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Talent management in a big football club

FERRAN SORIANO

Talent management in a big football club bears very complex and even extreme challenges. The difficulty in signing increasingly young football players based on hardly assessable criteria, training in a team sport that requires balance and commitment by all stakeholders, very high salaries and issues related to structure, management and ability to motivate are extreme challenges but subject to the same rationale and common sense as any other company or organisation.

Talent management in a big football club bears very complex and even extreme challenges, but I think that they are subject to the same rationale and common sense as any other company or organisation. I suggest to revisit these challenges as to recruitment, training and compensation.

One of the challenges of signing football players in recent years is the reduction of the age at which candidates are appraised and recruited. If asking football coaches at what age they are able to tell if a player is able to become a professional, the answer will almost always be the same: «From... twelve years!» Therefore the games of youth teams are full of talent scouts, people sent out by clubs or firms intending to discover children with potential and «sign them up».

Big teams will always have players with great technical talent, and differences will lie in how these players get prepared and coordinated.

Signing a child in Brazil may mean to keep half the transfer rights on the player for his whole sports career in exchange for a tiny sum, a basic weekly food basket and the bus ticket to attend training... In Europe, it may mean sophisticated lawyers and complex systems to breach the contracts binding children to their club, simulating the move of the family to another country and transfers of millions of euros. Some cases have become notorious, such as Arsenal signing very young players from Barcelona (Cesc Fàbregas and Fran Mérida) or young Brazilian players with some manager owning 50% of their rights.

This scenario brings about great challenges: how to regulate the relation of children with clubs and managers as they are minors who cannot have a working contract? How to educate children who earn a million euros a year at the age of sixteen? How to make sure that these children have a minimally normal academic education? None of these challenges have been properly solved yet.

FC Barcelona has been working in recent years in developing stable contract bonds with the children and their families to ensure them basic education and to help parents in this respect. The most important initiative related to this has been the establishment of a club in Argentina so talents discovered there do not need to come over to Europe immediately and can develop close to

their families and their native environment, but enjoying the care and method Barcelona devotes to young talents.

The other obvious challenge is assessment: who decides and how that a player has talent and potential? There are people who have developed semi-scientific criteria and others rely on their «sixth sense». A very interesting experience can be found in the book *Moneyball. The art of winning an unfair game*, which despite its title explains how a highly scientific statistical method helped the Oakland Athletics talent scouts to become MLB champions several times in a row. Either scientifically or artistically, experienced coaches tend to coincide in opinion. Likewise, there are recruiters who believe they are able to know if somebody will be a good salesperson after a ten-minute interview, while others prefer to do two psychological tests.

Training is very important in any organisation, the more so in football. This is an extremely complex team sport in which interaction between the eleven players is the key to success. The great teams always have technically highly talented players, and differences appear according to how these players get prepared and coordinated. Training sessions convey tangible knowledge and systematic movements for coordination on the pitch, but they also are to build a team spirit by which the group does all the necessary effort to reach victory; it is not a stereotype that attitude and eagerness to win is often what decides on victory or defeat. Asking Frank Rijkaard on the key to success of the Barcelona squad he coached in 2005 and 2006, I think he would give several ideas that could be summarised under the concept of «balance» (everybody knows what their task in the team is, they do it with stringency and generosity, and the team will gain balance) and «commitment» of players with lots of talent but also very eager to win.

The same concepts are applicable to other industries and companies, but in this case it becomes more critical as victory may depend on a centimetre, an extra effort, additional commitment of the centre-forward, stretching a bit more his leg

to score, after a balanced team having trained its systematic movements and bodily shape serves him the decisive cross.

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The situation is even more extreme in payment, but the rationale is the same. A footballer in a great team earns between 1 and 10 million euros a year, and the greatest stars earn a similar sum from advertising. It is not difficult to imagine the challenge of the human resource manager who needs to manage multi-millionaire twenty-year-old employees.

As early as in 1959, the psychologist Frederick Herzberg said in his «Two Factor Theory» that economic retribution is a «hygienic» factor in motivating employees. That is, somebody not feeling well paid will be unsatisfied, but paying more will not achieve medium-term employee motivation. I believe that successful retribution models in football are based on:

- ▶ Guidelines assisting every player in justifying their salary (salary bands) according to talent,

experience and contribution to the team. Johan Cruyff already talked about this concept when he coached Barcelona and, more recently, Barcelona set salary bands in 2003 that are those being currently used.

- ▶ Proactive management to adapt salaries to player progress without them asking for it and without entering into publicised negotiations with player managers. An example is the case of Leo Messi, whose salary has been improved every year as his contribution to the team and the club was increasing and improving, without any friction between the player and the club.

- ▶ Variable remuneration. As in any other industry, players have to earn more money when they meet the targets, when they win games and championships, and less when they lose. It makes sense and everybody is able to understand it, even players. When we started implementing this scheme at Barcelona in 2003, many branch experts thought that players would not accept this. But they did, and the salary at Barcelona has been roughly 2/3 fixed and 1/3 variable ever since, according to individual and collective performance of the players and the team.

All in all, such talent management challenges are extreme but they are subject to logic and common sense... as is always the case.

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