

External Influences in Football Recruitment

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Many factors will impact talent identification and subsequent recruitment. Craig Simmons, Player Development Advisor at The Football Association, considers for "Insight" some influences which may affect the decision on player recruitment for long term development.

External factors which may affect recruitment into football include the following elements:

- 1 Age (chronological age)
- 2 Season start date (September or January)
- 3 The first selection for any team (knowledge of the selector)
- 4 Genetic inheritance (physical and cognitive qualities)
- 5 Environment (club / school / opportunity / social / economic)

The degree of influence each factor creates should be considered as they will not be in unison or comparable between players. The differences between players may be substantial and this may affect the opinion the coach or scouts may have on players true ability, particularly if comparisons are made between mis-matched players.

The current football system in England with a September recruitment start date, has mixed benefits and some adverse effects. Age, season start date, selection process, physical and psychological qualities all produce a number of influences, these are reviewed in this article along with contributions from environmental issues.

Age

It is remarkable that two children, born one day apart, might be either possibly disadvantaged as the youngest in the year for age group teams, or enjoy the benefits that may be available to them by chance.

The selection bias towards recruiting the older performers appears as the first three to four months in any competition year. In the United Kingdom with a September 1st start date for school and the football season, the majority of

September - December	1st period	School and football club peer group
January - April	2nd period	UEFA and FIFA peer group
May - August	3rd period	No peer group (school, football club, UEFA or FIFA)

'talented' players identified at 11 to 16 years of age come from the September-December period.

World research has reviewed the alignment of the start date influence within age-band recruitment. The seasonal age bias found is not simply calendar based, but relates to the start date of the relevant age-bands of competition.

Dividing the year into three periods is a simple way of demonstrating the influence age may have on football selection in England.

Season Start Dates

The date which determines the season start affects selection and recruitment strategies for all age defined team sports as demonstrated by the following charts.

Birth date distribution of players aged 9 to 16 years at professional football clubs with a September start date demonstrates the reducing contribution from the younger children.

The changing influence from a January start date (UEFA, FIFA) is shown in the following chart and demonstrates increased opportunity for the younger children.

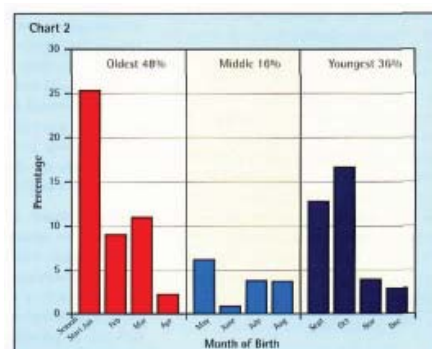
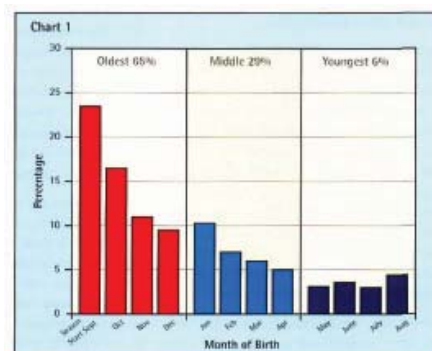
Research findings demonstrate that the age bias influence in selection shifts from September, (Premier and Football League and school start date) to January, (UEFA and FIFA international start date), in line with the changed start date.

Charts 1 and 2 demonstrate the changed effect for both the "oldest" and the "youngest"

players from different start dates. The May to August birthdays are always a significant minority.

The September start date produced a contribution of 6% from the youngest players who are born in the four months May to August - these players do not form school or football peer groups in England.

The January start date produced a contribution of 36% from the youngest players who are born September to December - these players form school and football peer groups in England.



The differences (Table 1) between the "youngest group" born May to August with a September selection start date, compared with the group born September to December with a January selection start date, are significant.

Selection start date	Birth date of youngest players	Contribution
September start date	born May to August	6.0% from the youngest players
January start date	born September to December	36.0% from the youngest players

Why should an age bias exist in football selection, given that normal population births (Table 2) show no bias?

Males born in England and Wales 1977-1982			
Group - months	Jan-Apr	May-Aug	Sep-Dec
Population births - percentages	33.3%	34.4%	32.3%

Studies confirm season-of-birth selection bias in soccer produces the following circumstances;

There is an age bias in recruitment/selection towards older players; this bias shifts in line with the changing start date.

The relative contributions made by the youngest players differ when the start date of competition is moved.

The May to August birthdays are always a significant recruitment minority.

The data in Charts 1 and 2 represent the monthly birth proportions of players selected on a September start date compared with players selected on a January start date.

Two features appear -

1 First, the over-representation from the oldest players born September - December shifts to the January - April period.

- The change in start date continues to afford greater opportunities to players born in the new first period of the competition year as predicted by the chronological age argument.

2 The second feature (January start date), is the significant contribution of the youngest players with birthdays in the September to December period of the year.

- This factor may stem from the larger pool of players born September to December already recruited into the club football system.

The most plausible reason is that many of the September to December born players may have enjoyed a dominant role during previous years among their peers in both football and

school. Therefore, their self-esteem and efficacy expectations would be high despite the presence of 'older' players in the new (January start) selection age-band. They may continue to achieve against the odds - at least in the early years of the change.

The First Selector

- Findings would suggest the stage of biological maturation, both physical and cognitive, may be a better measure of compatibility for assessment than age banding based on birthdays.

Question: Does the recruitment programme consider this vital factor?

- Biological maturation reflects the stage of growth within the chronological year, however, this feature may be advanced or delayed in individuals within particular age groups.

Question: Will this be taken into account?

- Age-banded selection confirms that a 12 month period of development can be enough to create ability and selection differences among competitors, thus allowing those older, hence possibly more advanced developmentally, to out-perform younger or smaller opponents.

Question: Should allowances be made within a 1 year group for varied ages or sizes?

Generic Inheritance

In a five year study at The Football Association National School, physical size was matched at selection trials. The older players were still selected irrespective of the varied body mass of the group, which included late maturing players - WHY ?

Season-of-birth bias effects are not exclusive to sport, with school education providing the most convincing statistics of a results age-bias within academic year groups. Season-of-birth bias benefits were shown to exist in these traditional scholastic achievement settings for the older children within each year.

If we accept that this is evidence of a developing ability, then might such a cognitive processing system over time also contribute to sporting capability?

An additional factor to be considered is an interaction between cognitive and physical performance. Is classroom achievement totally independent of physical development? If we believe that self-esteem and confidence can be global attributes in achievement domains, then we might expect that children who are used to success in the playground through physical superiority have a strong self-concept, better time management and

confidence in classrooms composed of the same peer group. An interesting phenomenon arises for coaches in that if we accept this premise, then why has the older age-bias in school academic achievement diminished in high school?

This is most likely due to the involuntary structure of education, in that children cannot usually drop out and disappear from achievement statistics. In fact, weaker students are deliberately 'included' and may be directed to enriched instruction until they catch up! This would appear to be the direct opposite of the general 'exclusion' of "perceived less able" athletes approach in football when selecting players into national or regional squads and club teams.

Environment

Meanwhile, what is the lesson for football? This lies in the prediction of eventual ability from the observation of the players performance. If there can be great maturational variation in children, how do we know what an unknown player's potential is when they are selected on a simple comparison of on-field performance against a peer group with similarly unknown developmental characteristics? Are we doomed to minuscule accuracy levels of early prediction in attempting to identify the eventual top class players through:

- 1 The exclusion of younger or later maturing child players who would eventually achieve at the highest level given enriched coaching and competition?
- 2 The inclusion of mainly older or early maturing players who are advantaged by their status. They may not go on to the highest level when the need for cognitive abilities is in balance with physiological attributes and age ratios that equipped them for notice early in their career?

The answer must be considered positively if investigations and actions are to be initiated.

- Creating the ideal environment for accurate judgements to be made is essential (pitch size, ball size, matching players, previous experience and expectations are some examples).

- The key lies in achieving a high level of experienced subjective opinion from coaches and scouts in any selection procedure.

- This process has to be effective in detecting 'potential' as well as 'current' performance as powerful predictors of eventual ability.

- The next step is to determine which physical and psychological characteristics contribute to ability and at which age or stage of

biological maturation they are likely to be influential. Individual differences must be accommodated to allow these characteristics to be matched in opponents.

Given the investment made by sport into talent identification and recruitment and the development of elite performers, any contribution to improve these strategies will be beneficial.

Selection for age defined sport with seasonal start dates is based on adult convenience, this situation will have to be either redefined, or allowances made for recruitment and selection criteria. This approach will allow the younger or smaller as well as older or bigger children to participate equally in the selection or assessment process.

Note:

"Younger" may have been subjected to later learning opportunities and may also be smaller. "Older" may have enjoyed early learning opportunities and may also be bigger

Questions arising:

- The youngest players, when they are born September to December, infiltrate the older group in a way that those born May to August appear to find difficult WHY?
- Is the reason - larger football pool, peer group, cognitive or socioeconomic factors?
- The late born players - September to December (from the January start date), are the youngest but are they able to demonstrate a quality the selectors can relate to. WHY?
- If this is a learning process derived from early schooling or football experiences, then how does football and education address these factors for boys and girls in order to provide equality, opportunity and a formula to benefit all children?
- Why do the older talented child athletes not necessarily continue into adulthood as the most skilful among their peers?
- Are there excluded younger players, perhaps later maturing, who may have the ability to develop into elite performers but who are not identified for enriched coaching and competition in their early years of sport?

In order for the coach/scout to identify football talent for long term commitment, the need to recognise and account for adverse external influences is necessary.