishing's really average, really average, nigh on terrible for someone who's played in the championship as a winger, so he knows, and he's very honest, he wants to work on his finishing as much as possible because he wants to get better at it, and I love that, as much as it frustrates me when he misses the target I love that he wants to do as much shooting as he can because he wants to improve it, and he's only just sixteen, so by the time he's twenty-six, you know, he might be an unbelievable finisher.

#### **8.10.19 Participant 19**

**I: So to start at the beginning, what is your current job title?**

P: Youth development phase league coach, [club].

**I: And what academy category status is that?**

P: That's category one.

**I: And league does your first team play in?**

P: Championship.

**I: And how long have you worked in football?**

P: 13 years.

**I: Okay and how long is that in your current position?**

P: This time, since I've been here at [club], well, I've been here for four, in this position for two years officially, and then the club before that I was involved for three years.

**I: Okay and which age group will you be discussing later on?**

P: 14's.

**I: Brilliant. So a bit more interesting stuff for you now I guess, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah so I was ... I guess I was bred into the game, my stepdad was an academy manager for nearly 30 years so, not that I didn't have a choice but I was ... yeah, I was kind of growing up in changing rooms, first team environment, because he was also assistant manager and first team coach so. Yeah so I played football, I was playing at [club], [club], in youth academies, and then went over to America for six years, pursued college football, but I didn't get a pro, and then ended up playing in the [championship] just for a year before I ended up retiring with injury ... that's alright, I was fed up with it anyway to be honest! I couldn't think of anything worse than playing a game of football. And then yeah, throughout that time I was always coaching, whether it be camps, whether it was my own individual sessions, private coaching, teams, clubs, because it was always something I knew I wanted to get into and I was interested in. My first coaching job was actually when I was 17 and 18 at the [club] in Northampton, so I was taking the 9's, assisting with 16's as well, during an injury, so it was ... yeah, I've always been in coaching, then moved back from America to go to [club], from [club] I went to [club]. Yeah, and that's where we are today.

**I: Brilliant, and how would you describe your current role?**

P: So it's basically overseeing the development of the players within those age groups, overseeing recruitment, organisation logistics, managing staff and support staff within those age groups, all in view to obviously optimise the development of the individuals.

**I: Do you have personal philosophies or beliefs towards player development as well?**

P: I do, I think it's hard to put into I guess a phrase, but I'm very, I guess in terms of my coaching, very process and character building driven.

**I: Okay.**

**P:** As opposed to necessarily technical execution. So for me it's really important ... this is more for these age groups in particular, that the player's intent is correct, and I think a lot of technique is built prior to them getting to me, and it's about them using those techniques in the correct context. So some will be technically slightly behind but I imagine hopefully they'll catch up, for me it's really important that they've got the right process of what they're trying to do, and what they're trying to do it, and then in terms of character building as well, there's obviously ... you're going from like a very emotional brain to a bit more regulation but it's obviously a lot of hormones kicking around. So I think there's a lot of room to build and shape the character that they will be one day, when they're a teenager, particularly around peers, so if you're influencing peers it can influence each individual. So I think there's a lot of room there for character skill building.

**I: And just to tag onto that I guess, what is it that makes, in your belief, the character building such an important aspect?**

**P:** Because I think that talent gets you so far, being very good at anything in any industry gets you so far but it's how you act and behave that keeps you in that industry for much longer, at the highest level. That seems to be the very ... like the main key difference, through my time in football. So it's often people always say the players that are at their first, the players that are behind, the ones that are doing extras, the ones that give absolute everything are always the ones that make it. So if that's the common thread and the common theme through football then we should be developing those characters and those ... that attitude and behaviours from an early age.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. And do you have expectations, and this is general wider so it can be, you know, more holistically, do you have any expectations on player capabilities when you're thinking of future success?**

**P:** No, I think every individual, they are who they are, and all you can do is optimise their individual development, every player has their own different needs and their own ceiling of where they can possibly get to. If they're in the building then I've got a responsibility to support and help them maximise what their potential is, not to decide what that max ... like, what that looks like. That's down to them. So whether they become professional footballers or not, whether they go into our first team, whether they go to a different club, whether

they play at high level, that's really down to them, all I can do is help support and I guess guide them to where their potential might lead them.

**I: So is that almost the idea of not shoe boxing a player?**

P: Absolutely.

**I: Mm, okay. You're one of the first people that's said that, so that's good to hear!**

P: Yeah? Good.

**I: So moving onto the next part now, which is some more around strategies but it's nothing crazy, you'll understand as we get there. When we get ... when I mention selection, like I said, it's more about retention release, so sort of end of season stuff, I appreciate at the 14's it's probably ... I don't know how it works in your club but from all the clubs I've spoken to [inaudible 0:06:04] is less likely at 14's, so just think of it hypothetically in that instance instead. You can obviously consider the 16's, if you wanted to, but yeah, so it depends how you want to work it. So in regards to development plans or deselection selection, who would be involved in such sort of decision making processes?**

P: So it would be obviously myself, head of coaching and head of recruitment.

**I: Yep, yeah. Do you bring into wider ... do you ... like sport science or externals?**

P: Yeah so support staff would I guess collect the data and evidence behind the decision, so it doesn't become subjective. So you'd obviously have your sport science that would do report for on the, I guess physical capability now and what it could possibly be, which is obviously hard to read and judge but you get I guess a general idea. You get ... we've obviously got player care department with us, we've got psych department, education department, so you all meet together in a multidisciplinary and people share their ... not judgement of whether they should be signed or not, but just the, again, objective data of how they're performing in that particular field, so we can collate all of that information, make an informed decision on whether we feel they've got I guess potential to be in our first team or not one day.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and is that a similar process that you ... do you go for a similar process when you sort of go through development programmes, versus a deselection?**

P: Yeah, exactly the same, it's no different, all you do is make a decision one way or the other, so particularly with analysis and data collection as well, I guess I didn't mention that before

but it completely informs your decision. So you do have ... there is always going to be some subjective nature because numbers are numbers and you know, if people aren't performing as well in education but are outstanding on the football pitch, you're not going to say no because they're not doing as well in education. So I think it just builds a bit more of a more holistic picture, but ultimately it's the human being that has to say yes or no in the end.

**I: And when you are going through like a deselection and selection process how do you determine who goes ... who gets selected, who doesn't get selected?**

P: First of all it would be pathways, so dependent on what is above a player, what is below a player, not blocking an individual pathway to the first team, and that comes in with recruitment as well, we're now at a stage where you just don't know what happens with a player, he might be the best one year and then the next year it could be something that happens within their life that just determine whether they'll be able to hit the heights that you might thought they could reach or not. So we're lucky enough in a category one academy to be able to recruit players of high quality for every position, to the exact requirement of what we feel we need, how we play. So I mean the 14's is a particular age where now it's we recruit the best players for each position we possibly can, and that means buying out nationally and spending money, so [inaudible 0:09:15] that's okay. But yeah, in terms of the actual whether we select and deselect, it depends, it depends on the individual. So you may have players that are ... there's so many dependencies, they could ... obviously through I guess relative age [inaudible 0:09:29], you've got your fourth quarters, first quarters, you're taking that into consideration, you're looking at what they can do now, what they could possibly do later, you're looking at comparisons from players that have previously been in a similar situation, maybe five, six years ago, or current first team players, you look at their data from where they were the same age and they might be of similar physical stature for example and you say well actually no, look the stats are very similar and the data is the same, maybe it's worth taking a punt and continuing with this player. So there's a lot of things that come into it.

**I: And is that ... is that ... I'm assuming that interlinks with the development plan again, so it's almost like you consider those processes and they get ... they get interacting, what to do with a player versus how to select a player?**

P: So the ... I guess we build our development plans slightly different, so ours, there's a lot of player empowerment.

**I: Okay.**

P: So particularly at these ages. So another I guess key part is that, for me, real success would be that I become redundant.

**I: Yeah! Yeah.**

P: So I become wanted not needed. So it's trying to get the players to have more responsibility and accountability for their own learning, because I guess if you look nowadays they've got everything they need to be a professional footballer, incredible ... well for us particularly, incredible facilities, support staff coming out of their ears, video analysis they can use, there's things all over the internet, they're watching some of the best players in the world, such easy access to watch football games now. So they've got everything they need if they really want to make it, we're just there to facilitate and provide those opportunities I guess. So ... sorry I kind of lost track of what I was saying there but ...

**I: In development plans you were saying it's quite ...**

P: Yeah sorry, yeah, yeah, brilliant. So we sit down together, there's some key competencies that they kind of grade themselves against that we think are positional requirements, and they'll grade themselves and then we'll come together and we'll discuss what they I guess assessed as areas that they want to develop, or need to develop, and then real strengths as well, and then we'll build the development plan together. So really they're coming up with ... we can guide the conversation as well, if they are obviously well far off the mark saying that I want to work on my shooting and they're a goalkeeper, obviously you're going to question it, because it's just not going to help them. So you are guiding the conversation that way but ultimately they're coming up with what it is they want to work on. So they now have the buy in because they come up with it first and then they're coming up with strategies of how they're going to improve it and what deliberate focus within games and training will look like, what extras they're going to do, and just making sure that what they're doing is actionable. And then providing evidence, so that might be through video, it might be through the conversations they're having with us, it's just making sure that they're actually living that plan.

**I: Okay.**

- P: Which is ... our job is really to have that check and balance on that player of are they really being accountable for what they're doing, and ultimately if they're not that's on them, we're not going to force them and push them to do the things that they said that they want to do, ultimately it's their career.
- I: **And I guess that then leads back to your initial philosophy of that character building as well?**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **So I'm assuming you're familiar with the four corner model by the FA?**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **Do you have any thoughts on the four corner model?**
- P: For me it's just a way of I guess coding up a players competencies I guess of ... so obviously going from physical to psych social, it's just a way of ... able to kind of split up where their strengths and weaknesses are, and within that what are the traits that are needed for getting to where you get to. Obviously everyone's four corners would look very, very different. So yeah, I think it's just an easy framework to go off to I guess summarise a player.
- I: **And I'm just ... just to come back to your initial ... I guess that, the whole idea of the character building, would you say that the psych social aspect is maybe a more compounding factor of that four corners? Or do you think they're still all fairly equal?**
- P: No, so for me they're all intertwined, I don't ... I see it as a framework to I guess decompartment ... like compartment like the ... what they need to work on, but I think it's all intertwined, so whether it's physical, psych social, tech, tact, they all exist in the same human experience at the same moment, there's no one or the other. So it's making sure that everything you're doing ... if I'm talking about character and process building it's within the technique but it's what they're doing physically, it's how they're thinking mentally. So for me it all has to be a combination so they can adapt in the moment as opposed to, like I say, [decompartmentalise] in a ... what it is they need to work on.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, and I know you mentioned you did a number of assessments, so like you were saying about the analysis and you're saying you get a physical profile and stuff, when you**

**get a lot of data, how well do you personally think that it represents what you see on the pitch?**

P: Yeah it's hard, I mean it depends again, because if you've got a centre midfielder that his pass completion rate is 100 percent and then you find out that all they've done is pass backwards, they've played very safe, they've not really created any chances, very few final third entries, which also you can collect that data as well, but the one that will stand out is that they've completed 100 percent of passes. So it's then having to quantify I guess, what is the effectiveness of those actions, and that's hard to do, in the moment. So it might be ... might have ten final third entries with passes but how many of those are actually effective? So you get a general idea of things that stand out, I think in particular things they do a lot and things that they don't do, but the actual context of those actions can't be formulated. For me it's just an evidence of maybe this is something to look at a little bit closer, it doesn't give you an answer it just says you need to take a little bit more of a look at this and see what you think.

**I: And is that ... would you say ... I guess as a scenario, if you had somebody with a physical profile, that they were really good in ... for instance, really good in other areas, have you ever had a situation where they might perform really well in the test but actually you don't see it as much on the pitch?**

P: Yes, often, and that ... I can think of one player in particular where that's been an issue for the last two years, and it all came down to mentality, so he was probably ... I think he was the quickest runner from an athletic point of view in the whole county.

**I: Oh wow.**

P: For his age. We never saw that speed on a football pitch, and it comes to first of all timing, tactical understanding, some tech tact bits, but more than anything it was mentality. So he was actually trying to find I guess that purpose and drive and desire and fire to actually use that and understand the dominance that you can have using that strength. Yeah so it happens often.

**I: So in that case, it was almost like the player didn't really understand how to use his talent to then get ... be most effective?**

P: Yeah.



- I: Okay, interesting. So would that be to do with game intelligence and decision making as well, or just merely a lack of understanding of their own strengths?**
- P: That definitely comes into it, so a lot of it was timing, so he'd be quite reactive [inaudible 0:16:57] prior to run, so he was a striker, so wait for the ball to be played then get in a running race with the centre back, probably beat the centre back because he's physically far stronger, bigger, which isn't obviously great in terms of down the line, where the players can do the same thing. So that's definitely come into it, in terms of game intelligence. But it was also that ... yeah, that drive, that inner I guess fire to give everything you've got.
- I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So more of a scenario based set of questions for you now, if you had a player who they came to you in the foundation phase and they were doing exceptionally well, how would that inform you of their future success?**
- P: Not particularly.
- I: Okay.**
- P: I've seen too many excellent foundation phase players not being able to transition well into the youth development phase; it's a completely different game. So you're talking about time, space, area size, different amount of players, it's same rules different game. So the speed of thought as well and speed of the game changes, and as you get older some players aren't able to I guess adapt to that, with the physical changes sometimes they can't adapt to that, the size of the pitch suddenly becomes ... they can't see the things, they can only see very local, when it becomes a bigger picture they don't see the bigger picture. So I try not to make too much of a judgement based on what they've necessarily previously done, all I can make a judgement on is where they are now and where I can try and help them get to. I think it informs again decisions, it helps you understand the things that they can or can't do, maybe technically, tactically, more technically than tactically to be honest, you get an idea of them as a person, how they might I guess act in certain situations, how you can best help them and teach them, how they learn best, you get all those [inaudible 0:18:48] background past, but I try not to use it as a judgement moving forward.
- I: When you do get that scenario, do you find it's normally maturation related or is it ... can it be any maturation and they're just good in one area?**

P: No it can be any of them. So often you see it with maturation, often you see it that some of the [inaudible 0:19:08] pitch and they can't really run, they can't keep up with the game, which is a big part of what we do, our players need to be able to run, so it's a big part of the recruitment model. So that becomes evident pretty quick, but it also comes with I guess like pattern recognition of more players, bigger spaces, not being able to see the game, when it's bigger. It comes with technique, not being able to I guess cut certain distances with techniques or use techniques that ... yeah, just over wider ranges and suddenly find out they can't do certain things, whereas when it's a smaller pitch obviously it's more inside of the foot passing or etc. small spaces that you're dealing with, dealing with it all under tight pressure. So yeah and again mentality, when you're going off from foundation phase to youth development phase they've just moved from primary school to secondary school as well, or into high school sorry, and that brings a lot of change in behaviour and attitude and peer pressure example and suddenly they grow this ... the fearful brain I guess, you know when, you know, there's no fear as a kid you just live life happy and then suddenly this social awareness comes in, you start building this fear and that changes kids, that changes who they are and what they see the game, and I guess the last point is that kids are told how brilliant and great they are from a young age and they've done really well in the foundation phase and then suddenly they get to youth development stage and they start struggling, often you see the big crash. Because they're told how great they are all the time, as soon as there's any struggle or challenge they can't actually cope. So I think there's a lot of factors that come into it, it's not just maturation, but I think that's probably the easiest one to spot.

**I: So that's quite an interesting point to make and would you say this sort of this need of knowing how to handle failure is quite an important one?**

P: Yeah, absolutely, I think it's absolutely paramount. So we have still a culture I think and something that I think foundation phase, it's kind of turned to is that the coach wants to be liked.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: They want to be perceived as like the friend and the cool guy and when they go forward they want the kids to be able to say I love this coach, it's so much fun, and ... which of course is so important, I'm not saying that they shouldn't be enjoying themselves, I'm a bit funny on the word fun to be honest, because I think being professional academy ... I think enjoyment of course but fun is ... yeah. So I almost think it verges under child abuse because you end up

telling your kid how great they are all the time, you build almost like a friendship with them, you give them nicknames and then suddenly they can't cope when it comes to I guess actual like honesty and like trying to help them get them to where they need to get to, because they don't understand it. Because they've always been told how great they are and they've never needed to work on anything, they've scored loads of goals, or been the best defender on the pitch, or they've been stand out players and all of a sudden they can't do those things and they try to get helped and they just don't understand it and they don't want to listen. So inevitably at some point in their career they're always going to have a dip and it's how they overcome that dip, and as with growth mindset and I know it's been around for years, but you need challenge, you need those speed bumps in your career in order to actually fundamentally grow and the more challenges that you can overcome and the more you're willing to make yourself uncomfortable to grow the more likely you are to get better and develop. So if you don't have the coping mechanisms and I guess the bravery to put yourself through those with a view of the end point then you're not as likely to grow, you're just going to stagnate.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So similar question but the other way round now, so lets say you've got a player that comes to you in the youth phase, could be you know, any age you want it to be, but they've not done any academy in foundation or before coming to you, how would that then inform you of potential?**

**P:** No different, all it is is that you just have to ... you're just starting a new relationship, so you're just having to get to know someone's background, where they've come from, what football they have played and ... they're another human being so you basically judge them on the same things you judge them on the same things you judge other players, you just need to understand their background a little bit more. I mean we had a player that had never had any academy coaching before coming in the 14's this year, he was from inner city, and he's got this incredible edge and competitiveness, technically probably better than the majority of the players that we have. He takes up natural very excellent defensive positions, like he's just naturally gone...he's never been in academy setting. So you then question I guess the whole academy programme, when you've got someone that's never had it before and he turns out to beat players that have been in it ever since they were seven, eight years old, so. It varies again, you can't ... you don't have any preconceived judgement, so you can only judge them on when you actually see them, and I think the key thing is when someone's coming into that environment they haven't been in before is first of all getting to know them

and making them feel comfortable in that environment, because it's a massive step for them, in their eyes they're seeing the Hollywood sign. So it's making them understand why they're there and what it is that they want to get out of it as well, and the differences in what the expectations are of being in a professional academy.

I: Yeah, and in that instance with that player you were talking about there, if you got somebody which has got a low playing age or training age, coaching age, does that guide into towards what their potential is? You know, in the instance you're saying he was actually really good when he came in, but he's not been in academy, does that sort of indicate to you his potential is greater than somebody that's been in academy for a number of years but maybe not as good?

P: It could do, I mean, it could, it could say that they've actually got loads more room for growth, because they haven't had that coaching before. But it also might mean that they've already maxed, you know, it depends on their learning mindset as well, they might come in and they know what they know, they've learnt what they've learnt doing what they've done, but actually their room for growth is I guess hindered by the fact that they're not able to process extra information that is given to them, they're not able to apply it in an academy setting because the way that they've learnt is very different to probably the majority of how academies work and develop players.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So they're now having to adapt the way that they learn and a lot of ... like him for example, being inner city, a lot of it was obviously playing [club] football, but a lot of play and street football, so that's where he's learned his trade, he's learnt his trade away from club setting and coaches. To suddenly be in an environment where you will still have coaches that are quite instructional, you might not be able to learn that way, so again, it depends on the individual.

I: **And the last one on this section, how well does maturation impact decisions on development plans as well as selection strategies?**

P: Yeah it does, I think us ... is this a personal opinion or is this through the club or both?

I: **Either.**

P: Yeah so for me it's a really hard one because you just don't know, I don't think you can ever tell who's going to be a professional footballer at the age of 14, 15 even, I mean 16 I guess you start getting an idea, 15 you do, but before that I just don't think you know and you see players that suddenly come through at 21, 22. So again it just depends on the individual, you just ... sometimes you need a stroke of luck but I think the most important thing is do they have that one thing that they can always hang their hat on and I think maturation is ... it's just tricky because you're constantly changing, it's ... you see players that are outstanding and then suddenly they go through their PHV come out the other side and they really struggle for two or three years, but you always got ... yeah but before this look where he was at, and if they get through it then ... some players come out the other side and they just ... they just can't do maybe the things that they used to, maybe it was more from the mental effects of not being able to handle the maturation very well, you see that quite often. It's really tricky I guess psychologically to go through that, that suddenly you can't do the things that you used to, you can't pass, you can hardly run, it can be quite damaging so.

I: Yeah.

P: I think on an actual game day it's influential in the fact that can they actually last the 80 minutes? So it might be that they can only play 20 minutes because that's all they can do at the moment, they can only do 40 minutes, that's all they can do, their programme is more based around their PHV, so they need to do more gym work, they need to do more rehab and ... it's just tailoring to the needs of that individual and what they need the most, it might be that they need more psych work. So in terms of the actual game day it's just needs based, it's not based on performance. We tend to have quite small squad sizes anyway, if there's someone that you're looking to on the bench that you don't want to bring on then I think that's completely wrong, why have you got them in an academy setting or in your academy in the first place, it's completely unfair on them. So every player that you've got within your academy you've got a responsibility to give everything for and you believe in them in the first place, whether they hit the heights that you think they could or not, it's again like I said, up to them. So everyone is going to get the game time that they need and you try and tailor your programme to meet the requirements of each individual, it's not ... nothing that decides whether they should be selected or deselected, it's they ... they all need something.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah. So moving onto the next section, this is when you need your team sheet for now, so the first thing I need you to do is if you can put a letter H next to anyone in the team that you might consider to be a high performing player.**

P: Okay.

I: **And obviously that's not just your [inaudible 0:28:55] 11, that's everyone in your age group.**

P: Yep.

I: **And then similarly you'll do the same thing but you're going to put the letter L next to anyone that's a lower performer in the group.**

P: Yep.

I: **And then that would obviously mean that anyone who hasn't got a letter would be a sort of middle performing player, somewhere in the middle. If there's any changes you want to make obviously feel free to swap any groups around, with the knowledge of what's what.**

P: Okay.

I: **All I'd need to know afterwards is just how many you've got in each group.**

P: I've got seven in high.

I: **Yep.**

P: Two in in between, and then two L.

I: **Brilliant, okay. So questions on this all now, how have you determined who's in what group?**

P: I guess through again discussions, player pathway, of where we feel players are going to be. Yeah, it's through player pathway and years I guess of collecting data and particularly this year, when it comes to more the bigger decision of a two year, you end up collecting far more, so whether that's analysis, again psych, player care, the full holistic picture.

I: **Yeah, and then since working with those players, would they have always been in the same groupings or might a medium have been a high or a low and then they've dynamically shifted?**

P: Yeah no one has gone from low to high, you can often go from low to medium, medium to high. But yeah that happens, that happens.

**I: And are the players, who are in the top group, do they exhibit the same abilities as the others just at a higher level though?**

P: No.

**I: So they're more unique?**

P: Yeah.

**I: And would those groupings represent, sort of more hypothetically ...**

P: Sorry on that last one, it's hard to say, they will have the same capabilities and they'll have different capabilities, it's ... each individual is an individual, they're high potential for their own reasons, they're low potential for their own reasons, there's no comparison of the two, they are in that position, they are who they are, you're developing them as individuals, it's ... the comparative data is only when you're trying to have someone that you think is of similar capability. So for example, it might be a 14 striker that plays very similar to [name] in the first team, so you can actually have some sort of data that flicks across that you can compare, but in terms of players within the team it's very difficult.

**I: Just, do you have anyone in the medium who plays in the same position as somebody in the low, or somebody in the high?**

P: I've only put down the front 11, but yes.

**I: So in that ... would you have ... would they almost ...**

P: [Inaudible 0:32:24].

**I: Sorry say again?**

P: No it's alright, I've only put down like [inaudible 0:32:27] players, but there's other players obviously within that squad which ... yeah.

**I: And is there a reason why those be divided then, like if there ... I mean going off positional there?**

P: Not particularly. No, I mean I could have put any of these players within the front of the first [11 team] and had probably different answers for but, yeah, there's players that play the same positions, there's players that play different positions, yeah.

**I: So would that ... would those numbers ... so the lowers and the highers, would they sort of represent in the selection process at the end of the year who'd you more likely to select or more likely to deselect?**

P: Say that again sorry?

**I: So your highers, would they represent people you later select at the end of year, and your lowers be more likely the ones that you might deselect?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah, and your mid performing group we're just assuming that they could go one way or the other, they probably need a bit of further sort of watching and viewing?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So now just looking at your high performing group only, is there anything that's like a theme or consistent amongst them that puts them into the higher performing group?**

P: Yeah, I'll say the word unfortunately, for reason, but physicality definitely has a difference.

**I: Okay, okay.**

P: Maturation. I say maturation; it's not necessarily maturation it's just can they run.

**I: Yeah. Is that ... is that like philosophical for the club?**

P: Yeah, yeah.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, yeah that's key and I mean the tech tact stuff actually comes lower than mindset and physicality. Lucky again, like I said before, we're able to go out and buy players with all three if you like, so that's we've tended to do.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then is there anything that's unique about those individuals as well, and you don't have to go through one by one but you might pick out a few examples where you know, this guy has got excellent in this area whereas this guy has got this and this.**



P: Yeah 100 percent. They've all got their own strengths, their own weaknesses, they've all got ... again no ... it's not like you're looking across three age groups and you've got the same number seven, the same number 11 throughout those, they've all got their own strengths and traits, they've just got similar threads I guess of what our philosophy is and what our ...

[call cut out]

I: **Hello mate.**

P: Hope that saved?

I: **Yeah it's still recording so don't worry.**

P: Yeah I don't know what happened there, it just completely crashed, it went on hold and crashed, sorry.

I: **Oh no, no, not a problem at all. Technology is one of these things that it's great when it works then when it doesn't work it ...**

P: Yeah, I'm glad it still recorded, I was worried that you would have lost it, but.

I: **No, no, it's all fine my end. Yeah sorry I was just asking about what's unique within the high performing players?**

P: Yeah, like I said, they've all got their own traits that makes them unique, whether that's mindset, whether it's something that's technical, tactical, whether it's again physical, it's very dependent on the individual so. Yeah I guess ... I'd like to say there's common threads but there's not yet at this stage. Like I said with process and character building hopefully that's something that is more of a common thread as they go down the line, there's some players that are technically excellent, very, very good, big game changes you often see it with your maverick players, but if they can apply the right mentality with it as well then you've got a real player on your hands. But it's ... that's the battle, that's ... getting them to understand what it takes to actually be a professional footballer every day, kind of rather than your in and out maverick, so yeah.

I: **Are they positional as well, so would ... is somebody who's unique in one area more bias towards the position they play but you know, like a defender is going to be exceptional at something that maybe a winger is not?**

- P: Yeah I guess lots of things come into it, again technical, tactical understanding of the position.
- I: **Yeah.**
- P: What are their ... the techniques that they use, so they've got role specific techniques, what are they best at doing, and physical, you know, what's the I guess physical profile for each position definitely comes into it, it's probably the most important actually, because the technical tactical side you can always develop and learn, I guess to a point. Yeah but I would say the physical side is definitely probably the most determining factor.
- I: **And is there anything ... sort of strange question to ask I guess, but within the high performers still, could you remove anything from them, the players, attribute wise, and they'd still be a high performer, or do they require all of those to make them a high performer?**
- P: Yeah, I think that's a hard one to answer to be honest, because they are who they are for the reasons that they are, so if you take one thing away you might be taking something else away, or they might be given something that doesn't make [inaudible 0:43:40]. So for me it's ... they are who they are for those reasons, I think it's hard to say whether you take something away what could they be, because it's very again, subjective.
- I: **Yeah course, course. And now looking at the lower performers, is there anything that the low performers sort of ... I know there's only two, but is there a theme around why they're low performers versus not a medium and high?**
- P: Yeah it could just be general standard of the rest of the group, they might not actually be low performers, they could actually be maximising their potential at the time. So when I'm saying in terms of low performer you're considering it against I guess your, like you said like deselection I guess at the end of the season, of what the requirements are at the football club. However, they might actually be performing to their maximal capacity.
- I: **Yes.**
- P: So they're reaching their potential, they're doing the things that they can possible do but they're actually still behind what the requirements are.

- I: Yeah, so is that ... do you consider performance versus potential, I guess like for either selection or development?**
- P: No, so again, it's treating each individual for who they are and what challenges they may need, so some players might be performing quite well and they're overcoming challenges too easily so you have to then put another speed bump in the way, you then have to challenge them further somehow within the games programme, so there's no one that's every just sitting steady, there might be someone that's actually struggling and you need to try and make it slightly easier for them, they might need to digress to help their learning. So again it's constantly I guess just moving that [inaudible 0:45:18] of challenge and support for each player to get them in that optimal development zone.
- I: Yeah, that makes sense.**
- P: Yeah I don't know if you've heard much about the Pygmalion effect as well, if you start saying that some players have more potential than the other then I guess research suggests that peoples and coaches or teachers behaviours will actually change around that person.
- I: Oh really?**
- P: Yeah so I think a random study was done at Harvard by, I think it was David Rosenthal, he basically made up a fake IQ test that said that it tells you who those are, like the blossom group of who's got the highest potential for education, and it was made up, he made up the results of who the high performers are, who the low performers would be, and then after a year it showed that the people that were in the blossom group improved far more than anyone else ...
- I: Oh really!**
- P: Even though it was fake. So basically they worked out that people's behaviours, the teacher's behaviours changed around those pupils because they said that they've got the highest potential. So the moment that you start putting tags of people of being ... or labelling people for any reason, people's perceptions and attitudes and behaviours change around that person. So I try to stay away from that, I take each individual as they are.
- I: Yeah, yeah that makes a lot of sense what you're saying as well. So ... I'm going to have to look into that now!**

P: Yeah it's really good.

I: **I'll come back to that. With regards to the low performing players again, do they lack abilities or do they have the same abilities as the mid performing and the high performing groups just not as good as them?**

P: Yeah both, some ... they do have same abilities, other players just might be better, they might be okay for the standard you play against other teams and they might be performing absolutely fine, but you've just someone else in the pathway that's better.

I: **Yeah.**

P: And others might be that actually they're struggling to cope with the standard because they're missing certain confidences. So it varies.

I: **And is there anything that they might do which is really ... they do exceptionally well, but ultimately it doesn't really affect their, either outcome or their performance?**

P: Unfortunately yeah, so I've always been at the standing where if someone has an outstanding attribute then you stick by it, because that might be what gets them living in the game, whatever level that ends up being and I've always had the saying that kids have a funny way of surprising you, that you say can't do things and actually they can eventually, they will work it out. But yeah, sometimes it doesn't fit, so we've had often in the past where you've got players with outstanding attributes but can't run for example and end up not being with us, but they go onto another club that take them for who they are, for their outstanding attribute, and they do really well. So I think it's just again, club philosophy dependant.

I: **Would the two guys in the lower now, what might they be that they have that they do really well that doesn't affect their performance?**

P: Attitude.

I: **Okay, so it's a positive attitude ...**

P: Probably two of them have got the best attitude of the group, work harder than anyone else, very development learning mindset, you put their attitude with the other players and you've got a real complete footballer. I guess what they lack is just footballing ability I guess, the same footballing ability as what others have.

**I: So with that ... I'm going to sort of pose a ... postulate a question, and you can either agree or disagree, I'm definitely leading you here, I'm not going to pretend I'm not, is it almost like certain ... you always need to have a baseline ability across all attributes to be ... to make it anywhere, and if you have this outstanding one brilliant, but if you don't have a minimal requirement you're probably not going to make it?**

P: I don't think people make it on being average at everything, I think you have to be ... I think you have to get yourself to a standard where you can cope in all environments, or you can't have specific weaknesses. I think it's really hard [inaudible 0:49:18] to hide those weaknesses, I think the lower levels you go down you can hide your weaknesses, the higher you go up you can't hide your weaknesses, you get exposed. So you have to have a baseline but on top of that, if you're going to play on the high level, you have to have outstanding attributes on top of that. [Inaudible 0:49:31] or the better players just ... their mean, I guess averages for each competency is just slightly higher, or they've got like a really, really outstanding attribute that's better than anyone else's in the world, or across Europe, or across divisions. But the lower the levels that you go down you can kind of hide your weaknesses a little bit more.

**I: So that ... it's almost like the deficit is too great that they can't cope in those instances?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah ...**

P: I think so.

**I: That's a really good way to put that. So I'm assuming by that if they developed in certain areas they'd probably actually be maybe moving up to a medium performing player?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Yeah. So now, last couple of questions, it's just on the middle group now, what is it that sort of you distinguished to draw the line between them not being a bottom and not being a top player?**

P: It's just that extra edge I guess, that ability to really impact a game based on that extra I guess star quality. So have they got something in them that really is a ... can impact the game

now, not necessarily but you might see something where you think actually they could do that in the future based on this, they're just not quite there yet.

**I: So they're showing the potential but they haven't necessarily done it yet?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Whereas the top group are showing it?**

P: Yeah, and you're having to challenge them more in different ways and ... to make sure that those strengths are adaptable to different environments.

**I: Yeah, but I guess they're a bit more complete than the guys in the lower?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So would they still have unique attributes the same as the higher but maybe not as well developed? Or not really ...**

P: Correct, yeah, exactly.

**I: Okay.**

P: Or they might have an outstanding attribute but they're catching up on just some of the other competencies.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I get that. So is there ... probably last question if I'm honest with you, because you've answered a couple of those together, is there anything that they might do which is unique to them that the ... like an outstanding attribute or a good quality that isn't seen in either of the other groups, so it almost makes them unique but doesn't impact the performance too much?**

P: Are you able to give an example [name]?

**I: I guess like is there something that they ... it's not matched so you ... I guess if you took somebody in the same position and you sort of said a winger or a striker or something along those lines, one of them is in the high performing group and he has x and he's brilliant at it and he's also got good standards elsewhere, to somebody in the medium group, same position, he might have y that he's really good at but it's not necessarily as impactful as having x.**

P: Yeah, yeah absolutely, I think when you're in our phase as well [inaudible 0:52:29] physicality comes into it again, at the moment you can impact games physically very easily, you could be very early developed and you can dominate games through that, whereas other players might not have that but they may have game intelligence and technically be excellent and you're just waiting on that, so maturation definitely comes into it. The challenge is then going forward is that person that is physically dominant with games always going to be physically dominant of games? No they're not. So what are you giving them to be able to cope, are you allowing them to be too successful too soon and not preparing them for what life will be ahead? Whereas the I guess more underdeveloped players, they're constantly challenged and tested all the way throughout, so when they do physically catch up they're far better prepared for it, and that's a common trend through football and has been for a long, long time now, so. I think that's really apparent in youth development phase.

I: **Just a ... sorry, one more question, I'm just curious now, because you ... I know you were saying you work with the 14's and the physicality is important, what does that look like, would you estimate that the ... the group you've got now, would they be still the high performing players, would they still be high performing at 16, or might that change because the medium might have then caught up maturation wise?**

P: No I think they'll still be outstanding performers. So a lot of those players are [inaudible 0:53:51] 14 or ... basically when we give contracts at 14's we're basically saying we're going to scholar them, that's ...

I: **Okay.**

P: So we make our 14's extremely strong every year, whether that's having to buy in and recruit players or fill ... fill the pathway. So yeah, at 14 they're going to be scholars with us anyway so.

I: **Yeah, I guess I was ... I was alluding, it's fairly obvious, I didn't know whether maturational bias came into effect but not so much really then?**

P: Not particularly, I mean there's always a couple that you might ... or one or two that you might take a punt on based on what they can do and they might be physically really far behind, but you know, it's not a tendency of what we do to be honest.

### **8.10.20 Participant 20**

**I: Really simple and basic stuff to start with. What's your current job title?**

P: So, my current job title is Under 12s or Youth Development Phase Lead Coach.

**I: And what category status is the academy?**

P: Category one.

**I: And then, what league does the first team play in?**

P: Premier league.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: Professional football or football in general?

**I: Maybe do both.**

P: Professional academy football, four years. Football in general, six.

**I: Yeah, and how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Since the start of the season.

**I: Yeah, so basically a year, I'm guessing because the season will be end soon, so, yeah.**

P: Yeah. Yeah.

**I: And which age group will you be discussing later on?**

P: Under 12s.

**I: Brilliant. So, the more interesting stuff now about you. Can you give a brief overview of your background?**

P: In terms of general or football?

**I: You can do a bit of both. Obviously, like, if you played, talked about that. You could talk about how you got into coaching even if it's irrelevant to football. So, yeah, anything.**



P: Yeah. So, played -- not at really a high level, played [club] academy stuff. I played up until their under 19s, which is like their reserves, almost, their, like, second team. Started coaching when I was about 14, just grass roots stuff, just to be around football a bit more. Then, when I was playing for the 19s, I started coaching with some of the younger academy groups when I was about 16, and just enjoyed it. Started doing some of my badges, some of my courses. Then, was the -- the following season got offered the lead foundation phase role there, just still only part-time and voluntary at the club that it was, but just organizing a little bit more, and a little bit more responsibility. Then went to uni at 18, so I stopped playing completely, almost when I went to uni. But got a role at [club name] at the time, worked for two seasons, and almost sort of stumbled into assisting coaching the first team, at uni as well. And then, yeah, I got a full-time placement at [club name] last season, and from then in the role I'm in to date.

**I: And how would you describe your current role?**

P: In terms of what?

**I: How do you feel -- what would you say your responsibilities are, just -- I know it's a fairly broad question. So, what are your key responsibilities within the role?**

P: Generally just day to day organization, coaching, managing the age group, along with liaising with the parents and other staff, and organizing MDT. And then, more broadly, just managing the -- all the transitions at the 12s age group. So, the transition into secondary school, into the 11 v 11, into the youth phase. And also, we've got quite a variety of sites in the foundation phase. So, almost -- you go, foundation phase is quite separate, and then all the best boys come together at 12s. So, a little bit of the amalgamation of all those sites and bringing the boys together. So, a bit more of a social focus, to be fair. Yeah, and then just the general sort of player development within that of -- probably link more to the 11 v 11 stuff, so dripping in some more of the technical stuff in the game intelligence. And like general sort of IDP work and player development stuff.

**I: So, when you say, like, the foundation phase is different sites, do you mean they're literally scattered across the area?**

P: Yeah. So, we have the -- the foundation phase --

**I: Yeah.**

P: -- based in [city name]. And then, we've got the -- we've got a secondary academy, which is basically a development centre in [city name]. So, they run a foundation phase in their own right. And then, we've also got a development centre in [city name] and in [city name], where a couple boys come across from. So, yeah, I think we're the first age group ever to have a representation of all four sites.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So, yeah, just knitting that sort of stuff together is quite fun, but generally it's just the [city name] and the [city name] sites.

I: **So, when you're considering player development, and this is outside of, I guess, the constraints of a club. When you're considering player development, do you have personal beliefs or a philosophy?**

P: Generally we'd just be based around people, and people as individuals.

I: **Yeah.**

P: So, developing values that are more humanistic than football based, and developing good people, which should hopefully help develop better footballers. And doing that in an individualized and holistic way that learning is probably not going to be the same for everyone. I mean, different people need different things from different disciplines and different -- yeah, they need different support. And that's also perfectly fine.

I: **So, I know you sort of mentioned that learning is different for different people. Would you say learning is quite a critical part of -- not necessarily your philosophy, but would you say that somebody be able to learn is an essential part of being a good footballer?**

P: Yes, in short, but I think it's more the willingness and desire to learn than the actual learning itself, and wanting to learn and attending to try and learn rather than necessarily the speed of taking on that knowledge of learning a certain process.

I: **Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And do you think that -- can that be affected by the environment or the -- in some ways can that be affected by the coach?**

P: Yeah, and probably also -- it's probably a reflection of the coach and the environment with certain people. And maybe also just a bit like back to the individualized nature of it that some lads are going to learn better with different coaches, and that's also fine. Like, they

just resonated better or related better to that coach, and that's why they learn better, they just have a better relationship. But I think, yeah, relationship-wise and if you've got a good relationship, I think those tend to be the boys that seem to want to learn a little bit more, or whether that's just a confirmation bias in itself that you have a better relationship with those who want to learn more. I don't know.

**I: Yeah, I know what you're saying. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy almost.**

P: Exactly. Yeah.

**I: And do you have expectations, on a player that you're developing, do you have expectations on their capabilities as they go through the system?**

P: I think as a club we've got position-specific and individualized characteristics that are quite stringent, but then we're also reasonably fluid within that. I wouldn't say I've got -- it would be more, I think, personality and character-based than anything else. I think probably more not necessarily the characteristic, but a characteristic. So, have they got something that makes them stand out. So, are they physically really good, are they technically amazing, have they got a really good desire to improve and learn, have they got good leadership qualities, are they able to be really resilient even when they're having the worst games or in the most pressured situation, have they got one little gem that might be really good.

**I: So, that's quite a -- I'm just writing stuff down, which is why I'm not looking. That's quite a holistic approach because what you said there is things like the outstanding quality specifically, but it wasn't exclusive to, like, technical, it was psychological. I guess you -- it could be any of those things. So, that's -- is that, again, sort of, you know, you don't isolate, but you kind of thing broader around all areas?**

P: I think especially with the age group, like the younger age groups, our job is probably to pick which areas they need to develop more than others. So, if they're technically really tidy, but every time they go one nil down they lose their head, then they probably don't need to do loads more technical work. They probably need to be challenged a little bit more to build a bit of resilience. Yeah, so, it's a little bit -- yeah, not that one factor outweighs others, obviously at this sort of level they've got to have a base of technical quality, they've got to have a base of physical athleticism, but not that one would outweigh -- and also, I suppose, things are so malleable at this sort of age as well. They've not gone through their growth and their puberty yet, so physical stuff might not even be that accurate. They've got -- they

could have loads of stuff going on with, again, maybe linked to growth that means their coordination is out, so technically they look really untidy. But there are so many variables going on that I think if one -- yeah, if one thing is outstanding, then they've got something that we can try and work with.

**I: Yeah. I kind of get that. I know what you're saying. So, moving onto the next section now. So, this is a bit more about sort of strategies employed as well. I'll mention selection, deselection. When I do, I'm talking about release retention at the end of the year. Just thinking 12s, you wouldn't really have that end to your year, would you.**

P: Yeah, so we go -- we go nine to 11 one contract, 12 is one contract, then 13 and 14, 15 and 16.

**I: Ah, there you go. Brilliant. I was going to say if you didn't just think hypothetically, but you do so it's not a problem. So, in regards to player development plans, or selection deselection, who would be involved in those decision making processes?**

P: So, we have quite a wide audit process, which would have a representative of every member of the MDT. So, it'd be a lead coach, S and C coach, analyst, someone from the medical team, and -- I'm trying to think if I missed anyone. Psych could be in there as well, as well as the academy manager, assistant academy manager lead phase, potentially someone from recruitment, and potentially someone else in the senior leadership team, maybe around, like, pathways kind of roles. So, quite -- yeah, quite a wide --

**I: Yeah. And when you're going through that process, how do you determine who would get selected and who doesn't get selected?**

P: It leads back again to the characteristics I spoke about before, the specific characteristics. We do quite a lot of grading throughout the season in terms of boys get graded on games every week, so they get a grade from one to four, four being exceeding academy standards, one being below academy standard, and then approaching and at academy standard.

**I: Okay.**

P: So, they get match graded in terms of their performance every week, and then we also go -- so, that would be averaged out in that audit process, as well as we'd grade all those characteristics for this position. So, they'd get, they perform at this for each, for, say, their heading technique or whatever. And then, they also get their potential grade. So, again, as

subjective as that is, we're trying to -- we try and identify some -- up to three potential indicators for the boys.

**I: Yeah.**

P: So, yeah, any sort of -- what might be indicated potentials. So, maybe family support network or something like that. And then, that would all go into a grid where it would marry up so they were graded this and they were performing at this, and that's where they lie. And then, that would match up into descriptors of -- so, say, a A grade for our age group would say they should be trying to attain a scholarship. They should be expected to attain a scholarship, and then it works back sort of within the contract from there.

**I: So, I'm guessing you probably use that high performance, high potential versus low performance, low potential quadrant.**

P: Yeah. Yeah.

**I: Yeah. Yeah, which seems to be quite common more amongst the cat ones than anywhere else, and the idea of -- I'm assuming that the idea of potential means that if you've got a player who might not be necessarily performing particularly well now, but if you think he's got high potential, maybe through, I don't know, whatever it is, that might mean that you keep him on more so than a player who's performing well, but you don't think has got quite a potential.**

P: Yeh, yeah, I think so. And it almost provides a base for a conversation, then, doesn't it? So, we'd go -- they'd get an overview from coaching, then they'd get an overview from physical with their testing results and what's observed in games. And then, maybe anyone else that's observed anything. So, if they've been smashing their analysis, they might jump in and say something. And then, it might be, all right, so we've graded them this for potential or we graded them this for their match grade, but then there's some really nice indicators of potential within the [unclear 0:14:55] from everyone so, then, it just becomes more of a conversation around coming to those grades at the end really after -- yeah, after all the discussions from all the MDT.

**I: Yeah, it sounds like you're actually -- although a lot of the process is subjective, it sounds like a lot of it is attempting to be as objective as you can.**

P: Yeah. Yeah, it's -- I think the performance stuff is far easier to objectify. And we're fortunate that we've got a data insights member of staff in the academy as well. So, he -- before that audit process, he'll ping across all the data we've got, basically, of goal scored, goal scored against category of opposition, minutes played, games played, et cetera, so then you can add a little bit more objectivity to your subjective comment. So, you can go, this lad's been really good in for a goal, looks quite natural in his finishing compared to some of the other finishers that are graded quite highly in the other groups. And then, you go -- and that will be matched you by his scores. Currently he's scoring 1.5 goals per eight minutes. So, [inaudible 0:16:08] and stuff like that.

I: **Yeah. So, when you're creating a development plan, is that a similar process or is that a different process?**

P: As in the, sort of, IDPs, the individual ones for the players?

I: **Yeah.**

P: Yeah. So, they tend to be, like, a co-creation between the player or the MDT staff and the coach -- not the coach, and the player and the MDT staff. So, especially in current constraints, with the season starting virtually, and then we've not seen the players play -- or half the players we haven't seen play.

I: **Yeah, of course.**

P: And so, those boys design their own at the start. So, they gave themselves their three. Yeah, they did their first three themselves, and then after their first player-led review, we sat with them and went through, some of them didn't change. Some of them we tweaked a little bit. And then, we tried to give steer on some of them to be -- because obviously you can imagine that the first thing they think of with IDPs and targets is that I want to work on this, this, this needs to get better, these. So, we try to steer it towards one strength that you want to get really good at and make a super strength, and then two development areas. But, yeah, just really quite co-created between us. And then, we had a chat as a MDT around is there any bits we want to change or add. And generally they were pretty good, I think. By this stage they've experienced three seasons of having things like IDPs and [sort of the] process. And then, we also got a -- quite an extensive document that they sort of fill in across the season just with, like, what motivates them, their best moments, their toughest struggles, what they want to be really good at, who they aspire to be, and then that sort of --

that all comes before the IDPs. So, it's almost like a process trying to get them to think about everything, and then, okay, what do I want my IDPs to be with all that in mind.

**I: So, does the IDP play a role within the selection deselection as well?**

P: Depending on individuals and situations, yes. If there's, say, boys who were saying he's not technically quite as proficient as would need to be. Or say he's number four and he's not quite as technically tidy, or doesn't proceed to play forward as much as we'd like, but then that's an area of his IDP and something that we've seen progression in, then, that might look slightly different to a boy who's had their IDP for three seasons and still is struggling with it.

**I: Yeah, yeah, I get that. So, it is more flexible, I'm guessing. So, the FA four corner model, what are your thoughts on it?**

P: It's very -- I'm thinking of the word -- like, siloed off.

**I: Okay.**

P: And very isolated. I also think generally it's still quite geared towards tech tac. And even maybe more leaning towards tech tac and physical nowadays with the amount of S and C provision and that sort of stuff. And I think a lot of people look at physical as probably quite a big potential indicator too, at the moment, which if he's not physically great, he's probably not going to play in the premier league, which may or may not be true. I don't know. But then, I think, yeah, I think my biggest sort of bias of it would be the psych or psych social side is probably most neglected, and probably especially if you look at the research and anecdotal stuff, what people would say is the main factor that predicts whether you're going to be a footballer or not be footballer out of all these players that are good physically, good technically, and stand a game tactically. And the psych side is probably that last little bit of, do I make the step or do I not. So, yeah, I think it's probably still seen a little bit too as separate divisions and separate entities --

**I: So, would you change it all?**

P: I'm not sure if I'd change it. I think maybe within -- we don't use it within the club. We use a similar sort of model, but different terminology. But probably more of a -- probably more just how it's laid out and described to show the link of all of those together rather than being separated areas. I think even within clubs you go, and you'll know from your role, like, S and C, go on, then, take the warm up, you go and work with -- or you go and take the lads

in the gym. And there's not as much integration...Or, all right, go and have a sit-down with a psychologist because your head keeps falling off every time you lose. It's not quite as -- yeah, not quite as interdisciplinary as it could be. I think that's something we tried to work on this season of trying to have football-related S and C warmups or delivering site on-pitch, through some more [unclear 0:21:54] games, through constraints, then quite a big project on delivering -- yeah, like, pressure and competition situations to develop psych strategies into more [side] games. But, yeah, just trying to relate it all to football. And also because I think the lads will love you a little bit more as well.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah.**

P: It's just, like, oh, yeah, go and see the S and C coach, and the coach is going to stand over there and have a chat. Then it looks like the coaches don't really care, so the lads probably aren't going to care.

**I: Yeah. And with that... how can I phrase this? Do you feel like psych is neglected, and therefore needs a bit more? Or do you feel that psych is just a more confounding variable and probably just needs more regardless?**

P: I think it's under-resourced, maybe not under-valued, and maybe misunderstood. It's probably more complex than the other three areas. And rather than trying to understand it, I think people probably shy away from it a little bit. Or there's the misconception of psych means you have a meltdown when things go wrong, or you're struggling with anxiety or the negative connotations of it, rather than like the positive performance benefits it could have if you get better. It's not necessarily something is wrong, but it's a you can get better at this, the same way you can get better taking free kicks.

**I: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.**

P: So, I think, yeah, a little bit of -- a little bit of under resourced. A little bit of lack of understanding and probably a little bit of a fear of delivering psych-based stuff without necessarily having as good a knowledge or thinking that, oh, yeah, I probably shouldn't do that unless the psychologist is there with me to make sure it's all okay because I don't want to do anything wrong. So, I think all that maybe leads to it not being in the program as much because all those sort of variables come together.



**I: Yeah, yeah. Now, coming back to objective data, whether it be psych, technical tactical, or physical, how well do you feel that that data represents what you actually see in match performance?**

**P:** So, the most data we use would be physical stuff at our age group. The older age groups will have, like, lots more data for the more football-based stuff, but we don't at our age group. And psych-wise, we wouldn't have data. Normally we'd just have, maybe, a -- like, a psych profile of just as coaches, ways we can get the most out of boys, things to avoid, things to do more of. But I think the physical data is tough at times to link it to what we see on the pitch. I think there's boys that look really good on the pitch, and their testing wouldn't necessarily match it. And I think it's probably a link between some of those boys or lads are maybe don't value S and C as much as they value football, so they're probably not trying as hard as they can within in those testing sessions. As well as, like, we were chatting about it the other day, actually, the way that the testing is done, especially in the adolescent age groups, where it's in front of the group, in front of everyone so, if I know I'm not going to be the quickest, then I might just toss it off. And then, I've not lost or I've not won because I'm not quick enough, that's because I haven't tried. So, like, a little bit of fear of failure, sort of self-handicapping that aspect. So, I think that may be some points that sort of see that -- we see this really good mover on the pitch, but his testing is really poor and it doesn't match up. And I think we -- well, that's where we're reasonably good at going, yeah, I'm not sure that the testing is actually that accurate for this lad, which is good. And we're also quite good, I'm sure as you know with all the work that we do with growth maturation and bio-banding, that sort of stuff. We bio-age the testing scores, so that's really helpful, especially with some of the extremes of maturation so, the really late boys and the really early boys just to see what they look like in relation to their own bio-age which is really cool.

**I: Does that steer that potential idea as well?**

**P:** From a physical aspect, it would, yeah. We've had conversations around age groups scores are like ambers, but his highest scores are green, so he's probably -- he's probably going to be okay physically. As opposed to, maybe, ambers and greens, but bios are ambers and reds, probably shows the opposite.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I was just going to ask you a question before that as well. Oh, you obviously mentioned about them maybe underperforming in the test, and then over-**

**performing, if that's the right way to put it, in the game. Have you seen it the other way around?**

P: Slightly. I think with boys that are physically not the best in terms of them not maybe the quickest or the fastest over five metres, or whatever, but get away with it on pitch by being a little bit more game intelligent, a little bit better at reading the game. So, you wouldn't necessarily see it as much, especially if you didn't know the group and just came to watch, you wouldn't go, "oh, wow, he's really poor physically," but then you'd look at his testing and go, he's really poor physically. So, yeah, I think it is seen the opposite way. But then also, that links back into some other potential indicators. So, the fact that he is quite poor physically at the moment, and you don't notice it, might be a sign of above average game intelligence. That he's able to find solutions to, say, defend those big areas even though he can't cope with getting rammed by this really quick winger, but he didn't get himself in that situation.

I: **Yeah. I guess some of that is the idea of the context of the game is very different to the context of the test.**

P: Yeah. And again, you have some of those tests link in to their state of growth and maturation status and stuff as well. Obviously with, like, the power kind of movement, jump type stuff, pre-pubescent, how accurate that really is post --

I: **Yeah, yeah. No, exactly. I've lost my track on this now. Where am I? So, a couple of scenarios for you now. If you had a player -- and this is great for you because the age group is perfect. If you had a player that excels in the foundation phase, how does that inform you of their future success?**

P: Tough. It's irrelevant to be fair, seeing some examples of it last season and this season. Yeah, really tough, because I think with so many variables of -- foundation phase is smaller pitches, smaller sizes. Generally any sort of early maturing in boys, there's a bigger discrepancy between maybe some of the smaller boys, so they've got more physical sort of advantage at times. And with the contract length of our foundation phase being for the whole foundation phase as well, they sort of know for some boys that do well, there's maybe no bumps or no adversity within that period. And then, they get to 12 and it's like, boom, new school, new teammates, 11 a side, new phase, new coaches, and it's, like, wow, there's so much going on. And I think that's one of our biggest challenges at this age group is -- especially with it being a decision year straightaway, is did they perform really, really

well in the foundation phase because they're a really early maturer, for example. And now, it's maybe being counterbalanced by bigger pitches and bigger opposition. Or are they just struggling with being faced by their first bit of adversity and they just need a bit of time to try and get through it and they could be back to being one of those top boys again.

**I: Yeah.**

P: And I don't know the answer.

**I: So, when you're saying adversity, is that also accounting for the concept of learning to fail that maybe they weren't given before?**

P: Yeah, I think so, and learning to -- just developing those skills to deal with that adversity as well. Like, if they've not had to -- like you've said, if they've not had to learn how to fail, they've not developed or built the toolbox of skills to use in those situations. And again, it links back to that project we've been trying to do with the psychs, the fun pitch, just to try and get some skills into them that they might be able to use when they're on the pitch.

**I: And then, the other thing I was going to ask because -- and the word has come up a few times, is the word cope. Would you say that's a good way to summarise somebody that maybe they will progress, is the idea of they are able to cope versus somebody who wasn't able to cope, maybe in specific areas?**

P: Yeah, it's interesting you say that because doing all the psych stuff I've been doing and the research and that for this project it's probably one word that I don't like. I don't actually like the word cope, I'd rather talk about thriving or something like that, it has far more positive connotations, I think, than just saying cope. But, yeah, it's tough, isn't it, I think. It may be links back to, again, how you would describe some of the late maturing players as well. Oh, he's five to 10 percent lower in bio-age or in maturation than the rest of the group, and he copes, so maybe that's a real sign that he's got loads to come. And yeah, it could be the same again that he's not really had much adversity, but he's had it this year, and he's sort of got through it versus lads who have just completely collapsed. So, yeah.

**I: I derailed my own interview there. So, back to the scenarios. The other way around now. If you had somebody that had absolutely no foundation phase experience, no academy experience in fact, and they came to you in the youth phase, how would that then inform you of their future potential?**

P: Again, I think it varies on the individuals. We had an example of just that this season. A boy came in straight from grassroots on trial at the end of under 11s, and then it ended up being forever because of all the lockdowns and stuff. But he played the first three games of the season this season. He played against [club name] and was excellent. That was his last week of his trial, and we signed him the following week, and -- yeah, and then he played the week after and has played up ever since because physically he can cope and he adds to the group above. And technically tactically he's an intelligent boy so he understands it. He can cope and he can thrive in the older age group.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So within that, do you take consideration of coaching age, playing age, is that something that you might consider towards whether you take a player on, in a positive way, not a negative way as in, if he's only played for one year and he's showing really good capabilities, does that inform you that actually his potential might be really good?**

P: Yeah, that would be one of those indicators. So, we've got -- yeah, another boy in the group who's -- I think he joined us at under 10s. So, again, it seems really young, but I suppose relatively to the rest of the boys being in from seven, eight, he -- I think might have even not have not played a lot of grass roots before. So, he has got a relatively low training age, and that's one of the things that we've noted down as a potential indicator for him. So, yeah, I think definitely.

I: **And then, the last question on this stage, and you've kind of answered it a lot already, but it's how much maturation impacts your decisions towards development plans and selection?**

P: Quite a lot because -- yeah, because of how heavily we focus on it and the -- sort of the PhD research that's going on in the club, I think it is a big focus and something that's always at the forefront of our mind with decisions and stuff and maybe even to the stage where it's a bit too much. And so, maybe even to the stage where we're making decisions about, say, playing players up or down because -- purely on maturation rather than -- actually, they probably don't say that. That boy who's a late maturer who is doing well and is coping in his own age group and then, all right, we need to play him down because he's late. Or do we really need to play him down because he's late, or are we just saying we do because of his maturation that someone has shown me some numbers and I've gone, "all right, we've got to play him down." Where if we didn't have those numbers, we'd go, he's actually doing --

he's one of the best boys in the group. So, I think it comes into a lot. Yeah, maybe teetering on the edge of a little bit of caution needs to be taken with it.

**I: So, it's too much black and white, not enough grey.**

P: Yeah, and too much -- yeah, too much making decisions on one factor without weighing up some of the other options at times.

**I: When you said, that boy, for example, when you said that he's actually doing really well, was one of the top ones in the group, what -- obviously not physically because he's a late maturer, but he's destined probably to be a smaller one, where would you say he would have been excelling then?**

P: Well, even physically but there's different physically isn't there -- so he's still a lovely mover. He's still agile and quick in terms of short distance quick, so he can get away from a player. He can't necessarily burst from the halfway line to make a run in behind on a big area, but he's still even coping with that, as much as he's not excelling at it. Technically really nice, understands the game, can still -- because of his level of understanding, is then leading other people. So, with pressing, he's organizing teammates as he's pressing as well. And yeah, he makes the most out of the resources he's got and hopefully has got quite a bit more to come with the physical resources and yeah, find solutions to adapt against playing much bigger, more physical opposition, wherever boys get away with just being able to have a scrap, he's got to find different ways to get around it.

**I: Yeah, so he's -- I think you just nicely put it. He's very much identified his own areas where he's going to suffer, so he found a solution of how can I overcome this and use what I do have to my advantage to overcome you.**

P: Yeah, yeah, and the particular lad is -- that late, he would be the latest maturer in the 11s group, and the middle of the under 10s group.

**I: Wow. So, if you were going to bio-band him, he's going to be down two years. Wow, okay.**

P: Yeah. So, even when people are going, "Oh, yeah, his maturation data says he's really late, so we need to play him down." Okay, so, let's just bear in mind that if you want to play him down, and you're doing it purely on maturation, then you've got to put him down two groups, otherwise it's pointless.

**I: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. It's interesting in that scenario because it sounds like from what you're saying, he excels in pretty much all the areas. You're saying he's almost the leader. He's technically great. He's physically good, even though we're not talking strength, where he lacks he excels elsewhere. In essence, it sounds like the benefits of bio-banding aren't really going to come to fruition because he's getting them. So, if anything you might even want to play him up, which is a stupid thing to say.**

**P: It's just that balance of -- it's that balance of doing these, say, top five in terms of his match grades in the group, but by playing him down, would he absolutely boss it, and then develop something else. And I suppose that's the trade-off that is quite tough, but also I suppose the psych factor of it of no matter how people frame it, boys always see playing down as a negative regardless of what context it's in. And he's one that he described himself playing down last season as being the toughest moment of his academy journey so far. So, in playing him down, one, are we going to lose that relationship with him that I spoke about at the start as being so important. Is he going to lose confidence, that means he's not actually going to thrive when he plays down because he feels rubbish about himself because he had to play down. And especially in a decision-making year, is it making him go, oh, well, that's me done, then. That's why I'm playing down because I'm going to get released and it can just spiral itself in a really negative way.**

**I: I wonder, just going back to one of your previous points. In that instance, maybe that might be a good way to teach adversity, though.**

**P: Yeah.**

**I: Not necessary for this research, so sorry about that [laughs]. So, moving onto the last part now. So, now, is the bit you'll need your team sheet available to you. All I need you to do -- like I said, I don't need to see any of this, it's just for your viewing. All I need you to do is place a letter H next to anyone that you would consider to be a high performer of your age group.**

**P: How would you define high performer.**

**I: It's up to you.**

**P: This is quite tough.**

**I: It might get tougher, don't worry.**

P: I think that's it. I think I'm done.

I: **Okay. And then, you do the same thing, but you're now going to put a letter L for the lower performers of the age group.**

P: That was a little bit easier, I'll be honest.

I: **So, then, anyone that hasn't got a letter next them would be an M, so that they're a mid performer. And obviously, with the knowledge of the three groupings, you're welcome to make any adjustments.**

P: I think that's it. Although, I have got a couple of -- yeah, this slash this.

I: **No, that's fine. All I need to know now is how many you've got in each group, so how many higher, how many medium, and how many lower.**

P: Eight high. Six medium.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Four low.

I: **Brilliant. Okay. So, questions now. You won't need to do anything else, you can -- as long as you can see it, you won't need to actually write on it again. Right, so, first question, how did you determine who is in what group?**

P: No particular way, it was a mix of different stuff, but the lower ones were reasonably easy because I think you know the boys that are performing lower because you're sort of having conversations around them in ways to try and help them out. The high performers, two are boys that are playing up. So one was the boy who came in on trial, probably plays better than he trains, so in terms of performance he's really good. The other boy has played up all season, but more so maturation-wise although, he is supposedly, chatting to the other coaches, been one of our best players. So, those two. One was the really late maturing boy, the fact that he's in around the top of the group. Well, the top -- yeah, the top half of the group, and the physical challenges he's got.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Who else- who else? One is a boy who's not played loads of minutes, but he's -- like, at times he's been -- we played one game and he played for 24 minutes, and without a trick. He was -- he's was almost unplayable all the time he was on, and then came off injured after getting stamped on. So, he was -- yeah, he was good. One's a boy who's rated quite highly, although being a late maturer, I've only seen 40 minutes of him this season because he's been playing up. Who else did I have as a high one? And then, I had one boy that I have high, and then slash maybe medium, was -- he's just unbelievably consistent. He's like, sort of, a [name] type he'll give you seven out of 10 every week, and -- yeah, be really consistent and can maybe add a little, these are full backs, could maybe add a little more going forward, but physically really nice, like forward depending one v one, really nice out of possession. So, I wasn't sure whether he'd be medium or a high. But I thought -- yeah, I'd go with high for him. And then, there was -- yeah, there was one of them -- yeah, one of the mediums that could have maybe been high. He's been playing a different position this season, so we've moved him to playing as a striker, and he's been scoring loads of goals, and showing loads of a little improvements of stuff we've tried to drip in with him when we're talking about movement and we're talking about positioning, or whatever, considering he's not played there before. He's doing -- he's doing, like, reasonably well given that it's new.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

P: Oh, and one was -- sorry, one other high one that I missed, was a boy who's actually under 11 who's played up all season and he's been one of the best boys in the group, playing really well physically, moves lovely, technically really tidy, good attitude, wants to learn, and in context of the really late boy in our group, he's only a little bit earlier than him. So, like, matching the two up is quite interesting.

I: **Yeah, yeah, I imagine so. And when -- just when you're saying about the low ones, you just know they're low, is that because when you're trying to get them to go through their IDPs, they don't progress, or what is that?**

P: I think we just -- in terms of, again, like talking about performance, I think it's easier to pick out the extremes again, isn't it, of on a match day who's doing really well, who's really struggling. I think one of them could have maybe been a medium, like he's sort -- and it's tough in the context of this season, I suppose, with the lack of training and whatever and playing games. So, he probably would have been low start of the season, to medium now as he's sort of settled in. And then, also just -- with almost no similar limitations of some of the



boys, so we note two of them are -- two of them are physically excellent, and one's technically okay. One's technically quite poor but has a low training age and doesn't really have much game understanding, but we can hopefully develop that. So, yeah, they're currently performing low, but we hopefully know areas where we can try and help them, but even if it may not be enough, but we know those areas.

**I: So, if you were to do that again based on potential, would they be different, or would they be the same?**

P: They'd be different.

**I: Much different?**

P: I don't know, I think I biased myself in grading some of these. Just with -- yeah, like one of the boys I put is higher, but high is like medium. He's more high in that he's a really good leader, amazing attitude, gives 100 percent every game, gets every ounce of his potential out of himself even though physically not great and stuff like that. So, he's performing quite well, but just based on other factors that aren't necessarily physical tech tac. Some of the ones that are low have maybe got quite a high potential because physically there's quite a big area of potential, but looking at -- especially, like, they are two wide players. So, premier league wide players are going to have to be physically quite good. And I think people like [person's name] is almost like, just in my opinion, a little bit as well, like, he's technically quite poor on the ball, but he's physically really good, and now plays for one of the top teams in the prem, which is quite interesting. There are a couple that are high and would probably be a high potential. There's two that were low that are -- there's one that's low that's potentially low potential. He's one that was one of the super early ones in the foundation phase, and just almost cruised his way through.

**I: Yeah. So, it's a bit of a mix?**

P: Yeah, and there's probably some of the middle ones that could go up based on some of those potential indicators as well.

**I: Yeah. So, with those gradings at the minute -- and I kind of think I know the answer because you kind of just answered it, would those gradings replicate or not replicate who would you select or deselect with deselection being lower and selection being higher?**

P: It's tough, my club answer is yes in terms of discussions we've had and who might be at risk. But my personal as the coach answer would be, I genuinely wouldn't release any of them this year, based on the fact that they got retained six months ago and all the adversity stuff that we spoke about, I think we'd probably need to see a little bit more of them to see whether they'd just try and put all the pieces together and find their way through some or all of these changes, rather than just the --- oh, they used to be good, so we signed them and then now they're not good, so we're not signing them. I think there's probably a little bit more for that and I think six months especially in the current climate, there's not a lot to really judge that.

I: **Yeah. Yeah. So, just referring to the high performing players, now. So, don't worry about the rest of them, is there anything that's a theme or that's consistent amongst all of them that places them in the high performing group?**

P: All apart from one are more attacking players.

I: **Okay. That's interesting. So, there is a positional maybe.**

P: Yeah, all apart from one or two. One of them was a half and half one. So, two are more defensive players, the others are all higher. I'd say apart from one they're all reasonably well rounded, so very good physically, technically quite good, they have a -- a reasonable game understanding. And yeah, they have a positive impact on the game. Mixed in terms of maturation, but I think that's -- like I said there, I think I made some of the decisions based on maturation rather than just sheer performance, so that's probably a little bit counterbalanced.

I: **When you say positive impact on the game, what does that mean?**

P: Scoring goals, creating goals, making positive passes, being quite purposeful, out of possession understanding how to press, and their role within that and being dominant within that, would probably -- yeah, that would probably be --

I: **Would they be consistent at doing that as well, then?**

P: Reasonably, yeah. Yeah, reasonably. But there's one ...the one that I put that he's had one game where he was horrendous, but generally would be pretty consistent. [That was about poor] game more than most of them. That poor game almost gave a nice of gauge of his learning as well, like his willingness to learn. So, we then played the same team three weeks

later, and he dealt with the situation completely differently, and we hadn't talked about that with him as much. But he'd almost recognized it himself and figured it out, which is quite nice.

**I: I was going to say this is obviously all in the context of the age group, so don't worry if they're not amazing, but we're going by the amazing on the context of an under 12.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So, is there anything that they -- I'm assuming within the higher group, there's things that they all probably do uniquely, which they're quite good at, maybe outstanding.**

P: Yeah.

**I: And would they be different?**

P: Yeah, there is a bit of a mix. So, I'll go down the list. One is -- would be -- if we're going to go outstanding, would be outstanding at his leadership traits, his general sort of personality, willingness to learn, desire, sort of I'm going to get every single ounce out of what I can every single day. So, that'll be more his. Next one down would be, just sort of creative, positive on the ball, like physically matching him with that as well. So, just quite an exciting player. Next one would be probably a -- probably no outstanding attribute, but just a mix of -- a combination of a lot of good attributes. So, he's just -- he's pretty good in quite a lot things that is making him do well.

**I: Yeah.**

P: The next one down would be similar, but probably really good at a lot of those. So, like, nearly outstanding in a lot of attributes, so clinically really, really good, understands the game, especially given that it's a transition to an [under] 11, and technically really tidy as well. The next one is the really late boy, so within the context of the challenge he faces, physically really good, technically really good, and a really good game understanding. Next one was the full back I've spoken about who's just really consistent, but outstanding with his one v one defending linked to, like, his footwork and the ability to accelerate and decelerate in one v one is really good. And then, second to last one would be partly intelligence, willingness to learn and, like, work rate and enthusiasm as well. So, he plays a nine, and he'll just go and press for days, and win the ball back [unclear 0:59:53] the pitch, and sometimes accidentally smash into people because he's just running around trying to win the ball so

high, but understands his role within that as well. And then, the last one would be similar to one of the top ones, like, really fluid mover, really creative on the ball, just some really exciting stuff.

**I: So, it sounds like to me there's actually a good theme amongst nearly all of them that their game intelligence, their understanding of their position, maybe even their decision-making, seems to be quite strong.**

P: Yeah, and to be fair, there's probably half of them who consistently play across a range of positions, which might link to that a little bit too, I suppose, with they're able to adapt to different positions, and understanding the roles of different positions too.

**I: So, now, going to low performers, it's similar sort of questions. Is there a theme or anything that places them all as low performers?**

P: Out of the four, two struggle a lot physically, probably doesn't use -- yeah, he probably doesn't use his stature and his strength to the best of his ability. So, he's got quite a big physical presence, but doesn't use it either really. And the other two are physically really good, but lacking in game understanding, and one is lacking in his tidiness of his basic techniques.

**I: It's interesting about the one that you said about is big and doesn't use it. I'm trying to -- I'm trying to sort of think of how to describe that, it's not really game intelligence, is it, it's almost self-awareness.**

P: It's a strange one because he's got some of the traits of, like, a really early maturer, so he'll take loads of touches when he doesn't necessarily need to because he can protect the ball. But then, say, out of possession, he wouldn't be running across getting his arm and his body in to push him off the ball. He'd been defending almost as if he was one of the small boys trying to dip a toe in. So, yeah, it's like a I think a self-awareness, and maybe even just a knowledge of how to use his body in certain situations too.

**I: Yeah. Yeah, I guess that's quite a key one, is this idea that he sounds like you've got the opposite in that late maturer and the higher who completely understands what his body is and how to use, versus this guy in the lower who doesn't understand his body and doesn't know how to use it. So, that's quite an interesting one. Within that lower group, is there**

**anything that they might have unique that they do well, but maybe it actually doesn't in fact impact their performance?**

P: Well, the one who's the early maturer is actually technically -- especially for an early mature, he's technically -- he's really tidy, but because he -- probably because he is technically quite tidy, he can get away with his size, he wants to touch the ball as many times as he can every time he gets it. And then, probably linked to the being early part as well, he doesn't check his shoulders as much as he could do, so that stops him playing forward as much and being as positive with the ball. But actually, technically he's really good.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Another one is actually a really good defender in terms of doing, like, almost the dirty side of defending. The -- he'll happily put his face on the way to get blocked and that sort of ugly stuff that people don't necessarily want to do, he's quite happy to do and just get stuck in which is quite unique, I suppose, in that not everyone wants to just get their face in the way, do they.

I: **Yeah.**

P: Then, one of the other two -- well, both of the other two are physically really good. Both have got gymnastics backgrounds as well, which is quite interesting. And then, one of them is left-footed and his ball strike on his left foot is excellent. He can strike with really nice power and really nice accuracy off his left foot, but just needs to add up some of the decisions of what -- how he uses that, and be able to see some of the pitches, and it will work really nice for him.

I: **So, it's -- again, it's quite an interesting one there, and it sounds like they have these outstanding abilities, but maybe they don't have that intelligence or that -- the right decisions to know when to apply them and how to apply them, as well as sort of probably of lack of other areas that may be required to compliment that fuller trait.**

P: Yeah. Yeah, they've definitely got -- and I think that's the -- that's the bit that spins back into the potential, isn't it, of they've got these, and we know these are probably the limiting factors, and how can we almost counter the limiting factors to help drag these qualities, these outstanding attributes out.

**I: Yeah. So, now, the last set of questions, there's only a couple more. The mid-performing group, how did you distinguish a line between not being in the lower and not being in the higher groups?**

P: So, that's when I ended up doing some H slash Ms and stuff like that. Generally, the middle group are probably a little more inconsistent.

**I: But more consistent than the lower?**

P: Yes, and potentially more -- have more of a game impact in those better games than the lower group do in their better games.

**I: Yeah.**

P: The middle group probably have better indicators of potential than the lower group as well, even if some of the performances might have been similar. A couple could have been argued high, but maybe not as consistent as the high group to have been pushed up. And then, yeah, a couple have maybe got, like, one significant area that would push them up to the high group if they could just get around it.

**I: Is there a consistent -- is there anything that they consistently all lack that might stop them from being in the top, or is there -- is that more unique?**

P: More individualized, I think.

**I: What might a couple of examples be?**

P: One really struggled with his emotional control, so you could lose him for ten minutes of the game just because he's lost the ball, which is quite tough because he's actually -- his outstanding attribute would be his range of pass and his vision. So, he sees some really difficult passes and some really clever passes that we don't see....But then, because he's trying those passes all the time, he obviously then loses the ball more, and then he can just - - yeah, you can just lose him for a bit where he's frustrated inside his own head. Another one would be one who is probably always would have been high in the younger groups, but he's going through an unbelievable amount of growth and looks -- yeah, just looks to struggle physically at the moment, which means he's not performing very high. But it's nice to have that bit of context around with the physical stuff. The other example is the boy who's just moved to playing as striker, so he's not performing consistently really good, but

he's also learning some of the stuff and putting into practice some bits, so he's sort of in between. And then, the others are just generally a bit up and down. They can be pretty good one week, and then not so great the next week, and they just have a little bit more of a zig zaggy type pattern.

#### **8.10.21 Participant 21**

P: Development Phase Coach at [club], working with the under-16's.

I: **And what academy category status is that?**

P: Category one.

I: **And what league does your first team play in?**

P: The Premier League.

I: **How long have you worked in football?**

P: Approximately in terms of paid employment 10 years.

I: **And in your current position?**

P: So at [club] for four years, just over.

I: **And I'm sure later on you'll talk about the 16's?**

P: Yeah.

I: **So the more interesting stuff, and this is the bit you're probably going to repeat now. Can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Sure, so as growing up always had an interest in sport, particularly football, loved keeping kind of fit and active, and after my A-levels went to university to study sports science, kind of without a real idea of what I wanted to be, whether it was a teacher or a coach, sports scientist, fitness coach, gym instructor – anything, just knew I liked sport so wasn't quite sure what job to take, so I decided to go to university.

While I was at uni I took on a placement at [club] as an intern with the Sports Science Department and the experience was doing fitness tests, helping out a little bit with heart-rate data and those sorts of things, and then after spending a little bit of time there at the end of my degree got offered the opportunity to do a Masters by research with them, so being full-time there for that year, collecting heart-rate data and recovery data with the under-18 team, and that was fully funded by [named] uni. Again, at that point I still wasn't 100 percent sure about what I wanted to pursue long-term, was just taking any opportunity to stay in education, get more qualifications, and obviously spending time in football getting work experience, it was the best of both worlds. And then again because I'd spent so long there, I'd become quite familiar with some of the staff, I'd taken my Level 1 and Level 2 football coaching qualification, again just keeping everything quite broad, doing qualifications where I could, just to pick up and enhance the CV. I got offered the opportunity to go in my UEFA B and [club] said that they would pay for that, and then I could do a little bit of paid work working with the younger age groups.

I did that and then, yes, started working part-time at [club] as a coach, found out I enjoyed it. And then I was really fortunate with the next part, because as a really inexperienced football coach in academy football I managed to get a full-time position at [club] probably almost six months after doing my UEFA B. So then I went to [club] and became a full-time football coach there working predominately foundation at the start, and then I left in 2017 so I'd spent about five seasons there and worked all the way up to under-18, and left in the end to come to [club] which I just saw the opportunity of working at a bigger [club], the opportunity to learn so much more from having the multidisciplinary team that the [club] has got across sports science, physio, psychology analysis that yeah, that probably really helped me in my development and something that I needed. So, I've been there for just over four years now.

**I: That is an incredible journey, and I'm guessing from the point of a coach it probably bodes quite well, because you've got a really full understanding of player development in a wider MDT.**

**P:** Yes, I certainly understand where a sports scientist in particular is sitting on that table, and what they're probably feeling having sat in that position myself, in a similar position to myself listening to coaches and kind of understanding their needs and what they want to get from things. So yeah, I guess it's a little bit of a different pathway, not specialising too early. And before going to [club] on my internship having no experience of academy football, I



played football when I was growing-up but only kind of grass roots. Always had a massive interest and loved watching football and playing, but in terms of professional football and academy football I had zero experience, so it was definitely being thrown in at the deep end in the first few years trying to learn everything.

**I: Which is fine, because not to derail my own interview too early but, you're one of the few coaches that actually hasn't come from a... not necessarily a great background but from an extensive background let's say, in football.**

P: Yeah.

**I: How would you describe your current role?**

P: I lead the under 16's group and basically run their programme from a team point of view and an individual point of view, so with their ILPs and things like that. Under 16 is obviously a big year in terms of scholarship decisions, so it's supporting them through that process, whether they get a successful decision at [club] and they get to continue their journey with us or supporting them in their next move and trying to help them get a club elsewhere. With that, not just obviously from the boys' point of view, it's leading and collaborating with an MDT team that's quite extensive. So, there's another coach in there, we have psychology analysis, sports science, there's nutrition, there's every discipline that you could possibly think of we have access to. So it's then linking in with them, finding out what their needs are and what they want to do with the boys, and where they think they can help and benefit. Sometimes me directing them as well, asking them for support on certain things, but yeah that's another really big part of the role is leading that team and making sure it's firing on all cylinders, and supporting the boys in every way possible.

**I: I know you can sometimes get constrained by the academy's in what they allow, but outside of that do you have your own philosophy or beliefs towards player development?**

P: So I'm lucky probably where I am at [club] that views are kind of aligned, particularly from a long-term point of view having patience with the boys and trying to develop them over a long period, rather than losing faith and releasing them early if you like. But in general I describe my coaching philosophy as being collaborative, so wanting to work with others, definitely not someone who thinks he's got all the answers and just wants to do his own thing; I'm very happy to listen to people and to take onboard other people's opinions and suggestions and finding the best one that fits.

I would describe my style with the players as very player-centred, and trying to be all about them, really trying to get to know them and help them in every way possible being as supportive as I can. In terms of a football perspective I like to see the boys play as much football as they can in terms of getting the ball down, taking risks and trying to play a really good brand of football that you see teams like our first team play, and the other top clubs, obviously a little bit more of a watered-down version in terms of the ability levels of the younger players. But I think that's where sometimes at [club] it was possibly different where results probably carried a little bit more importance at times, and maybe the philosophy wasn't that well engrained into what we were trying to do.

So at [club] it is very much development first which goes hand-in-hand with the way that I like to work at the moment with trying to help the boys as much as I can, and there's no pressure on having to get a result in a certain game or anything like that.

**I: So is that almost a focus on the environment being a comfortable one so that they can take those risks and there's not a consequence for doing so?**

P: Yeah, I think this is a really tough balance to strike where the environment isn't so relaxed where there's never any consequence or there's no challenge in what we're doing, it's really important to strike that balance, but I think something that I'm quite good at identifying is where someone's trying to do the right thing that you might have asked them, or that aligns really well with their ILP, or what the academy philosophy is, and where someone is showing a lack of effort which is not what we want to see. So, it's creating that environment where the boys feel safe enough to try things and make mistakes, but also, they have to ensure that it's backed-up with a well thought out idea and 100 percent effort, because I think with the environment times if you are relaxed but there's no consequence, or there's no challenge, that isn't a healthy environment for development.

**I: Yeah, agreed. When you are working with the players, do you have any expectations on capabilities for future success?**

P: So, would you be looking at data or...?

**I: I guess a bit of both. I know that a lot of clubs have basically stated that there are some positional ones, so maybe that's the same with you, but that could be across all of the domains as it were.**

P: In terms of... we use benchmarking data from an analysis point of view, and we're lucky where we've collected that data over such a long period we can look back at – just taking under-16's for example; under 16's that have been successful in getting a scholar and those that haven't, you can measure against those benchmarks, and we're lucky where we've got that all the way to positions, so what we expect a centre midfielder to do, the centre defender and so-on.

With that as well the sports science data is really important in terms of tracking maturation, and where they are at that moment in time. Something that I think could probably add value is if you had enough data you could not only track it positionally, but also from a maturation perspective, and what does a late or early developer look like in under-16 Cat 1 football, what kind of stats should we be looking for. Does that kind of answer your question?

I: **Yeah definitely. So now going into a bit more strategy stuff, I'll ask some stuff around selection/deselection, and I mean the contract side of things at the end of the season, as opposed to game selection. So, when you are creating development plans or go through deselection/selection process, who would be involved in those processes?**

P: Very much an MDT approach, it wouldn't just be the coach having his say on who should progress and who shouldn't. So in terms of a meeting you might be looking at the coaches of that age group, and then you'd be looking at the MDT around that group as well, so the sport science, psychology analysis, strengthening conditioning, you might have player care or Head of Welfare, Head of Education in there, so we very much look at it from a holistic point of view. Then topping it up on the football side, Head of Coaching, from a 16's point of view as well you might have the under-18's coach because obviously they're the boys that he's going to inherit, and the Academy Manager, and the Head of Recruitment.

So really it sounds complicated throwing that many people into the pot, but it's really important to talk about the boys in detail from every aspect, not just from what they can do on the football pitch, because someone could excel from a physical point of view, and the sports scientist really needs to get that across to everyone in the meeting. Someone could have had a really stressful year in terms of their home life which could well be happening in these times, and the player carer or the Head of Welfare needs to ensure that everyone's aware of that, and that could have impacted on their football and their performances. The analysis from the stats and the data side, where they are on the benchmarks and potentially how that compares to players gone by in the past.

Then also from not just looking at whether we can get this boy through, it's also important to talk about, well if we're not going to take this boy, what's the plan? What support does he need next? Who are we going to pick up the phone to try and get him trials elsewhere? What contacts have we got from then a recruitment side as well, it needs to be discussed if we're not looking to take a boy then what potentially is coming in to take his place? So, there's a lot of factors to take into account when you're having those meetings. But yeah, in general that's how a meeting would look in terms of personnel.

**I: You've gone into good depth of almost the process as well; from a coaching point of view... because from sports science it's almost fairly easy in the sense of you can get objective measures and you have that data, what does that look like from a coaching point of view?**

**P:** It's a really good question. I do like to use the data from the analysis to challenge my thoughts on what I've seen or reinforce. So for example I got it wrong a few months ago in an MDT meeting where I thought a boy had done a little bit better than the stats had suggested, his stats actually suggested he was a long way off from what I thought he was doing, so I had to realign my thoughts and my judgement on him because he clearly wasn't doing the things that I thought he was. That came down to a little bit of bias I think from myself, where this boy was in terms of attitude and application excellent and that kind of clouded my judgement on some of the other parts of his performance, which unfortunately weren't quite up to the level of a technical point of view.

So it can work like that, or it works the other way where you say this boy is an excellent passer, he's really good at breaking lines and the stats reinforce that. Then we use a scoring system on the PMA which is after every game we rate the players out of 10, we have statements attached to each number, so if you're a 10 in a game it would be an international standard level of performance, and just off the top of my head if you were a three it's a grassroots player performance, and then everything else in the middle – an 8 or a 9 might be just the best player on the pitch, top three players on the pitch – one lower than that and so on. So we use that.

We can talk about the scores, so this player on average in the Cat 1 games programme has scored a seven would look really good because he's been the best player on the pitch in a few games, the score's quite high on the scale. If someone is a four, then again if you're saying this kid is good but you've only scored him a four on average, again you've just got to

check yourself and identify what it is that you're looking at in terms of his performances and does the data correlate with that.

So I try to get as much information as I can now to try and inform my opinion on players, and particularly inform my opinion maybe on the boys who do challenge my biases a little bit more. Like I gave the example of the boy that I thought was doing really well because he suited my style of coaching and the way I want a player to be, but what about the boys who don't quite fit that mould for me, and my opinion might be, 'I can't, I've got to be professional,' I've got to give them a fair opportunity and gather all the information I can on them, to make sure it's as objective as possible, rather than just whether I like the kid or not.

**I: Just on that point, do you find that might be where some academies struggle, where they might give a better opportunity to the players that they would consider fitting what they want, versus the ones that they don't, but not necessarily realise that actually the stats don't back up still?**

P: Certainly. I think biases are really hard to get away from, and you only become aware of them when you do a bit of reading or research into that area. Some people won't even be aware they're doing it, they'll be acting with the best intentions. Also at [Club] we're not really loose in terms of it will be the wrong word to describe us as really loose in terms of the types of players that we want, but we're not rigid to just say we want a wide player just to do this in a game, stand on the touchline, come inside, or we want a dribbler just as a wide player; we really try to take into account that every player has got their own identity, and if they've got what we consider to be a super-strength that is good enough to go to the next level, so into the PDP, then that's good enough for us.

Every club is different in terms of their philosophy and the way they want to develop players. If for example you only play 4 – 3 – 3 in terms of your teams in your academy, then you're only to probably produce a certain type of player. Whereas if they're flexible with them over the period of their development, and they play in numerous formations, maybe different positions at times, or it can be the same position with a different formation – it just has a different role, you might develop something else in the boy, or the different formation/different role might allow someone else to shine. So it's keeping that pathway as broad and open as possible I think is important.

**I: Those development plans, that process for deselection and selection, and also what you're talking about then, does that link towards creating those ILPs?**

P: Yes, definitely. The ILPs are for us really important in terms of detailing what the players strengths are and what they need to work on, and also informing their development and their needs and requirements over the season. We spend a lot of time designing the ILP with the player so it's very much a two-way process in terms of getting the players ideas on what he thinks he's good at, and what he thinks he needs to work on to get to the next stage. Then from the coach's point of view it's first of all an agreement has to be reached with the player that yeah, we're on the right path here in terms of identifying who you are as a footballer, and then how do you go and improve in those areas and detailing all of that.

So again, every player has a different set of strengths, and we do try to work on their strengths so it's very much a strengths-based programme, we won't try to say to one of our strikers, 'You need to have this as a strength,' if they've got something else that's a strength, we will continue working on that. For example, you might have a boy who is really quick at his pace, his pace is one of his real strengths, obviously he might like getting in behind defences and running onto things, but then you might have a boy who is not as quick but is a bit taller and stronger, and he likes to be a little bit more of a linker. So, you could have your Jamie Vardy, or you could have your Diego Costa type, but both are good enough to potentially play in the Premier League, but Diego Costa is never going to be Jamie Vardy, and so it's making sure that you work on that particular player's strengths to give him every chance of progressing.

**I: Is that almost like rather than making the player adapt to you, it becomes the coach adapting to the player?**

P: Yes, and that's where I think our programme helps, where we're allowed a little bit of choice over what formations we play at different groups. Playing style, we have some playing style rules – not rules if you like but principles, which guide the way we want to play in terms of play out from the back, dominate possession, and those sorts of things, but there's nothing in there which says that you can't go long over the top if that's the best thing to do, or anything like that. So again, the coaches have got the flexibility to develop their players in line with their ILPs and their strengths, but also be faithful to the academy philosophy.

Whereas, if you only had a 4 – 3 – 3 and, 'We're going to play like this,' I know patterns of play, and 'We're going to play out from the back like this. You have to move here, you have to pass there,' all that stuff is great and can certainly help, but also there may be a limiting factor for some boys – for some boys it will certainly work for and they will develop in that

programme and go and play at a really high standard, but for others that just might not suit them. So yeah, I think giving them a variety is key.

**I: Yes, definitely. I know you've mentioned quite a few times about your holistic approach, and just in regard to the FA four corner model, what are your opinions on that model?**

P: I think it's [pause] we still use it to talk about sight, social, technical, physical, and I know the FA kind of technical/tactical are together, so when we discuss a player, we certainly talk about all those four things. I think it's a really easy model to understand and get thinking about when you're talking about player, and maybe identifying where their strengths and weaknesses are. We have boys who technical – tech-tac might not be their strength, but psych and social might be, and does that have value to what we're trying to do? Is there potentially a pathway for a player whose super-strength could be around his communication skills or his confidence, and things like that. His commitment, obviously their football has to be at a certain level but is there scope to develop a boy like that? And the same from a physical point of view certainly, where a boy could come in and physically, they're outstanding in terms of their speed, their agility, their balance, but they need technical work. So I think it's a really good model for identifying where a potential player's strengths and weaknesses are and guiding a really informed conversation.

**I: Would you say that they're equal, so it's not like one is more important than the other?**

P: Yes, this is a really good question. I would say in terms of player selection and deselection I think the two corners that probably carry the most weight are physical and tech-tac, and social - not that I think it's right, I just think that potentially they carry less weight. I think with Psych and social I think maybe there's a view that players can cope without it, so without the necessary training if you like in that area, it's getting better but it's certainly not the most funded area across academies at all. We are lucky where we have got psychology provision, but I know that at [club] that was completely unheard of, and a sports scientist or a strength and conditioning coach had been prioritised before a sports psychologist, which is why the perception is possibly that those two corners carry more weight.

Also I think if you've got a player who is perceived not to be strong psychologically or socially, can you train the boy in that area? Can you help the boy to give him those skills to develop? I think there is a perception that potentially we can't change the way people think, or the way they behave; whereas there is a firm belief that we can make a boy stronger, we

can make them quicker to an extent, and obviously we can improve them technically/tactically, but maybe the same beliefs aren't held across all four corners.

**I: Yes, so it's almost like the psychological stuff maybe needs more work, not because it's more important but because it's more neglected?**

P: Yeah, it's one of those areas that is definitely emerging and becoming more prominent. So for example for me from a coach's point of view, the four-corner model was discussed on my Level 1, Level 2, UEFA B, UEFA A, the first time I ever spent any sort of significant time, and whether you can call three days significant, was on my advanced youth award where it was three days dedicated to psychology. Even though the coach should certainly be educated in that area, I would suggest that yes, it isn't spoken about enough, it isn't taught enough on coach education courses, and it's probably an underfunded area across most academies.

I do think like I say it's emerging in terms of things are getting better, so not just having sport psychology provision at [club] now, we've also got player care which links into mental health, mental wellbeing side of things which is really-really important when you're working with young people. So I think those roles are growing, and overtime I think they will become more prominent across all parts of the game, and become really-really important, which I think is needed. In terms of players development they need to experience success, but they also need to experience how to deal with tough difficult times as well. How many players who have had a tough and difficult time and then not knowing how to deal with it or have any strategies to be able to do it, and then have we done them a disservice and then stalled them in their development, because we haven't got the necessary skills or strategies to be able to help them.

From a sports scient strengthening conditioning point of view, in an academy now if a boy needs a gym programme, he can have one straightaway. From a sports science point of view that isn't the case across all academies.

**I: Yes, agreed. I'm going to come back to a previous point you made about the objective data that you get, and you actually said that you were wrong on one player. The question I was going to ask is, how well do you feel objective assessments replicate performance? But I guess I'm going to slightly change that for you to be more of, when you have seen a player that you felt the stats hasn't represented, and I know you highlighted potentially a bias of yours, but have there been instances where you found that actually it just doesn't represent them?**



P: [Pause] So almost the other way around, the stats aren't giving the full picture?

I: **Yeah.**

P: So, I think one of the problems we've had this year when we've looked at players and the data, is we haven't actually got enough data, because the accessibility that we've had to the games programme with obviously being on and off so much has really impacted the number of games the boys can play. Then even though we've maybe played 15 to 20 games this season at under-16, some of our boys have only played about half of that because they have injuries, then there's isolations that they have to do when they get sent home from school. So, some of our players that scored really highly on the data last year, this season they're really coming under the radar if you like, the benchmark, but that's only because the quantity of data just isn't there. So, we've had to factor that in.

There was a boy who... it's hard to describe his game style, he's someone that as a coach I would describe as a very effective gameplayer, but from a technical point of view, from a tactical point of view he isn't that strong, he would make a lot of mistakes in games. When I say he's an effective gameplayer, he's so involved he has a lot of actions because his GPS will be sky-high, he does a lot of running, really good from a physical point of view, but he makes a lot of mistakes as well, but he's really effective in terms of impacting the game and getting noticed.

Again, it just comes back down to what type of player you want. Some players are really effective at sprinting, covering the ground on the pitch, having lots of involvements around the ball, so they might be really effective on the press and getting up to the ball. They might be really good at making runs where they don't get the ball, so it doesn't register as anything apart from a sprint on their GPS, you won't see it on a technical radar, but that helps someone else get on the ball because it's a movement that they consistently do. It's that immeasurable stuff that as well you have to take into account, we've had players like that in the past in our system who, yes, they didn't always show up as one of the best players from a stats point of view, but from a coach's point of view he always does well, people haven't got a bad word to say about him, or the coach always picks him because yes, he does have an effect on the game, even though he might not be the one who catches the [35:31 s.l. eye] but with a dribble that beats two or three players, or plays the defence splitting pass, he's constantly on the move and he's constantly involved in the nitty-gritty part of the game if you like.

**I: Yes, that's almost the unmeasurable I think as you said. I guess part of it as well it's easy to lose the context between the two things. So, testing – I think physical testing is an easier one to consider, the context of physical testing has the requirements of you to run for example, versus the context of a game has the requirements of you to run at an instance of a decision, that's the correct decision to run. So, yes, I think that's aligning to what you're saying there I guess, in the sense of actually certain stats are good but they might not show the full picture.**

**P:** Definitely. I think the managers – I'm first team now, in all teams there will be that player that fans are like, 'Why does he pick him, he doesn't do anything,' but the manager will pick that person every week because whether it's just for the balance of the team that this player really helps with, or he excels in doing a particular role really well, he gets into the right position that again when the team haven't got the ball, you can't measure it, but he stops the opposition doing something. Yeah, it's that – that immeasurable what that player does that gets him in the team, and like I say there's a number of teams out there that the fans will go, 'I don't get why the manager picked him.'

**I: So, a couple of scenario-based questions for you now. If you had a player that excelled in the foundation phase, how would that inform you of their future success?**

**P:** I think it depends in what area they excelled in, in the foundation, in terms of again the four-corner model. So, if they excelled from a physical point of view in that they were really quick or had outstanding agility, I think we would back ourselves, so keep that player quick all the way through the YDP with the provision that we can provide. Obviously, players go through their maturation there's a bit of a no, but I think in terms of coming to the end of foundation in terms of how that player viewed, we'd be really excited about having that player with us.

If the player was really good technically but wasn't as good physically and we could see that potentially he was maybe an early mature, and was only having so much success at foundation because of his early maturing status, we would be a little bit more wary, and what we try to do is challenge that boy as quickly as we can in the YDP by potentially playing him in an older age-group, or when we do buyer-banded stuff, playing him and his buyer band. So, even though everyone's excited technically because he's scoring lots of goals, or makes lots of excellent passes, we would have our guard up that, oh, is this just fools-gold if you like where it's early success because of maturation.

We'd also be very interested in the later developers in the foundation who maybe are not excelling in every aspect, but they've coped if you like within the programme and they've shown glimpses of quality, we'd be really excited about watching them go through the YDP and design an appropriate programme for them with the challenges and that sort of stuff, to give them the best opportunity of continuing to develop. Does that answer your question?

**I: Yes. Does that almost allude that something like speed as an example, is that something that's more inherent and harder to develop, whereas technical skills are something that pretty much everyone can develop with coaching?**

P: Yeah, certainly I think speed can only be developed to a certain point in everyone, and some people are quicker than others just to do with their genetic makeup and the way they're built. However, with the technical side, again I think it's similar, I don't think everyone has the ability to become Lionel Messi or Virgil Van Dijk, or Jordan Henderson in the middle of midfield. Some of it's already developed within them that allows them to be, and then as well it's probably not just to do with what they've got, it's not a technical gift, but it might be to do with an inner motivation that they've got to keep getting better at their craft, that self-motivation type stuff where I'm sure we've both seen players that you think are really talented and they have all the ability in the world, but they haven't got that inner motivation to keep getting better and to keep effecting what they're really good at. So then they reach a ceiling.

So, yeah for me it works a little bit like that, where some stuff that we can give to the, but also there's a lot of stuff that is already in there from probably not just genetics but from the environment that they've grown up in at home, from what their parents, their grandparents, their brothers, their sisters, how they are with them, their school, all that which is going on in their outside life which is affecting their behaviour. Some get really good messages and support, and some get messages that yeah, you probably wouldn't want them to hear because you know that doesn't fit with the attitudes and beliefs of what we want, in terms of improving every day. For example, if a player was technically really good and dad was saying to him, 'Yeah, you're just naturally amazing at that,' it gives that impression that you don't need to work, you don't need to practice, because 'That just came to me,' when we all know that you need to keep practicing and you need to keep that desire to improve. So, that would be the growth mindset stuff I guess, which is really important for the young players.

**I: So a similar question but the other way around, if you had a player that came to you in the youth phase, and they've absolutely zero academy experience prior to that, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: At under 14 we took a boy who has now just been offered a scholarship with us. Although he'd been on trial at a couple of clubs in the [area] he hadn't been in an academy in terms of a prolonged period. He played grassroots football and was just starting to get noticed, he'd been and sampled a couple of trials and they hadn't taken him. So he came to us and we actually put him into a position which again he had very little experience in, he played right-wing for his club and we played him centre back. Physically in terms of his speed and his athleticism he scored really-really well in terms of our tests and came out really high on that. One of the reasons why we thought potentially he could be a defender, his predicted height came out 6ft 2in, so again we thought there was something worth pursuing there. From a technical and tactical ability he was tactically quite poor, technically he was just okay, you wouldn't have called him one of the strong ones in the group. So we developed him over the last two years really, and what's been interesting is the progress that he's made, not just because... we have given him a good programme but there's also been a lot of commitment there from the boy in terms of the way he's taken on the information, and practiced, and all those sorts of things.

But also from his point of view there's been that thirst, a thirst for wanting knowledge, and a thirst for wanting to get better, because he's never had any of the experiences that he's been getting over the last two years. In his younger years when he was playing grassroots football he'd never been on tour, he'd never trained three or four times a week and played two football matches a week at Manchester United, Chelsea, and all those types – all this stuff was brand new to him. So his motivation was really high, especially because he was probably at an age where he could understand, 'I love football, I want to get better at it, and I see a real opportunity here to progress.' Whereas for a boy that's been in from nine, maybe that flame dims a little bit at times with some, which is a skill for the academies to keep that flame alive when they're with them for so long.

So we would do a real talent ID kind of process on anyone coming into the building in YDP, and identifying what are their strengths, do we need a player in this particular position, because we could have taken this player and thought, yeah, he could be a centre back, but we already have three good centre backs, and then he's not going to play and get any practice so there's no point in taking him. Whereas there was a pathway available, he was

going to get a lot of opportunity to gain time and experience different things. So a real in-depth talent ID process for anyone coming in the building that late; because it is tough without having the technical foundation, even some of the experiences they gain in foundation they are valuable and I'm certainly not saying that everyone should come in at 14 because it's brand new to them, and there's a bit more energy towards it. He had missed out on all of that, but we managed to get him to a level where we could offer him a scholarship.

**I: Would you say that sometimes coaching age, or playing age, it might indicate potential, for arguments sake on a positive if it's very low, and they're learning very quickly, their ceiling actually might be quite high but your obviously yet to determine it?**

P: Yeah, I'm sure there are boys out there who maybe have never kicked a football in their life but could have been; given the opportunity they could have been excellent, and that probably goes across all sports that there are people just walking the street who could have been the quickest man on earth or something like that, but just never had the access to training and the opportunity to participate in that sport. So yes, for me I would say it's a real hard one to judge, we weren't 100 percent sure we were going to get this one right, and it's not saying that he's going to go and play for anybody's first team, never mind [club]. He's got to the next stage and it will be interesting to see what happens next.

Again, where we're lucky at [club] is, we've got a lot of people that have worked at the club for a long time and they've seen a lot of player journeys. So people like [players names] who are in and around [clubs] first team now, they were with the club since under-9, so we do speak a lot about the kids that we get in at foundation, seeing the journey with them all the way through. Why do we release them, under 12, under 15, or under 16? Because who knows, if we keep giving them the opportunity of our environment for long enough, they might get to the level where they're good enough to play for our first team. [Player] they speak a lot about him at the club, he came in a little bit later, I think he came in at 11 or 12, but at under 15, maybe under 16, he was really struggling to even get in the team for his age-group.

That has built a lot of the conversation with our staff around why do we get rid of players, because there could be [player] where, alright one coach doesn't pick them because he's not good enough at that point in time, or he's not big enough at that point in time, whatever, but [player] then I think when he was in his scholarship, which obviously he managed to get

a scholarship, he was playing for England then, so it kind of came from nowhere if you like the way his trajectory went after not being able to play for the under-15's, and not getting picked for the team. Some of his interviews that are out there, he speaks about that, that he couldn't... I think he speaks about a particular coach that really helped him during that period. So again, it comes down to that opportunity where he was lucky that okay one coach wasn't picking him, but then another coach maybe took him the next year and thought, 'I can work with this boy, I can make him better, he's got things in his game that I really like, and yeah we can build on this.' Whereas for somebody else...

**I: Sorry, is that something that you would find some coaches would develop better relationships with players, therefore get more out of a player?**

**P:** Yeah, I think it exists. It comes a little bit down to those biases, and you've got to be really aware of them as a coach. At the end of the day in your squad, in your team, it's the same as your worklife, you're coming into contact with 15 different people, you're not going to be best friends with every single one, and you're definitely going to warm towards potentially a couple because they value the same things that I do, or they're a little bit like me when I was young. Then there will be others that you just can't relate to, and you've got to be really aware of that when you're discussing players in terms of how they're doing in their development, and obviously deselection and selection because you can't let those things get in the way.

The one thing... and this is one of the reasons why with our MDT I try to bring them as close to the players as well as much as possible, I don't want them thinking that they can't talk to the boys because I think what's really important is, I'm not going to be best friends with every single player, but I think out of the six or seven MDT staff we've got, the potential for one player being able to hook in really well with one of us is quite high, and that doesn't always have to be the coach. So if it is our analysis that has a really good relationship with our centre back, then I think that's absolutely fine, there can be certain things then that maybe the coach can use if he's aware of that – that they have a real strong relationship the coach can use that maybe for... 'Right, there's a bit of work for you to do today with this centre half around his game'. The analysts can go and talk to them and deliver that message. Again, as long as the coach is happy giving up that... it's the wrong word, but giving up that power, if you like.

**I: Yeah, I know what you're saying.**

- P: Yeah, from a leader's point of view I think that's a real strong leadership position.
- I: **That's quite a common thread that I've heard across, is this idea of you can make or break a player based on your own self-fulfilling prophesy, if you think he's good you apply the time for him and he gets better, versus if you don't think he's good you don't give him the time, and therefore he doesn't get any better. So, yeah, it makes a lot of sense.**
- So, the last part now, this shouldn't take too long if I'm honest with you. This is where you need your team sheet. So a couple of activities to do first of all, all I need you to do is, you need to place a letter H next to any players in your squad that you would consider to be a high performer.
- P: No problem.
- I: **There can be as many or as little as you want.**
- P: Done.
- I: **And then you're going to do a similar process, now you're going to put an L next to anyone that you consider to be a lower performer.**
- P: Done.
- I: **And anyone who hasn't got a letter would be an M, obviously they'd be a mid-performer. And now you've got those groupings, if you want to change anyone, you're welcome to make any adjustments.**
- P: No problem.
- I: **Then all I need is to know how many you've got in each group.**
- P: Okay, so I've got two high performers, then medium I've got nine, and two low.
- I: **So, how have you determined who is in what group?**
- P: [Laughs] I thought first of all about who's been offered a scholarship with us, and who's been released, so that was the first thing that sprung into my head. But then I have given mediums to some boys that we have said no to, for me when we were going through our selection/deselection, they were really good conversations from a selection/deselection point of view as reasons for and reasons against taking them. Then also the guys who I gave

high performing to, I thought about who has performed best in our games programme, who has played at an international standard and received that recognition for their age-group, and the two that have played really well in their own games programme, received international recognition, and then as well have played under-17 football and received good feedback, I've gone for them as my high ones. I didn't think about maturation status or anything like that.

**I: That's alright. Since your time working with those, mightn't the players have shifted groups, so a medium might have been a high or a low, likewise a low might have been a medium etc?**

P: Definitely. Over the last few years definitely. We've seen possibly... yeah, someone go from high to medium. We've seen since I would say... this is a really interesting one for one of the boys, someone who would have been... in fact I'll go for both of them, two boys at under-12 who would be seen to high-performers are now low-performers.

**I: Wow! Okay, why do you think that might be?**

P: So under 12 these boys will have played a lot of 9 v 9 and going to the 11 v 11 these couple of boys in particular found it really challenging and are still quite low in terms of their maturation, certainly late developers. But yeah, they really struggled with that adjustment to 11 v 11 playing on the big open spaces, even though they're low from a maturation point of view, physically they're not the best, so they really savoured playing on those smaller pitches in those tighter areas.

**I: That's interesting. Now, if you just consider the top two, is there anything that those two specifically do, they might both do, that outshines the rest of them which is why they're top performers?**

P: Yeah, their ability on the ball.

**I: Is that technically or game understanding?**

P: That would be both I would say, yeah. Probably more their ability on the ball technically, physically very good. One I would say is psychologically better than the other, and there will be mediums who are psychologically better than this other high performer, but he's still outstanding in other areas.



- I: With those two then, what areas would they be uniquely outstanding in then?**
- P: So being specific, one would be high performing in his passing technically, and the other would-be high performing in his dribbling.
- I: So, I will talk about both but, the one with the passing is that the choice of passes, or is it moreso the execution?**
- P: I'd say it's both, so it would be his decision-making, and it would be his execution.
- I: And then the dribbler, is it a case of he can dribble and then it doesn't just end there, it leads on to something else? So again it might be decisions of when to dribble, but also the idea of there's a finishing product, whether that's a pass or whether that's a shot, as opposed to just a dribble?**
- P: Yeah, definitely it will be his ability to beat people, and get assists and get goals. It would also be the ability to have almost wow moments, to be able to do things on the pitch that potentially no-one else can do and beat maybe not just one player but numerous players with one move.
- I: So quite the player by the sounds of it then.**
- P: He's a good player yeah.
- I: Is there anything they do that you could almost take it away – an attribute away, but they'd still be a high performer?**
- P: [Pause] Yeah, because those couple of bits that we spoke about are that strong, you could still take something else away and that would still stand out as, yeah that's a real-real strength, definitely.
- I: So now, if you just refer to your lower performers, again I know there's only two of them but that shouldn't make a difference, is there anything that's consistent as to why they're both there, so a theme across both of them?**
- P: I would say being late maturers is a theme. [Pause] I would say as well to do with their psychology, neither player had the awareness or the desire to really want to change their game from moving from smaller pitches to larger areas, also coming up against physically more mature boys and opponents, to really try to adapt and change to that. They were very

similar players, obviously they had developed a little bit but very similar players in terms of the things that they tried to do on the pitch, to what they were trying to do at under-12, which they found really challenging. So, just an example, playing 11 v 11 and within a team of those older ages, it's more about not just you on the ball anymore and 'me and my ball' if you like, and dribbling around everywhere, it's more around the role that you can do within a team, but obviously there's that side of it as well, 'me and my ball and what can I do with it?' I think they really struggled grasping that and that changeover across the phases.

**I: Is that almost – not quite game intelligence, but almost a sense of 'I'm playing the game that I want to play,' versus 'playing the game that needs to be played from what's in front of me?'**

P: Definitely, game intelligence, kind of awareness of almost of what brings about success, a lack of awareness of what coaches are looking for at those ages, particularly when it doesn't... so nothing wrong with holding onto the ball and setting someone up or scoring a goal yourself, but when you're not sharing the ball and it keeps breaking down, it becomes something that you have to try and change and educate the players on. So, yeah, I agree.

**I: And if they're not learning from that error as well, I guess that's...**

P: Yeah, again another sign, so if they keep making the same mistakes, another sign that maybe they're not learning from what's going on, and what's around them.

**I: With those two players, is there anything that they're really good at but it probably doesn't affect their performance?**

P: [Pause] There are things that they are good at in terms of within their game, but there wasn't anything good enough that we saw that would be worth holding onto for the next level. So, whether then another coach sees them, and they think, 'That's good enough for us,' where they are at the moment, and we can continue to develop that,' they still had their strengths if you like, but they just weren't deemed of the level for us to take them through to the next stage.

**I: With those strengths – let's say the dribblers a classic example, if you've got somebody who is really good at dribbling, he almost has an outstanding ability but, if he doesn't know when to release the ball that ability to dribble becomes redundant almost because you effectively lose it.**

P: Definitely, yeah.

**I: Would they have such things as that?**

P: Yeah, I would say that sums up one quite well. The other one I would say he wasn't so much as a dribbler as he was... at under 12 he used to use his pace quite a lot to get in. But then as he went through the years in the YDP as players matured faster than him, he could no longer use his pace. Then because he didn't have the technical foundation, he found it very-very hard to impact the games, so it was almost like his pace expired if you like.

**I: Sort of a crutch.**

P: Yes, and then from a maturation point of view in the end he wasn't even quick for his maturation, it kind of fizzled out.

**I: Right, short-lived.**

P: Yeah.

**I: The last few questions now, the mid performing players only, obviously there's quite a few of them, but that's a good thing. How did you distinguish a line between them not being in the lower, and not being in the higher?**

P: Again, thinking back to our scholarship decisions, we made a couple of decisions early on players in September/October time, so the two lowers were them and then anyone else beyond that point I've put into medium, and then like I said I've got a group of boys in there, some that we took, but yeah, some that we didn't take as well.

**I: So with that, I know you said about the international status and playing [67:45 inaudible] etc. but what would they need to place those mid ones that maybe are deemed as higher, because they've got the scholarship as an example, what are they lacking that could place them into the higher group?**

P: I would say it's really easy to identify with the higher players what stands out from a football point of view in terms of their strength; again, my mind goes straight to technical. With the medium players it's harder to distinguish and put your finger on exactly what it is that they're excellent at. So, to get into that high group I would say you've got to have a standout, really clear, technical strength that you can hold your hat on. I would say the

mediums, some are okay at a number of things, or good at a number of things, but it's not clear and obvious every time you see them, that that's a real strength of his.

**I: Yes, they can be excellent but it's not incredible basically.**

P: Yeah.

**I: That's probably the only thing I've got about the mids actually. The only thing I was going to ask which is separate from all the groupings now, if you were to determine performance and potential, would the players be in the same groups?**

P: It's a good question. [Pause] Performance and potential, yeah, I think they would be. Yeah.

#### ***8.10.22 Participant 22***

**I: So really basic, very simple stuff to begin with. What's your current job title?**

P: Yeah, so it's Assistant Head of Coaching for the 9s to under 16s.

**I: And what is the academy category status you are?**

P: Category 1.

**I: And what league does the first team play in?**

P: Premier league.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: Erm...I've worked in football since 2005.

**I: And how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Eighteen months.

**I: And for the last section, which age group would you be discussing?**

P: Obviously, so I work 9s to 16s, but for this I can sort of focus on the 16s as an age group.

**I: Yeah, yeah that's perfect. The one you are most familiar with I guess is always the better one.**

P: Yeah.

**I: So the more interesting stuff now I guess. Can you give a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, so I was an academy scholar at [club] football club, up until the age of 19. And then I was obviously released at 19, erm...got a full time in engineering, and so I did that for eight years, but in 2005 I was sort of a part time coach at [club] Academy. So, I did that until from 2005 until 2011...I was a part time coach working in the foundation phase, the youth development phase. And then in 2011 I became a full time member, so I've worked in the ... so I've been lead foundation phase coach, lead youth development phase and under 18s coach, and head of coaching at [club], so that was from 2011 until 2019, and then in 2019 I joined [club] as assistant head of coaching.

**I: That's quite a journey really.**

P: Yeah, yeah, quite quick, yeah.

**I: I know you said you did engineering, is that correct?**

P: Yeah.

**I: How was that transition between going from a full time scholar, to then going into a different world and then coming back?**

P: Yeah, it was tough when...obviously as a scholar and then going into the real world as such really, so it was a tough few years. Erm...In terms of ... obviously I didn't have qual ...you know, I had GCSEs but no direct qualifications to construction and so I had to start over again a little bit, you know...interesting.

**I: So how would you describe your current role then?**

P: My current role is- I would sort of say it's the sort of the lead in the 9s to 16s age group. So overseeing both play and coach development. So a bit of a line manager really for the 9s to 16s.

**I: Yeah, yeah I get that. And this is sort of outside of the constraints the club may place, maybe not. When you do consider player development do you have your own beliefs, or philosophy towards how to do that?**

P: Yeah, I would say...yeah, that just comes through your experience erm, in the roles you have had, erm...obviously courses and gaining knowledge from other people so, yeah I would say I've got my own beliefs on player development.

I: **And how would you...if you could explain them, like how would you explain it, what your philosophy is?**

P: I think my philosophy in terms of ... I think we've got to give ownership to the kids. We've got to give ... it's not a case of me as the coach knowing it all and being commanding. I think we've got to give, you know, the kids have got to be part of that process. I think it's important to coach as well, I think ... I see a lot of work now and it's all about like the environment which is important, but I think in the practices...but I think you've got to get in and coach and support them when needed. I think the biggest thing about their development is, I think it all does come down to the individual and the biggest thing for us as coaches and staff is building that relationship up with the person. I think once we achieve that we're winning.

I: **Yeah, definitely. And just within that idea of giving ownership, but also coaching. Is that ... I use this analogy of, like guided learning's like a multi questionnaire, if you need to provide them with the answers for them to be able to make the selection. Is that almost the same sort of criteria?**

P: Yeah, for me it's a little bit of like a sliding scale. [0:04:45 unclear] individual and is it like, what is that individual's needs and wants, how do you best engage them. So sometimes it might be actually where you have to tell them, because that's what that player needs at that given moment. So my philosophy is very much ... I think it's like a sliding ... you know, sometimes you'll be really like the questions and answers, asking questions, but sometimes you might be up the top here and being a bit more direct. I think the best coaches have the tools to do all of them, and they know what tool to pick at the right time.

I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah definitely. And when you're working with these players and you are developing them, do you hold expectations on their abilities?**

P: Yeah, I think you do. I think for me it's, you know, again, if we go back to those individuals, it's like who are the strivers at that given moment and how am I going to challenge them? Who's potentially finding it tough and I need to support them? So I think that all goes into consideration really when you're working with these players. Who needs to be pushed?

Who needs to be sort of pulled along? And who needs a pat on the back? Who needs a little bit of a warning? I think that's all ... all the skill, of first of all recognising that and then knowing what they do.

**I: So those expectations are almost, they're not so much we expect all players to do this but they are almost more so, we expect you as an individual to improve where you need to improve?**

P: Yeah, but I think yeah, I think, you know, there's expectations I would put on the group...on them as a group and that's not in terms of their ability, in terms of their football ability but in terms of what we expect in terms of the standards around the players. So like giving them ... this is what we expect, so we expect you to work hard, we expect you to give it your all, er...we don't expect bad language, you know, things like that really as expectations I think we can put upon them. And I think it's important that we have those sort of those expectations of how to conduct themselves and what's expected, what they can control and what's expected.

In terms of their football ability, you know, I think they're kids, so they are going to be up and down. There's times they're going to come in, you know, they will be the best player, and there's times will come for whatever reason and they'll not be able to perform for whatever reasons that is, family reasons or personal reasons, because they're kids their progress is a rollercoaster.

**I: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I am assuming those sort of demands in character is a good sort of life skill development process as much as a football skill development?**

P: Yes, an example, I'm working with under 23s at the moment, so there are certain things being asked of them which will prepare them if they go up in the first team or prepare them if they haven't got a club next year, and they're on a construction site, or wherever they are, and [unclear 0:07:53] those life skills.

**I: Yeah, definitely. So moving to the next section, so a bit more strategies employed, and I will ask about selection, deselection and I mean release retention at the end of the year as opposed to like for a game. So in regards to player development plans for deselection and selection processes, who would normally be involved in those processes?**

P: So the club I'm with it's a multidisciplinary team so we get together on a weekly basis to discuss ... to review last week, to plan the week ahead but we'll also talk about players if need be, so any, you know, whether it's players making good progress, players who there's a particular issue with, players who we feel are finding it tough, we will discuss those players on a weekly basis. But then every six weeks, that's like ...the multidisciplinary team will then discuss all players' progress. So whether we see them at ... how they're doing with their ILP, how is their progress or lack of progress. So that will be done on a six weekly basis which obviously then leads into the player review. So the player review is very much the input from all staff who have been around that player.

I: **Yeah. And when you come towards that process, like how do you actually determine who would be selected, or whom might be deselected?**

P: I think it's just a discussion amongst all staff really about where we see them. Obviously part of that process would be discussing pathways as well. Especially with the under 16s and under 15s, so looking at what's ahead. So as a 16, does he get a scholarship, you know, we discuss the player erm, but then also there is these two players currently playing that position, so where does he get his game time from. Will that sort of help his development? There is a player underneath who plays in the same position we want to fast track him. So all those discussions come in the process as well.

I: **Yeah. And that always fascinates me the whole pathway thing, because that seems to be quite a common thread amongst most people. I guess one of the questions I'd be keen to ask, whether there is a decisive answer I don't know, but is there a point in time when you almost have to make a decision on someone's pathway like do you change them, or do they stick to that position based on the pathway?**

P: Yeah, I think yeah, I think...Again it's on an individual basis. So has that player got the skill set or attributes to be able to play in a different position so that's a discussion, you know, if you see his pathway blocked, just say he's a midfield player but there are two or three midfield players ahead of him, you know, that discussion will look, can he play full back ...you know, can we convert him into a full back, or can we convert him into this position. And again, I think that just comes down to that discussion with that individual and the attributes or the potential we feel he has.

I: **Yeah, yeah, definitely. And are those processes, are they similar to making a development plan, like an IDP?**



P: Yeah, so obviously with the IDP we get the players input in. So speaking to the player about ... I think the thing with the IDP plan is we're trying to get the players to think more about their strengths so a bit more strength based approach to it, but we get the players input so what does he consider his strengths to be, what does he consider his areas to develop or add to his game. Obviously gets the coach's input and then it's a discussion about what are your two or three targets to then work on and that could be a strength that he wants to get better, it could be an area of his game that we all feel that he needs to develop, and it's important he develops that. But we're trying to make it a bit more strength based approach.

**I: Is that to keep it as a positive thing, more so than a negative thing?**

P: Yeah, to keep it positive. But I also think sometimes in football in academies when we bring players in, they're coming for a reason, so they have come in because you've seen their strengths basically. And then when it comes to their individual development plans then you ... then all of a sudden we talk about what he can't do so we want to keep that conversation about what he can do as much as possible. But there comes a time where if what he can't do is going to affect his potential or is affecting his performance then that needs a discussion. But just trying to have that conversation about, well this is what he can do.

**I: Yeah definitely. And does that consider positional demand as well?**

P: I think yeah, certain age groups, I think with the younger ones it's very generic in terms of, you know we don't know where they are going to play, they'll play all over, you know you could put them in groups of what they need. As they get older, you know, 14 it does become a bit more position [0:12:56 unclear] so if you're a defender and you can't ...you know, you're not very good at your [one v one] defending and that would be for me an area to work on, because it's an important area to work on, it's an important attribute for that position. So yeah. I would say 14 or 13, it becomes position related.

**I: And obviously I'm assuming, I'm sure it's fairly obvious that you will be familiar with the FA four corner model?**

P: Yeah.

**I: What are your thoughts on it?**

P: We use ... Obviously I'm familiar with the four corner model. Our model is a little bit different at the club I'm at so we put football first, so for instance if it's ... if a player says he

needs to work on his agility, we would translate that, so what does that mean football? So what is it about your agility you want to get better at to help you improve as a footballer? So it might be the case of well I want to work on my agility because my one v one defending is not great. So we bring it back to the football.

**I: Yeah. It's very context specific almost?**

P: Sorry [name], are you still there?

**I: Yeah, can you hear me?**

P: Can you hear us?

**I: Yeah, I can hear you, can you hear me?**

P: Yeah, you're back, yeah.

**I: Yeah, so I was just saying it sounds like it's quite context specific your four corner model?**

P: Yeah, so yeah, like I said we try and bring it back to ... we try and relate it the football pitch basically as best we can with the younger age groups. Because sometimes we just felt like they were saying, I need to work on my speed. Right okay that's fairly general, but what is it about your speed you want to actually work on? Well I want to actually, when I am beating a man, I want to work on that change of pace to go beyond him so then it becomes a bit more specific, yeah.

**I: Yeah, yeah, no I get that. I'm assuming you do a bit of objective testing, I mean I know pretty much every academy has to get certain like speed tests, and agility tests, etc. Do you do much else outside of your physical stuff? Do you do psyche or anything like that?**

P: No we don't, which I think to be fair I think that's something we need to improve on. So the previous club I was at we had two sorts of psyche coaches. So we had a very much psyche programme starting with the younger age groups, and that was really beneficial, really beneficial.

**I: So, with the data you do get, so probably the physical stuff in that regard, how well would you say that when you see ... I mean sprint is probably the classic example. If you've got a sprint data do you feel that data resembles what you see in match performance of all the players?**

P: Erm...Yeah, I think it does. I think like obviously like 16s obviously have the GBS data, we're not hung up on the GSB data, it's not the be all and end all for the session, because I think it's like you say, it's really important you've got that four corner approach. And I think sometimes they can always fall into it when they get older, in the GBS, around the physical stuff, the physical data. And sometimes they get the other stuff, the other corners. So for the coaches it's something to support them, something to critique on, reflect on rather than that being the main focus.

I: **Have you ever sort of come across a scenario where you might get a player that they put down really good speeds in a test but then you might not actually see that in a game?**

P: Yeah, definitely yeah. I worked with a boy who in the speed test wasn't very great, but in the game you never really ... you didn't see that, it didn't hamper his performance. When you spoke to him he got really nervous of the speed test, so it played on his mind but ultimately he read the game, he was clever, so he was that one step ahead of players really and that showed on the football pitch.

I: **So was it almost in that instance that his game intelligence and his decision making was almost good enough to cover where he lacked in that physical ...**

P: Yeah. And again little things like the growth and maturation. So he was a late developer, so yeah, we had to take all that into context and he will have seen it, not in terms of the speed but in terms of when a sports scientist works with a player in terms of the best technique, he had the best technique but he just couldn't transfer that technique into anything meaningful really.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So a couple of scenario based questions for you. If you had a player that was excelling in the foundation phase, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: [0:18:05 unclear] on this because I feel like for me, just on the experience I have, I generally find like when you are in the foundation phase you'll always have that one or two who sort of out fly the rest of the players in the age group. And generally as they go through the system, they are generally in and around that when it comes to scholarship. Now don't get us wrong, some fade away a little bit, and then other ones come in from nowhere but in my experience certainly getting into the scholarship stage is that those players are still in that bracket. Now sometimes then transferring that into becoming a professional then it does change, because obviously the rate ...you know, like the statistics of first of all the making a

professional is slim anyway. But I do feel sometimes you have better players in the foundation phase, or you have better players in the development phase, the early development phase. But obviously you do get...you know, people progress at different rates. I still feel like, you know, in the area we are at, there is still a ... you know, people at 13 or 14 who come from nowhere who haven't been in an academy system before, but all of a sudden they're late bloomers as such. So I think you've still got to be aware of that. It goes back to every individual's journey is different isn't it, and everyone's pathway is different and we all grow at different rates really, and when I say grow in terms of their football ability as well.

**I: Would you say that as a club maybe you work ... do you work to make sure that somebody who is doing well in the foundation phase, that they're continually stretched or do you almost let them thrive and see how they produce?**

P: A bit of both- a bit of both. So going back to that multidisciplinary team meeting we have on a weekly basis, that will be discussed, so we've got an under 10 player who is a striver and it's been a discussion about when he moves up, and how long he moves up for and does he move up for one training session, two training sessions, the game. So that will all be on an individual basis, but we definitely wanted to get that balance right. I think it's dangerous when you move a player up and you say, right you're up to the under 11s from now on because what happens when he does go... when he does need a bit of support and if you're a 12 year old and a 13, that can be a difference physically. It's just discussing that really, and then again, the individuals will all be different so they will go for different periods. But certainly at times there is a time to stretch them, and there is a time to support them.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: You're in your own age group and you're going to be the best player this week. For instance, a striker, if a striker is in the under 16 age group and he's scoring loads of goals, but then he jumps into the under 18s, that physically could be far too much for him. So all of a sudden from scoring goals to an under 18s programme where he doesn't get many chances, that could be a negative on him as well. He needs a bit of both.

**I: Yeah, yeah, I completely get that. So similar question but the other way around now. If you had a player that came to you in the youth phase, but he had absolutely no academy background prior to coming to you, so obviously grass roots though, how would that inform you of their potential?**

P: Yeah, we've took in over the past few seasons people in the development phase from grass roots. I think you've gotta... it's really important when they come in you've got to get a good background on where they've been. So I always feel if you've gotta grass roots player, 13 say, and he isn't too far behind the academy group, you know, you dig a little bit naturally, well he has never been ...you know, he's only been at his grass roots club, he's never been in an academy before but that's telling us something, you know, he's not too far away and he's had very little. So is there something to work there with because there's somebody who's been in for five years and he is just behind them. I think that's all important to look at it, like you know we call it the football age how long they have been playing football for, where they've been. Because that will help ... that's part of the decision making process and sort of just looking at it there and then. Obviously looking at their potential, so when they're coming in at grass roots, you know, have they been picked, selected from grass roots because they're simply just the biggest player, and the potential, there's not a great deal to come. So that's part of the discussion.

I think the biggest thing, I think, certainly our academy has got to get better at and I think other academies, is the psychological bit, how do you ...you know, how do we judge, how do we gauge the person's ... where they're at in terms of their desire, their attitude, their work ethic, how much do they want to be a footballer because that will go a long way. I'm not too sure we fully know and understand how to do that yet.

**I: So would you say those psychological aspects, would you say they are actually quite confounding aspects of the game?**

P: Yeah, I think so, yeah, I think becoming a footballer there will be knockbacks, you'll have to be resilient. There will be setbacks along the way, so how do they overcome those, have they got the mentality to overcome those. We can measure the physical stuff, we can see the technical stuff and the tactical stuff and the game understanding. We can see bits of the psychological bits, but that's my question at the minute is like, is when a triallist comes into eight weeks how can we really get to know them so we've got a really good gauge of who they are, what's their potential in terms of their mindset.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah definitely. And with maturation, how does maturation come in towards decisions, or even development plans?**

P: Yeah, it's important, you know, some of the data you get now is fantastic, the way it's presented is fantastic and it's heavily involved, so that's important why the multidisciplinary

teams are in these discussions, so the physios, the sports scientists can, you know, enlighten us where they're at, you know, if a person is really struggling through injuries it might just because he's simply grown so much, so he needs more time, so that's part of the process, yeah definitely part of the process.

We've got to be careful that we don't use it as an ex...like the only reason to keep players in the system. So you've got to be balanced with your view because even when it comes to retainer release, we've got to do what's best for that person, that player and sometimes it's a hard decision releasing that player, that might be the best decision for them, you know, because I've seen players who, where staff have sat on the fence a little bit, and they've decided to keep that player and everyone thinks, oh well we're giving him an opportunity but then in six or seven months that player is really struggling and he doesn't enjoy football anymore because of that struggle, and sometimes I just think, well you know, us as staff have let him down, so yeah, it would have been a tough decision, you know, it's the worst news to give someone, but look where he is at now, he's unhappy, he's not enjoying it, he wants to leave, and it leaves a bit of a bad taste I think on their experience of the academy. It can leave them with a bad taste about football, so I've seen it where, you know. they come to a decision, I'm not sure I want to play football anymore. And I just think we've delayed a decision that we knew.

**I: In that instance if you delivered the decision earlier, do you think their passion for football may have increased?**

P: Yeah, they could have gone into an environment, into a level where they thrive.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's quite interesting actually and I was going to ask something on that as well, do you think that the late maturer almost might get a bit too much leeway nowadays?**

P: I think you can, yeah, I think it's got to be a really balanced view. And again, you have got to look at everything, so going back to that four corner you've got to look at his potential, is that [0:26:27 unclear] in all four corners, we can't just look at the physical corner and say, well he's a late developer and then look at the technical corner and, you know, well he's really poor technically, he hasn't got a great game understanding when it comes to ... I always think what are we waiting for. Whereas if the discussion is, oh he's technically one of the best players, his game understanding is really good, but he struggles to translate the game at the minute, but he's a 14 but really his body is a 12 year old then common sense

will tell you we need to be patient with him, we need to ... we might have to play him down and age group so he does thrive.

**I: Yeah, yeah, so you almost have to have something as opposed to nothing expecting that to come?**

P: Yeah, like what's the attributes that we're going to give him time for.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So moving onto the last part now, this is when you will need your team sheet, whether that's on your computer or paper, the first thing I will need you to do is put a letter H next to anyone in the squad that you'd consider to be a high performer. That can be as many or little as you want.**

P: I'm obviously using our 16s as a gauge. I've done that.

**I: Yeah, and then you can do the same thing but you put a letter L next to anyone that is a lower performer.**

P: Yeah.

**I: And then obviously anyone that hasn't got a letter they would be considered to be a mid-performing player?**

P: Yeah, yeah.

**I: So if you wanted to make any additional changes now that you know the groupings, you're welcome to swap any around if needed?**

P: That's great, yeah.

**I: So all I need to know is how many are in each group. So many higher, how many mid, how many lower?**

P: I've got three in the higher, I've got one, two...three in the middle, and one, two...two in the lower.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Sorry, add a fourth one to the middle.

**I: A fourth one to the middle?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So, how did you determine who is in what group?**

P: So, in terms of the performer I took that as now is a high performer, so in terms of the way he's performed this season, and where he's at now I've put him as a high performer. So what my next thing would be if I was to do this, you know doing this myself, I would then start looking at their potential, so he maybe a higher performer but a really low potential. And then, so if I look at my low performers they haven't performed ... like they've just done okay, they've just done okay whereas your mid ones obviously...you know, middle of the road really, I wouldn't put them in that high performer bracket, but I wouldn't put them as underperforming either or the low performers.

**I: Okay. And would those players have potentially been in different groupings across the season, so can they change from a mid to a high, or a low from a ...**

P: Yeah, definitely, so you can move up and down.

**I: What would it be that would normally make that happen?**

P: Obviously the consistency, so obviously you know one or two of the middle ones who've got the potential to go to the higher ones, if they were consistent with that. But again, that's part of being a kid and having that patience with them. Yeah, so the way I've done is probably because of the word 'performer' I've took them as they are now.

**I: Yeah, yeah. And if you were looking at them as a potential would the orders change much?**

P: Yeah, I would say, yeah, I'd probably lose one of the higher ones. I'd probably gain a low one in the middle. And the middle could go to lower.

**I: Oh, really okay. And are those potentials based on what you think, what you have now is probably all you're going to get?**

P: Yeah, so if were to look at the lower who would move to middle, somebody who has just come in from grass roots football, so in terms of where he's at now, you know, he's behind but in terms of his potential because of his physical attributes, his mentality, we feel he is you know... we can work with him and really develop the technical side, he's a goalkeeper. So we feel he can develop the technical and tactical side and again he's come from ... he's



16, but he's never had no goalkeeping coaching before. If I go to the high one who's currently a high performer, I worry about his mentality so I think that will cost him.

**I: Yeah, yeah where does he lack then in regards to mentality?**

P: Just his mindset, he's probably a little bit spoiled. It's about him, he's quite selfish which I think sometimes you've got to be careful with, because sometimes that's not a bad trait actually in football to have, that selfishness but he's very selfish and it's all about him, and it's just he can't control his emotions and I assume that mindset will be tough for him.

**I: Is that almost that idea of, that fine line between confidence and arrogance and he's probably the arrogance one?**

P: Yeah, yeah, he is ... but he can't control ... so when he makes mistakes or when his opponents make mistakes he just can't control his emotions with that and he just loses his ... it just affects his whole game.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, if you just refer to the higher performing players now, is there anything consistent like a theme that places those players above the others?**

P: Erm [pause]...I certainly feel with one his application, his like sort of love for football, his desire to improve and to listen, probably that's why he's probably one of the stand outs amongst this group really.

**I: So, it's almost like his learning and his desire to learn, and his application, well his attitude is really quite key for him to be a high performer?**

P: Yeah.

**I: What about the ... Is there anything unique about the other two which is why they're there?**

P: Probably just ... I wouldn't say...I don't like using the word natural talent, because obviously ... people would say just they're a natural football ability but that hasn't just come, that's come through them practising when they're younger and never having ... always having the ball. But like people would describe it as just a natural football ability.

**I: And is that like- is that more technique like ball manipulation, or is that more like reading the game?**

- P: Yeah, a bit of both really with the two of them. Ball manipulation and the technical qualities, but also a game understanding and how they affect the game as well in their positions.
- I: **And I guess I'm in same ways leading this, because I'm coming off the back of previous interviews which have said similar, would you say that those guys, do they understand their own strengths better so that they can impact the game in knowing what to do, more so than others?**
- P: Yeah, I think probably yeah, they've got a... especially two of them, they're very confident in their ability and I would link that they know what they are good at.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, sorry, I'm just writing notes.**
- P: So they've both got that bit of selfish streak in them.
- I: **Okay, yeah, yeah.**
- P: Like one of them controls it well, the other one obviously that's what he struggles with at times but they've both got that bit of ... they will do it for themselves a little bit, which again I don't think ... I think sometimes we want all team players. [I've looked at] the success from the players I've worked with over the past few years and they've that little bit of I want to be a footballer and it's about me becoming a footballer.
- I: **Yeah. And with those things are they all those things that maybe you don't quite see in the mid performers as well?**
- P: Sorry, you just broke up there.
- I: **Sorry, can you hear me now?**
- P: Yeah, I can hear you now.
- I: **With those things just discussed in the high performers, would they maybe be things that you don't quite see in the mid performers?**
- P: Yeah, I think if you look at them all I think they've got the potential to go into the high performers, it's a little bit belief in themselves, that bit of arrogance at times, certainly that consistency, but I think again that could come with age and them maturing. Yeah, no, that's

probably one of the biggest differences between them, they probably don't believe they belong in the high performing ... in the same [0:37:13 unclear] as them.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So now if you just refer to the lower performing group. I mean I know you said there are only two in here but is there anything that they both have that they actually ... that sort of brings them down there that maybe they lack?**

P: With two of them it's certainly ... well with both of them, they both came in the system late, so they're technically behind the group. In game understanding they're both behind the group, that could be because obviously like I said they both came into the system late. Certainly with one of them it's the case. That's probably the biggest differences.

**I: Is that game understanding more important than technical, or is the technical more ... or are they both equal?**

P: Yeah, I would say for me there's an argument for both being equal. With the two of them as well I don't think football is their number one priority.

**I: Okay, so mentality not quite focused either then?**

P: Yeah.

**I: Why do you think that is?**

P: I don't know whether it's because they came in late, it's just I wouldn't say ... the two I just think their focus is elsewhere at times which is I'm not saying that's a bad thing, I'm not saying it's a good thing. What certainly separates them from the high performers is, the high performers love football.

**I: Yeah, yeah, so that desire is more obvious in the high performers than the low?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So within ... between those two is there anything unique that they might do really well at, but still as a low performer?**

P: So just on these two, both of them have got good physical attributes for where they play. And to be honest, one of them has probably stayed in the system because of those

attributes... well two of them, both of them because of their physical attributes, so you could say they're both a bit of a project, certainly one of them is, a longer term project.

**I: So with those, being physically good is it almost like it's a great attribute, but it hasn't actually helped them get better?**

P: Erm...I think with one of them, one of them needs more time and it's hard to say that because he's only been in the system for such a short while. With the other one his physical attributes are by far his strengths and his attributes, probably the lack of progress in the technical and tactical comes down to what I said before really is his desire for football, is his focus football, and does he really commit to it, not just when he's at the academy but away from the academy, I'm not too sure, so if you spoke football to him and about his position, I'm not too sure you would have a detailed conversation with him about that.

**I: Yeah, yeah, I kind of get that. And the last group now, so the middle group. How did you distinguish the line between not being in the lower and not being in the higher?**

P: Again probably just their performances over the course of this season. Probably that word 'consistency', you've probably seen it on more occasions what they're capable of doing. If you were to ... as we do when they play the games, and you give them a score and a bit of a comment they'll probably be in 6s and 7s where [they] would probably been in a 9 and sometimes be in a 4, and they're so up and down with that. Again, you know, certainly with some of them, the middle ones not in the higher ones, it's probably that ... the psychological corner if I'm honest again when I look at it, that belief in themselves, you know, the mentality to do it all the time, and they're probably just lacking it at this moment in time. Again, hopefully that comes through maturation and experience.

**I: So the middle group are almost, they're not quite as well developed in the psyche area but are more developed in the lower?**

P: Yeah, I would say but they've got other qualities. A lot of the middle group as well two or three of them have had tough times, one's had a bad injury. One's had a lot of growth over the last 18 months, so he was ... as a young one he was high, he was a high performer but over the last 18 months growth maturation and people have left him, and he's just finding his body now as such. So that's had an effect on him.

**I: Yeah, course. If he was on a potential would he then go to a higher then?**

- P: Yeah, I would say he has sort of medium performance, could be high potential or middle but you know, he's probably got a little bit more convincing to go back on that high potential but he would be in and around [if he was like at] the 9 grids.
- I: **Yes, yeah, yeah definitely. And are there qualities that they have in the middle group that obviously they're great, but they're not good enough to place them in the higher group?**
- P: Sorry have they got qualities, did you say?
- I: **Yeah, have they got qualities but I guess the best way to phrase it is maybe they are outstanding at those abilities but they don't seem to be affective enough to make them a high performing player?**
- P: Yeah, I think ... Just with the players I've got in front of me really they've got a lot of good attributes, it's the ability to do that on a consistent basis whether that's training, whether that's games, whether that's a mindset. Like I said, two of them, there's one with a cruciate... just came back from a cruciate injury. And then one has obviously been ... like his growth has really affected him. And another player is very much up and down, that's his personality really.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, yeah. And only really one more question I guess. I know you're saying consistency of performance, how would you define what a good performance is versus what a bad performance is?**
- P: I think in terms of the games, his impact on the games. So if he's a wide player, there are certain things we're looking for from a wide player, so his crosses, his assist, his goals, it's like his contribution to the game really given his position. So like the full back does he stop crosses, does he defend, does he get forward, does he assist, so their contribution. And in terms of training and in terms of the ... one of the biggest things I always look for is like their attitude and willingness to work, to be involved, I think that's a big thing. I think your best players are always involved, they're always in and around the ball whether it's they're winning it back, or whether they're on the ball.
- I: **Yeah, yeah.**
- P: I look at their involvement and I think with these three players, sorry, the four middle players some weeks they're always there, you come away and think like, who were the best

three players tonight and they would be in that bracket. But then other times you think, I didn't see him tonight.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

P: So that involvement.

**I: And would you say a good performance, does that mean no errors or can that involve making errors but still having a good performance?**

P: Yeah, definitely making errors I think again it's going to ... what have they contributed to the game given their position, like their energy, their attitude.

**I: Yeah, I guess the main reason I ask is that I always wonder if somebody does ... if somebody is a mid fielder and they play sideways passes the whole time, you know, they've not lost the ball, but have they actually affected the game versus somebody that maybe plays it forward, they may lose the ball a couple of times but if it does pay off then maybe that's a goal. So which ones ... how do you measure those I guess?**

P: It's like our mid field player something that we want him to do more of moving forward. But we understand that with that play forward, you're going to give away possession a little bit more. But we want you to do that because the risk is greater, sorry, the reward is greater than the risk. So keep doing it. I think sometimes football, when we're looking at the players, the simple thing is does he stop goals, does he assist goals, does he score goals. And sometimes looking at these high performers, it's like one of them he scores goals, he assists goals, so his contribution is high. And when I say assist goals, he's involved in the moves, it doesn't have to be like he's actual assist ...

**I: Yeah, the build up yeah.**

P: One of them he stops goals, so like just ...so that's simplifying really to those three things, you know, what can he do, can he do two out of the three and then he is contributing a lot.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So would that be a contribution of those things is really sort of lacking in the lower group then?**

P: Yeah, I would think, yeah. At the moment, this moment in time that's probably what...that's lacked. Like one of them would have been a high performer last season, so last season if you had asked us this time I would have said, yeah he's a high performer. So again, he was doing

it, scoring goals, assisting, involved in goals but this season he hasn't done that, and that's what his position needs. But again it comes down to that consistency for him.

**I: And does that come down ... sorry this pretty much would be the last question. Does that come down to that mental mindset that you were saying, that he just seems to be lacking that desire?**

P: I think with this player it's a bit of the belief. I think with obviously the 16s it's a big year for them in terms of [0:48:00 unclear] school. So I think that pressure's got to him a little bit more. So it will be interesting now that he knows the decision, he's got a scholarship, what he would be like in the second half of the season, in the games with that pressure took off him a little bit.

#### **8.10.23 Participant 23**

**I: Okay, so really easy stuff to begin with. What is your current job title?**

P: I'm lead youth development coach at [club] at 12 to 16s.

**I: And what Academy category status is that?**

P: We're category two.

**I: And which league does your first team play in?**

P: The Championship.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

P: [Sighs] Erm...Good question. Bear with me in, in elite sports or academy football for 10 years. And then prior to that, I did work in sport, within football, but as more like a football development officer.

**I: Yeah, how long was that for?**

P: That was for six years.

**I: Okay, so a good length of time.**

P: Okay. So about 16 years in football altogether.

**I: Why the transition then?**

P: I think whilst I was doing my football development role, I was always working as a part-time coach at an Academy. So I guess it was just the involvement over time. And more, I guess, an opportunity arose to go in full time and I thought that was a really good chance to maybe go and try and do something around [unclear 0:01:23] so more around the opportunity I got I guess, rather than ever really thinking that was exactly what I wanted to do, you know.

I: **So how long have you been in your current position?**

P: Six years.

I: **And the last part, which age group you'll be discussing?**

P: So currently I coach the 15s and 16s, so it'll be an amalgamation of them two.

I: **Yeah, fine. So the more interesting sort of questions now, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah. Across everything, the football based stuff, yeah, and obviously focusing around football more than anything?

I: **Yeah.**

P: Yeah. Great. No worries. Okay, so I guess I started coaching as a 16 year old in a grassroots team and was coaching a young players there. I guess as a result of that, I got really interested in working with young people and coaching. I was offered a role as a football development officer working in local schools by a football club in the local area that had a charity arm, a community trust, so started...and literally that was brand new, so pretty much I was the first employee for that. And we started that, and I guess through time we developed a programme that had I think 14 members of staff, and we were probably covering pretty much all of South Wales in terms of delivering school provision, disability football, women's football, a variety of stuff.

And through that time, I started getting involved with [club] at the time as a part-time coach and was working for the under eights initially and then some older age groups around the elevens and fifteens later on. I had an opportunity, and was seconded in my work, my day job, from the community trust to a social inclusion football programme called Game On. I worked there for two years, which was more national. I was delivering social inclusions through sport with various partners in Wales, you know, with the FAW Trust and others. And then was offered an opportunity to work full time at [club] so actually moved to the local rivals has head of foundation phase, but originally it was assistant foundation phase, but



quickly moved to head of foundation phase within sort of three months. I think I was there for 13 months in all and was offered the job I'm in now, youth development role at [club]. I knew the Academy manager really well from previously. It was more, the reason to move I guess, back to [club] was more the exciting...it was a completely brand new team put together in the Academy so I think I was appointed. And then following that, we appointed pretty much a new person in every role in the Academy. We had a new head of foundation phase, a new assistant to myself, two new 18s coaches, two new 23s coaches, new Academy managers. So it just seemed like something exciting to be a part of where we could rebuild something. So that was sort of the real take around that.

And I guess since that, I mean, obviously I've worked in my current role. I have had roles through various internal problems. I've done the under 18s for I think three seasons in a row post-Christmas when we've had issues that have had to be dealt with. So I've had...there is experience with that, and as well alongside all that, I've been doing a lot of work around coach education. So I worked for the FAW as a coach educator delivering on their C certificate, their B license and their A license.

Then just from a training aspect I guess, you know, obviously through the time, the journey, I've obviously got my A license, both youth and senior, got the advanced youth award through the FA as well, specialised in youth development phase for that, and yeah, pretty much that's sort of been my journey, I guess, to now.

**I: Yeah, it sounds like a great journey as well. So within your current job, how would you describe your current role?**

**P:** I guess daily it's a dual role really. I do quite a lot of work around obviously the fifteens and sixteens so like my coaching, I guess, background is to focus on them, preparing them for their scholarship decision, apprentice decision with us, and obviously try and get as many through to an apprenticeship as we can. Then alongside that obviously overseeing the other age groups in the phase. So I've got an assistant who predominantly takes the fourteens, so I guess I work with him directly on what goes on underneath. And then just again, through maybe experience and time and relationships, I've spent a lot of time with the Academy manager, just sort of supporting the day-to-day running really of what we're trying to do or where we're trying to go with certain aspects. So yeah, that's sort of what I would say is my normal daily routine is to get the sixteens ready for the sessions, make sure everything's organised for the other age groups and then support the Academy manager with just daily issues.

I: **Yeah, yeah. So when you are working with the players, do you have a personal belief or a philosophy in how to develop the players?**

P: I would say I have my own philosophy on what I think is right for youth development. It doesn't always match up with maybe the philosophy of the club, but ultimately, you know, we're always trying to do what's right, and I would say some of my personal beliefs wouldn't match with the clubs, but that doesn't matter to me, I think, I'm not precious about that. I think I'll always try and do what's right for the kids first, if I was honest with you. The club obviously is important, and I have to maintain what they're looking for but obviously at the same time, the most important thing to me is the player.

I: **And what would be your personal philosophies?**

P: I think in youth development, the one aspect I believe is quite true is that I believe we have to treat them as good players, good people and good competitors. Now the good competitors bit is sometimes the bit that I believe can be misconstrued. So if your competitor is we play to win and people don't like you in that sometimes but if you don't instill that in young people, I'm not sure it's something that they haven't got anyway, that they don't [cross talk 0:08:23] so, but it's good people and good players er... good players, good people first, like we'll always work on aspects of their game that I believe is right for them rather than maybe right for our first team as an example. So it's putting those three things into context.

The good people bit to me is, I guess there's a lot of in the press at the minute around what was right for Academy football, and to me, you know, the experiences the kids get, even in a category two programme and category one is extended even further, but the experiences our kids get off the back of being part of this, I think are huge beneficiaries for their personal development, their confidence, their independence just to the point where like now with COVID like the amount of independent work they've had to do and the actual engagement within that has being phenomenal. I never thought the kids would engage as much as what they have. And I don't think our programme is any different to probably other Academies are offering, but I think most probably youth developers would say how surprised they've been by the way they've taken to working independently, working through Zoom and through Team because like, we did reviews online and I couldn't believe how engaged the kids were, they probably spoke more through this means than they would in a classroom with their parents. Maybe part of that is the era and the times, like they work through Facetime now with the friends and social media and all of that so like, they seemed a lot

more comfortable this way then maybe just even face-to-face. So it's been really interested, but yeah.

So my philosophy is good players, good people, good competitors. And like for the club, maybe that might not always match up because they might see the winning aspect as it's not important, or they might actually see the winning aspect as the priority, but for me it is an amalgamation of all those things.

**I: Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. So that's almost a lot of the social side of things and the psyche side of things it sounds like?**

**P:** Yeah, I think we've obviously got a responsibility for that I wouldn't pretend to know a lot about it though, because ultimately we're football coaches and I guess as a category two programme, I wouldn't say we've got an array of support either around, you know, how we develop psychological skills and that, you know, we've got a part-time consultant that supports us, but you know, a lot of it is left to us as coaches. The good people bit to me, generally, we spend a lot of time with the parents with like and almost it's unconsciously, you know, when you speak to the parents it's more talking about their kids, what's their kid like? And if there's an issue it's generally around that, it's not around the playing bit it's around the person bit and how do we develop a skill within them that obviously the parents need to support and almost ingrain as well. So like I guess getting them on board is a good way of doing that, but I wouldn't say everyone's on board with that because again, they're not, but, you know, I think it is a critical part that the stakeholders to me are the players, they're the number one stakeholder.

The parents are the number two stakeholder and the staff, the coaching, the actual Academy staff programme that's your third stakeholder really, and the club is a beneficiary, it's not actually a stakeholder in my opinion. And that's how I sort of look at it is we treat these three sorts of strands as the most important strands and then the club benefits if we're doing everything right.

**I: Yeah, yeah. Seems like a guide then as opposed to a [audio cuts 0:12::03] in a sense.**

**P:** Yeah. I would say so because no player that I work with is the same, there's similarities, but no one's exactly the same. So, you know, the way you treat everyone is with those guiding thoughts of what do they need, how do we get them...one of the, it's not mine, but one of the other staff like said that coaching derives from a Latin term that means transporting, so I always look at that as, so my job is to transport someone from A to B and that means where

are they now and where can we get them to, so yeah, I always look at it like that and say, well, for every player that guide, that transporting is our role.

**I: Yeah, that's interesting that. And when you are working with the players, do you have expectations on capabilities when they're going through various stages?**

**P:** I would say it's probably evolved. When I started. I thought they all, I say started, when I first started the role, I guess, I think I was looking for certain skills and aspects that I felt were fundamental. Whereas now through time, I guess, I've learned that there's no timeline on when those skills develop. I would use an example of an under 23 player that's now hot in the press because he's been around the first team and fans are thinking that he's going to be a player and he's gonna make it. His youth development years were probably his worst in terms of his [cross talk 0:13:36] just based on his growth, his maturation, his coordination, technically really nice, but like couldn't impact. So if I was basing it on game impact as the priority, you know, in terms of, can the player impact the game, the answer pretty much for three or four years was no, he couldn't impact it, but yes, I guess we, and maybe not even me, it wasn't, I wouldn't take credit for it, I was probably one of the ones going, not sure, I don't think he can impact, but having seen him now and the people that did say listen there's a long-term development plan year for this player, I think without them and that foresight to actually trust that the growth would support him in the long term, I think that we might've made a mistake. And we probably have on others in the past through a similar reason but I would say when I first started, I was probably quite eager to say, they've got to tick these boxes, whereas now I'm probably a little bit more like, well, is that something that'll come later. So yeah, I mean, to me that there's no one path, it's actually being a little bit more open-minded to say that the skills can develop at certain times, but also that in some players it takes a bit longer or sometimes for some players, it comes quite quickly and quite naturally, so it's just being open-minded really.

**I: So within that is there almost like a minimum expectation you hold on, I'm assuming that that player in that example, the under 23s player, he would have probably had some standard of ability across maybe different areas as opposed to nothing at all. So would you expect to have a minimum threshold of ability?**

**P:** Yeah, I think so because ultimately to be in an Academy, there's probably a minimum requirement of they could maybe handle a ball and, you know, have some technical efficiency. The bit for me, I always sort of... the bit, I think that's the hardest to grasp is the game understanding, the game intelligence. We classify that as game awareness. I think

those are the bits that are probably... to me now they're the bits that have become fundamental is does the player understand the game and do they show understanding of what the game looks like. If they can't impact it from a physical or a technical aspect, then those are things that maybe we can correct. Eventually we can enhance game intelligence, absolutely and we can enhance game awareness, but I think the way the game is going, to me, that's probably become one of the fundamental aspects now and maybe the kids that can't influence the game in those ways are the kids that may be then struggle the most and maybe in our programme would be the ones that might get released.

The only other bit I would say is, I guess, when we started, we made a conscious effort that we were going to reduce our squad numbers and move in and focus on the elite. Now I would say I've completely turned. I focus on...you know, we have quite big squads now, when we started I remember like our under 12s had 20 players and by the time the season finished we had 14 because we felt like that was the... we were doing the right thing. When actually now when I look at our under 12 squad, six of them that were released to play in other football clubs, like, are doing well and are like around first team. So I'm like, well, we probably just had a good group of players and we didn't need to worry about how many we had. So that's evolved as well.

Yeah, I think there's definitely certain requirements to be an Academy footballer, you know, technically, tactically, you know, you're going to have to sort of tick certain boxes.

**I: I guess it's almost like you don't need to flourish in those more so.**

**P:** No, the one player example, I would say he really flourished in his foundation years, and then the minute everyone started growing and his growth was littered by, you know, now he's six four, but like, you know, at the time, you know, you wasn't sure if you could see that. It's quite interesting, we've actually got his brother now and sort of... he's different, but physically there's some similarities in a way, so you're looking well, again, I think he's actually better than him in terms of game impact now, but like, I mean, whether he gets to that, you're actually thinking well, you know...So I've learned lessons along the way. I've definitely made mistakes in saying you have to be able to do this when actually I'm not sure that was always the right thing.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So now we'll be talking about some strategies that might be employed by the club, but it's still primarily around your beliefs. I'll mention about deselection and selection. And what I mean is at the end of season sort of player retention release so not**

**like squad selection. When you're actually creating development plans or you're going through that deselection selection process, who would normally be included in those decisions?**

P: If I reference the top end first, I guess, so for me which is 16s trying to get scholarships, obviously that's quite an important decision for the club. We describe it as would you put them on the payroll. And I think whilst that could be quite a blasé thing to say, actually what we're saying is do we want to invest in this kid, do we want to pay him money to come through the door to be a football player? And as I've said then the club benefits from it. So I think in that sense, you know, the Academy manager ultimately leads on pretty much every decision at that level, not that it's his decision but, you know, he would have the final say in terms of recapping and giving that.

Myself as the sixteens and youth development coach, probably, particularly now with my experience of having seen most of these kids come through the system, you know, whether they joined us at 14 or whether they joined us at eight, I would have seen them come through. Then head of recruitment is involved, assistant head of phase, head of coaching. We didn't have a head of coaching for probably four years and we've just appointed someone now that I guess has got lots of experience. I think his experience is invaluable with us now in developing that. Head of sports science for the phase. Medical. So it's a multidisciplinary approach; education would be in those decisions.

We try to meet ...COVID...We would normally meet every 12 weeks, now online, we're probably discussing it every week if I'm honest, but maybe not as a full multidisciplinary team, that team probably meets more, again, like three months. We had a meeting obviously recently, because currently our sixteens aren't back, but they're coming back this week. But yeah, we've had regular meetings, but the multidisciplinary probably every 12 weeks is what we try to do.

I: **Yeah. And within that though, when you are going through your de-selection processes, how do you actually determine who gets selected and deselected, and I guess considering all those people as well?**

P: Yeah. So there's probably a couple of strands to this. I think the first thing we would look at is the game impact, the game model, so out of our current sixteens who has impacted the game the most. Obviously being a cat two club, we tend to play our better players in the age group above where it's a challenge, and test and probe in terms of what their capabilities

are. So we'll have obviously looked at that around the eighteens programme as well, and have we got players that could impact that, So I think those are probably be the first people that would get talked about is them. And then the second stage, I guess, which it becomes more multidisciplinary then is maybe those late developers and those late maturers so which kids have got the potential to get there that may be are not there yet and what does that look like around their testing data, their medical screening. So then there's probably more input there from the supporting departments to really sort of focus in on that.

I guess the checklist really, it is an evolving checklist. I don't think we treat every player with the same checklist, you know, there'll be kids that will get the scholarship based on the fact that they can impact the game. There will be kids that can get the scholarship based on the fact that they've got physical maturation to go, there'll be kids that'll get the scholarship as well based on the fact that maybe what's ahead of them or behind them, maybe he's an influencer, so I mean, not that this ... this is just an example, but, you know, if we haven't got a right back in the age group below, and we haven't got a right back in the age group above, then that obviously has an implication on the team going forward. So the selection process might be based around positionally as well. And I guess, you know, those are all...So there are various strands of reasoning behind maybe a decision being ...and that obviously can work the other way. You could have two left backs in the age group below that you think these kids are gonna blow this other kid out of the water in a year's time. So like there is that as well. There's no set number. I think we...I think we get like so many funded, so when it comes to 16s to 18s, we probably do have a number of kids that we know we could take and there's no major issue to the club. But having said that, you know, for the various seasons, we've probably exceeded the funding by taking more kids. So it's not necessarily just based on the money or how many we actually get funded, you know, we take on more if we need to.

The one bit I would say, it's my personal philosophy, and this includes me, the one bit I've always struggled with is externally, like, I don't think we necessarily get a lot of players from other clubs to compare with, like into our programme. Our external recruitment probably isn't anywhere near some of the other clubs, even category twos.

**I: Why do you think that is?**

**P:** It's twofold. I think sometimes we're not proactive enough and that's me included on it. And I'll be honest, there's some personal biases sometimes where I want to give our own the opportunities first. The other bit is being in Wales. So we can't- if we take a trialist across

border there's cross border transfer regulations that mean that we can't play a trialist from England as an example in our under eighteens. So if we want to take a kid from another club who's been released and want to play them and put them in our eighteens programme, then we can't do that. They can literally only play in the programme 16 down. So that's a problem. Also, then there's a limit on...so a normal trialist would get eight weeks as a maximum but again, cross border means it's 14 days. So we've got 14 days really to look at a kid, find a game for them to play in. They can't play in an official eighteens game. So there's loads of, I guess... like we have recruited externally, like now we've got a goalkeeper from Australia, we got a kid from Fulham, a kid from Bournemouth, so like we have got kids, but I find it that we are playing at a disadvantage in some aspects of that. So yeah, I mean, that makes it a lot harder for us to get that external recruitment.

**I: And just to come back to something you said earlier about the game impact side of things, maybe a difficult question, but how do you kind of define what is game impact?**

**P:** So that's a great question. I think to me, we're looking for players that can influence a game. Now that doesn't mean ...so a centre back influences game differently to centre forward of course. So like, you know, I think that it's based on how they influence the game. The criteria for me generally around the game is game intelligence, game awareness and game impact. I think they're all slightly different in each role and position, but I try to look at it around those three things that they are the sort of strands for game impact. To do that what we need as well, and I think this is an important part of the programme, is game variety. So we have, we pinched it from [club], no lie, we have stress games, learning games and comfort games.

So a comfort game would be us playing one of our local Welsh premier academies, maybe a year up, they bring a year older. So that'd be a comfort game for us because what we would expect was we'd have lots of the ball, we'd maybe dominate areas of the pitch that we would expect.

Then a learning game for us would probably just be our category two programm. So our general games programme, which might be [club], it might be [club], where on most cases, the games are fairly even, sometimes they're [swung] in a bit of various ages, you know, to a certain club if they got the stronger players, but on the whole they're more...So the learning there is that you playing someone roughly at your level, but can you impact the game?

And then the stress games is category ones or international games. So we actively seek those extra opportunities to play against the better clubs. Now there's probably a myth in



our theory, as well, is assuming sometimes that all the best players are in the category one programme, which isn't true. And particularly in youth development, you know, even I would say we've obviously had some successful age group, I think, you know, we won the [competition], which was the first category two team to win a [competition]. And we actually played [club] in the final, a league one club and I think at the time their 18s were bottom of the league and stuff, and it would be easy to say they're not the best, but clearly, you know, we qualified ahead of [club], they qualified ahead of [clubs], and then we obviously knocked [club] out. They knocked out I think it was [club] and then we knocked out [club] and stuff ... So, like, when I look at it, I actually think the theory probably isn't always right, but a stress game to me is putting the kids against the better teams, if you can. And ultimately, even if, let's say it's [club], even if [club] haven't got the best players, the fact you're playing [club] means there's something different on the game for the kids and there's probably an element of stress attached to it. So that's something, I think that's important to us as well is looking at it across those strands as to, well, we might have kids that are impacting at the comfort and learning level, but the stress level might be the issue. Well, okay, that's fine because we just need to expose them more to it maybe, and support them through that. Or we might have kids that can't perform in the comfort level because it's too easy and then it's the good people bit, so [they don't know how to transfer their skills] to when things are a little bit easier for them. So I guess the game model has to match the selection criteria almost.

**I: Yeah. And just within that, I've got two questions really, I'll get around to the other one eventually, but the first one, I guess, is when you're talking about the stress games, is that almost having the ability to deal with adversity?**

**P:** Yeah, absolutely, yeah. And it doesn't like- it doesn't mean you you're going to get [unclear 0:30:08] or anything like that but, you know, but this season has been a write-off obviously, our sixteens have played five games, so, you know, we're actually in a position where we're making scholarship decisions on probably the previous two seasons rather than this season. But if I take the season before as an example, you know, we would look actively, we played [club] in the pre-season, we played [club], we played [club] in October, you know, we like literally would actively go and seek those games. Now I think that then is can you play at [club ground] against [club] in the floodlights on a Wednesday night after a four hour bus drive. And when I look at last night, you know, the championship we go to [club] in the snow, four hour journey on a bus, you know, and getting a result, I mean that's what you're almost trying to recreate really. I know [club and [club] are completely different, but it's that

feeling of, you know, this is a tough game. This is going to be really, you know, we've really got to be, you know, at our best to perform well to try and, you know, make a statement or make an impact on the game. And I think that those things are definitely then challenging how players can cope with stress, the demands of football, the adversity bit, the challenging bit. So yeah, I think absolutely they have a part to play.

**I: And the other question I wanted to ask was when you're considering game impact of a player, and it's probably quite easy, you're in a best place to answer it I guess having a fifteens/sixteens group, if you have a player playing up, is it fair to determine their game impact on the game they're playing if they're playing up an age group compared to if they're in their own age group?**

**P:** Yeah, that's again a really good question. So six years ago when I started, actually, I said, right, I'm going to run the fifteens and sixteens as one group. And we're basically, we're recreating the scholarship. So the two year scholarship, you get first years and second years as well, we're going to have first years as a fifteens and second the sixteens and the better fifteens then are going to try and get in the sixteens and ultimately there's a knock on effect to that.

But yeah, ultimately, we have a scoring system on the players that they're not necessarily aware of, but we try and grade one to five. One is struggling, and so we use the word struggling because it can be a struggle sometimes in a game and, you know, you've found things really tough, but struggling to me always suggests there's a way of improving. So I'm struggling at something, but I could improve it. So we have struggling.

We have developing which is like level two then, which basically in context is I've developed an aspect of my game.

And then progressing means I'm pushing and I'm really sort of enhancing.

Exceling means I'm flying in. I'm doing really well.

The level five is elite. Now elite to us is you can do some...you can impact the game above your age. So if I've got an under fifteen playing in the sixteens and he scores a five in that game, then he's an elite player to us. You know, if he's impacting our game above his age, he's an elite player to us, he's someone that we would be looking at, right, what's his individual programme, like, how are we really enhancing his physical capacity? What does he need? What more can we give him because he's one of the maybe potential players to succeed.

If you've then got a player that's maybe developing or struggling, [even plainer], and they're a year younger as an example then I guess that's taken into context, it's like he's struggling because he's playing up. But the exposure is for him that's a stress game.

I: **Yes, yeah.**

P: So we're just actually putting him in a situation where he's under a bit of stress and maybe recognising that it will be tough for him, but in his own age, if he's getting a five every week, then we've got to balance that off with maybe some opportunity to struggle as well. And that's sort of, I guess, the way we look at it. It's not always easy to do with every player and there's obviously circumstances that sometimes you need players to play up because you need numbers and...you know, so there's various circumstances, but I think used in the game model, and then almost the grading model is to match them up and, and to recognise why somebody might be a three or somebody might be a five.

I: **Yeah, yeah, no, I get that. And then coming back to the whole process, is that a similar process that you'd go through for the development plans, like on ILP for players?**

P: Yeah. So we have two ways...we have two sort the main strands we do there. So firstly, at the start of the year the players design their own...so we give them the plan and they create their plan. And then what we do as a staff then, and as a multidisciplinary team is we almost prioritise it. So we'll go, the kid might have mentioned that, you know, technical, tactical, you know, it's a four corner model, but what we'll say is there's these three aspects of the priority action plans. So the kids this year, they did - they presented that via Zoom, but normally they come in the classroom and they can put like a bit of a presentation together. We have the Academy manager in to listen to them. So a bit of like personal development as well in presenting and doing that, which I know loads of clubs are doing, but I mean the key bit then is the priority ... the prioritisation of what it is they need. So like that's more than multidisciplinary. So we give the kids almost the framework to say, what do you want to work on? What type of player do you want to be? And then we utilise that to almost really narrow in on, well, what are the key things he needs in this next twelve months and create a priority action plan and then that has various strands again. So, you know, if it's a physical one, then we have accountability for certain staff as to how to improve that. What type of testing does he need? What type of training does he need? Various circumstances that allow that. We do that for every player. So the IDP is the start. The prioritisation is for every player. And the actual filtering of the programme then to support it, truthfully, we focus on what we would class as our elite players.

I: **Okay, yeah.**

P: So as an example, I would be responsible for two or three players in the sixteens out with the twelve for almost additional support. And then my assistant would be responsible for two or three players, and then the sports scientists might be responsible for two or three players. Then that way we've almost got a working sort of team that's [an influence 0:36:57] in those players. And ultimately then as that filters down, truthfully, obviously the actual influence becomes less and less. So because we've got less staff in say the under twelve age group, not all sixteen players might be actually getting individual bullseye...we call it [bullseye-ing], but like they might then just be getting additional support through generic plans, generic frameworks to say here's power session for you to do, some agility work as an example. Whereas with the sixteens, actually, we might be saying right, take that kid out of that practice and give him fifteen minutes with the sport scientist and then it becomes a lot more individually focused really.

I: **Yeah. I've heard of...I've heard of another club do a very similar process on that. So that's, yeah, that sounds good. So you obviously spoke about the four corner model sort of briefly then, what your thoughts on the forecourt and the model?**

P: Yeah, I think it's an objective way of looking at the players individually. I mean, I don't think there's, you know, a perfect model, a perfect four corners. I don't think there is. I struggle to see that, you know, but I mean it obviously works in terms of maybe measuring what the game might look like for a player. But I have my reservations in some aspects that I think it's very easy to just get caught up in technical and tactical and obviously in youth development we do get caught the physical because of their growth, and then the psychological, or the social aspects, because for say a category two programme where we have no real sort of programme support, you know, pushing something, you know, things can get maybe neglected in that way. So, I guess, you know, the key bit for me is a priority plan and that doesn't necessarily need to be technical, tactical or physical. I just think you've got to know what is it you need that player to improve on, or what is it you need that player to excel at because it's not just always the things they can't do.

We actually, part of the IDP is the four corner model, but the main strand of it is, we class it for the younger kids as superpowers, but like what is it that makes you the player you are? And I think that's like still, I think, really important in youth development is you have to enhance their excellence and really take those things to another level because that generally makes players stand out as well.

I: **Yeah.**

P: One of the other bits I should have said was I always look what went ...and this is my own philosophical idea, I always look for external verification on things. So, I think because I've been here six years, you get ingrained in stuff. You think things are there and they actually might not be so I'm always like looking, so, you know, with the greatest respect to some staff, [tell me to do one] but I'll always try and speak to the opposition coach after, and again, maybe even just say, who sort of stood out to you for us today and were there any reasons why...I have good relationships with, I guess, through these six years of knowing staff at the clubs and, you know, the ability to pick up a phone. We had a CPD recently and I just asked, I just rang [club] and asked him...said, right, if you were playing [club] what do you think [club] are going to do? What's the key things that you would think [club] would bring and then does that match up to what we actually think we're bringing.

So to contextualise it, if we say we dominate the ball, but those three clubs say, hmm, I wouldn't say that then we'd probably not do it. So I think like, I always try and look for that. And we use like, we've got an FAYC whose son is in the Academy, so he literally spends a lot of time around us, so I know there's maybe some bias, but like I try and always treat him as, like, you're the external one, don't give me what I want to hear, give me what is actually happening. And I think that's really important because otherwise we do get ingrained in what we're doing and we think everything's brilliant and sometimes you just need that check and challenge bit from someone else

I: **Just within that then, that's actually nicely queued up because that's my next question is do you use objective data as well to maybe inform you on developments or even selection deselection?**

P: We do in that obviously we film every game, the analyst tips it down and we get individual data for that player. GPS has been something that's maybe evolved into the youth development programme although I would say to me, if I was really honest, I don't think it's objective enough because I don't think we got a big enough data range for it. So I would say, you know, when we meet the sports scientists, we'll have a profile of the physical player and say, this is what he's at max B, this is what he's at total distance as an example. But the actual data range to me, obviously, we're only comparing it against what our current kids are, we're not really comparing against previous because we haven't got that data, we're not really comparing it against other clubs because we haven't got that data. So, to me, there's

some bits of that are not massively relevant all the time. To me, those help inform action plans rather than informing decisions.

So if someone's high-speed running is low, then, you know, you can clearly say, well, we can improve that and that's fine. And you could say it's low based on just the current group and that's fine as well. So yeah, there's definitely objective learnings in that sense, but at the same time to me, do they inform those critical decisions around say scholarship or not and I'm still not convinced we've got enough data. Now that doesn't mean data doesn't work, it's just, maybe we haven't got enough.

The individual like analysis data around, you know, I guess we've been quite proactive there and we have tried to, like, almost positionalise some of that, and say, well, you know, if you're just measuring pass, or pass accuracy, well, that looks completely different for a striker than it does for a full back. So like, you know, it's maybe looking at what are the raw data points for each position that might influence us in a game and we do have that. And again, that is something that is looked at and shared. But if I was still really honest with you, I would say it's based on staff sort of subjective belief around what [they're] actually capable of.

The growth and maturation data becomes an influencer in our development from twelve to sixteen. At sixteen it's still maybe not the biggest decision, but at twelve as an example, I'd be really reluctant to release someone for physical reasons. I think like, to me, we don't even... I wouldn't even consider that at that stage because I know that they're still developing through their growth. So yeah, we've gotta be mindful of...so certain things it's great that we got it, but again, I would say personally, we probably don't have enough subjective data to really, really go, we've got to take this kid because of these numbers, you know, I don't think like so actually we've gotta release this kid because of these numbers. So yeah, that to me isn't the actual influencer.

**I: So I'm guessing, it might back up beliefs more so than be used as a tool to decide things.**

**P:** Yeah. I think it would probably inform discussion, but yeah, and maybe back up a belief or even disprove a belief sometimes in some cases. So yeah, I would say it more informs that discussion around the player, which I think is a good thing because at least you've got, I guess, almost clear talking points then on what it is then that that looks like. But to me, to make real honest objective decisions on that data, then the data range needs to be really robust and it needs a good depth of understanding as well. And maybe again, that's a

personal bias, I wouldn't say I'm ...obviously I understand the data, but I'm not...it's not something I'm proactively like really chasing and physically trying to do, you know, to me, good players, good people, good competitors, that's my role, you know, and there are physical implications to that. But ultimately those are the things I'm really trying to develop.

**I: Yeah, yeah. So a couple of sort of scenario questions for you now, if you had a player that came to you and they were exceling in the foundation phase, how would that inform you of their success?**

**P:** How would it – sorry?

**I: So if you had a foundation player who is exceling, how would that then inform you of their future success?**

**P:** Can I say it doesn't?

**I: Yeah of course you can, there are no right answers.**

**P:** Yeah. I don't want to...I don't want to...I don't want to be critical of like what goes on below, because it's great, you know, and I obviously I've come through that system, but I'm not sure you can really quantify whether a player is going to be a player at ten or eleven years old. I think you can quantify Academy players at that age, you know, ultimately the recruitment of young people can be questioned and, you know, the sixes and fives and all of that, you know. I think to me generally at ten and eleven years old, like, we're starting to get an idea on, are these kids Academy kids and can they like, you know, have they got role qualities to become an Academy footballer that really would set them apart to maybe, you know, their school... what I'd class as the school yard, like, are they standing out in the school yard. But does them exceling at a younger age influence their success? I don't think it does.

But I don't think it does harm either sometimes, it honestly depends on what you're dealing with, but like, you know, a good young player in the young age groups could develop into a good young player in the older age groups. I don't think there's necessarily a correlation to that success, but I would say it doesn't harm as much either. But it's not an influencer for me that, you know, well, this kid was the best at eleven if he ain't the best at sixteen. I guess what might influence me then is what did we do? Did we do anything wrong? Did we do anything right? Is it just that natural course of selection and how players have evolved and developed? But I think it would inform me to look at maybe if we did something wrong, but not really inform me to say that he's definitely going to be a success.

**I: Yeah, yeah. And then, so now the opposite scenario, if you had a player that came to you in the youth phase, they'd had absolutely no history in Academy prior to that, how would that then inform you of their future success?**

P: It's a difficult one. I actually think that's probably...that's probably a harder one to answer because most examples would say people are less reluctant to take a punt on someone that hasn't been through the system. But there are various examples of success with people who have come in late to Academy and thrived. So, I mean, to me it would just depend on that sort of game impact and really are they offering something that maybe either we haven't got or we have got and it's an advancement of that. So that would be probably two things.

The other one would be probably harder for someone coming out of the local football, maybe as an example, but one thing I would say from a player coming from another club is they late develop a bit. In six years really, we made one recruitment decision on a late developer from another club that came to us at 16 and that boy is now playing in our first team. And to be honest, it was a punt and it wasn't my punt so it wasn't me, but like credit where it's due, people saw that actually this kid is nowhere near the product that he could be yet, you know, at 16 years old. So I think, like, having people that can almost see that, and I don't think I'm the best at that, but I think if you've got people around that can actually see this kid isn't finished yet, you know, he's got a bit to go, then you have really got a chance.

We probably only got that right once in six years in terms of what is now, again, I talk about product for the first team, you know, that's what we've got, but I mean, I guess I would always now be mindful of and ask the experts, the ones who can actually... who can see it, I'd ask them, do you think this kid has got more to come or do you think he's done? That's always a really good way to look at it.

**I: Yeah, moving on to the last part now then, so now it's when you need your team sheet. The first thing I need you to do is if you look through your team and if you place a letter H next to any player that you would consider to be a higher performer of the group.**

P: Yep.

**I: Yeah, and you're going to do the same thing again, but you're going to put an L next to anyone that you consider to be a lower performer of the group.**

P: Yeah.



- I: **And then anyone that doesn't have anything would therefore be an M, so they're sort of mid performing in the group.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **So with the knowledge of those groupings, if you wanted to make any changes, you're welcome to make them now.**
- P: No, that's fine I think.
- I: **Okay. All I need to know is how many you've got in each group, so how many higher, how many mids, and then how many lower?**
- P: So I've got four high, I've just done 11, so there's four high, there's four low and three medium or middle, sorry.
- I: **So questions on this now, how did you determine who's in what group?**
- P: Game impact.
- I: **Which would be what your definition was earlier, the idea of how they affect the game, the influence on the game.**
- P: Yeah.
- I: **Yeah. And since your time working with these players, would they have always been in the same groupings or might a medium have previously been a lower or a higher been a medium, et cetera?**
- P: Yeah. I would say they'd have moved, they might have been, it probably wouldn't have been the same.
- I: **Yeah, yeah, so the dynamic. And the players in the top group, do they exhibit the same abilities as the others just at a higher level?**
- P: [Pause] ...No.
- I: **Okay. So they're more unique by player?**
- P: Yeah, yeah, I would say so, yeah.
- I: **And in consideration of player selection and de-selection, and this has only really accounting for the higher and the lower would those replicate who you're more likely to select and de-select?**

- P: Yeah.
- I: **Okay. So now just referring to just the higher performing group only, is there anything that consistently, or maybe as a theme, that places them above all the other players?**
- P: Erm...So obviously I think game impact is the reason they're there. The things that probably make them maybe more enhanced to me looking at them here would be they're actually all very good physically.
- I: **Okay.**
- P: By that I mean athletically and you know, it's not just speed, there's various reasons for that, but I would say speed would probably be one of the main factors in the ones I chose. And then... yeah, speed is definitely one of the factors, actually. The other one would probably be I don't want to quantify it as one v one dominant, but more like individual dominance. I'm not sure that it's one v one dominance, I think it's more around, like, they can individually dominate opponents. So, I would say that probably is one of the other aspects is sort of the strength, the strands for them. The only other bit that I probably would have said is, but it doesn't apply to all four, it probably applies to three of the four is like their practice mentality.
- I: **Yeah? And how would you describe that practice mentality?**
- P: I think they're willing to do more.
- I: **Yeah. There's almost like a determination or a desire or..?**
- P: Yeah. I would say they're willing to do more to improve and enhance their game and they're also wanting to do more to win, say, in a game these are probably the kids that probably demand a little bit more from maybe themselves or others. So yeah, those would probably be the main characteristics. So that would probably apply to three of the four because one's probably a slightly different character, but I mean, yeah, those would be things I think they would...
- I: **Just out of curiosity within those four, how would you measure their decision-making versus the other groups?**
- P: The other groups...how would I measure it?
- I: **Yeah. Would you say it's better, the same?**

- P: Oh, sorry, right okay, how I physically would measure it, but no... I would say their decision making is probably more consistent.
- I: **Okay. So is anything that is unique maybe by player that they do that also places them in the higher-performing group?**
- P: So the unique one is probably the one, the fourth lad that I didn't think met the other three criteria, probably, the bit for me is his dribbling capabilities.
- I: **Okay. And out of curiosity is that specific to a position as well?**
- P: Possibly, he's an attacker, but I mean, just the raw dribbling capabilities I think he has and maybe based on our philosophy, people might say that that type of player wouldn't exist in maybe our Academy, but... based on the way we play the game, I guess, as well, but actually I think of his age as in, so this kid is an under fifteen that I picked in my sixteens team so he's an elite performer, I guess, yeah, he would, to me stand out as that.
- I: **Do the others have anything which is unique or outstanding maybe against the medium and the lower groups?**
- P: Power and speed is definitely one thing I think that stands them apart.
- I: **Yeah. But not unique though because obviously, I know you said that they've all got that, there's nothing that they have...**
- P: Yeah, those three out of the four are all very powerful and athletic, physical players. So I think that's probably that. No, I wouldn't...not that I can actually directly pinpoint to say that that... they've all got individual qualities and slight differences, but yeah, ultimately I wouldn't say there's anything that really stands out there that I would say...the individual dominance bit I think is the bit that matches them all and how they do that is different.
- I: **Just out of curiosity, you know, you said about the game understanding and awareness, is that an awareness of their own abilities as well as how to apply them within the game being played?**
- P: Yeah, I would say that would be part of it is understanding how you can influence the game based on your super strengths or whatever that is. So, yeah, yeah I would say that's definitely part of it.
- I: **Okay. So now if we just look up the lower players, what is it that places them there?**
- P: Inconsistent.

I: **In what?**

P: Probably decision-making and game impact. I would say just looking at the profile, maybe there's an element around maturation and physical development as well which I would say would link to that athleticism maybe in that, you know, they maybe later maturers. I wouldn't say...They're varied types of players, but yeah, the bit for me would probably be the consistency of their impact really.

I: **When you say about the decision making is that that they're just making the wrong decisions or they're not being brave to make, you know, play other than the safe play.**

P: No, I wouldn't say it's around safety, I would say it is more around just maybe influence. So maybe recognising or maybe just not seeing the decision, the right decision, or maybe not executing the right decision when they've seen it in which case I would say the execution bit is something we can almost live, it's can they see it. So that would probably be one of the bits I would say.

I: **And as a group do they lack abilities in specific areas or are they just not quite as good within those areas?**

P: Not quite as good.

I: **So I still have those abilities though?**

P: Yeah. Actually, I think three out of the four might actually get a scholarship...

I: **Oh really?**

P: But that's... but they are low, I would say they are low ability in that sense.

I: **Why would they get a scholarship?**

P: I think the late maturer bit, I think is definitely...probably would be for two of them in one aspect. One actually is, when I say influence and consistency and impact, it is a medical reason I would say. Basically the child had a heart operation in lockdown. But he's been with us a long time, but obviously there, you know, you're talking the consistency level is low at the minute. But the potential could still be high so that would probably be, you know, I guess, an outdated thing, but that was actually flagged up by the club through the cardiac screening process they go through and then, yeah, two operations later, he's got a new aorta and back playing football.

I: **Wow. That's good to hear.**

- P: But yeah, ultimately, so they...you know, I guess that's maybe a slightly different issue, but there are I guess other aspects.
- I: **Of course. So within the same group is there anything that maybe they're really good at? It might not be categorised as outstanding, but they're still very good at it, that actually it doesn't impact their performance?**
- P: In the lower group, actually yeah, maybe. Yeah because ultimately they got in my eleven out of players below them who might have got in there as well. So yeah.
- I: **What would those be?**
- P: I would say maybe like comfortability around the role, so maybe like quite comfortable and confident in their role. I think in the late developer sort of consideration, it would be that maybe there's moments of, as I said, they can see it, but maybe they can't execute it so there's those glimpses of what we're looking for. And then, yeah, you know, I would say that whilst they're inconsistent, when they do things well, it's very, very evident so it may be that.
- I: **Yeah. So then the last group and only the last few questions as well, the mid performing group, how did you distinguish that line between them being not in the top or higher group and not in the lower group?**
- P: So I guess game impact would probably be one of them. And the other one probably would have been consistency that they're more likely to make a good decision than a poor decision, but maybe not make as many good decisions as the high-performers and maybe not make as many poor decisions as the lower performers.
- I: **Yeah. And again, do those players possess the same abilities as all the others? Maybe they're better than the lowers, but not quite as good as the top?**
- P: Yeah. There's some [unclear 01:04:35] so some things that I think they're better at and then some things probably that you could argue would be the same.
- I: **Yeah. And is there anything that maybe they do outstanding or, well, that again, it hasn't really helped them to get into the top group, but maybe puts them above the lower group still?**
- P: I would say ...tough one. I mean, yeah, there are probably things they do well that...I'm just trying to think of actually...so like if I take the examples here... they're probably all sort of middle maturers if I was honest, so like, they're not late and they're not early, they're sort of

in the middle so that probably means that physically they're probably in the middle of the group somewhere. But actually when I look at them technically they probably may be as good as the high-performers so, yeah, maybe the height, the technical aspect is something that has moved them up to the upper level maybe.

**I: So the last question, really, if I asked you to do this again, you don't have to do it, but hypothetically, and I asked you to measure to group them by potential, would the groupings be the same or would they be different?**

**P:** There probably would be some movement but I would think it would be between the middle and the lower group. I think the high performers are there probably because of their potential as much as their impact as well. But I do think there would be more players from below that could maybe jump based on potential.

#### **8.10.24 Participant 24**

**I: Hopefully that's going now. So the really easy stuff to begin with, what is your current job title?**

**P:** It's under 15s and under 16s Head Coach.

**I: And what's the Academy category status of the club?**

**P:** 1.

**I: And what league does your first team play in?**

**P:** The Premier League.

**I: How long have you worked in football?**

**P:** In football, going on for ten seasons.

**I: Okay. And how long has that been at the current club you're at?**

**P:** Seven seasons.

**I: And which age group were you going to discuss later on?**

P: The 16s.

I: **16s, brilliant. So probably the more interesting stuff now, can you give me a brief overview of your background?**

P: Yeah, so I left university at that time in my third year, I was doing video analysis for the first team at [club name], that then led on to the following season, they actually then got relegated so then there was obviously all sorts of cuts, I was one of those cuts.

I was lucky enough to bounce back and go to [club name] as a first team opposition analyst, I'd always balanced coaching with analysis, at that time it was obviously doing the first team stuff and then my coaching's always somewhere else so it was always at two clubs.

At [team name] there was the view that I would coach the Academy and that didn't kind of materialise, and then as luck would have it I got the offer to come to [club name] and do that, so analyse the [00:01:42 inaudible] the younger groups, so yeah, and then started at [club name] as eight to fourteen analyst and thirteen to sixteen, and then basically went up a year group every year until last year where I went from 17's or the under 18's assistant individual coach to the 16's, 15's lead so that's kind of a one stop shop for me.

I: **Yeah, it's quite interesting that sort of transition between analysis and coaching as well, I can see them complementing each other.**

P: Yeah, ideally, yeah, I suppose obviously you're biased aren't you because it's obviously the field that I like, but yeah, they do complement each other really well, and I think taking the middle man out of it you get clearer messages, obviously the less people that speak the clearer the message is so obviously me doing, or I have been doing both for a number of seasons, obviously I know the work that I do informs the work that you do, so yeah, I think it's been really good for me.

I: **So within your current role, how would you describe what your current role is?**

P: So it's to oversee the 15s and 16s programme that obviously you'll be aware yourself, that works as its own little phase sometimes, so although it's the top of your development phase it links heavily into the 18s so it kind of becomes its own little animal at times, especially when things get really busy and post-Christmas when you lose a lot of your boys at the 18s, so it's to manage that.

Obviously within that you're making scholarship decisions and the ones that we decide won't be getting a scholarship here, you're trying to manage that exit strategy which we've had quite a number of this year, so that's a big part of the job, and making sure that the individuals with the best potential are getting what they need from their training and game diet point of view really.

**I: And when you're considering that player development, do you have personal beliefs or a personal philosophy, and this obviously can be outside of, if you're bound to the club's philosophy it's going to be outside of that?**

P: Yeah, so I think, you know, a basic diet, and obviously they need to be stretched at certain times, like the like chain analogy, you need chain at certain times, but then I am a real big believer in that outside of the games the training should be really specified to the best individuals, but within then the games I see the game is varied.

So I would, my personal view is that the game should stay as that, as a real, as a variational tool, and trying to play more games than not so, you know, if a first team plays twenty-two games before Christmas then you should aim for, the most potential to be aiming for around sixteen hundred minutes really, and with that you're obviously training a little bit less so that when, so when you train less it can't be generic because the games give you, has given you that variation.

So that's really how I try to look at it, and obviously with the video and how that plays a part with me, then the [00:04:46 inaudible] and stuff we've got from the games that informs that specified training worked for you.

**I: And just within that concept of the varied games, obviously I have a pre-assumption of why, but it would be good to get an explanation of like how you feel that benefits to have different variations in games?**

P: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of talk about what happened in the past and kids played more and they played on the street, so I think it would be stupid of people to play a lot of games but a lot of the same games because they want to play it physically, and I have seen that first hand, and I think, two, you're probably, you know, stretching them on all levels, and they're not getting the equivalent of what would've been school games.



So I think everyone has to be on board with that, because if you're going to try and replicate closer to what it was back in the day say then you need to replicate actually what those games were and sometimes that was your maths teacher on the side taking a game against a school who are a lot worse than yours and you were by far the best player.

Now sometimes like I say then we have the argument, I've said it to our staff in here, and sometimes we get people [00:05:56 inaudible] as well, that's too easy, that was too easy for him, but if you don't just take the snapshot and you take the bigger picture of what the overall games programme is then he's actually got a good diet, but if you try and stretch your players all the time they'll break mentally or physically, and obviously if it's too easy all the time then you're not going to create elite footballers, so it's getting that balance really.

So the idea is that the elite programme, and I think it is really for the Premier League, is there we're lucky enough as a club to get invited on a lot of tours, if you get to the latter stages of those tours you will get top games for your players, now that's a whole conversation in itself of how you get to the latter stages, it's one thing going to a tournament that's got Real Madrid in it, it's another thing getting to the game where you play against Real Madrid, yeah, and that's an interesting one from my point of view, and there's certain pressures that come with that, to get what your best players need and like I said the ones that don't stretch them as much, and everyone would be on board with how that looks because that can look easy, but as long as you want it to look easy I don't see it being an issue.

**I: Yeah. And I guess that's also really considering a lot of the aspects of dealing with adversity as well as feeling success so you're getting both ends of the spectrum?**

P: Yeah, and it's difficult working at a club like this because to try and find games where the opposition are going to be better than you is tough at times, you then start to play around with age groups which again can be dangerous from a physical point of view, so your ideal one is those tournament fixtures but, you know, if you go out in round one unfortunately you haven't found [00:07:29 inaudible] players, so yeah, it's a real tough one that one.

**I: Yeah, I can imagine, yeah. And so do you have expectations on player capabilities as they're going through these sort of development sort of transitions, it might be for fifteen to sixteen's or sixteen's to eighteen's?**

P: Can you expand on that a little bit, Rich, sorry?

**I: Yeah, so that might be, do you have expectations on certain abilities within the four corner model so skill, obviously physical ability, et cetera, you might expect them to be at a certain threshold?**

P: I think the beauty of football is that there are very limited objective measurement tools, so I think when there's nothing objective out there to measure it you've got to be very careful in casting your opinion on that, and then obviously we've talked about a varied games programme, the players that you get through the building they're varied.

So I suppose success is are they looking like they're functioning as an individual within a team setting, and ultimately the team is just the vehicle so there'll be some players within that, you're right, you know, your near hand side wheel for instance and so long as it's doing that job and it turns and your brake pads are working then you are quite happy with that because it enables the people in the passenger seats who hopefully you're going to take to the first team [00:08:56 inaudible].

So your expectations of different players within the organisation are very different as well because if you had eleven globetrotters, you know, I'm probably up for manager of the month because, you know, we work like that, so you're always going to have probably whatever level you work at, three or four players who you really like or you really favour or [00:09:15 inaudible] performance make the difference, if your development team want to justify why you're doing what you're doing as a club in terms of running that programme, and then the others really are there to support that.

**I: Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense, so there's almost quite an individual specific expectation more so than a generalised one?**

P: Yeah.

**I: So now sort of moving into the second part which is like I said a bit of like the strategies employed, when you are going through development plans or even selection/de-selection, and what I mean is end of season de-selection so release/retention, who would be involved in those decision making processes?**

P: So we involve, and I think we're quite good at this to be honest [00:10:05 inaudible] all the key stakeholders, so the Head of Education and Welfare, myself who's obviously the Head of 15/16s, the Assistant 15/16s, the under 15/16s Goalkeeper, the under 16s Fitness Coach, the

Head of the Academy, the Academy Manager, Assistant Academy Manager, and then two consultants who we employ who work across a range of age groups there, so yeah, you're probably talking like seven or eight people in those discussions.

**I: So that's quite a big group, quite impressive.**

P: It is, yeah, and obviously you get varied opinions with that, so we know [00:10:46 inaudible] seven people are very rarely on the same page, and that would be a discussion because, you know, the hard conversation, so if it, you know, a lot of them do take time and we probably do go over a lot of things, and rightly so, I think the ones that are an easy conversation then maybe you could argue why didn't they make it earlier.

**I: Yeah, agreed. So when you are going through these processes, how is it normally determined who would get selected and who wouldn't get selected?**

P: It's based on the pathway of who's above ... who's in the, so it's who's in the pathway above so like from my point of view it's like what we've got in the youth team, obviously you have to look a little bit further than the youth team but you can get carried away of how far it looks, obviously those, from a thirteen and twenty-three's point of view that landscape can change very quickly with loans and transfers ...

**I: Yeah, of course.**

P: ... so I suppose like obviously is there a pathway for that player, now obviously if that player is a top player then the conversation is more of how do we maybe knock things out of the way above him, but on the flip side is if we think that there's players that will only clog up the pipes or will get in the way of what's below or what's above maybe one generation then and how this comes into it, their current ability, but that's always matched with what their potential is, and is there any potential more for the technical growth or physical growth, we very rarely talk about tactical development because we have a strong belief in the building that we can do that, and I dare say that if I worked somewhere else that would be my viewpoint as well. If there's a tactical issue I think as a group of staff you have to look at yourself and think well, you know, come on, we can do that, and if we've not done it yet then it's probably on us a little bit.

Yeah, so it's probably those areas to be honest, and then obviously it's the wider area, you know, will he fit into the culture, and is it the right thing for the boy concerned to travel, and

if we think that the boy's got potential but won't play every week then we see that as being that could be a potential issue for that player, then obviously that's a conversation in its own right as well.

**I: Yeah, of course. I found that really interesting, just to go back on your last statement about the tactical's not as well considered, and not in a negative way, just out of curiosity do you do, like how do you measure if their learning capability, it might not be that obviously you're not delivering it but maybe they're not absorbing it, like how does that, how do you overcome that dynamic?**

**P:** Yeah, so I'd say in my personal view that we probably have to take more of the responsibility on that. Obviously the conversation may roll on to well are they coachable, are they a learner, and I think if the answer is yes then it's like well, you know, one, there's time to solve that, you know, with the age group I work with because you're going to pass them on to a full-time training model for two years, so the hope is that they would then get that, and then the other one is, you know, are we doing everything that we can, so I think very rarely on that, one, do we spend a great amount of time discussing that corner for instance, and the second one is I think that all comes from a real inner belief that now we can do that.

**I: Yes, no, I think more people should be like that in a sense because that's ultimately what they're coming into academies for, right, to get that sort of specialist training?**

**P:** And I think it's the background as well, like I say I really do believe in that because it's the easiest thing to see how those managers go in and see how they change formations and in three or four weeks [00:14:42 inaudible] now I think it's starting to take a little bit of shape, and we're only talking technique, you can't cope with technique anymore so.

**I: Yeah. So are these similar plans, so when you go through that determination for selection/de-selection, is that similar to how you would create a development plan, like an individual learning plan for a player across the season as well?**

**P:** Yeah, and I guess we don't have, obviously it's not all seven players, certain people sit in that room, although I will say it is for the players who we think have got the best potential, so we do have those meetings throughout the year. Those meetings obviously the retain and release conclude whether we're going to take or release, the development plans conclude with a document in which we decide two or three, and we try not to keep it any more than

that, of what we think of the development plans, and then it's who's going to be responsible for those.

So if we feel like the best person, and I think we're really good at that here, the best person or the best tool we've got available to coach running in to out, that is one of the consultants because he was a top, top winger, Champions League winger, then ultimately it's right, okay, that's good, you're responsible for that.

**I: Okay, so it's good delegation.**

P: So that's the format, yeah, but that's how they conclude is we have a document and then okay, well you're going to be responsible for that, and obviously everyone chips in, obviously me being their coach I have to oversee all of that, but I think it's good if you don't want to identify people's strengths and where they can add value to your programme.

**I: Yeah, definitely. And does that consider positional demands as well, or do you use it quite loosely with positions?**

P: No, that considers positional demands as well. Now obviously some players' positional conversations are a little bit broader, but if the group's all fifteen/sixteen you might just hesitate to say that they're more, they're going to be a front-half player, you don't know whether they're going to be an eleven, nine or ten, whereas some players more often than not your centre-halves or deep-lying midfield players, it's quite clear that's probably where they're going to be.

**I: Yeah, no I get that.**

P: Full-backs may be similar in that as well.

**I: Sorry, go on mate.**

P: Full-backs may be similar in that as well, sorry.

**I: Oh okay, yeah. So I know we mentioned briefly the four corner model as well earlier, did you have any thoughts around the four corner model?**

P: Yeah, we do use it when we, to score some maybe new players, but I do think to treat them in isolation it can, yeah, it can be dangerous in my opinion, you have to take into account all the four corners but ultimately they are still dictated by the other three corners so, you

know, if you [00:17:43 inaudible] mentality's always one where I think it's a really good example of this, and that I think some people don't value it as much but I think if you want to value it you have to value it within the demands of what they're working in.

I think you used the example before of, you know, creating resilience or if you look into creating resilience then the environment you have to create and the demands you have to put on individuals to do that, that takes a lot of buy in from everyone that's involved with the programme because if one person is a chink in the chain, that analogy I use [00:18:16 inaudible] if you're trying to really put someone under pressure and take them to the cutting point, if there's one person in the chain that it can go to, it's like the mum and dad one isn't it, if dad's saying it can go to mum, so if you've got all parents on board saying no then that's a good way of working.

**I: Yeah, definitely. And this will slowly come around to making the point you've already made, but do you use, I guess a better way to phrase it is with objective tests that you might collect do you believe that they best reflect match performance that, you know, of whatever you do collect?**

**P:** In any of the four corners?

**I: Yeah, so if you were doing like obviously I anticipate you probably get a physical objective set of scores such as your sprint tests, I don't know whether you do psych testing or the others, but yeah, would you say that they best reflect what you see on the pitch by individual testing?**

**P:** I think it's case by case because I think [00:19:26 inaudible] you do, and I think there's all, I think it inevitable if we get that conversation [00:19:31 inaudible] really quick or we don't quite see that pace in the games I think that's quite a common conversation that they'll have, so yeah, yeah, I think it's very much case by case but I think year on year there's always the one where maybe someone scores exceptionally well but you would argue that you never see in the game except for above average attribute.

I think the other way when you rarely disagree if someone has below average objective scoring, I think you very rarely see in the games, oh I don't quite see that, and he's really... so yeah, it probably won't always work the other way when people are scoring really high, maybe that sometimes [00:20:13 inaudible].

**I: Why would you think that is, I mean you've kind of alluded to it already, but what would make, if you did have somebody that was really quick but you don't see that in the game like what is it that maybe that you would think that they're lacking that doesn't allow them to show that?**

P: I think a common one really, and we're seeing that everywhere, is predominantly it'd be your front-half players who score high on the speed tests, I think if it's not a front-half player then it's a bit difficult in that sense yet again because if you're playing a style where you're a centre-back, you're playing half-centre-back to quite a high speed distance so that's maybe where that one quickly becomes not a conversation, but midfield players who are given licence to run forward is a point of why you maybe don't see that, but I think front-half players is then more of do they know when and how to run in behind is a common one I always find.

The other one in terms of the team being the vehicle is whether the team is allowing, not just the physical attribute but is the team allowing for all players that you think have the best potential to showcase the best attributes, and that can be quite a difficult mixing pot to get together at times.

**I: Is that almost, do you mean for example understanding how a player wants to receive a ball for example, or is it wider than that?**

P: Yeah, so obviously you have to understand what their [00:21:46 inaudible] playing together, and more so I mean the style of maybe a club or an organisation, if you have someone who scores really high for instance on spinning or high speed action but who never play directly, who've never played into space, and you're going to find it really hard for that player to record that level of high speed distance because the team style doesn't allow for it, so yeah, that's kind of what I mean on that, it's sometimes you have to look at is the vehicle supplementing it.

And you could have that for a development or a performance team, I think if you ran into a club tomorrow and took over it, and I think that's why maybe where new managers come in and people come back out of the woodwork again is because they look at the attributes and try and get those out again.

**I: Would you say, this is probably starting to get ahead of myself here as well, would you say that within that instance you might find that players that other teams might release based**

**on lacking areas another team might inherit as a really top player based on the different philosophical demands that they each play?**

P: Yeah, 100%, and I think that can also work the other way as well in that someone who's [00:23:03 inaudible] goes to a club or a similar say category or whatever, and the styles are very contrasting and they actually are miles off getting in that club, so maybe [00:23:14 inaudible] the style can be [00:23:16 inaudible] which means they're nowhere near then getting into another one that plays a different style, and yeah, to your point, 100% is what might not fit for one definitely fits for another.

**I: Yeah. So a couple of scenario based questions for you now. If you had a player that they were excelling in the foundation phase of the Academy, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: Again I think that we'd have to look at what determines success and why that success is, so if that success was because they were physically plus which it can be quite a common one when they started sort of at the back end of the foundation phase, not necessarily at the lower end, it's almost like an even playing field isn't it which is unusual, at that point it's very much not an even playing field until about nineteen/twenty and even then it's, you know, how you define equal.

So yeah, if it's towards the back end of the foundation phase, you have to ask yourself the question of is it just purely down to that they've matured quicker because, you know, two or three months of performance can make a big difference when you're ten and being on kind of for half a year more is a big thing, so that can't be under-estimated, and then, yeah, so yeah, that's one example.

And then it would be is if that success of what you turn is it real, so can you foresee them still being able to perform that action in the latter years as the pitches get bigger, and as obviously the opponents around you ultimately get better.

**I: Yeah. And I guess that's that concept of performance versus potential?**

P: Yeah, 100%, so yeah, you do that, obviously you have high performers in every phase, but yeah, sometimes it can be misleading can't it because if the performance is down to a reason that has no longevity that can be very dangerous, I suppose the art of the codes there is to try and get that message across to the player that they are still going to need



other tools in their armour because, you know, doing what you've always done you'll get what you always got, but if you, and this particular style that means you're always going to be a very good under 14 player and that's not going to work when you're seventeen.

**I: Yeah. So now the flipside of that question, if you had a player that joins the Academy in the youth phase but they've never done any Academy training prior to that, how would that inform you of their future success?**

P: Yeah, that's a really good question, and that's, you know, certainly ones that I've lived as a coach, I think every coach would have done from time to time I would imagine, especially if you go maybe a little bit further down the categories.

Yeah, I think that idea what I've said to you before about games and variation of games, I think ultimately you often do get more on the games, the games is what gets players into the building because of how they perform or show potential within games, so when you do a Y drill on a Monday that player isn't going to look as good as the other players in the Y drill purely because those players have been doing those sort of practices for you're talking like at fourteen/fifteen, that sort of phase, but it could be going on for six or seven years, so there's obviously going to be a big difference so you can't get caught up on that, but at the same time they have come in at some point for a reason and just purely from getting in from grassroots as it is a real big success in itself.

So I think, going back to the point of what I've said of bringing out a player's best attribute, you have to look at what's got 'em into the buildings, so to come in six years late to any party you've got to, do you know what I mean, got to bring something to the table really, your job as a coach is to work out very quickly what that is and to build on that and in the background try and refine new things, but being realistic in the work that you can do and what you can refine I think you have to be really selective with those players on the work that you can do.

**I: Yeah. And the next question I've got I'm going to slightly rephrase it, in an instance of that scenario, if you took him on would that be with consideration of his coaching age or his football age prior to coming in?**

P: No, to be honest from my personal point of view I wouldn't be that interested, like I say if you saw someone who could, who showed potential or future potential or from a performance point of view could hold his own in a game environment with the players that

would probably be enough for me, I wouldn't be too fussed because I think again it's that argument of, you know, someone gets slightly, as we've discussed, before someone gets to sixteen, who leaves at sixteen from another club, I think one thing is coaching, but the type of coaching, the level of coaching, it might not fit in to, into your way of working anyway, so I've been very careful on judging players on that to be honest.

**I: I guess another way to put that is would you favour, well not favour, would you say that somebody with a younger exposure to football that is doing well would they have a greater potential than somebody who's been doing football generally for longer?**

P: ... Potentially yeah, but I think, yeah, I think that's very case by case.

**I: Yeah.**

P: Yeah, I wouldn't be able to answer that one in terms of [00:29:08 inaudible] to be honest, going on my own previous experience I haven't got, and maybe in ten years' time I would be able to answer that question, but at this point I haven't got a definitive answer on that, so apologies.

**I: No, I don't think there is an answer if I'm honest with you so it's always an interesting one to throw at people. And I know you mentioned maturation earlier, how does maturation steer your influence towards, whether that's development plans or selection plans, how does that impact your input?**

P: Yes, I think there's two sides, obviously there's maturation, plus maturation maybe some people, some maybe seeing it as being on time so I think we definitely have someone who is a high performer who shows high potential, and that's not necessarily down to their physical attributes or their maturation.

So you then have to be very careful with how much stress you put on them because I think it's very common still, and it's something that really frustrates me a little bit, is I think there's a real fine line between a player getting what he needs out of maybe say playing up or playing at a greater level, but if that player breaks they will then miss or potentially miss between anything from two to, you know, sort of twelve, it's an ACL, months of development, you don't get that time back.

So I think in terms of scale and the pros and cons of what you get I think you have to be very careful that, you know, three games of playing up resulting in a, you know, an eight month

injury, I don't think that's quite worth it, but I think managed properly then I think you can have the best of both worlds.

Now the other side to that coin is obviously players that are plus but may not technically be there. I think if the, from a maturation point of view they're able to cope with more physical tasks [00:31:00 inaudible] different types of games, and technically if you believe that your staff there are at that level as well, I think then that's a real, it's quite an easy conversation, it's just one that you have to monitor.

I think it's the ones that maybe are on time or early that it's a range of, there's a, yeah, of what the games programme looks like for them, who they're playing with, what else they have on, where they are in terms of the predicted high, how they [00:31:29 inaudible] and I see that people get that, yeah, I see people, I get, I see people get that wrong a lot, and I think, yeah, I think it's something that as a collective that coaches [00:31:46 inaudible] they're a lot better at to be honest.

**I: So with somebody who was, maybe they were average maturing but technically at the front of their age group, I know it comes outside of the maturation bio-banding sort of questioning, but would you still think it's appropriate to then move them up so that maybe they're getting the technical development?**

P: Yeah, but I think it can't be as simple as, and this is where I'm saying I think you've got to be a lot better at this, I think moving up, for how long, what does it look like, what games [00:32:23 inaudible] programme or games in the year up are you playing them in, yeah, and who are they playing alongside, more often than not you are playing a similar sort of teams so you kind of know who they're going to be playing against. I think it really is a, it's just, you know, it's scrutinising it up to weekly discussions in my opinion, I really do.

**I: And what about the opposite, if you were playing them down?**

P: Playing them down, again I think it's the same conversation, it's, you know, why are you playing them down for that particular [00:32:59 inaudible] that particular team playing alongside that particular player with that particular training week, so I see it, yeah, I see though, I think if you're going to do that with a player and you obviously think the player's got potential otherwise you wouldn't be kind of giving him an ad hoc or really individualised programme, so [00:33:17 inaudible] look at it as an individualised programme, and if it's an individualised programme you have to constantly ask the other question, is it the best for

the individual, and I think unless you're doing that on quite a regular basis I think it can be quite easy for things to run away, and that's when those players break or lose their way.

**I: Yeah, and just within that would you say that if somebody's excelling and maybe are physically mature and they're excelling in their own age group, you put them up, if you keep them up I guess what you're saying there is you could in certain domains, but if you use psychology because they're no longer succeeding if you did that for too long that would become negative, you obviously want to stretch them, you don't want to keep them negatively like impacted?**

**P:** And that's my point [00:34:03 inaudible] yeah, so if you're constantly being stretched and you are constantly having success I think that as well [00:34:10 inaudible] you in I think, you know, quite quickly the danger is then you start to change tact which can be dangerous, and that's where players then lose their identity when they play up, I think that's a good example of when players play up, sometimes the danger is they can lose their identity because they then try and cope with the environment that they're in, whereas actually the plan was to help them excel, when in fact what you're trying to do [00:34:35 inaudible] in like a survival mechanism and they end up, you know, losing their identity because they're just doing whatever it takes to survive, and all of a sudden it's [00:34:44 inaudible] that you were watching a year ago, and yet to, yeah, in terms of going down then again, yeah, you've got [00:34:54 inaudible] it's all the same questions really, yeah.

**I: So now we're moving on to the last part, so this will be when you need your team sheet available.**

**P:** When you say team sheet did you mean for the game or just like the squad list, sorry?

**I: Like a squad list would be better, but whatever you have to hand, I don't want to.**

**P:** I've got a squad list.

**I: Okay, cool. All I need you to do, I've got three tasks for you to do with it, the first one is all you need to do is put a letter H, so if it's in like an Excel or something, just put a letter H next to anyone that you'd consider to be one of the higher performers within the group. ... It can be as many or as little as you want as well.**

**P:** ... Yeah.

- I:** And then it's the same thing but you're going to put a letter L next to anyone who's a lower performer in the age group.
- P:** ... Yeah.
- I:** And then lastly that would leave anyone that doesn't have a letter they would be considered maybe a mid-performer so they'd be an M. So with that knowledge of the groupings, if you wanted to change any of them around you're welcome to do so.
- P:** No, that's fine.
- I:** So all I need to know is how many you've got in each group, so how many are in the higher, how many are in the middle, and how many are in the lower?
- P:** Okay, so there's three higher ... five lower.
- I:** Yeah. And how many are in the middle?
- P:** ... Five, and the keeper.
- I:** Yeah, that's fine. Okay, so the questions, how did you go around determining who's in what group?
- P:** So I think obviously at this time the conversation that we're having, this chat, obviously a number of those decisions have been made around the low performers, and the high performers are those that we have those in-depth conversations around as a group, and the ones that are made when I go out every day when I'm talking about the training model because the training model is fitted around them and their needs in every session if I haven't, if I don't think we've maybe eluded to something that's on their development plan, the session probably hasn't hit the levels I wanted it to, and I've got to ask myself the question is what, who was that activity for then if it wasn't for one of those, because it's certainly not about the team, yeah, so that's the high performers basically, yeah.
- I:** And what about, how did you determine the lower guys?
- P:** So, yeah, that's obviously the time we're having this conversation are the ones that we have decided are getting the least or will meet obviously the deadlines in fourteen days, so I've got two more [00:38:44 inaudible] so they're all the ones that we've advised that we think it's best that they do their scholarship somewhere else for whatever reason.

- I: Yeah. And since your time working with those players, whether that's across this season or previous seasons, would all the players have been grouped in the same way as in the high, medium, lower, or would they be dynamic in moving across groups?**
- P: Yeah, it's dynamic, we have an audit which happens twice a year across all the groups where we meet as a staff and basically just discuss that, and it's quite good to look back historically on sometimes the gradings that have gone, so I guess maybe the question what you're alluding to is is there low performers that were up at one point, the answer is yes, and then definitely not so much with this particular group we were discussing but yes, I have seen it where there are those M players that end up being H players, I very, oh well I have not seen it here where I've seen an L go to a H.
- I: Yes, yeah, that's quite a common thing that I hear, although they might be M to an L.**
- P: Yeah, so it's like a silver medallist getting on gold to the podium or serve a medallist for and off the podium, but I very rarely see a bronze medallist ending up on the top of the podium.
- I: Yeah, exactly. And the guys who are the top of the, in the H group, do they exhibit the same abilities as all the others or do they have additional abilities to all the other groups?**
- P: In terms of the high performing groups, sorry?
- I: Yeah, so are they in high performing because they have a wider array of abilities or are they the same but they're just better at them?**
- P: Yeah, so like they have a better capability or they have potential for their ability to be better than others and obviously, you know, that's case by case where there's one conversation is that they are better now, the other one is well maybe they're similar to those M players on a number of [00:40:52 inaudible] but you can project I think that, you know, the way that they've been progressing but they've got a lot more to come, a lot more potential.
- I: Yeah, and I appreciate that's not the easiest question to actually answer anyway. And, sorry, I'm just looking at my questions, so I'm going to move on, so if you just consider the high performing group only now, is there anything that's consistent, like a theme among those three players that places them in the high performers above the medium and the lowers?**

P: Well not, none, well the one thing they haven't got in common is they've not all been at the club since they were eight so that's not a common factor. In terms of maturation it would be the same, they don't have that in common. So I guess it would be, well my view, [00:42:01 inaudible] that is, yeah, they show, they show the technical capabilities in the games and they are constantly coming out as your high performers in all the different variations of games, and in that time they've been able to play in the age groups above and they still show those capabilities and not lose their identity as to what I probably alluded to earlier.

I: **So is that the idea of that you would say they're consistent performers then?**

P: No I wouldn't say consistency is how they're being measured, I would say it's on showing the ability that they've got which allows them to excel within the games programme, but yeah, I wouldn't say that's been like consistent over every games but nor would you want it to be.

I: **So they maybe, so maybe then they understand themselves better so they know what they do well versus, you know, versus sort of playing what they want to do, they're doing what the game demands of them?**

P: No, I'd probably describe it more as, and I'm not disagreeing with you there, I think I'd describe them more as when they are at their best they are, but they excel the rest of the group by quite a big distance, now obviously they're not at their best every game and obviously the job of the coach is to try and convey the message of what they look like when they're at their best and what they do when they're at their best.

And that's why I'm saying [00:43:33 inaudible] in terms of there's definitely one player on that list who hasn't quite yet got a real grasp on his identity, and is moving quite a number of positions still, so I think he's still trying to work it out a little bit.

So my job this year has been trying to convey that message of when you're at your best this is what it looks like, so yeah, I definitely, yeah, again it's case by case but no I couldn't say that about the group as a whole, I don't think every single player in the group of three is really clear on their identity and nor are they being consistent throughout the season.

I: **That's interesting. And with, just in reference to that player that you said he's been moving positions, what is it that places him in the higher performing group for you that,**

**he's obviously uncertain of where he plays but he's obviously showing something that makes him great?**

P: Yeah, the player has got exceptional physical abilities, he's got exceptional pace and he's a great ball striker. Now the conversations we have, although we get the best out of him, is at the point of developing, obviously like you say you're trying to stretch players and test players, but I think ultimately we're getting to a stage now where at sixteen is, well if they are your real big strengths then you may be better playing a more [00:44:53 inaudible] game that will allow you to bring out your best attributes more and more often rather than playing in the congested midfield area, well that seems great for your development to test [00:45:03 inaudible] but will probably become more towards the performance end of the spectrum now.

And you might be better on the side, and you get more [00:45:11 inaudible] on the side, it's almost like a running track isn't it at times, you're just working in your lane, you have the ability to [00:45:19 inaudible] by crossing and cutting in, but you don't have all the extra peripheries of playing in the middle of different under-loads, over-loads, congestion [00:45:28 inaudible] you're often receiving the same layout, playing in the same way, and I dare say there's more room to perform high speed actions and sprint actions when you're on the side than when you're in the middle, you know, that kind of.

**I: And then with the other two, do they have things that they are also really good at or outstanding at?**

P: Yeah, I think the common one is receiving under pressure, I think that's on a lot like not just with this group but a lot of groups, when your players are able to receive under pressure I think that's often what sets players apart is the technical ability to receive in games, and that's where I think we get, the games are really important because you can have players that look really good in training move to the [00:46:14 inaudible] but, yeah, it's very different, so yeah, exceptional receiver or exceptional outplayers.

**I: And is that linked to decision making in regards to knowing how to receive under pressure, or is that just sort of awareness, of game awareness?**

P: Yeah, I think it is decision making, yeah, of knowing when to do something and why you're doing it, obviously it all happens in a split second so they're doing it subliminally which means that they probably won't have a vast array in the toolbox which again sets them apart



from other players who can't cope in [00:46:52 inaudible] situation, but that the toolbox is and is expansive as theirs.

**I: Yeah, definitely. Okay so if I move on to the lower performing group now, so the five guys with the L's, is there, the same sort of question, is there a theme of a reason why they would be all lowers compared to the medium and the higher?**

P: No, because I think there's probably two conversations really with the lowers, and I would imagine out of the interviews you'd deem this probably quite a common one in that I think the high performers, there's definitely [00:47:29 inaudible] in the, you know, the physical core, and it plays a massive part I think in trying to develop [00:47:35 inaudible] I think ultimately I think sometimes the game catches up with them as we discussed in that foundation phase and the pitches get bigger.

So I think now you often see players that were able to cope, so they not necessarily were a high achiever but they were sort of middle of the pack and they quite quickly moved to the bottom of the pack as the physical demands of the game gets greater, and I don't often mean that so much as the players they're playing against or with, sometimes it's purely by the dimensions of the area they're playing on as well, they're just not able to cover the ground neither.

So therefore I do think there's a couple of players who fit into that category physically, it's just been the end of the road for them, and the physical capabilities they're going to have at the end we can quite confidently say that that's not going to be enough of where we need it to be for our team performance model I think would be fair.

And then the other one is to that point where I alluded to the other side that high performers is, they're not able to, that their toolbox isn't as vast to cope with the technical demands under pressure in the fixtures or the fixtures that we can see coming forward in the next two years.

**I: Yeah. So it's almost, maybe not quite as simple, but it's almost like the opposites between the higher's and the lower's, they almost lack things in the lower's where the higher's seem to excel in those similar areas.**

P: Yeah, it is, yeah, I think so. I mean obviously, or in case by case, [00:49:02 inaudible] there's are other things that inform your decision, but I'd say in the main looking at it and sort of

speaking to you now, yeah, that is the conversation that we've had about those low performers, it's either been, you know, physically they're unable to cope now, or we don't think they will be able to cope at the next level, or knock someone else out of the way, or clog up the pipes for someone who's below showing more at this moment in time.

And then yeah technically is it breaks down all the time, and I think like I said very rarely will you go from bronze to gold, so I think the middle of the group or if you're top of the bronze category ultimately you are that sort of right wheel that I spoke about, so you have to be able to, technically in order to serve and support the high performers as you've termed them so, yeah, and if you can't do that you're kind of not serving your purpose in the organisation anymore, it's probably the right thing for you and the organisation to part ways.

**I: Yeah, definitely. And within the lower group again, is there things that they're perhaps uniquely very good at but it doesn't seem to impact the game enough to make them a mid-performer or a higher performer?**

P: Sorry, say that one again, sorry?

**I: If there's like an attribute that maybe they're really good at but it doesn't carry over to their performance?**

P: I think you maybe often see that with ball striking, I wouldn't say that particularly for this group, I think that's a common one, a player who has a real good passing range or range of passing, but he's unable to transfer that into the game, I think that I've had conversations around players like that, and that's purely because they don't give themselves enough time to receive and prepare that ball strike which comes back to receiving under pressure.

**I: Yeah. And then the last group then, so the middle performing group, how have you distinguished that line between not being in the higher but not being in the lower?**

P: Yeah, I think it's more like the opposite of what I said of the lower, so they're not in the higher because you maybe think that there is someone in the year group above who has more potential in positional area, and I think the other one is that you can't project that they're going to progress as much as the high performers, you know, in a roundabout way of speaking, [00:51:36 inaudible] but yeah, I think it's more that you could maybe see them making a late charge and they maybe could go up a category but something drastically

would have to happen in one of the areas, but I think it's more of a simple conversation of why they're not in the bronze is that especially the bottom end of the middle pack is that they are still really providing a robust part for the vehicle.

But again I suppose that's a really interesting conversation of like maybe your top two of the middle and why you haven't graded them as higher, but I think it's more like I say just the view with all of them is what it will look like in three or four years' time, you're trying to project, and I think a lot of the times for whatever reason you can't quite project, you can't quite shut your eyes and picture them getting on the train to go on a pre-season tour with the first team [00:52:36 inaudible] that's different of why you can't quite picture that. So, yeah, I almost [00:52:41 inaudible] splitting that group into two almost.

**I: Yeah, definitely. And with those, just with that projection of ability, is that almost deemed by the rate of progression that they demonstrate across the season?**

P: Yeah, and I also think sometimes it's the position that they play in, and identifying the demands of that position further down the spectrum and whether they will be able to meet those demands.

A real good example, I haven't got that on my list, but a real simple example of that is a central defender who's not going to reach six foot three and might be six foot, I think you could have, I don't know the England selection, but there's been a lot of players who are centre-back [00:53:23 inaudible] England who are six/six one, and obviously they don't [00:53:27 inaudible] the national team senior or they don't make the first team and height plays a big part in that with, you know, first team [00:53:34 inaudible] selection and their ideologies, so things like that that's a really easy one I think to try and maybe convey my message on that one.

**I: So that's almost an holistic, so it could be across any of those, you know if you use the four corner model, it could be across any of those four corners I guess you're suggesting there?**

P: Yeah, or it could be that he performs really well in a certain type of your games programme, but when you really go to the top and your best players often really thrive off those experiences, but that's what makes them a high performer that they feed off those and they still excel in those situations.

The ones in the next bracket they're maybe the ones where on those particular occasions you've come off and just survived which is okay because that's the top of the pyramid and you've gone away and you play Barcelona in thirty-four degrees in the semi-finals, loads of people watching, and they serve the purpose, they serve the vehicle, no problem, but that's the reason why I think yeah, at some point, you know, yeah, you're going to reach your roof.

**I: Yeah, definitely. And within the middle group again, do they still have things that they individually excel in, and if they do are they as good as the guys in the top performer?**

P: Yeah, they excel, I think a common theme with all those is, is you, like I said before in an example is you're looking at it and you're thinking the things that they excel in it will probably go at your detriment, so it will go from excelling to adding value to being competent to surviving, as they go further on in the programme, yeah.

**I: And the last thing, I'm really interested about your, the role of adversity or dealing with adversity seems to be quite prominent, so is that like a really, is that a bit of a confounding thing within the maybe the philosophy or maybe the development process like I know you were saying about coping, but coping can be good sometimes but is that thriving and coping, so is that adversity quite a big part of that process?**

P: Yeah, I think [00:55:48 inaudible] so I probably should split that up into two because I think you're right, yeah, and that's again where their diet becomes really important, so coping in the situations where you deem as the coach for the programme of why you put that particular situation or environment [00:56:06 inaudible] where coping is enough, that would be something where you come off and you're really happy with the individual there because it was so much of a test in that coping was enough, but I suppose what you're alluding to with the question again is certain players who are coping but they might only be coping in the situation where others are excelling, and others don't see it and others don't see that particular situation as adversity, [00:56:30 inaudible] really envisage that particular bit of the programme being really adverse, so if someone's seeing that as an adverse part of the programme then, yeah, that's probably where they start to sway into the different groups. I don't know whether that answers your question, it was a bit waffly towards the end, but I kind of knew what I was talking about, what I meant by it.

**I: No that does, and I think it's a sort of interesting construct that I've come across in a lot of the interviews, the idea that coping can be both good and bad, you know, coping to get through a game positively as in you're saying like in a stretched game you know it's going**

**to be tough, but that's a good thing because your mental resilience is obviously good, whereas coping to get through an age group because you need a player for example and he's only just clinging on might not be the greatest thing, although he could still come to fruition.**

P: 100%, and I think the second part about what you say is like I say it's in the coping bit and [00:57:28 inaudible] I think adversity is a really interesting topic of conversation because in order to have that you have to create it, and I think for your high performers that can be a really big challenge because I think for most of the Academy journey it's maybe been a bit more of an upwards trajectory for them, and that's where you see more silvers end up on the gold because they probably have more adversity in different times, they value it more like that, and sometimes that's where they end up performing higher in the end because they've had to overcome.

So I think the real task which I'll come back to and I think I alluded to it before, if everybody's working together as a staff to create an environment that produces that, so if you're going to produce a bump in the road there can't be, if it was a road that can't be a slip road, we have to make sure that everyone puts the curb on the other side and it's non-avoidable, you have to get over it, but you know with the amount of staff there are at clubs now it's quite easy for a player to find a quick slip road and they go down that slip road and you've maybe missed the opportunity there to try and create that, but yeah, I think with your higher performers I think that the skill of creating adversity is, yeah, I think that's maybe one of the hardest parts of the job to be honest, I think it's a real, real interesting conversation.

**I: And just the last question really, within that same sort of context, do you think it's hard for a coach to put a player that maybe makes the team perform, if they sort of carried the team almost, do you think it's hard for them to then put them up an age group or up into a higher performing game when that might cost them the actual game without the player?**

P: Yeah, you see it, yeah, you see it every week to be honest, Rich, and we're quite good at that here, from my background and being the individual coach I'm quite clear on my thoughts in it, and I say to the 16s, I'm not being nasty but I don't want you in my team, I think it's quite, it can be quite easy for your job spec to become blurred within the higher end of your development, the higher age groups, but it is ultimately not about results, it's ultimately, your actual job description is to produce players, and that means differentiating the players as we've done there or maybe different ways, and those high performers ultimately need a

different diet, so yeah, I do see it, but I don't think it should be as hard as what people make it. That would be my answer to your question.

**I: Is that ego?**

P: It is, it is ego, there's no question of that, but I also come back to that thing of like the vehicle or the car, the vehicle or the, you're not going to graduate the group so why would you want us to keep the group together so [01:00:34 inaudible] it doesn't make sense, it just doesn't make sense.