
HOW TO STOP THE CONVEYOR BELT TO MEDIOCRITY

Scotland may still produce the odd top-class player but only a cultural shift and a bolder approach to coaching will truly raise our game.

By Greg Gordon

How should we evaluate Scotland's youth development programmes? It is a deceptively simple question. But it is also a question that is just as political as it is contentious.

Depending who you ask, the exhortation to “play the kids” will mean different things, with different consequences, for different people.

A manager might see bleeding youngsters as a necessary part of teambuilding: a project that creates playing assets selected and shaped to the boss' preferences, players he can put his name to, build a side in his image around. Create a legacy.

At selling clubs, or for agents, parents,

scouts and coaches, youth talent means opportunity – an opportunity upon which careers, cash and social mobility is predicated.

For the scarf-clad fanatics it means producing players for the first team that share the same bonds of affection for their club that they have.

Certainly, everywhere you look there are signs of Scottish youngsters flourishing inspired by our most prominent Premiership stars Andy Robertson and John McGinn. On the face of it Scotland's younger generations are blooming.

Billy Gilmour (Chelsea), Keiron Bowie (Fulham), Aaron Hickey (Bologna), James Scott (Hull), Liam Morrison and Barry Hepburn (both Bayern Munich) and David Turnbull (Celtic) have already made high-profile moves to bigger clubs.

Others such as Liam Smith, Josh Adam, Cieran Slicker and Adedire Mebude are sleepers for a next wave, embedded in the youth system of Man City. And another Scot, English-born Scotland U19 Lewis Fiorini, has already blazed the trail for

them with his loan move from Manchester City to NEC Breda in the Eredivisie.

Taken in isolation, that very potted run-through suggests that much in the garden is rosy and certainly if you have skin in the game of youth that is an easy argument to make.

John McColl is one of the great Scottish

scouts of our generation and a man who has taken a procession of players to Wolverhampton Wanderers from Scotland over the last two decades – prime-age international players of the calibre of Colin Cameron, Alex Rae and Steven Fletcher, Leigh Griffiths and Christophe Berra. In the last few years John has concentrated on academy aged youngsters. But with the double whammy of the Covid crisis and a manager in Nuno Espírito Santo whose preference is for signing talent from his native Portugal, McColl finds his services surplus to requirements at Molineux and is currently looking for a new club after a scouting restructure at Wolves that doesn't include representation in Scotland.

McColl says: "You can look at it two ways. There is no doubt there's an interest in young Scottish players. You only need to look at the transfers to big clubs like Bayern Munich, Man City and Chelsea, or the scrutiny placed on visiting scouts to Lennoxton and Murray Park to realise that there is talent here. But there's also the realisation that while clubs are tracking the Scottish market, football is a global game and that other countries' players are simply more prized than Scots. That's been directly reflected in my changing situation at Wolves and it is the same at most Premier League clubs. You'll regularly get even full England internationals struggling for game time in their own league. So while there is a pathway for Scots, it is by no means an easy one to navigate."

Certainly, the era where Scottish players represented 20 per cent of the players in England's old First Division as their

national team won the World Cup in 1966 is both literally decades past and a reflection of simpler times in football and wider society. These days, marquee signings' surnames tend to end with a vowel rather than begin with a Mc or Mac prefix. Now where Scottish players are moving on to bigger and better things, they are doing so as part of an industrial scale player stockpiling operation on the part of the biggest clubs, rather than as part of a clear and obvious career progression of the kind that Scottish greats of the past could almost have taken for granted.

And this disconnect between notional

opportunity and what he believes is a distant reality of Scotland's youngsters thriving at the top of the game has prompted Gordon Strachan to deliver what's been described as "a withering assessment of the player development model in Scottish football". For Strachan, the ex-Scotland, Aberdeen, Manchester United and Leeds midfielder, now Dundee's technical director, Scotland's wide-open pathways are allowing a "flood of nonentities" to progress to careers that falter with exposure to a standard of football they have not been schooled to excel within.

Speaking on Graham Spiers' Press Box podcast, Strachan explains that the fundamentals of player development have been lost in the modish pursuit of football fashions and a pick and mix approach to creating youth systems cobbled together from consultants' reports on the latest global success stories – stories that may or may not have much relevance to our immediate context here in Scotland.

Strachan told Spiers: "The first Under-18 game I saw here [at Dundee], the coaches asked me what I thought. I said: 'What do you think?'"

"There were clichés about how it was overrun in midfield, so I went and watched the game... there were 78 unforced errors from our players in that game.

"That means bad decision making,



bad control, first touch is poor, not got the ability to beat people when they're under pressure – so there were all these unforced errors. The coaches asked me how to make their decision making better, I said: 'You make sure that everybody in your team can beat somebody.'

"They looked at me like I was stupid: 'No, that's only for wingers.' I said: 'No, everybody in your team must have the ability to beat someone.'

"If you look at Barcelona, Man City – they will pass the ball, but they're engaged five or six times while passing. (That's) where the top players can beat you or shield the ball from you, like David Silva, De Bruyne, Iniesta, Xavi, and that means their decision making is better.

"Us, in Scotland, we get [the ball] and because we lack the ability and belief in beating players and shielding it, we will play balls first time – 50/50 passes – and we'll go: 'Unlucky,' as coaches.

"No. It's not unlucky. It's because you're scared to be engaged with somebody coming at you."

But there's double bind here, a bind that gets back to the original idea, that the youth development you get is a function of deciding what kind of youth development we want and whom it is designed to serve.

Strachan's interview with Spiers makes fascinating listening, but at 63 years of age, he is well-placed to deliver his home truths about poorly conceived coaching, complacent kids, excuses rather than commitment and the easy ride of a pathway system. He can also do so without fear of derision or with any need to curry favour. That's because Strachan's career flourished at the top of the game, bolstered by a track record of fantastic achievement. He played for clubs that won 11 trophies including league titles in England and Scotland and a European Cup Winners' Cup. Strachan has 50 Scotland caps, memorably scoring at Mexico 86's World Cup Finals against West Germany. He also has 10 notable individual

awards including fourth place in the 1983 Ballon d'Or. He is an inductee of the English Football Hall of Fame, due largely to his stellar contribution to Howard Wilkinson's title winning Leeds side of 1992.

As a manager, he won three league titles with Celtic and took them to the last 16 of the Champions League before managing Scotland. He confirms as much to Spiers when saying that he "wouldn't swap his life for anyone else's" in or out of football.

But of course those making their way in the game, and those struggling to stay in it, do not have the luxury of either tearing up the rulebook of current corporate coaching orthodoxies or speaking freely, for fear of its impact on their careers.

If Scotland has failed by Strachan's rubric

in terms of developing rounded, diverse and self-motivated top-level footballers it has done rather better in creating an economic infrastructure that pays the way of a significant coaching fraternity, and provides jobs that would presumably otherwise be lost to the game.

In that sense Project Brave and its many predecessors have had a significant role to play as job creation schemes both within the national association and the wider football landscape. Even if you're minded to dismiss the outputs of the enterprise as selling Scottish football and Scottish footballers short, it is churlish to suggest that the economic model has not been broadly successful. And if that is one of the stated ambitions of youth development in Scotland, then it is a broadly laudable aim.

The reality is that, in every developed nation, youth development programmes inevitably support a lucrative 'coaching industry'. That can be seen either as an end in itself or at the very least as a very significant by-product of the pursuit of on-field excellence. There is no doubt that the SFA's coaching culture provides an important backstop for coaches young and old and for those between jobs. And of course, it also explains why there's

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little interest in rocking the boat and why that is a major negative, preventing truly innovative change.

Instead Scottish football in particular is littered with examples of think-tank plans, initiatives and blueprints that have arrived with a bang and died with a whimper as victims of regime change, the latest 'blue sky thinking' and a sense that there is always a newer, shinier and groovier model to latch onto – a new and better plan elsewhere.

The problems in Scotland are both cultural and historic. They can't easily be resolved by political intervention by any political party or by the Scottish Football Association.

And that means that success in Scotland, whatever it looks like, will likely come from individual clubs rather than from a

national plan as a product of what used to be called charismatic leadership.

The reason I say that is due to the reality that Rangers and Celtic, as Scotland's behemoth clubs, are always operating to their own football and commercial agendas. And typically those agendas often run contrary to the good of the wider game or against the wishes of football people in a leadership role. Fundamentally, the big clubs are too compromised by their status as corporate entities, answerable to shareholders, fans and so-called wider stakeholders. You can have a football vision. You can have a corporate vision. But I can think of no examples in football that have successfully married the two.

The press in Scotland operates to a commercial agenda and it is an agenda that begins and ends with access at Rangers and Celtic. There is no other story in town and in private, those involved will admit as much. But perhaps as we've seen in the past at clubs like Dundee United and Aberdeen and at brief flowerings of excellence at the likes of Hibs, Queens Park and also Livingston during my lifetime as a scout, there is an opportunity to do good work away from the glare of public scrutiny, at least for a while.

When the last Scottish boom came, it came from Aberdeen and Dundee United, both ruled by benevolent dictatorships (Alex Ferguson and Jim McLean) and in a time of economic recession, de-industrialisation and relative slumps for Rangers and Celtic. Maybe that might happen again, though a blue moon renaissance will likely emerge fully formed and unbidden, if it does.

You certainly don't need to dig in too far to the backstory of successful player conveyor belts whether in Germany, Spain, Croatia, Belgium or elsewhere to find a lot of after-timing, a lot of undignified pursuit of credit and a few wise old owls happy to admit that luck played a greater part than recognised in these stories. If



Beyond the game

How to stop the conveyor belt to mediocrity

there is a takeaway, it is that there is no magical formula to explain why a Golden Generation can simultaneously come together.

Certainly, Belgium's former technical director Michael Sablon, who retired in 2012, has made a fair stab at retrospectively explaining the wellspring of a process that's led to Belgium's Golden Generation becoming the top ranked team in the world. But sadly for Sablon, the dates don't quite add up for Belgium's programme to take any sort of credit.

As detailed by the Independent's Glenn Moore in 2014, the key date is 2006 and the publication of a Belgian blueprint recommending a familiar, predictable package of youth development practices – small-sided games, no league tables for youngsters, a Dutch-style 4-3-3 and centralised coaching schools. And yet in terms of their formative football education (ages six to 11), Belgium's World Cup semi-finalists of 2014 belong to an older generation of players.

Of the 2014 World Cup squad only six players were under 16 in 2006: Thibault Courtois (14 during 2006), Kevin De Bruyne (15), Romelu Lukaku (13), Eden Hazard (15), Divock Origi (11) and Adnan Januzaj (11). All of them would have been becoming established young men by the time Sablon's ideas were in full swing.

In fact, the reality suggests that the Belgian players realised the painful truth that their best hope of fulfilling their potential would be to sign for clubs in other EU countries. In 2006 Belgium's best player, Eden Hazard, was already a 14-year-old at Lille, where he was joined by Divock Origi (aged 15) and Kevin Mirallas (aged 16). Thomas Vermaelen, Jan Vertonghen and Toby Alderweireld were all at Ajax. Moussa Dembele (Willem II) and Nacer Chadli (AGOVV Apeldoorn) were also playing in The Netherlands in 2006. Meanwhile Adnan Januzaj left Anderlecht for Manchester United aged 16 in 2011, and would have been right on



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the threshold of the Sablon plan as an 11-year-old in 2006.

More crucial than the impact of a domestic formal football education for these players are broader societal influences coming to bear on these young men simultaneously.

Nine players are children of immigrant families, an identified factor in the development of talented football generations within numerous countries. Januzaj, Dembele, Lukaku, Chadli, Origi, Marouane Fellaini, Vincent Kompany, Anthony Vanden Borre and Axel Witsel

all had at least one parent born outside Belgium. In addition, Hazard, Origi, Lukaku and Fellaini were also sons of professional players. Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois signed for Chelsea at 19, yet did not feature in a single Belgian national team until the U18s. Dries Mertens, the oldest of the group, was 22 in 2006 and a four-times capped Belgium under-17 international, kicking his heels at Gent (where he failed to make a single appearance). He was sent out on loan to Dutch club AGOVV where his ability was realised and he played his first 100 first-team games, ultimately making his move permanent. In this context, neither Courtois nor Mertens, both relative late developers, are obvious poster boys for Belgium's ability to develop players at a young age.

There is no doubt that, even here in Scotland, luck might coalesce in the form of a golden generation of players emerging simultaneously and from nowhere and unbidden. But this type of golden generation also needs the oxygen of luck and opportunity to flourish.

That is especially so in a small country like Scotland with a mere 5 million population. For context, Spain has a population of 46 million, Germany boasts 80 million inhabitants, while the Netherlands and Belgium boast 16.7 million and 11.2 million citizens, respectively. We put a high number of players through our so-called elite system every year and yet Strachan estimates that at any one time only four to five boys in all ages could legitimately be classed as elite level players by a broader standard. The rest presumably are good, bad and indifferent: players that could come good, players that won't come good and a procession of jersey fillers that are the common currency of every team at every level from school teams to World Cup winners. To one degree or another, every squad contains players that the coach would

choose to change if they could.

Perhaps Croatia, with a population of 4.27 million, is the aspirational (if unrealistic) benchmark for Scotland? And what a fine football nation Croatia is. Precisely because a lot of their population actively play football and because of their long-term track record of producing top-level pros either because or in spite of testing social factors.

As of 2020 a total of 11 Croatian players are credited as winning the Champions League: Alen Bokšić, Zvonimir Boban, Davor Šuker, Dario Šimić, Igor Bišćan, Mario Mandžukić, Luka Modrić, Ivan Rakitić, Mateo Kovačić, Ivan Perisic and Dejan Lovren although Šimić, Bišćan and Kovačić did not appear in the relevant Champions League finals. Croatia also contested the 2018 World Cup Final against France in Moscow (4-2). The legacy is a fantastic procession of potential role models for any aspiring youngster in this footballing hotbed.

What that list screams out with is characterful players, big personalities; competitors, brave, tough, fully-rounded footballers. And you do wonder how and to what extent these 'children' of that series of separate but related ethnic conflicts, wars of independence, and insurgencies which were fought in the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 2001, had their personalities shaped in a context of stress, adversity and a sense that football could be their ticket to a better life in Western Europe.

Strachan believes that the major barrier between many young Scottish players and true elite status is cultural.

"Hard work can get you places," he said. "The problem nowadays is what kids think is hard work is not really hard work.

"If you look at the Champions League – and maybe it's a generalisation – the real characters [are from] South America, Africa... places like that, where kids don't see pitches, football boots, their mum and dads don't take them anywhere, so they've had to fight their way through."



What Strachan and many others allude to is a football equivalent of economics' Middle Income Trap that sees many countries enjoy the fruits of given advantages such as climate, raw materials, political stability, health, education and geography but are unable to rise beyond above a certain level due to a perceived glass ceiling. In political terms this glass ceiling is the product of an economy that is reliant on resource-driven growth and cheap wages rather than high productivity and innovation – the preserve of the super-rich nations. In football terms a number of issues are cited: sedentary indoor lives, a culture of complacency and a poverty of aspiration pithily defined by the Dutch former SFA performance director Mark Wotte as Scotland's Burger and Buckfast culture. There's truth in that but Scotland has also not fared well from globalisation, and specifically so in football terms.

Football-wise Scotland is bang in the middle of the road as a developed nation. Rich enough to provide comfortable lives for its population but too poor to aspire to competing at the very top level. We are neither a nation that can win tournaments due to our mega clubs, massive populations or high GDP, nor are we a country with a poor or immigrant population that sees playing high-level football as a route out of poverty. The World Cup winners since 1966 – England, Brazil, Germany, Argentina, Italy, France and Spain – broadly mirror the Champions League winners' roster with the addition of Holland (who were also beaten finalists in three World Cups). And all of them boast many of the keys to football success listed above.

Here in Scotland, the one new variable in the equation is the role of an emergent immigrant population and that has certainly had a significant role to play in the creation of winning teams for France, Belgium and at lower age international levels in England.



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No question, Scotland badly needs the melting pot talents of our Poles, Somalis and Roma families, and all the other foreign nationals who have made their homes here – and not just for football, but for the betterment of the nation as a whole.

Whether you are a manager, a technical director or a coach, Strachan says: “Players will determine whether you are successful or termed as a failure.”

He says: “We’ve got six, seven, eight different systems going about the world right now. Nothing guarantees you success. What guarantees you is good players with touch, fitness, vision, decision making. Good men.”

It is a fundamental for Strachan and it is a fundamental that has hardened his view that firstly, Scotland needs to find its own way, and secondly, that our coaching fraternity should find the courage to return to first principles and start with players' education rather than as a former manager of mine once put it: “Have heads that bear only the impression of the last coaching course they went on.” ●