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CASES EXPERT STATEMENT

THE CASES EXPERT STATEMENT ON CREATING EFFECTIVE HOLISTIC TALENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENTS IN FOOTBALL

Produced on behalf of the Chartered Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences by Dr Adam Gledhill FCASES, Dr Stacey Emmonds, Dr Dale Forsdyke, Dr Carsten Hvid Larsen, Prof Sergio Lara Bercial, Dr Tom Mitchell MCASES, Dr Jamie Salter MCASES, and Dr Barnaby Sargent Megicks

Identifying, recruiting, and developing the next generation of elite footballers remains a key priority for clubs and national associations. Modern football talent development environments (TDEs) are increasingly professionalised, with youth players engaged in highly structured training. While TDEs can support player development, progression to elite levels is low. TDEs can also pose physical, psychological, and social challenges that may affect players' health (e.g., Sothorn & O'Gorman, 2021).

In response, the English Premier League (2022) advocates for a focus on holistic development and success promoting a systematic, integrated approach to whole-person development and care through their elite player development and personal growth principles. This includes empowering players to reach their full potential, so they can succeed, whatever that means

for them. The aim of this is to enhance developmental benefits while mitigating associated risks. As a result, TDEs have evolved to include targeted support services—such as specific requirements regarding dedicated roles for player care staff in academies and full-time psychology provision in category one academies.

Holistic Talent Development provides a system-level model for planning, implementing, and evaluating TDEs (Sargent Megicks *et al.*, 2023). Its central goal is the simultaneous pursuit of three interconnected and interdependent outcome domains: Athletic Performance, Health and Wellbeing, and Life Readiness (Figure 1). Effective Holistic TDEs (HTDEs) are intentionally designed to support all three domains continuously throughout a player's engagement – and ideally, beyond – marking a clear shift from traditional performance-focused models.

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ADAPTED PILLAR	APPLICATION TO FOOTBALL HTDES
Long-term focus	Prioritise sustained growth over early results. Avoid early de-selection and focus on long-term holistic development rather than prioritising wins. Recognise that players develop at different rates.
Coherent organisational culture	Ensure shared values across players, coaches, parents, and support staff. Build a 'player-first' culture that all stakeholders reinforce in training, matches, and communication. Adopt a consistent playing philosophy across age groups.
Integration of efforts	Co-ordinate support from schools, coaches, parents and club staff. Ensure collaboration between club departments (e.g., collaboration between player care, psychologist, safeguarding officer and the medical department.)
Supportive relationships	Build trust and psychological safety. Foster open communication, respect and appropriate informational, emotional and esteem support. Emphasise reflection, curiosity and effort.
Player-centred coaching	Involve players as central stakeholders in their own individual development plans. Openly discuss and rationalise individual action plans; seek player (and parent) input into their viability. Encourage active engagement rather than compliance. Balance meaningful football challenge with appropriate support that encourages players' learning from setbacks and adaptive responses.
Opportunities for progression	Demonstrate clear pathways through the club with clear, player-centred feedback to facilitate pathway progression. De-selection should incorporate player care and guidance towards other opportunities within football (e.g., signposting to level appropriate teams), to facilitate continued involvement in football.
Support for holistic development	Prioritise education, life skills, and broader identity development. Promote developing players' mental, physical, and social health. Integrate education with training and triangulate support from parents, education providers and club staff.
Role models	Involve former academy graduates to mentor and inspire (not scare) youth players, by demonstrating and reinforcing desirable values and behaviours (e.g., creativity, rest, recovery, discipline, commitment, self-regulation). Role models demonstrate realistic pathways to achievement.

▲ **Table 1:** Eight pillars adapted to youth football environments.

- **Health and Wellbeing:** Promoting and protecting physical, mental and social health and wellbeing, now and for the future.
- **Athletic Performance:** Developing the athletic skills and characteristics required to reach and perform at the elite level.
- **Life Readiness:** Developing the life skills and characteristics required to succeed inside and outside of sport, now and for the future.

▲ **Figure 1:** The three outcome domains of Holistic Talent Development.

The purpose of this expert statement is to draw on existing best practice in football to inform and provide an evidence informed framework for designing effective HTDEs. This includes shaping the football environment for holistic talent development, creating effective stakeholder relationships, and progressing through to providing recommendations for integrated psychosocial development, injury risk reduction, and growth and maturation monitoring.

SHAPING THE ENVIRONMENT

Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) identified eight pillars of successful athletic talent development environments. They represent consistent characteristics found in environments that successfully develop athletes over time. Table 1 shows the adapted eight pillars, which we have adapted to suit youth football environments, and share

these as areas of focus for clubs looking to develop their TDEs.

CREATING EFFECTIVE STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

Effective stakeholder relationships (e.g., those between players, parents, coaches, player care staff, and teachers) have a significant impact on the success of HTDEs. To contribute to effective HTDEs, football academies should consider the following:

- **Open communication** – Clear, honest and age-appropriate communication and dialogue between stakeholders, empowering the player to be central to the communication. Appreciate that sometimes healthy and appropriate conflict can contribute to a more effective HTDE.
- **Understand roles and boundaries** – Clearly define each stakeholder's role and what would be considered unhelpful overlap/confusion.

- **Foster a shared goal commitment** – Have a commitment to shared goals that emphasise holistic development.
- **Role model behaviour** – Parents, coaches and other stakeholders should role model behaviour expected of players (e.g., respectful, supportive communication; clear articulation of concerns; open discussion regarding feedback).
- **Constructive feedback** – All stakeholders should use feedback appropriately to promote holistic development via reflection, encouragement, and with an emphasis on learning.

INTEGRATED PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Intentional, integrated development of players' psychosocial skills and characteristics (PSCs) can enhance performance, wellbeing, and life readiness (e.g., Gledhill *et al.*, 2017). Football coaches are well-placed – especially with support from sport psychology staff – to embed PSC development into training sessions (Mitchell *et al.*, 2024). The PACER model (Mitchell & Barraclough, 2025) offers a practical framework to support this:

Plan – Identify which PSCs to develop, what it looks like in football, and who you're coaching. For example, developing emotional control to stay composed under the pressure of emergency defending.

Approach – Decide on your delivery strategy. This might be themed training blocks (e.g., 4-week focus on resilience), or more flexible, individualised player interventions.

Coach – Design practices and use coach behaviours that create opportunities for PSC development. For instance, an overload practice might build confidence in the overloaded team, while questioning can develop communication and self-awareness.

Environment – Adjust the wider training or match environment to shape player experience. A "win-at-all-costs" approach in a tournament will bring out different emotions than a purely developmental fixture and will present a different type of developmental challenge.

Review – Build in reflection with players to consolidate learning and foster development. For example, ask: "How did you stay focused when underloaded? What would you try next time?"

With coordinated support from sport psychology and player care staff, football coaches can help players develop and transfer PSCs into education, relationships, and broader life settings – building not just better football players, but more rounded individuals.

INJURY RISK REDUCTION

One threat that can impact all three outcome domains of HTDEs in football is injury. Injury can result in time-loss from training and competition, or players continuing to participate, whilst experiencing pain, and often with altered movement strategies. Both scenarios disrupt player development, reduce performance, and can contribute to players being released from academies or dropping out of football. To support both football development and health and wellbeing, proactive injury risk reduction strategies should be integrated into HTDEs.

Injury in youth football players often stems from a complex interaction of many internal and external risk factors. Hence, a multimodal, holistic approach to injury risk reduction is essential. Practitioners should ensure players are exposed to a holistic athletic development programme that incorporates the development of motor skill competencies, strength and conditioning development relative to a player's stage of development, fatigue and recovery management, routine wellness monitoring, and other individual specific considerations. A well-rounded programme will support the development of overall athleticism important for football performance, as well as promoting long-term health and injury risk reduction.

MONITORING GROWTH AND MATURATION

Optimising holistic talent development begins with player talent detection and identification, where training age, and maturity bias must be carefully considered. Without an individualised approach to recruitment and retention, development pathways often reinforce maturity-selection and relative-age biases, favouring physically advanced players (Towlson *et al.*, 2020). To counter this, HTDEs should routinely assess anthropometric data (e.g., quarterly) to monitor biological maturity and inform decisions regarding recruitment, training, selection, and retention. Early risk stratification is essential, using markers such as rapid growth ($>7.2\text{cm/year}$), atypical maturity timing (± 1 year), altered movement patterns, and symptoms like discomfort or fatigue (Salter, 2025; Towlson *et al.*, 2020). Accurate monitoring requires consistent use of validated methods such as predicted adult height (PAH%) (Towlson *et al.*, 2020) or hand-wrist ultrasound (Cumming *et al.*, 2024).

Pertinently, routinely collected and longitudinally tracked outcomes must be clearly and empathetically communicated to players, parents, and coaches. This helps build a collaborative support system within the HTDE and reduce the risk of players experiencing maladaptive anxiety, fear of failure, or burnout. Performance data should be interpreted relative to biological age (i.e., PAH%, maturity status) as well as chronological age, supporting developmentally appropriate training loads and exposures. Finally, bio-banding and similar strategies (e.g., player labelling, playing up/down, birthday banding) can supplement age-grouped programmes to better showcase diverse player attributes (Salter, 2025), ensuring environments are both scientifically grounded and individually

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responsive to maximise potential and minimise risk within the health and wellbeing and athlete potential domains of HTDEs.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of HTDEs is the simultaneous pursuit of three interconnected goals: Athletic Performance, Health and Wellbeing, and Life Readiness. Through this Expert Statement, the practice – and evidence – informed framework we have presented is designed to support the application of key principles in creating HTDEs. We encourage football clubs to:

- Think holistically from the outset and commit to deliberately working toward the three HTDE outcome domains.
- Embrace the three HTDE outcome domains as complementary qualities as opposed to competing demands.
- Foster effective multi-stakeholder relationships to create an appreciation of the HTDE, the outcome domains, and the different ways that the outcomes are to be achieved. Co-creating this appreciation with all stakeholders is central to integration of efforts and a coherent organisational culture.
- Ensure that activities undertaken to develop players are appropriate for their psychosocial, physical and emotional stage of development by appropriately monitoring player maturity levels and designing activities accordingly.
- Integrate player psychosocial development through connected coaching, S&C and sport psychology activities. ■

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