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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**Support** - This research is not financially supported.**Review Stage at time of this submission** - Preliminary searches.**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY2024120104**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 25 December 2024 and was last updated on 25 December 2024.**INTRODUCTION**

Review question / Objective The objective of this systematic review is to analyze the processes employed by football clubs in recruiting talented athletes. This includes stages such as club strategy planning, technical observation, identification, and selection (e.g., testing, evaluation, and decision-making). To achieve this, the proposed systematic review will address the following question: What processes do football clubs utilize to recruit talent?

Rationale To the best of our knowledge, there has not yet been a systematic review focused on the processes and strategies football clubs use for player recruitment. However, it is worth noting that some recent systematic reviews are highly relevant to the area of talent identification, such as:

- Murr et al. (2017) analyzed studies on physical and physiological characteristics as predictors of success in football. Following this, Murr et al. (2018) expanded the review to include psychological predictors of talent in football.

- Reeves et al. (2018) reviewed sociological predictors in talent identification in youth football academies. They highlighted four key predictors: practice hours, coach-player interaction, parental support, and the educational system.
- Sarmiento et al. (2018) pointed out the most common topics addressed in talent identification research. Key highlights include specificity and practice volume, psychological factors, technical and tactical skills, physiological factors and anthropometry, as well as sociocultural influences and the relative age effect.
- Bergkamp et al. (2019) published a position statement on methodological issues in talent identification, reviewing studies from 2000 to 2018. They identified several areas that require more attention, such as the use of performance levels as criteria, the focus on predictors of performance components, and the influence of range restrictions on the generalization of results, considering sample size and population.
- Williams et al. (2020) analyzed 20 years of scientific literature on talent identification and development, updating a previous review (Williams

& Reilly, 2000). The study emphasized the need for a multidisciplinary approach to talent identification and mapped out various predictors influencing player development until they achieve high performance in adult football.

• Lath et al. (2021) examined the "coach's eye" to understand how coaches subjectively assess players based solely on their intuition. They identified four main characteristics: intuitive, subjective, experience-based, and holistic.

In recent years, numerous studies have underscored the need to examine deeper into talent selection and recruitment processes. Reeves et al. (2018) suggest that clubs, in alignment with their culture and philosophy, should provide support and training for the staff responsible for talent selection and decision-making, including scouts and coaches. Larkin et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of understanding the decision-making processes of scouts during player observations. Sarmiento et al. (2018) and Sieghartsleitner et al. (2019) advocate for future research to adopt a multidimensional approach to enhance the quality of talent identification and development systems within clubs and associations. Williams et al. (2020) recommend that research should focus on the early stages of talent identification in youth academies and strive for objectivity in the selection process at young ages. Ford et al. (2020) and Lath et al. (2021) note that youth academies are becoming increasingly structured, involving multiple staff members. They highlight the need for research to advance in understanding the selection and de-selection processes within these environments, considering all participants involved.

Condition being studied The focus of this study will be on professional football clubs that invest in youth categories with the primary aim of developing players for high-level performance in the professional category. This approach, known as long-term player development, includes the stages of "sport initiation" (typically between the ages of 10 and 13, sometimes even younger) and "sports specialization" (particularly between the ages of 14 and 20).

METHODS

Search strategy The following research databases will be used: SPORTDiscus, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed.

To define the keywords for this research, we based them on some of the most relevant studies on the topic (Bergkamp et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2020;

Gullich, 2014; Larkin et al., 2020; Lath et al., 2021; Reeves et al., 2018; Sieghartsleitner et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020). The main keywords are subdivided into four groups:

1. Main Theme (Talent):

- Talent identification
- Talent recruitment
- Talent selection

2. Related Theme (Management):

- Strategy
- Process
- Procedures
- Practices
- Decision-making

3. Role:

- Scout
- Coach
- Manager

4. Specific Sport:

- Football
- Soccer

Subsequently, a preliminary search was conducted to assess the relevance of the terms from groups 1 to 3, always combined with group 4 ("Football" OR "Soccer"), focusing on those that returned the highest number of publications (e.g., "talent recruitment" AND soccer OR football). During this initial relevance search, some terms produced duplicate results regarding the number of articles. Therefore, these terms were refined to more specific ones aligned with the focus of our research. For example, "talent recruitment" encompasses research on "talent identification" and "talent selection". The following is the final Boolean equation used in the search:

"Talent recruitment" AND "Strategy" OR "process" OR "decision-making" AND "Soccer" OR "football".

Participant or population The participants in the study will be football academies from elite clubs in any country that have players under 20 years old. Additionally, employees who play a decisive role in the talent identification and selection process, such as technical scouts, coaches, and managers (including technical coordinators and technical directors), will also be included.

Intervention Not applicable.

Comparator Not applicable.

Study designs to be included This systematic review will include studies that are quantitative and qualitative, observational and experimental, comparative and descriptive, as well as longitudinal and cross-sectional. Specifically, we will consider studies that utilize various methodologies to analyze talent recruitment and selection processes in football clubs.

Eligibility criteria Inclusion Criteria:

1. Original scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2015 and 2024.
2. Studies describing processes related to detection, monitoring, selection, testing, and decision-making by decision-makers in talent evaluation.
3. Studies detailing strategies used by clubs in the search for new talents.
4. Samples involving youth male players from football clubs, aged 20 or younger.
5. Articles written in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Articles not exclusively focused on football.
2. Samples involving professional players aged over 20 years or female players.
3. Review articles, theoretical papers, meta-analyses, theses, dissertations, reports or books.

Information sources The following research databases will be used: SPORTDiscus, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed. Additionally, we are considering including PsycINFO for its relevance to psychological aspects related to talent identification and recruitment.

Exclusions: The study will exclude review articles, theoretical papers, meta-analyses, theses, dissertations, monographs, and reports.

Main outcome(s) 1. Processes Used by Clubs: Description of how the initial observation of players is carried out (on-site or via video, number of observations until recommendation to the club).

Criteria for talent identification.

Tests conducted at the club.

Final evaluation process.

Decision-making process of the decision-makers.

2. Strategies for Talent Identification:

Methods clubs use to observe the greatest number of players during the talent identification phase.

Data such as search radius, competitive level, whether futsal is also observed.

Number of partner clubs and scouts.

Open events.

3. Structures for Youth Categories and Talent Evaluation:

Composition of technical staff.

Accommodation capacity.

Overall investments.

4. Training and Roles of Employees:

Description of training, experience, roles, and authority of employees involved in the process (scout, coach, technical coordinator, director).

Databases and Methodological Manuals:

Description of databases and methodological manuals used by clubs for talent identification and selection.

Additional outcome(s) The literature on talent identification includes publications that describe technical, tactical, physical, psychological, and social aspects, as well as the effects of birthplace and relative age. While these aspects are not the primary focus of this research, they will be considered as additional results to provide a more comprehensive understanding of talent recruitment processes.

Data management Following the guidance of the PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021), the articles identified in the search will be independently analyzed by two authors (LRF and MF), following the established eligibility and exclusion criteria. In cases of disagreement between the authors, a discussion will be held to resolve the issues. If a consensus cannot be reached, a third author (JVS) will be consulted to establish a final decision. Zotero software will be used for data recording and management.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis The methodological quality of the studies will be assessed using the checklist proposed by Letts et al. (2007) for qualitative studies. The checklist consists of 13 items: purpose, literature background, design, theoretical perspective, method, sampling, data collection, procedural rigor, data analysis, theoretical connections, overall

rigor, conclusions, and implications. Each item will be scored with "1" (yes) or "0" (no/not possible to determine) for each study. The scores of the items will then be summed to provide a final score for each study, with a maximum possible score of 13 points. Studies with a score lower than 6 points will be excluded due to their low methodological quality, based on the criteria established by Wierike et al. (2013).

The quality assessments will be carried out independently by two authors (LRF and MF). In case of disagreement, a discussion will be held between the authors. If a consensus cannot be reached, a third author (JVS) will be consulted to establish a final decision. Zotero software will be used for data recording and management.

Strategy of data synthesis 1. Data Extraction:

- A standardized data extraction form will be used to collect relevant information from each included study. This form will capture details such as study design, sample characteristics, processes and strategies described, key findings, and any reported outcomes.
- Two reviewers (LRF and MF) will independently extract data to ensure accuracy and consistency. Any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer (JVS).

2. Qualitative Synthesis:

- Qualitative data will be synthesized using thematic analysis. The extracted qualitative data will be coded and categorized into themes related to talent identification and recruitment processes.
- Thematic synthesis will involve identifying patterns and relationships within the data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategies and processes used by football clubs.

3. Quantitative Synthesis:

- If sufficient quantitative data are available, a meta-analysis will be conducted to statistically combine the results of similar studies. This will involve calculating effect sizes and using appropriate statistical methods to assess the overall impact of different talent identification and recruitment strategies.
- In cases where meta-analysis is not possible due to heterogeneity, a narrative synthesis will be performed to summarize the quantitative findings.

Subgroup analysis • Subgroup analyses will be conducted to explore potential differences in talent identification and recruitment processes based on factors such as geographical location, club size, and level of competition.

- These analyses will help identify specific strategies that may be more effective in certain contexts.

Sensitivity analysis • Sensitivity analyses will be performed to assess the robustness of the findings. This will involve examining the impact of including or excluding studies with lower methodological quality or those with specific characteristics.

Language restriction English.

Country(ies) involved Brazil and Portugal.

Other relevant information 1. Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval is not required for this systematic review, as it involves the synthesis of existing published data. However, all data from included studies will be handled in accordance with ethical standards and best practices.

2. Team Contributions:

The review team comprises experts in sports science, systematic review methodology, and data analysis. Specific roles and contributions of each team member will be documented to ensure clarity and accountability.

3. Limitations:

Potential limitations of this systematic review include language restrictions (English only) and the exclusion of grey literature such as theses, dissertations, and reports. These limitations may impact the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Keywords Talent selection; talent identification; talent recruitment; strategy; process; decision-making; soccer; football.

Dissemination plans Findings from this systematic review will be disseminated through peer-reviewed journal publications and conference presentations. Additionally, summaries of key findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders, including football clubs, sports organizations, and policy makers, to inform practice and policy.

Contributions of each author

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