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Change ‘authoritarian’ football culture to produce future stars, says research

Premier League soccer stars are subjecting their club’s junior players to regular insults and practical jokes in a humiliating rite of passage, the British Sociological Association’s annual conference in Leeds heard today. [Wednesday 23 April 2014]

This was part of an “authoritarian” treatment of youth team players which undermined attempts to change the culture of clubs and produce better footballers, Dr Chris Platts, of Sheffield Hallam University’s Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, said.

Dr Platts interviewed 303 junior players aged 16 to 18 and 13 coaches at 21 professional soccer clubs in England which operate an Academy training system.

One Premier League team youth player told Dr Platts that first-team footballers in his club once forced another youth player into a laundry basket and then dragged this into the showers. “If you bite (fight) back, they’ll just keep doing it,” another player said.

Dr Platts told the conference: “It’s not unusual for youth players to be the butt of jokes, be talked down, to or in extreme cases be on the end of verbal or physical punishment.”

Other examples given by the players were having their possessions hidden as a trick, or being “battered” (mocked). One youth player told Dr Platts: “In football clubs people batter you all the time and you just got to take it as a joke.”

Another said: “If you answer back then you are going to be in even more shit, aren’t you - if you answer back to the first team? Once they know you’re biting they’ll just keep doing it to you.”

Dr Platts said: “What was particularly difficult for the younger players was the way in which their treatment by professionals provoked negative emotions towards players whom they held in such high esteem because they had made it as a professional player.”

One coach told Dr Platts that clubs were “probably like a grown-ups school playground, and it can be quite cutting if you are not used to it.”

The youth players reported that the coaches could also be disrespectful. One Premier League youth player said that a coach had addressed him with the words “Listen, bollocks” and another said his coach could “make a show” of someone by criticising them publicly.

Dr Platts noted that coaches often adopted “deep-rooted authoritarian approaches” to ensure youth players were always aware they had not yet made the grade. One Championship club made its youth players write a log of mistakes they had made on the pitch. The coach told Dr Platts: “So when it comes to telling players, parents, whoever, that they are not getting it [a contract with the main team], if they were unsure about the decision, I’d open the book and say ‘well, these are the reasons’.”

Dr Platts noted that the Premier League and Football Association had launched the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) to improve the development of youth players.

“However, the findings of this research suggest that the deep-rooted culture that exists within Academy football will serve to undermine the effectiveness of any policy.

“What policies such as the EPPP fail to consider is that, for many in football, being able to tolerate the treatment of coaches and professional players is viewed as a rite of passage by younger players. The younger players must learn that central to surviving in this particular workplace is to accept that they will routinely be subject to practical jokes, some of which may be humiliating, but are presented as helping to build character.

“While the EPPP might be regarded as a step in the right direction for player welfare, in practical terms it is unlikely to achieve its desired outcome without radical changes in the deep-seated cultures of the game. Many of the findings presented here are similar to those found in similar studies published 20 years ago.

“Evidence gained from these interviews suggests that the masculine culture of professional football based on controlling mechanisms such as banter do as much damage to young players socially and psychologically as they enhance their welfare. For Academies to produce better players, and if player welfare is regarded as important, they must move away from such authoritarian forms of discipline and control.”

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Notes

1. The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association’s mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729 and a Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk

2. For copies of Dr Platts’ paper, ‘Developing the next generation of English professional football talent: A figurational analysis’, contact the Sheffield Hallam press office on 0114 225 2621 or email laurie.harvey@shu.ac.uk

3. Sheffield Hallam's Academy of Sport and Physical Activity brings together our courses and our world-renowned research centres to offer a major centre of excellence for sport industry education, research and consultancy services. Its mission is to make a national and international contribution to the advancement of sport and physical activity.