

Football Clubs Talent Recruitment: A Scoping Review Protocol

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**Support** - No financial support.**Review Stage at time of this submission** - Preliminary searches.**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY202670019**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 7 July 2026 and was last updated on 7 July 2026.**INTRODUCTION**

Review question / Objective The objective of this scoping review is to map and synthesize the existing literature on talent recruitment in youth football. Specifically, the review aims to examine the organizational structures, recruitment processes, decision-making practices, stakeholder involvement, assessment methods, and technological approaches used by football clubs to identify, evaluate, and recruit young players.

To achieve this objective, the review will address the following question: How do football clubs organize and conduct the recruitment of youth football players (<U20), including the processes, strategies, decision-making practices, and assessment methods involved?

As a secondary objective, this review aims to inform future research and practice by summarizing current approaches to football talent recruitment, including traditional scouting

methods, multidimensional assessment frameworks, and emerging technological tools.

Background Talent recruitment in football is widely recognized as one of the most complex and strategically significant challenges faced by clubs across all levels of competition. The ability to identify and select young players with the potential to progress to elite performance has far-reaching implications for sporting success, financial sustainability, and long-term player development systems (Ford et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2018). Despite its central role, recruitment practices have historically relied on subjective judgments, informal procedures, and context-dependent approaches, resulting in considerable variability across clubs, regions, and competitive environments (Larkin et al., 2020).

Within this context, talent recruitment can be understood as a set of organizational processes through which clubs identify, evaluate, select, and ultimately integrate players into their structures, particularly within youth academies and elite

development systems (Larkin et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2018). Although these terms are often used interchangeably, the literature distinguishes recruitment from other stages of talent appraisal. According to Williams and Reilly (2000), talent detection concerns the search for individuals with the potential to perform successfully in a sport in which they are not yet participating. Talent identification refers to the recognition of athletes already engaged in sport who demonstrate the capacity to progress to elite levels. Talent selection involves the subsequent choice of athletes for specific teams or developmental pathways. Recruitment encompasses a broader and more strategic function, including the coordination of scouting networks, trial processes, and the negotiation and integration of players into club systems (Ford et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2018). In professional football clubs, these processes are commonly structured within a dedicated recruitment department, typically overseen by a coordinator and supported by specialized staff (Larkin et al., 2020).

Rationale To the best of our knowledge, no scoping review has specifically examined the processes and strategies used by football clubs for player recruitment. Nevertheless, several systematic and scoping reviews have addressed related aspects of talent identification and development.

Murr et al. (2017) reviewed physical and physiological predictors of success in football, while Murr et al. (2018) expanded this work to include psychological predictors. Reeves et al. (2018) examined sociological predictors in youth football academies, highlighting practice hours, coach–player interactions, parental support, and educational environments. Sarmento et al. (2018) identified the main themes in talent identification research, including practice volume, psychological factors, technical and tactical skills, physiological and anthropometric characteristics, sociocultural influences, and the relative age effect.

Bergkamp et al. (2019) discussed methodological issues in talent identification research, emphasizing concerns related to performance criteria, performance predictors, and the generalizability of findings. Williams et al. (2020) reviewed two decades of research on talent identification and development, reinforcing the importance of multidisciplinary approaches and multiple predictors of player progression. Lath et al. (2021) explored the “coach’s eye” and identified intuitive, subjective, experience-based, and holistic elements in coaches’ assessments of players.

Wrang et al. (2021) conducted a scoping review of talent identification processes and highlighted the need to consider the perspectives of children and adolescents involved in club selection procedures.

More recently, Ribeiro et al. (2025) reviewed scouting in football and found that research is concentrated in Europe, while also emphasizing the importance of scouts’ experience and qualifications. Gong et al. (2026) examined the evolution of talent identification research, showing a progression from predominantly physical assessments in the 1970s, to the integration of technical and physiological measures in the 2000s, and more recently to multidimensional approaches incorporating psychological and social factors.

Collectively, these reviews highlight the need for a deeper understanding of talent selection and recruitment processes. Reeves et al. (2018) argued that clubs should support and train staff involved in recruitment and selection decisions. Larkin et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of understanding scouts’ decision-making processes during player observation. Ribeiro et al. (2025) reported a lack of formal academic and specialized training among scouting professionals. Sarmento et al. (2018) and Sieghartsleitner et al. (2019) recommended more multidimensional approaches to improve talent systems within clubs and associations. Williams et al. (2020) called for greater attention to the early stages of talent identification and more objective selection procedures. Finally, Ford et al. (2020) and Lath et al. (2021) noted the increasing complexity of academy structures and highlighted the need to better understand selection and deselection processes involving multiple stakeholders. Given the exploratory nature of the topic, the heterogeneity of study designs, contexts, stakeholders, and recruitment practices, a scoping review was considered the most appropriate approach to map the breadth and nature of the available evidence.

METHODS

Strategy of data synthesis The following research databases will be used: PubMed, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, Web of Science and PsycINFO.

To define the keywords for this research, we based them on some of the most relevant studies on the topic (Bergkamp et al., 2019; 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; talent selection; talent development; player identification; player recruitment; player selection; player development;
- 2 - Related Theme (Management): strategy; process; procedures; practices; decision-making; criteria; assessment; evaluation; framework; model;
- 3 - Role: scout; recruiter; coach; manager; coordinator; director;
- 4 - Location: academy; club;
- 5 - Specific Sport: football; soccer.

The following is the final Boolean equation used in the search:

ALL FIELDS: (((("talent identification" OR "talent recruitment" OR "talent selection" OR "talent development" OR "player identification" OR "player recruitment" OR "player selection" OR "player development")) AND ((strateg* OR process* OR procedure* OR practice* OR decision* OR criteri* OR assessment OR evaluation OR framework* OR model*))) AND ((scout* OR recruit* OR coach* OR manager* OR coordinator* OR director*))) AND ((academ* OR club*))) AND ((football OR soccer)).

Eligibility criteria The study selection criteria were developed based on the Participants, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework as follows (Peters et al., 2021):

Participants: studies describing professional male football clubs with youth talent development academies for players under 20 years of age from any country. Participants also include professionals involved in talent recruitment processes, such as scouts, coaches, managers, technical coordinators, and technical directors.

Concept: Studies investigating talent recruitment processes in football, including talent identification and player selection. This also includes research examining organizational strategies, decision-making processes related to player approval, scouting practices, testing and evaluation procedures, technologies, and the criteria used by professionals involved in youth player recruitment. Studies addressing technical, tactical, physical, psychological, sociological, or multidimensional factors influencing talent-related decisions will also be considered.

Context: This review will focus on elite male football academies and high-performance

development environments associated with professional football clubs. Studies conducted in professional club academies, national development programs, or elite youth football systems will be eligible. Studies involving female football, recreational, amateur, school, or university football contexts will be excluded unless explicitly linked to elite talent development pathways. No restrictions regarding geographical location or publication year will be applied.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Original scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals, with no date limit.
- Studies describing internal club processes related to talent identification, monitoring, selection, testing, and decision-making processes used by decision-makers in talent evaluation.
- Studies detailing strategies used by clubs in the search for new talents.
- Samples involving youth male players from football clubs, aged 20 or younger.
- Articles written in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

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

Source of evidence screening and selection

Following the PRISMA-ScR guidance (Tricco et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2021), all records retrieved from PubMed, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO will be imported into Zotero, where duplicate records will be identified and removed.

The screening process will be conducted in two stages. First, two reviewers (LRF and EC) will independently screen titles and abstracts according to the predefined eligibility criteria. Studies considered potentially relevant will proceed to full-text review. In the second stage, the same reviewers will independently assess the full texts for inclusion.

Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage will be documented and reported in the PRISMA-ScR flow diagram. Any disagreements between reviewers will be resolved through discussion. If consensus cannot be reached, a third reviewer (JVS) will be consulted to make the final decision.

Only peer-reviewed journal articles will be included. Grey literature, including theses, dissertations, reports, institutional documents, conference proceedings, and trial registry records, will be excluded. The review will focus exclusively

on male youth football players (<U20), as substantial differences exist between male and female talent development systems, recruitment structures, and academy organization. This restriction will be acknowledged as a limitation of the review.

Data management Studies meeting the eligibility criteria will undergo data charting using a standardized extraction form developed for this review. The charting form will be piloted and refined when necessary to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness.

Data to be extracted will include study characteristics (authors, year, country, study design, participants, and data collection methods), as well as information related to talent recruitment, such as organizational structures, recruitment processes, decision-making practices, stakeholder involvement, assessment criteria, technologies used, contextual factors, and key findings.

Two reviewers (LRF and MF) will independently chart the data. Any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion and, when necessary, consultation with a third reviewer (JVS). All references will be managed using Zotero, and extracted data will be stored in electronic spreadsheets for analysis and synthesis.

Reporting results / Analysis of the evidence The review will follow the PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). Data will be synthesized descriptively to map the existing evidence on talent recruitment in youth football.

The analysis will focus on identifying and categorizing the organizational structures, recruitment processes, decision-making practices, assessment methods, stakeholder roles, and technological approaches reported in the literature. Extracted data will be grouped into thematic categories derived from the review objectives and refined through an iterative examination of the included studies.

The synthesis will also explore how recruitment systems are structured across different organizational contexts and identify recurring patterns, relationships, and evidence gaps. Attention will be given to how football clubs organize recruitment departments, evaluate players, make recruitment decisions, and integrate traditional scouting practices with data-driven approaches and emerging technologies.

Consistent with current methodological guidance for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2021), no formal critical appraisal, risk-of-bias assessment, or evaluation of evidence certainty will be conducted, as the objective is to map and characterize the literature rather than assess the effectiveness of recruitment approaches.

Presentation of the results Results will be presented through a combination of narrative summaries, tables, and visual representations to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on talent recruitment in youth football.

A PRISMA-ScR flow diagram will be used to illustrate the study selection process. Summary tables will describe the characteristics of the included studies, including authors, publication year, country, study design, participants, and recruitment context.

Additional tables will summarize:

- Organizational structures involved in recruitment (e.g., recruitment departments, scouts, coaches, analysts, coordinators, and directors);
- Recruitment processes and stages (e.g., player identification, observation, evaluation, selection, and acquisition);
- Decision-making practices and recruitment criteria;
- Assessment methods and technologies used in recruitment;
- Contextual factors influencing recruitment practices (e.g., country, competitive level, academy structure, and resources).

Where appropriate, evidence maps, conceptual frameworks, or graphical summaries will be developed to illustrate relationships among stakeholders, recruitment processes, assessment methods, and decision-making structures. These visual representations will also be used to identify areas of concentration and gaps within the existing literature.

Language restriction English.

Country(ies) involved Brazil and Portugal.

Other relevant information 1. Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval is not required for this scoping 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, scoping 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 scoping 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 scoping 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.

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