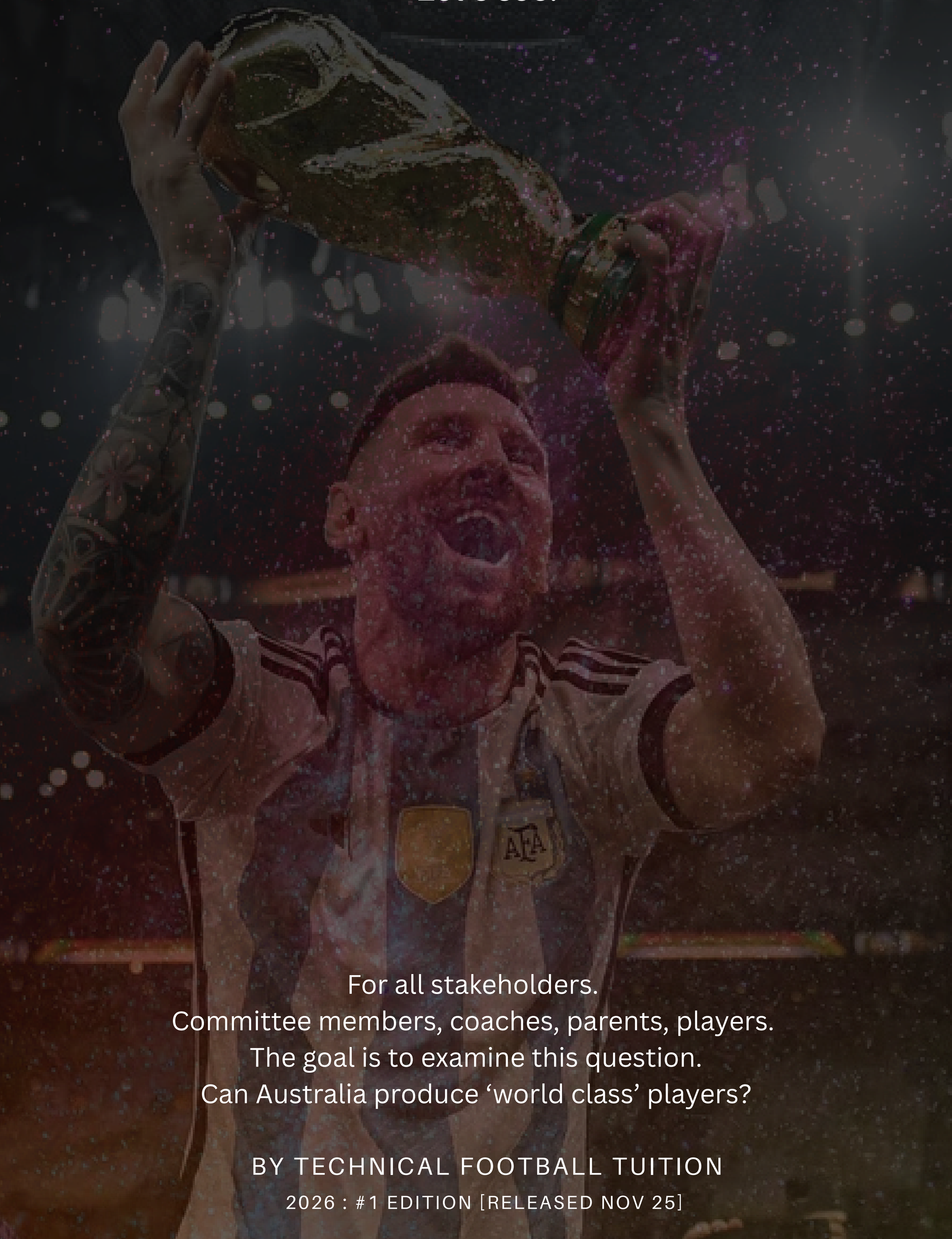
BUILD A WORLD CLASS PLAYER.
VICTORIA (AUS) EDITION.

Can Australia produce ‘world class‘ players?
Let’s see.



For all stakeholders.
Committee members, coaches, parents, players.
The goal is to examine this question.
Can Australia produce ‘world class’ players?

BY TECHNICAL FOOTBALL TUITION

2026 : #1 EDITION [RELEASED NOV 25]

Quick note :

This article is the property of Technical Football Tuition. It is however an organic article which will be updated regularly based on feedback, ideas, and new perspectives from readers. If you can add to the article, offer new perspectives, or offer counter arguments then we encourage you to engage. (X might be the best place for this).

https://x.com/tft_2023

This article can be shared using this link [https://tft-tube.com/build-a-world-class-players-australian-edition-2026/]. We want the discussion to reach as far as possible with no barriers.

Kindle App : We also recommend downloading the kindle app (or similar - free and reads pdf files). This will offer you a book like experience (flipping pages etc). If you use a normal pdf reader then you will have to scroll down to get to the next page

This is also not a text book. I have not cited sources or added references. If you are not happy with an anecdote, an opinion or a stated fact, then please feel free to use AI to do your own research and respond if necessary.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 01 ***INTRODUCTION***

Part 02 ***SPACE MANIPULATORS***

Part 03 ***MACRO FACTORS***

part 04 ***SUMMARY***

PART 1 : INTRODUCTION

BUILD A BETTER PLAYER

‘WHATEVER THAT MEANS?’

PRODUCING BETTER PLAYERS.

If you're involved in the beautiful game, you might not have time to overthink the journey that young aspiring football players are on. However, as a stakeholder in the game, you definitely need a clear understanding of this journey.

If you're a stakeholder and can't write an opinion piece like this, seek out someone who can. Engage with them, learn from them, encourage them to put their ideas in writing. Their insights are crucial.

If you're a stakeholder and can't find someone to write an opinion piece like this, this opinion piece is for you. Use it as a foundation to craft a vision that aligns with your philosophy, your goals and the impact you want to have on the game.

Soccer Stakeholder Meaning : Stakeholder means governing bodies, clubs, committee members, club volunteers, football directors, technical directors, coaches, parents, and players. Simply put, if you are involved in the game then you own a part of the game.

THEY'VE ALL BUT DISAPPEARED

Twenty years ago, Australian players were a common sight in Europe's top football leagues. Today, they've all but disappeared.

This raises some big questions:

- **Has the global football landscape moved on and left Australia behind?**
- **If so, what's the reason?**
- **Can Australia turn things around?**
- **And does it even matter?**

Before we dive into these questions it is important to recognize that not all coaching is the same.

Coaching for 'wins' versus 'development'

It is a widely held view that coaching to 'win' versus coaching for 'development' creates notable differences in how coaches, teams and players behave.

Focusing on winning over player growth, can produce less creative and less intelligent players who play more pragmatically and robotically. Some stakeholders prefer this.

A development-focused coach prioritizes long-term growth using diverse methods. They help players tackle the challenges of true 'technique, touch and intelligence' (TTI) development whilst slowly building all the attributes required to win games.

This 'opinion piece' uses these two extremes as if they are the only development options. They are obviously not.

Building better players - whatever that means?

As a final note, it is importation to spend time on the statement 'building better players - whatever that means'. Does 'better player when young' mean a player that will offer a better chance of winning the next match? Or, a player who might one day win a 'Ballon D'Or'? Or does it just mean a player who is technically better (when older) than they otherwise would have been?

Stakeholders need to decide this for themselves and then make sure the development journey they are on and their definition of 'better player' align.

INTRODUCTION

BUILD A PLAYER

DIGGING A LITTLE DEEPER

DIGGING A LITTLE DEEPER

Recently, several junior soccer clubs in Australia have invited me to join their efforts towards developing ‘better’ players. The question is why?

I've always felt that clubs could do far more to nurture long term player development.

I don’t mean to suggest that clubs aren’t putting in significant amounts of time and effort to provide training and playing opportunities for their players. Nearly every committee member I’ve met is a dedicated, hardworking and superbly conscientious parent who strives tirelessly to ensure their child, and all children at their club, have everything they need to be part of a team. Committee members and all volunteers at all clubs, I take my hat off to you. You have my utmost respect.

However, why do committee members (clubs) feel the need to seek external solutions when they already have qualified coaches, a technical director, and perhaps even a director of football within the club?

It doesn’t make sense.

TO THE CLUB'S CREDIT,
THEY RECOGNIZE THERE'S A PROBLEM.

In an environment where results are increasingly prioritized, they see that their players are getting a skewed exposure to the game—one focused mostly on winning matches.

Perhaps clubs don’t know any other way. After all, ‘clubs/committees’ hire Technical Directors (TD) to help coaches coach a team. If a team is winning (most the time) and doing well in the league, then the obvious conclusion is that the TD is doing their job, the coach is doing well and the players are developing.

A technical director once told me ‘winning is developing‘. His belief was unwavering.

At face value, it’s tough to dispute this belief. If you’re a coach, technical director, committee member, parent, or player and you see a team consistently winning, it’s natural to assume it’s due to their accelerated development.

But Is ‘winning’ really the best indicator of development?

Football Victoria clearly believes it is. Take a look at their 2026 football plan. A structure which clearly says ‘winning is the only thing’.

Conventionally, winning the league is a thing that affects 2 or 3 teams in the league. This then allows all other teams (assuming no relegation) to switch focus and be a little more ‘player’ orientated. Not anymore.

In Victoria (2026) a 'club style league table', not an ‘individual team’ league table, has been introduced for ages U13-U18 (NPL).

How does this work?

Consider this scenario (starting in year 2). There are 5 teams per club : A top-performing team (U15 say) win the Division 1 title but all other teams team from the same club finish last in Division 1.

Since the combined position is now what matters, the U15 Division 1 winners will be relegated to Division 2 along with all the other teams at the club.

So what you may ask?

If every league position counts, then every result matters and if every result matters, then the coaching model and style matters. All coaches will be forced to coach a certain way, all the time. Every game will be like a cup final and a loss won't just impact one team, it will impact five.

It is well known that ‘player’ development (in terms of ‘technique, touch and intelligence’ (TTI) is stifled when results matter too much. Learning happens in the failures, the mistakes, the experimentation. Will clubs and coaches allow this learning environment if the stakes are too high? It is unlikely. Coaches will increasingly coach the team rather than the players, and prioritize game time for the match winners while less impactful players keep the bench warm.

Back to our two club scenario : The U15 Division 1 winning team disbands following relegation. Despite winning the league, players move to other Division 1 clubs to maintain their Division 1 status. The team and club get ransacked generally as it becomes a merry go round of moving players. Is this really what team sports and player development are meant to be about? Football Victoria seem to think so. Maybe they will be proved right over time.

TOURNAMENT FOOTBALL

Historically the off season was a great time to kick-back and focus on the developmental lessons that may have been missed during the season. It was a great way to hit next season running. Confidence sky high on the back of thousands of extra touches and a better appreciation for the nuances of the game.

If technical growth had taken a back seat in the season, the off-season was the time to catch up, reinvent yourself, and return as a transformed player. Not anymore.

Now, nearly every weekend during the off-season, there are tournaments. Why? There are now even ‘quick game’ competitions with half's just over 10 minutes long. Why? Some argue it’s about playing more games.

In Australia, many believe playing more games enhances player development and produces better players. Logically therefore, if Australian players play more, Australian players will improve.

So are off-season tournaments simply filling a gap in the development model?

As always, if only it was that simple.

When we talk about playing more games, what kind of games are we referring to? Tournament games focused on winning or thoughtfully designed games that teach small developmental lessons?

1v1s, 2v1s, 2v2s, 3v2s, 3v3s, or 5v5s are games too.

Stakeholders need to think carefully about the path chosen in regards to the games played.

WHAT ARE EUROPE DOING?

It is interesting to note that while Australia increasingly adopts a results based development model, some European countries are shifting toward the ultra-small-sided game (USSG) model.

In parts of Europe, 3v3 games are increasingly used as a key developmental game for young players. The 3v3 model is replacing the 7v7 and 9v9 model Australia adopted from Europe.

While Europe is going one way, is Australia is going the other?

LET THE GAME BE THE TEACHER

This is a great message. Kids would agree with this too. Games are great! But always bare in mind that the more players involved in a game (11v11 say), the harder it becomes to learn from it (especially when young). The bigger the numbers, the less the opportunity to 'revise, revisit and retry' (essential learning ingredients). Add Tournament football into this equation and the chances of learning the football lessons that enhance 'long term player' development become increasingly slim.

Coaches may say training provides learning opportunities and games are the test — absolutely true. But how many coaches prioritize a players 'long term' development in training. And let's not forget, no one respects a coach who develops clever technical players, if they get beat by a team that is 'selected and coached' to win. Why would a coach hang themself out to dry like this?

So ask yourself : Are tournaments an essential development opportunity or are there better alternatives? Are tournaments played for the benefits of a 'players' long term development or for some other reason?

In all honesty it is hard to say it's for the long term developmental benefit of young players.

Not to say this is wrong.

Maybe there are more important things than the the long term developmental of young players.

Maybe clubs, TDs , Coaches, parents and players have other priorities.

Maybe what happens today is more important than what happens tomorrow.

Maybe.

But is it just more of the same?

Currently more and more players get team based and results based training and little else. More and more players play games where the result is the most important thing.

'But Kids like games and tournaments!' some say.

Kids also like party food. It's a god job adults are in control of how much party food a kid can eat.

When it comes to the ‘player’ vs ‘team’ development issue, it is becoming increasingly clear that clubs have no idea what path they are on. They want ‘better’ players, but then proceed to focus on winning the next match. They want to eat well, but can’t stop eating party food!

There are always exceptions.

One club I know hosted an off-season futsal competition on their synthetic pitch. It brought in money for the club, while offering something different—smaller pitches, fewer players, and a natural focus on development. **It worked well!**

It only ran during the off-season, but it should have been year-round. It could have become an inter-club futsal gala night. Clubs could have collaborated to make it a regular part of the soccer landscape. Perfect for those interested in more than just ’team’ development.

For clubs training three or four times a week, this could have replaced a session. Players would have loved it and got something a little different.

It would have been a win win for everyone.

CLUBS ARE STRUGGLING PHILOSOPHICALLY.

A committee member I spoke to said they are lost. They're unsure what they need, but are concerned that their up and coming players aren't strong enough to keep their high NPL status.

It is clear that clubs are now (from 2026) under intense pressure to deliver results from U13 onwards. However, the knock on effect of this is that it forces them to develop 'strong' teams at younger age groups too. Failing to do so runs the risk of losing their 'strongest' players to a higher ranked club.

So what's the solution?

The solution that all clubs will turn to is to simply run more training sessions - more of the same. I guarantee they won't get the results they want from this. This is counterintuitively the wrong approach if the aim is to produce better 'players' in the long term. Sadly I see clubs becoming increasingly negligent about long term 'player' development.

But then again why should they care?
What benefit does caring serve them?

THE GOVERNING BODY

The Football Victoria clearly want the best players ‘now’ playing with the best players ‘now’. [‘Now’ being the key word and ‘Best player' meaning the player 'who maximizes the chances of winning now' regardless of age].
This sends a clear message to all stakeholders :

‘We want the ‘big strong fast’ development model to be the base on which our best players are built upon’.

There's nothing wrong with this approach if it's their chosen path, but they should own it. They should be clear with stakeholders that the goal isn't to produce world-class (or even elite) players. The goal is to prioritize the use of whoever is the best player right now.

A 'big strong fast' model still produces good players. Players capable of playing at a good professional level. But let's be clear, the governing body are putting a ceiling on how high a level the very best players will play.

You might ask if this is the right approach? It’s not wrong if this is what they believe Australian football should be about.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT APPROACH?

Should clubs encourage a ‘pragmatic coaching and playing style’ to win more games. That is : Keep the status quo. If clubs do this, what's the downside? Who, if anyone, truly loses out from this approach?

Kids love playing games more than anything. They are also blissfully unaware of the different development models, and don’t really care if their ‘potential’ is being capped.

As long as kids enjoy training and playing and like their coach, they will be happy. So why should anyone care about what development model gets used?

SHOULD COACHES CARE?

Coaches naturally prefer winning over losing. So most coaches aren’t inclined to adopt methods that might jeopardize the ‘next’ game’s result. They are, in general, happy to lean into a results-driven process. Coaches are often a parent too. What parent doesn't want their child to be on a wining team. The journey home is a much happier one! So why should coaches care about a long term development model?

SHOULD CLUBS CARE?

A club's main role is to create a space where young athletes can enjoy and learn from playing a team sport. Why should a club care what development model is used in this process?

But let’s go out on a limb :

Let’s say, developing players who are naturally more technical, have a better touch and are individually intelligent does matter to some stakeholders, and more importantly, to some clubs. Should these clubs align and be at the forefront of offering a different developmental experience, regardless of whether they lose players in the pyramid system in the future. Maybe.

So is it about finding the right club?

Some clubs will simply be happy to create the opportunity to be in a team. Some clubs will be passionate about results and league tables. Some club will be passionate about long term development goals.

Clubs need to work out which one the are and let other stakeholders know.

LET’S TAKE THIS TO A NATIONAL LEVEL.

Is a national team a reflection of the developmental system?

Watch the Australian national team, what do you see? Grit, physicality, and a direct style — reflecting a system prioritizing athleticism and results over technical finesse? Is this a product of a culture that values competitive spirit, but often lacks an emphasis on creative and intelligent play?

Watch the Spanish national team, what do you see? Fluid passing, technical mastery, and tactical intelligence. A style that stems from a youth system obsessed with ball control, vision, and small-sided games that hone skill from an early age.

When you look at this difference, are you proud of the ‘Australian’ way or jealous of the ‘Spanish’ way? When Australia beats a small football nation like Thailand, are you proud to win or a little embarrassed by the fact that Thai players are technically better and only lose because of the physical factors at play? A Club’s answers to these questions should indicate which path they should be taking.

YOU OWN THE GAME !

If you're involved in football—as a coach, parent, player, or administrator—you're a stakeholder. You own a part of the game and your choices shape the game's future.

Your decisions and your actions matter!

If a player quits at 18 or plays for 70 years what role (directly or indirectly) did you play in this? If a player ends up playing for money, becomes a pro, an international player or even wins a Ballon d'Or, did the decisions and actions you took (directly or indirectly) contribute to this?

Remember, a rising tide lifts all boats.

Whatever your role as stakeholder, you contribute in some way to the 'level and style' of the national team. Did your actions as a stakeholder match your hopes and dreams for the national team?

As a stakeholder, use your hopes and dreams for the national team to lock in your developmental philosophy. After this, every action you take in the game should align with this philosophy.

SO WHAT'S YOUR VISION?

If it is pragmatic results based football, that ultimately earns global respect for its physical, tactical, and mental qualities, then focus on developing young players with these qualities in mind.

If you want technically advanced, intelligent footballers that the world admires for their touch, technique and intelligence (at an individual and collective level), then focus on developing these qualities in your young players.

Sounds simple.....

If having a vision is impossible, then this makes it all very simple. Simply create a nurturing team environment. Let players play the game, enjoy the sport, learn the life lessons and move on. The sport is not more important than this.

If your vision is possible then currently clubs probably hold the key needed to bring it to life.

The question is : How do they start the process of bringing a vision, for both players and the national team, to life?

CURRENTLY CLUBS HOLD THE KEY

The process starts with a club blueprint.

- **A club blueprint should ensure TDs and all coaches implement the clubs development philosophy (whatever this is) for their teams and players.**
- **A club blueprint should outline exactly what type of 'players' the clubs tries to find at the start of the development journey, and what type of player they hope to produce at the end. This would be closely aligned to the development philosophy adopted by the club.**
- **A club blueprint should offer a detailed breakdown of exactly how they will go about developing these types of players.**
- **A club blueprint should equip players, parents, coaches and committee members with a clear and comprehensive framework to ensure no aspect of player development is overlooked in the pursuit of creating footballers that match their vision.**

Imagine going to a club trial, knowing exactly what the club is looking for. Where their development priorities lie. What parent and player wouldn't love this?

You could argue the FA curriculum (first launched in 2009 and revised in 2013) was meant to serve as that blueprint for all clubs. Back then, it aimed to shift Australian football away from the "fight-ball" mentality, which it flagged as detrimental to youth development, pushing instead for a more technical, player-focused approach. 12 years on, the curriculum is still the same, but the current development landscape bears little resemblance to it's vision.

Did Australia go full circle?

'Fight ball' has now been replaced by 'bigger stronger faster'. There was a window where 'technique, touch and intelligence' was lorded as the holy grail of development. This window wasn't open for long.

Has this mirrored the world game?

Has the 'Barca-Pep' revolution, been matched and surpassed by the ' bigger faster stronger' model at the highest level? Maybe. It certainly has at junior levels where it's easier to get 'success' from an 'anti-Pep' style of play than a 'Barca-Pep' style of play. No doubt It will go full circle again. Pep will evolve the 'fight ball' model and everyone else will then learn 'how to play' in order to beat him. (Pep = Pep Guardiola).

THE MODERN FOOTBALL LANDSCAPE

Thanks to the 2026 NPL (Victoria, Australia) league based model, the football landscape will be dominated (for a while) by the 'bigger stronger faster results first' model.

This was not Football Australia's vision.

The current emphasis on wining the ball back asap against players who can barely play, and playing forward quickly before the opposition's press arrives, is not in anyway developing the 'technical and intelligent' players the FA hoped it would. Football Australia's vision for football when it introduced its 2009 curriculum was to achieve a fundamental transformation in the sport's development to make Australia a leading football nation, characterized by developing future generations of world-class players and a strong grassroots foundation : In 2006, we had had the golden generation. 2026 looks nothing like this.

Is it ironic that in Australia (Europe is different) the 'bigger stronger faster' model is the perfect way to stop young players learning how to play with technique, touch and intelligence. The FA coaching development process has taught coaches how to achieve the exact opposite of what they wanted.

SO CLUBS ARE NOW ADRIFT

The national curriculum has largely been forgotten or ignored. Without a refreshed and enforced blueprint, many have taken some key elements of the curriculum / coaching process and used these to enhance a results-driven football environment — prioritizing short-term 'team' wins over long-term 'player' development. This disconnect leaves clubs without clear guidance, and they are now struggling to align their philosophical ambitions (develop great players) with the pragmatic coaching methodology that exists (chase results).

Australia is not unique in this regard.

In 2025 Cesc Fàbregas identified Talent Pool Shortages and Development Gaps in Italy

- **Italian football's youth system has been criticized for prioritizing tactical discipline and physicality over technical flair, creativity, and explosiveness—qualities that align better with Fàbregas's possession-based, Spanish-influenced style at Como.**

In a recent interview, Fàbregas said:

"I personally went to scout for Italian players... I looked and analyzed for youngsters who can raise our level, it was incredibly difficult." He attributes this partly to an "obsession with youth" in Italy that doesn't always translate to first-team readiness, contrasting it with Spain's deeper bench of technically proficient prospects.

Broader data supports this: Serie A clubs now field around 65% foreign players, with Italian representation in top European squads dwindling (e.g., only a handful like Barella or Tonali regularly start at elite clubs abroad).

Italy's national team struggles reflect this, with their 2020 Euros win feeling like an outlier amid recent underperformance.

Italy have been historially one of the best football nations in the world. 4 world cups. A conveyor belt of world class players and yet the youth system, despite this football heritage, is turning the nation into a mediocre national team - that is still a level above Australia.

Italy has not been in a world cup since 2014 and may not make 2026.

The Purpose of this piece

The purpose of this 'piece' is to offer clubs a springboard towards developing / improving their own club blueprint.

Clubs can no longer rely on governing bodies to tell them how the game should be prescribed.

When a governing body chooses a development structure that is a logistical dream for them, but puts a ceiling on the level of our very best players, can they really be used as beacon of inspiration moving forward.

When every advanced development initiative the governing bodies introduces fails, can they really be used as beacon of inspiration moving forward.

Committees, parents and players are oblivious to this on the whole however. So to expect change would be foolish. Choosing mediocrity would be more prudent for those who wish to remain sane.

GIVE CLUBS THE OPPORTUNITY TO STEP UP.

Why is this critical? Why do clubs need to step up and do more? Clubs wield the greatest influence over players and can have the most impact on their development journey. They're the ones delivering training, setting priorities, and fostering environments where young players grow. They have the leverage over players that no one else does. Under the guidance of the governing bodies, clubs don't use this potential. Maybe they don't even know they should, or even know the potential they have. The consequences of this goes unnoticed.

When player potential is squandered it is impossible to quantify and no one is ever accountable.

A well-defined club (specific) blueprint however, ensures a club has an identity, can take responsibility and accountability, and can offer full transparency to all it's stakeholders. If a player's best interests were the priority this would be done. As it is, far too many players and parents have terrible experiences at clubs because of this lack of transparency. What they expect and what they get are often very different things.

One final thought: Let's dispel the myth—there are no true holistic experts in football coaching, only opinions ! This piece is mine !

The field of football development is too vast for any one person to master every area. Even coaching is too vast for one person to understand anywhere near it's full spectrum.

So when evaluating someone's 'opinion', consider their background, playing experience and style, their detailed coaching history, their bias, and then weigh their 'opinion' accordingly. But be very careful about presuming they are an 'expert in all areas' just because they are an expert in one, no matter who they are.

The governing bodies prove this time after time. The difference for them is that their opinions are implemented under the guise of 'world based best practice'. Has the FA curriculum improved Australian football? Has their vision of producing world class players got anywhere close to hitting the mark? Why do Football Victoria constantly change the junior league structure? Didn't 'experts' work on the last one or have the 'experts' only now got involved?

INTRODUCTION

BUILD A PLAYER

EVERYONE WANTS THE SAME THING

WHAT DO STAKEHOLDERS WANT ?

It’s probably safe to assume that :

- **Clubs want players to be the ‘best’ players they can be and want their teams to be the ‘strongest’ teams they can be.**
- **Coaches want their players to be best they can be and play in the strongest team they can squeeze into.**
- **Players want to be the best player they can be and play in the strongest team they can squeeze into.**
- **Parents want their child be the best player they can be and play in the strongest team they can squeeze into.**

Everyone wants the same thing!

Surely therefore, getting these results should be easy! It is not : Why?

Maybe stakeholders don’t truly know what is required to achieve these objectives. The list of component parts that make a player is long. Stakeholders are probably not aware of them all or why they are important.

This is a problem.

BACK IN THE DAY.

Historically, players relied on a few things to get to a high level. Natural talent, team training, kick-abouts outside of team training, practice at home and the rest was left to chance.

Johan Cruyff trained 3-4 hours a week (at Ajax when he was little) but played 3-4 hours everyday (on the street).

'So where do you think I learnt football?"
Cruyff once said.

In the past players weren't educated about the game and its component parts. The streets was all there was.

Today however, everyone has access (in theory) to all the resources they need to ensure players can be the 'best' they can be.

So producing better players should be easy.

But it is not. This piece looks at why. It looks at what's missing, what's misunderstood and what should and could be added to the player development journey (in Australia).

DEVELOPING A ‘BETTER’ PLAYER.

One huge problem stakeholders will immediately hit is that at the junior level it is impossible to get a universal definition of what is meant by developing a ‘better’ player.

Is it about developing the player who has the biggest impact in games right now, or is it about developing the player who can potentially play at the highest level of the game when older.

When something as simple as this can’t be easily defined, what hope do stakeholders have?

With the aim of developing better players (whatever that means), this piece will do the following :

- **Define the game using one sentence.**
- **Condense the game into one word.**
- **Use a 1v1 to show how this is true.**
- **Go through the ‘space manipulators’ that all stakeholders need to be aware of.**
- **Look at what role macro factors play during the player development journey.**

Let’s go !

INTRODUCTION

BUILD A PLAYER

A USABLE DEFINITION OF THE GAME

A USABLE DEFINITION OF THE GAME.

Consider this definition of the game (when in possession) at a fundamental individual level.

'The game at a fundamental level is an exercise in manipulating 'time and space' to improve the position of the ball.'

And conversely the objective for players on the team not in possession, is to manipulate time and space, so that it is hard for the team in possession to improve the position of the ball.

For the sake of simplicity, let's ignore the 'time' aspect of this definition, and just use the word 'space', such that :

The game, when it is simplified and stripped back to a 'fundamental developmental' level, can be seen to be purely about 'space' and every 'problem to solve' when playing, is simply a spatial problem.

For the purpose of this piece, this is the definition of the game we will use : The game at a fundamental level is an exercise in using 'space' to improve the position of the ball

If you have a different definition, build a complete developmental model that helps stakeholders build better players. Plus send it to us, we want to read it and learn from it!

If you can't build a complete developmental model from your definition that helps stakeholders build better players, then you need a new definition.

Also, just to clarify '**Improve the position of the ball**' means :

- Get the ball further forward (without losing possession).
- Get the ball closer to the goal.
- Get the ball to a position from which it is possible to score.
- Get the ball into the goal.
- Or if the above isn't possible, then get the ball to a player in a better position than you (who can improve the position of the ball).

Many coaches talk about 'high value' and 'low value' passes. This is the same thing. It's is all about 'improving the position on the ball'.

INTRODUCTION

BUILD A PLAYER

1V1S AND SPACE

1V1S AND SPACE

It's fair to say that a 1v1 is often seen as an exercise in outsmarting, outmaneuvering, or bypassing an opponent, and this is how it's commonly taught to young players.

But are 1v1s really just about this?

What if 1v1s were viewed as simply a 'race to space' rather than a 'me vs you' contest?

After all, attackers cannot go through defenders - they have to go around them, and to do this they have to find, use, enhance or create space.

A '1v1 moment' is simply a 'race to space'

In a 1v1, the attacker selects a space to advance into, and the defender must decide how to best counter that move. This encapsulates the essence of a 1v1.

If the attacker wins this 'race to space', or the defender wins (disrupts the ball and the ball moves on to the next phase of play) then the 1v1 moment is over.

If the attacker doesn't win the first ‘race to space’ but doesn't lose the ball (and so is still in a 1v1 moment), they can then choose a new finish line and start the race again.

The attacker can also 'fake' an intention (at any point and any number of times) and ‘trick’ the defender into defending the wrong space until they escape.

[**Let’s talk quickly about ‘tricks’** : 1v1s' are usually and incorrectly thought to be <u>only</u> about the ‘trick’ (a scissor for example). Most of the time a trick isn’t even needed to win a ‘1v1 moment’ or is only used as a last resort to get an extra bit of movement into the defender. Yet coaches teach tricks like they are the most important thing and teach them way before before the fundamentals are even in place. Coaches who coach like this see the contests, not the space. It is poor coaching].

In summary

In a 1v1 moment, the main objective for the attacker is always to win the ‘race to space’, escape and ultimately improve the position of the ball. The defender is simply a complication within this process.

With this in mind : Watch any Messi clip on YouTube and see this at an elite level. It is clear to see that each moment is simply a 'race to space to improve the position of the ball' and to win this race Messi simply keeps changing the space he is racing towards until he eventually escapes. Often in these moments : Messi does not just run fast to win this race. He regularly changes his speed, waits, sets traps, and watches for a moment of defensive weakness, and then tries to escape. Not a ‘scissor’ in sight.

Relate this to understanding the game

In terms of understanding the game, thinking about the 1v1 moments in terms of space, rather than a 'me vs you' contest, can make a massive difference in regards to a player's understanding of ‘1v1’ moments and then ultimately the game. That is :

It is all about space.

Sadly, few young players are taught this essential lesson about the game. They start off being taught the game is a ‘me vs you’ contest and then never lose that mindset.

Intelligent players do not think this way.

Messi, when asked about the secret to his '1v1' ability, said something similar to this.

- **He works out where 'the space to escape to' is.**
- **He moves, and then sees if ' the defender moves with him' - and often uses his initial movement as the 'tool' to unbalance the defender.**
- **Once he gets the defender off balance (even for a fraction of a second) he then 'escapes' to another space if necessary, and repeats this process until he wins the race.**

[Note: The 'race' finish line is always determined by the attacker, and so it could be argued a good attacker should never lose this race (whilst also noting that a good defender can minimize the extent to which the attacker can improve the position of the ball, and make the 'race to space' harder to win). The best attackers and best players are very good at working out which 'finish line' will achieve the best outcome, and have no problem switching where the finish line is and starting a new 'race' if it will give them a bigger advantage and achieve a better outcome].

This is (part of) individual intelligence.

THE 'CLASSICAL / PURE' 1V1

Often in 1v1 exercises, young players (and also their coaches) believe the ultimate objective is to get in behind the defender. That is : take the defender 100% out of the game. [Let's call this a 'classical 1v1' : An 'I will get past and behind you' contest].

Why classical 1v1s are difficult to win

Winning a classical 1v1 is very difficult for most players to do, as it involves '3 different spaces' to get to and through. [These 3 spaces are : The lateral space, the forward space, and the space in-behind the defender.]

There also needs to be a significant speed and 'skill' advantage for this to work. Slow players will not win classical 1v1s.

Hence why most good 'classical 1v1' players are always fast and technical (Relative to the defender they are against). As ‘1v1’ players progress in levels they develop the ability to play with their eyes up. They don't look at the ball - they look at the defender (the feet, weight, balance, hips, shoulders etc) and beyond.

A RARE COMMODITY

Good 'classical 1v1' players are very rare, especially at the highest levels. Having speed, technique, touch, the ability to move the ball with the head up, intelligence, as well as being able to fit into a team system is a very rare commodity. Plus the fact that defenders at the highest level can match attackers for speed, and don't get phased by ‘1v1’ technique very often means that winning a classical 1v1s is tough.

All is not lost thanks to the lateral space

Most good players however, are only really interested in the lateral space, as this offers enough of an advantage to easily improve the position of the ball. (Pass, shoot, cross etc). Good players don’t need more than this one space.

Players who take more risks may use two spaces when in a 1v1 moment to improve the position of the ball. The lateral space and the forward space. Players who do this well stand out a bit more! And in general :

Players who can use space more effectively are usually the better players.

If young players understood that 'Getting to just one space' is a win (as long as they also then improve the position of the ball), then they would be getting a step closer to understanding the true nature of the game at a 'fundamental individual developmental' level.

They will begin to see the game more like an advanced player. A player who understands that space is the most important thing (not the contest).

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Even though ‘1v1 moments’ seem like a small part of the game, they are in fact at the heart of the game. And if the key to winning a ‘1v1 moment’ is wining the race to space, then the key to winning the game is winning the battle for space.

SPACE

So with this one word, we can now try to develop better players. With this one word we can identify factors (which we call ‘space manipulators’) that a player can use to get a space advantage when playing.

PART 2 : SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

SPACE MANIPULATORS

SPACE MANIPULATORS

The following page lists the important attributes a player can use to manipulate space.

It's not rocket science. These factors are intuitively known by most senior players and senior coaches. In this piece however, we are talking only about 2 things :

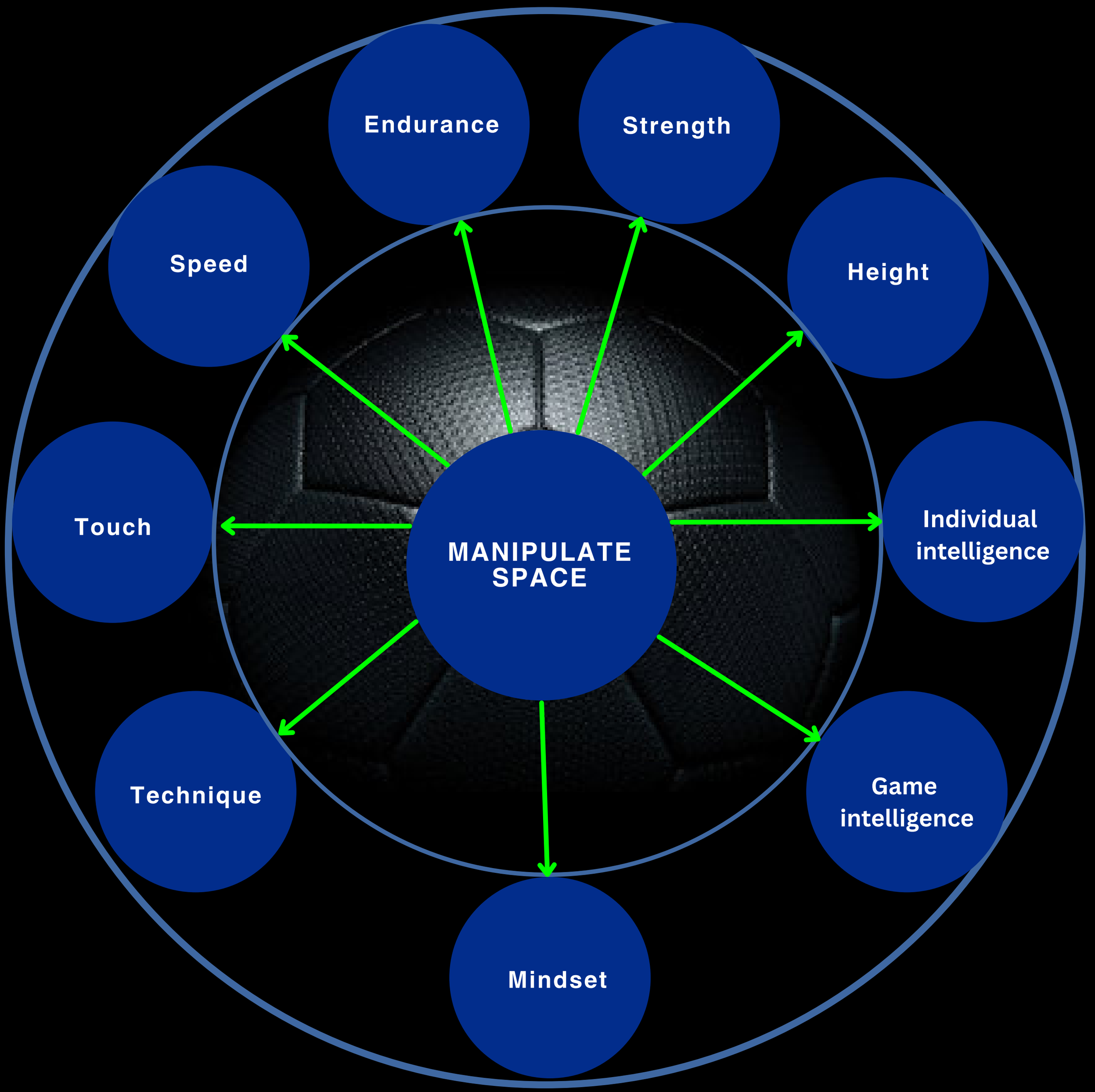
1. **Developing young players.**
2. **What stakeholders can do to accelerate the development of young players.**

In terms of trying to make this information useful these are the steps stakeholders need to take :

- **Step #1 : Be aware of these factors.**
- **Step #2 : Understand if and how these factors can be enhanced.**
- **Step #3 : Understand if and when these factors can be enhanced.**
- **Step#4 : Workout who is responsible for enhancing these factors.**

USE SPACE BETTER

Space manipulators.



To be a better player, just use space better.

It’s that simple.

Take a closer look

Each ‘space manipulator’ is a huge topic in it self. Most have endless books written on them.

This piece is not here to go into detail on the space manipulators.

This piece briefly looks at why each factor helps a player manipulate space, and if and when it can be enhanced and who is responsible for this enhancement.

The Space Manipulators

- **Size / height**
- **Strength / Stability**
- **Speed / Agility / Quickness**
- **Endurance**
- **Mindset (Attitude / Obsession)**
- **Technique**
- **Touch**
- **Individual Intelligence**
- **Game intelligence**

Some educators simplify these further into the 4 pillars of the game: Technical, Tactical, physical and mental. We will be a little more detailed than this.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

PHYSICALITY

PHYSICALITY

Physicality is a great space manipulator. This is why.

Height : Tall players can protect space better, so have an advantage. [Think : Van Dyke].

Strength : Strong players can protect space better, so have an advantage. [Think : McGinn].

Speed : Fast players get to the spaces first, so have an advantage. [Think : Mbappe].

Endurance : Players who never stop will eventually dominate the spaces as their opponents tire, so have an advantage. [Think : Kante].

AT A VERY YOUNG AGE : IT IS WHAT IT IS?

At a very young age (U8 for example), the ability of most players is based on their 'natural size, speed and strength', rather than developed ‘technique, touch and intelligence’(TTI). This makes sense. It takes years to develop ’technique and touch’ to the level where it can offer a significant advantage over players who are relying on other attributes. Young players simply won’t have done this work.

That is why at a young age, the most effective players are often the fastest, or the strongest or the biggest and the most effective teams are the ones with the 'biggest, strongest, fastest’ players overall.

If very young players are asked to trial (which happens more and more), ‘big strong fast’ (BSF) players are almost always picked before players who are more technical but less impactful. This is especially true if senior coaches are involved in the selection process.

Obviously ‘BSF’ players and teams need to use their natural advantage to use space better otherwise it is of little use.

PHYSICALITY OFFERS A HUGE HEAD START

But that is all it is. It is well documented that the best players at 10 years old, or even 16 years old are not the best players at 25 years old.

Is this because the natural advantages they had when young fade as they get older, whilst other players, who started behind, flourish with age due to the long term nature of true development.

Obviously some young players are blessed with a high level of natural talent (technique and game intelligence) and so stand out too. So it is not just about physicality. But the reality is, it takes years to develop elite level 'technique, touch and intelligence'. Positive natural talent offers only a head start - albeit a very advantageous one.

The point : It would be unwise to get too carried away when a very young player has a big impact when playing. They have a head start. That's all.

A head start can be caught up and surpassed, as long as the opportunity to do so stays open.

WHAT ABOUT ENHANCING PHYSICALITY.

Speed and strength are usually natural at a young age and it is very difficult for 'young' players (pre-teen) to artificially enhance these factors above what occurs naturally.

'It is what it is' for most young players unless a decent amount of work is put in.

If 'speed training' does occur at a young age, it is more likely to be working on fundamental strength and stability whilst improving hoping and plyometrics ability : PLus neuro-athletic ability will improve co-ordination and agility : Mindset training may also simply help players get used to moving quickly.

But is this simply just another ‘head start’ ?

Do slower developers (in terms of speed) have plenty of time to catch up as their strength, coordination and mindset naturally improves? Maybe.

Plus a 6 month growth spurt at 14 years old, can easily do more for a player's ‘speed and strength’ than years of strength and speed training during the pre-teen years.

So does this mean that we are saying that pre-teen ‘speed and strength’ work is a waste? No. In fact we will say the opposite.

A players ability to use their body well (hop, change direction, generate power) is directly proportional to their ability to move well with the ball (assuming the ability to move well with the ball exists).

‘If you can’t move well without the ball, how will you move well with the ball?’

Most young players who struggle on the ball, are actually physically weak. They can’t hop, they have poor stability and lack the co-ordination to move the legs efficiently and effectively. If you were to argue that at a very young age (say 5-9 years old) developing a young players basic athleticism is as important as developing their ability to interact with the ball, I would find it hard to disagree.

For more advanced players it may in fact open doors that otherwise would be closed.

It may get a player into in an ‘elite squad or pro academy’ that they would never have got into otherwise . For some this temporary advantage is worth it.

As players mature, 'strength and speed' becomes more pliable, and serious work on these can be done at some point. Harry Kane, who is not naturally quick, definitely did this at some point as a senior player. This work coincided with his ascendancy towards becoming one of the best strikers in the world.

But you must understand this : Players aren't going to become Mbappe at the end of their journey, if they are Harry Maguire at the start. [No offense meant by this, it is just pointing out that Harry Maguire is not, and would never be, no matter what work he did, as fast as Mbappe]. Your genetics will catch up with you eventually.

Plus any strength and speed enhancement work a very young player does to get a head start, will need to always be done to maintain the enhancement. As soon as the work stops, things fall back towards natural levels. It is never fully permanent although some adaptations may make future gains faster and more robust, especially if maintained periodically].

In general, if you have to do the work to get it, then you have to do the work to maintain it.

Always keep this in mind when developing young players.

STRENGTH AND SPEED PLIABILITY.

Most younger players lack basic leg strength, stability, co-ordination and the mindset to move at maximum speed. These can all be trained and enhanced.

Short term impact boost

One of the best ways to get a short term impact boost at a young age is to enhance speed and strength (etc). Once the benefits of this training kick in, players will have a bigger impact in games, and teams will get better results. This is why more and more coaches (and players) are working on these at earlier and earlier ages.

It might be only a 'short term' boost, but if the goal is to be the best player 'now' (or in 6-12 months - maybe for a trial) then it may be the most effective way to get there, especially if other factors (like technique and touch) are not being neglected.

Note however, if technique, touch and intelligence are overly neglected during this period, a player may never fully recover from this. Neglecting technique, touch (especially) and intelligence at a young age for an extended period of time will have permanent consequences.

IT’S NO SECRET.

A coach who taps into the advantages that physically can offer at a young age will do very well and have 'success' in terms of results. They will look like a great coach and the team will look like a great team. Parents are always wrapped with this outcome!

However, there is usually a downside to this.

To a degree, this type of 'success' negates the need for too much 'technical, touch and intelligence' based development, especially if it means abandoning a winning formula. So often these sort of teams don’t deviate too far from this formula and players develop accordingly. Over the long term, a certain 'type of senior player' emerges.

What type of player do you think this is?

Hard working and Athletic but with ‘average’ technique, touch and intelligence perhaps?

What country produces football players who are great athletes but not blessed with elite level technique, touch and intelligence? Does this match the junior development process?

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

ATTITUDE, MINDSET, ENDURANCE

What about the space manipulators that can be enhanced from an early age without too much extra time and effort spent on them.

Attitude and Mindset

Players with a good attitude will push their physical attributes to their limits and so get an 'spatial' advantage over the course of a game.

Let’s Take 2 players who are technically and physically equivalent : If one player has a 100% effort mindset, and another player has a 90% effort mindset, then the one who puts in more effort (over and over again) will be the more effective player. They will use space better over the period of the game and have more of an impact overall.

Great coaches (if based on results) are often great coaches, not because they develop technical players or intelligent players, but because they 'coach attitude and mindset' over and above anything else, and get great results from the players they coach as a result.

‘ATTITUDE AND MINDSET’ COACHES

‘Attitude and Mindset’ coaches develop players who are very good at 'stealing' (time and) space away from the opposition and can use a 'strong work ethic and intensity' to dominate the 'spaces' when in possession.

These players don't even need to be very good technically or be overly intelligent in regards to the way they play. As long as they stay pragmatic in regards to tactics and as long as they can 'dominate the spaces' in general play, they will do well.

Are these types of coaches and players common in Australia?

Is the Australian National team made up of players with limited technique, touch and intelligence (relatively speaking) but are amazing athletes with great attitudes?

If so, is this a consequence of the general coaching style at a young age in Australia?

Or is it independent from the youth development process?

WHY WOULD COACHES COACH THIS WAY?

Coaches have to fight fire with fire when dealing with young players. Those who don't are often ridiculed. They suffer defeat after defeat because the (time and) space their teams need to play intelligently, is very quickly and easily stolen from them by the mindset coaches. No one wants to be ridiculed.

ENDURANCE AND MINDSET

Endurance allows players to repeat actions, without a loss of quality, over and over again.

Players who lack endurance may start off strong, but their ability to use and dominate space well, deteriorates quickly once they fatigue. Whereas ‘fit’ players can keep reproducing significant actions to dominate space (both in and out of possession) as the opposition players start to fall away.

Endurance is a controllable at any age: All players, regardless of age, can get fitter quite quickly, (although it can be boring for young players if overly isolated, so some coaches hide it in games during training).

A lot of successful coaches (at all ages) get great results due to their ability to get their players up to a very high fitness level whilst keeping them highly motivated (mindset training) to work hard, well after the opposition are done :

Alex Ferguson : Was this his biggest coaching strength perhaps? Coaches who do this well have a unique skill set. It is not easy to do.

It may be considered a quick fix when compared to developing 'technique, touch and intelligence', but it will get results in the short term, and if 'technique, touch and intelligence' can be built on top of this base, then over time the short term benefits may (in the end) have a long term positive impact. After all, players who win often when young, and see themselves as a better player than their peers, may be more prepared to practice and develop 'technique, touch and intelligence' as they mature (if encouraged and guided) in order to maintain their status as a good player (relative to their peers).

SUCCESS BREEDS SUCCESS.

Sadly however, the opposite is also likely to be true. Potentially very good players, who can't significantly impact games when young (due to lack of fitness say), may not practice outside of training because the 'reward' for their practice will be very difficult for them to see. The rewards for this practice may not come to fruition for another 3 or 4 years. For them, it will seem like a lot of effort for very little payback....and when you are a kid, it is hard to see and understand that there is a much bigger and more long term picture at play.

Is this why we get the big difference between the Spanish and Australian national teams?

Short cut to success?

Some might argue that developing mindset, attitude and endurance in young players is a short cut to success, and only done with short term goals in mind. Some may think this is worth it, especially if it gets more ‘success’ or opens a door.

However, if this success came at the expense of the technical development process would it be worth it then? When the temporary boost is taken away and the advantage disappears, what is left?

You could therefore argue that : Mindset factors can almost be switched on and off like a light switch (although admittedly it is not as easy as that) and that because they are the more transient components, they should only become a main focus when the ‘permanent benefits of hard work are locked in’? But clubs need to win today !

Should ‘irreplaceable technical development time when young’ be better spent on factors that take a long time to develop, but once developed, last a lifetime. Like : Technique, touch, intelligence and coordination training? Not if clubs need to win today !

It is probably fair to say that Coaches with a 'technique, touch and intelligence' centered development mindset, would coach very differently to a coach who is driven by short term results, and would produce a very different type of player in the long run when compared to a player produced under a 'results centered' model. And this is the dilemma !

This piece is not saying which is better or worse. It’s not saying one type of coach / player is better than a different type. We just want all stakeholders to know the difference, and know the consequences of the difference.

THE QUESTION FOR CLUBS:
IS ATTITUDE AND MINDSET A CONTROLLABLE?

Some might argue that 'attitude and mindset' is an uncontrollable (like size - although some disagree with this) and they might be right. Some players naturally like to try, whilst other players naturally like to cruise, and it can be very hard (but not impossible) to get a cruiser to become a trier (and vice versa).

What do scouts think?

Scouts of young players will always consider mindset when watching a young player, as they know that this is not an easy trait to change / embed into players as they mature. They always talk about body language, second efforts, competitiveness in battles, resilience following mistakes as it gives clues about a players underlying mindset.

THE PERMANENCE OF OBSESSION

Pro academy also coaches often cite players, who were not the best when young but were the most obsessed about their development, being the ones who eventually got the furthest. [Bukayo Saka at Arsenal, for example]. How often do we identify the obsessed when assessing young players? Probably not enough.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

TECHNIQUE, TOUCH AND INTELLIGENCE

TECHNIQUE, TOUCH AND INTELLIGENCE (TTI)

This used to be the holy grail of being a footballer. It was long thought that the better your ability on the ball, the better a player you were. World wide technical development programs were built on the back of the 'skills and moves' that the best players did. The thinking was that if you could do these skills and moves you would become a good player too.

The game has evolved. This antiquated philosophy has been pretty much left behind by many technical coaches in favor of models based on the use of space. This is not to say the importance of technique, touch and intelligence's role in the game has diminished. At the highest level, the ability on the ball of the worlds best players has never been higher. There has never been a player with the technique, touch and intelligence of Messi.

The problem however is that at a young age when the worlds future Ballon d'Or winners are laying down their technical foundations, players in Australia are playing a different game. One that looks more like senior football, than developmental football.

A 'TTI' DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

As a player gets older (as long as all other things are equal), 'intelligently applied touch and technique' will have an increasing impact on their effectiveness as a player. (That is : their ability to manipulate time and space to improve the position of the ball when interacting with the ball).

Players who have spent significantly more time developing 'intelligently applied touch and technique' when young, rather than predominantly learning to battle and run (which should never be neglected), will have an advantage (when older) over less technical players. Especially if the 'technical players' add an all ‘enhanced space manipulators' to their game as they mature.

The Ballon d'Or winner is almost always won by the most technical and intelligent players. Not just the fastest, fittest, strongest, biggest or the one who is the most aggressive.

There must be something in this.

Is this evidence to suggest that ‘technique trumps physicality’ eventually? Maybe.

You could argue that Ballon d'Or winners were probably always technically brilliant and would have got to the top of the game regardless of the development model they developed under, but what if a 10 year old ‘Messi, Xavi, and Iniesta’ were developing in Australian now?

Would they have been the same type of players they eventually became? Would they have played the same way? Would they have ended up playing at the level they played? Would they have still been part of the greatest club team in history? How much impact did the developmental philosophy of 'La Masia' have on them?

Can you imagine a country having a young Messi, Xavi and Iniesta but not the system in place for them to become the players they became? That would be sad.

The question for clubs though is to what degree are they responsible for improving the technical level of their players? What does this mean? How much of a controllable is this? Should it be a ‘priority’ development model?

INTELLIGENCE

It could be argued that the hardest controllable component to add to a player's weaponry is Intelligence. Players, at any age, who see the game as an exercise in finding and using space, will have an advantage over players who don't.

But the game is counter intuitive

Most players focus on the tangibles and obstacles when playing, as this is the most obvious thing to do. That is, they see the :

- **The tangibles : The pitch outline, the ball, teammates (who to be fair are often standing in the wrong positions when young so don't help much) and the goal.**

- **The obstacles : The opposition players (who try to get in the way).**

If you have ever driven a car - what happens when you watch the obstacle you want to avoid - don't you end up going towards the obstacle?

Apply this to football.

Intelligent players don't focus on the tangibles and the obstacles .

The obstacles are in the peripherals, yes, but they instead look for the spaces they want to play in and can use effectively (whilst always aiming to improve the position of the ball). This might be a space that gets them out of trouble (to escape to), or a space in which the potential reward is high (wingers being very aggressive about going forward). They are also mindful of the spaces their team-mates have to play in, and so interact with them accordingly.

Space makes the game easier

If a player has more space, then they will find it easier to play.
If a player can find more space, then they will find it easier to play.
If a player can create more space, then they will find it easier to play.
If a player can pass to a teammate so that it allows their teammate the chance to maximize the effectiveness of their play in the space they have available, they will find it easier to play.

[I hear advanced coaches screaming - it is about 'time' too! I hear you and am not disagreeing. Manipulating time (doing things quicker) so you can play in less space works too].

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF A PLAYER LOOKS FOR CONTESTS, THE GAME GETS HARDER.

Big strong players may be happy in the contests, but players who do not have physical advantages, have to see the game differently. When you are very young this is difficult to do.

Intelligent players, who see the intangibles : have an advantage. These players see :

- **The 'spaces' on the pitch.**
- **The matrix of passing 'lines' between players and spaces.**
- **The shapes (diamonds and triangles) made up by players and spaces.**
- **The playing zones (derived from the vertical & horizontal lines that cover the pitch) on which the system of play and tactics get overlay-ed.**
- **And when they connect all these, they see 3 or 4 passes ahead.**

‘Wayne Rooney says he saw the pitch like a chess board when playing’

As with all space manipulators : Knowing they exist is one thing. Enhancing them is another.

HOW DO STAKEHOLDERS DO THIS BETTER?

How easy is it to coach and develop better 'spatial awareness' and coach players to see the intangibles? It is really hard.

Players need to see the aspects of the game which are 'invisible' and if they don't know what they are looking for, then how can they see them even if they are right in front of them.

And even if they do know what they are looking for, it is still very hard to see them. It is like looking at a stereogram (a hidden 3D picture in a picture) and trying to see the 'invisible' picture within the obvious picture.

- **Most players only ever see the obvious picture.**
- **Good players see the picture hidden behind this.**

Developing this ability needs to be nurtured and encouraged. The results of this practice comes really slowly for players who do not get it naturally, and sadly some players will never get it. Results however may have to take a back seat while this process takes it course.

And who has the patience for this?

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF A PLAYER GETS IT ?

You will spot the players who get it (knowingly or unknowingly), as they will be the players who always seem to have a bit of extra time and space when they play.

They rarely get into contests and battles that they don't need to, nor choose to get involved in.

They rarely lose the ball.

When technique and touch is added, they usually move smoothly and flow when they play, always moving to a solution that improves the position of the ball. The opposition struggles to get close to them.

Rio Ferdinand talking about playing against Messi :

‘I tried to kick him, but i simply couldn’t get close enough to even touch him’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERMANENCE

True 'technique, touch and intelligence acquisition' is permanent (until the brain and body deteriorates in old age. Growing old is cruel to a baller!).

Elite players may lose their speed, strength, fitness etc and so therefore can no longer play at high levels (as these failing factors diminish their ability to dominate the spaces) but they almost never lose their technique, touch and intelligence.

So when young, is it better to work on aspects of the game that will last a life time (almost) even though it may take 10 years of work, or is it better to focus on more impactful space manipulators (and neglect TTI to some degree) even though they disappear once the work stops?

This is the dilemma facing those involved in junior football.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

IT IS A JOURNEY

CONTROLLABLE COMPONENTS WITH LONG TERM BENEFITS

Technique and touch development are controllable components with long term benefits. However, to get 'technique and touch' to a very high level is a very long journey. A journey most players are not willing to take. Players who think they will get there by only touching the ball at team training and in games will get found out one day, no matter how much natural talent they have.

However, before we talk about this, first understand that ‘Technique and Touch’ are not the same thing.

WHAT IS TECHNIQUE?

Technique is the action of doing something with the ball. It is stage 1 of the technical development process. Players can very quickly move through this level when learning basic techniques like a pass, or a turn etc. Also, a player’s technique doesn't even have to be that good to play the game. All players can pass a ball to some degree - even beginners. It is the beauty of the game. Even though there are levels - the joy is felt the same.

Learning technique is also a fun process. Learning something new is always interesting (as long as it is not too difficult and frustrating).

As players play, train and practice they slowly smooth and refine this technique to make the technique more and more reliable when playing.

THIS IS TOUCH.

Precision of technique (touch) describes the ability to put the ball exactly where you want, at the weight you want, with the spin you want and at the height you want. It's all about the fine motor control involved in the action of technique. Touch is Stage 2 of the development process and is the stage that catches almost all stakeholders out.

I am always surprised by how little stakeholders truly understand the importance of touch or how much time and effort a player needs to be put in, to take their 'touch' to an advanced level. Technique can be developed at any age and requires some work. Most stakeholders think technique development is the end game. Touch takes a decade to develop and requires a huge amount of work (100,000s of purposeful touches). This is the end game.

Many parents get very excited by the level of a players technique whilst being oblivious to how poor their touch actually is.

AT ELITE LEVELS

At elite levels the 'precision of technique' (touch) is ridiculously high. A fraction of a millimeter difference in respect to foot placement on the ball will be found out. If the weight of the touch is slightly off, or the duration of contact on the ball is slightly out, the touch will be found out. There is no room for an error at the highest levels. Technique is not being tested. The quality and consistency of touch is.

Developing an elite level touch is a very long (and often boring) 'journey' for most players, and is why most players never reach their technical potential as a player. They simply don't do the 'hours' of necessary practice (and get to the necessary number of purposeful touches) to offset a lack of natural talent. Even if they do the hours, often their practice is sadly of poor quality when compared against the 'neuroscience of optimal learning'.

In regards to ‘hours’ check out the 10,000 hour rule, or the 100 hour rule (over a 10 year period). Most players will never do this work.

DON’T BE DAZZLED !

Many amazing young technicians never get to the higher levels of the game, as their technical ability when young is largely natural and no ‘true touch’ work is done.

At a young age, such players are also playing against very young and therefore very poor defenders who allow them to get away with not having to improve their touch.

[With this said, It is important to note that a player cannot be considered a truly good player until they are playing against good players and good defenders. This is a critical development mile stone. One that young Australian players don’t get exposed to often enough].

A FUNCTION OF PRACTICE

At an elite level, where all players have great technique, a player's ability is in-part determined by 'touch' (whilst not forgetting all other components that make a 'player') and 'touch' is a function of practice for everyone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OBSESSION
DO THE HOURS

Elite players have almost always done the 'hours' necessary to offset a deficiency in their natural talent. And it is simply that :

An equation based on hours.

If a player practiced a little bit each week over the course of 1000 years then (ignoring aging) they would eventually develop an elite level touch. The issue is however:

Players don't have 1000 years.

They have to cram, whatever the number of hours / touches they need to develop an ‘elite level touch’ into a much smaller window.

And if the aim is to be elite, they need to cram these hours into a 5-10 year window and ideally the earlier they start putting in the hours (within reason), the better the outcome ‘might’ be.

There are no guarantees.

It has to be an act of faith and belief.

PLUS MATURE LEARNERS ARE BETTER LEARNERS

The quality of the practice is also a massive amplifier of development. Doing a 1000 hours of sloppy practice from 2-6 years old may not be as beneficial as 10 hours of purposeful practice at 16 years old.

PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE MATTERS

100 hours of sloppy practice using random YouTube clips at 16 years old may not be as beneficial as 10 hours of purposeful deep practice at 16 years old.

Why is good technique and a good touch important anyway?

It always comes back to space. Players who have good technique and touch deal with the ball better. They are generally more effective and efficient on the ball when playing (unless they have zero game intelligence). They look smoother on the ball and the ball is a part of them, rather than being separate to them. They are more comfortable playing with the head up and look at the ball less and less. All these factors mean they can use space better (potentially).

BUT A GOOD TOUCH IS NOT ENOUGH

Having good 'technique and touch' does not automatically mean you will be a good player.

Intuitively you would think that a player with amazing technique and an amazing touch, would naturally be a good player. Many young players think this to be true, but this is not the case. [Find Jeremy Lynch on Youtube].

Technique and touch without intelligence are pretty useless in games. Intelligence tells a player : Where (which space) they need to play in, where they need to put the ball, and at what weight, and at what speed, and whether spin needs to be put on the ball or not, etc.

Good players will also be mindful of the space their team-mates have to play in so that their team-mates can maximize the effectiveness of their time on the ball.

But likewise 'intelligence without technique and touch' is equally useless. There is no point being an intelligent player (understanding space) but then not having the technical ability and touch to deal with the ball in an advanced way.

CHILD PRODIGIES

It is very easy to find clips on YouTube of 'child prodigies' who are amazing with a ball at an early age. These players rarely make it to the highest level however. This is because 'technique' alone is not enough to become an elite player. These players get caught up.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Technique and touch are simply the tools of the trade.

MASTER TRADESMAN

Intelligence is the ‘master tradesman’ who knows what tools need to be used at any given moment and knows how to use them effectively and efficiently within the time and space available.

TTI development Guide

It should takes 1-2 years to become technical proficient (assuming you are getting good technical training). Developing a ‘good’ touch alongside this may take 5 years and lots of purposeful work. Developing an ‘elite’ level touch may take 10 years (1000s of hours). Plus developing individual intelligence can only develop when technique and touch have reached a certain level (as the head needs to be up most the time). This runs parallel to the above.

SUMMARY

The more intelligent a player is, and the better their technique and touch are, the less time and space they need to achieve the results they want. As a result they should be able to play at higher and higher levels of game, whilst always being restricted by the level of their other attributes.

For every player there is a level which suits their physical and mental qualities, their intelligence, their technical attributes and their level of touch. All these attributes combine to make the player. So at any level of the game there will be a spectrum of 'intelligent, technical, mentally tough and physicality based' players.

At the highest levels, players are normally really good in all areas of the game, but probably also have at least one factor that is exceptional.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

SHOULD A PLAYER WAIT?

WHEN SHOULD THE FOCUS ON TTI START?

Here is a question : Should a player wait until they know what ‘physical’ traits they get (after puberty hits) before focusing on ‘technique, touch and intelligence (TTI)’, or should players focus on TTI from a very young age and not be concerned about their physical attributes until their mid teens?

This is the Dilemma : If a player decides to not do the hours on their 'TTI' until they know more about their 'physical attributes when older', it will almost certainly be too late to take their ‘TTI' up to an elite level. The window will be closed.

It is true that improvement from practice (at any age) will always occur, but if a player starts the process too late, they will miss key developmental opportunities (the pro academy window for example) and in the long run won’t get their TTI anywhere close to what it could have been.

So when Stakeholders put TTI development to the side and favor other priorities (like winning games), it is a clear statement.

Now is more important than later.

WHO IS IN CONTROL OF THIS DECISION?

By and large, players don't have control on this process. Players have no control over the philosophy they are coached under. Clubs do, coaches do, parents do (to a lesser degree). These stakeholders get to decide how much time a young player spends on each area of development.

So why wouldn’t stakeholders put ‘TTI’ first.

It boils down to the age old dilemma. Train for results (short term training) or train to develop players (long term training). Those involved in running teams will almost always choose a ‘short term’ training approach. And when this is done, there is always a trade off.

Long term development suffers.

The effects of this process can never be measured at an individual level nor will anyone ever be accountable for it. So when stakeholders are judged on results (today), why would anyone deliberately go out of their way to look incompetent (today) and get ridiculed (today) when no one will recognize what they have done for the future.

HOW DO WE KNOW IT EVEN EXISTS?

Simply look at a country's national team relative to other nations. Which countries focus on 'TTI' when young and which don't? Does this correlate with the national playing style?

If there is no correlation (between development style when young and playing style at senior level) then there should be no differences at an international level.

Spain and Australian approach football development very differently, and their respective national teams play the game very differently. Is this a coincidence?

Anecdotal ? Maybe : But does this start gives us some level of subjective evidence to say that :

'How all young players are developed, has an impact at the very highest level of the game'.

With this said, do stake holders know how much their actions today affect the level of football tomorrow at the highest level?

Probably not.

BUT SHOULD STAKEHOLDERS CARE?

Are the short term gains from an over focus on results, league tables and tournaments, worth more to a child than a ‘long term development’ model, based on buzz words like ‘potential’ and a mindset that’s based on ‘belief, faith and hope’ (backed up by lots of hard work)?

So what if a national team is at a lower technical level than other countries. In the big picture of life - does it really matter? The reality is that kids need to play sport to get an experience (hopefully a positive one) and only an exceptionally small number of these players will be anything other an average player.

In binary terms clubs have to chose : Offer a results based ‘team’ experience and let natural talent find its own way to somewhere near the top, or develop all players like they will be ‘world class’ one day, noting that this is the only way to produce players with high TTI levels overall. (It is not something you can half and half).

The problem we have at the moment is that clubs are confused. They want both, but don’t realize it is impossible to have both.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

SYSTEMS AND TACTICS

SYSTEMS AND TACTICS

The whole aim of ‘systems and tactics’ is to use space better.

IT IS DEFINITELY A SPACE MANIPULATOR.

A team working together can make a massive difference to the performance of a team. When all players are thinking in a similar way and using strategies to open up and utilize spaces then team performance elevates. Pep G’s team are amazing at this, and take this to its limits.

In Australia, it’s fair to say that coaches are establishing ‘system and tactics’ at earlier and earlier ages and a lot more time is spent on this at training, than establishing strong fundamentals. Often players learn to press before they can control and pass ! This all comes back to a results based development model looking for short term gains.

The irony : Ironically when players are fundamentally better (in terms of TTI), ‘systems and tactics’ become more effective, but to get this you have hold off on the introduction of ‘systems and tactics’ for while to get this benefit.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

WHAT SHOUD CLUBS BE DOING?

WHAT SHOUD CLUBS BE DOING?

‘Space manipulators’ are the components that players need to develop (at some point) on the development journey, if the goal is to be a player. They are not a blueprint however. Clubs (football departments) need to use these to establish a blueprint.

A blue print that outlines : The club philosophy. The development model being used. The sort of players the club is looking for. What each player at the club will get in terms of exposure to the space manipulators (at every age/level).

A blue print that says what the club is about. It is a statement saying ‘this is who we are and what we offer’. This might be a :

- **A team experience. A social base, a chance to kick a ball, a chance to get fit and be healthy? or,**
- **A results based model or,**
- **A ‘technique, touch and intelligence’ model.**

We don’t know until clubs tell us.

A club can be what ever it wants :
But it needs to then own it and publicize it !

INNOVATIVE CLUBS.

Should a club try to do something different.

What about a ‘practice at home’ program.

Clubs think that the more training sessions a player does and the better the coaching, the more players improve. But this doesn’t work. More of the same quickly leads to diminishing returns. As Johan Cruyff said : ‘most learning should happen in the streets’. Transposing this into today's landscape means:

‘Some learning should happen at home’.

When it comes to true technique and touch development, the work that can be done at home compared to team training, can easily give a tenfold improvement in touch and technique. Clubs should have a practice at home program. It is crazy that they don’t. Clubs should be finding the players who are obsessed about their development and give them every opportunity to excel. These are your future superstars. Forget about the ones with natural talent - the ones that clubs normally love. Find the ones with the work ethic to do more and more and more.

‘Some learning should happen in the streets’

Clubs should have an ultra small sided games (USSGs) program running, that is independent to teams and coaches. A chance were players get to strip back the game to first principles without intervention. God forbid : Players playing without being yelled at by a coach and parents.

NEURO - ATHLETIC TRAINING

There is increasing evidence to suggest that neuro-athletic training, which uses a science-based approach, improves an athlete's physical and mental performance by optimizing the nervous system. I doubt this is on any club’s radar. If nothing else clubs should be educating stakeholders about the latest development innovations and give ‘the obsessed’ every chance to be the best they can be.

SO WHEN CLUBS WANT BETTER PLAYERS :

Where is the ‘Practice at home’ program?
Where is the ‘Ultra small sided game’ program?
Where is the ‘Neuro-athletic training’ program?
Where is the ‘Physicality’ training program?
Where is the ‘Benchmark’ program?

THE CURRENT FOOTBALL LANDSCAPE

The assumption by most players / parents is that ‘club’ team training is the best environment to develop as a footballer.

It is assumed that clubs will helps players learn technique, develop touch, learn about space, solve pressure problems (1v1s), learn about tactics and systems and learn how to win, whilst developing as a player and a person. It is assumed that players will get quicker, stronger and fitter. Get more coordinated. Be nurtured by a coach who understands about the long term development process whilst being a ‘good’ match day coach (win games). This is what most players and parents expect from clubs.

The reality (generally speaking) is that clubs are really bad at doing most of these things. The fact that the number of parents who end up dissatisfied with their club experience, far outweighs those who are happy with it, suggests this may be true.

You may argue that it’s not the club’s fault. Maybe parents expect to much, and ignorantly think they should get it all! Maybe.

CLEARLY THERE IS ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT.

With this in mind, clubs should always be asking these questions:

- **What do we currently do?**
- **What can we add or improve to match our development blueprint ?**

If the goal is to produce ‘world class’ players, clubs should be asking these sorts of questions:

- **Are we providing players with the opportunity to do the hours necessary to get TTI up to higher levels?**
- **Are we finding the obsessed ones?**
- **Are we developing individual intelligence?**
- **Are we tapping into all space manipulators?**
    - **Motivation, Fitness, speed, strength……**

If the clubs goal is to win the next game, league or tournament, the club would ask different questions.

If the clubs goal is to offer the best ‘team’ experience possible and think about the ‘child first’, the club would ask different questions.

More of the same will produce more of the same.

But if clubs want more they have to do better.

All this should be in the club blueprint.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

POSSIBLE CLUB BLUEPRINT GUIDE ‘RESULTS FAST’

HOW TO GET RESULTS ‘FAST’.

If clubs want results ‘fast’ and don't have the time or patience to develop players, then this might be their plan:

Focus on recruiting as many "big, strong, fast" players with a strong mindset as possible.

Prioritize a tall commanding goalkeeper, robust no-nonsense defenders, and at least one lightning-fast forward.

Hire a results-oriented mindset coach to amplify the effectiveness of the strategies above to get better results.

Encourage a pragmatic playing style that prioritizes denying the opposition time and space while leveraging physical advantages to maximize impact. Coaching during training should focus on game-specific scenarios, emphasizing tactical strategies to achieve better results.

Develop speed and strength as a priority, and teach players how to use these to deny the opposition time and space, whilst maximizing the time and space their team has to play in.

Build Endurance (Fitness): Improve the players capacity to sustain high-intensity performance over extended periods, enabling them to increasingly limit the opposition's time and space as games progress.

Basically get better and better at stealing the game away from the opposition.

You do need to also pick players with some degree of natural talent so that you minimize the need for additional TTI development. A savvy coach understands that TTI development is less critical for short-term training and performance goals. By the time any lack of development becomes apparent—typically in a player's mid to late teens—the coach will likely have moved on. Rinse and repeat coaches who do this, do exist.

In a club like this you would expect the youngest players and teams to be treated in the same way as senior players and teams. There would be no difference.

Why is this model so effective when young?

Micheal Owen said (in 2025) it is easier to be a defender than an attacker and used this analogy to explain his point. (He was sitting inside a house at the time). ‘It is easier destroy than create. If you asked me to build this house i couldn’t do it. But if you gave me a hammer, and a couple of weeks I could knock it down no problem.’

Now imagine learning the game is like building a house one brick at a time. Let’s say the mortar between the bricks takes time to set. It takes time for the bricks to lock together. Once they lock together they are hard to prize apart.

When young, players learn technique (the bricks) but the mortar isn’t set. Knowing this, the opposition deliberately whack the bricks apart. The mortar never sets and barely any bricks ever get laid. The house gets built very slowly.

It is very easy to get results if you aim to knock down each brick before it has time to set, whilst being good enough to make sure your bricks don’t get knocked down to the same degree. Your house gets built (a little less slowly) than the oppositions.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

POSSIBLE CLUB BLUEPRINT GUIDE ‘LONG-TERM’

If clubs implement a long-term player development plan during the foundation phase, their blueprint would likely include the following elements.

During the foundation phase, focus on engaging as many players as possible in the game, fostering a passion for it from a young age, without the use of trials.

Grading is acceptable to an extent, but avoid actions that lead to players not getting opportunities to develop, leaving the club or the game. Your future superstars may be amongst these players.

Employ coaches who can nurture a love for the game, whilst focusing on long term player development and a developmental playing style that produces more intelligent players.

Results should not be the priority. Producing 'better players in the long run' should be.

In regards to physicality factors - make sure players have a movement base. All new young players at the club should do a ‘foundational movement program’. This program will ensure that if players are struggling, it is not because they can’t move well. Having said this, TTI development should never be neglected in favor of just developing ‘physicality factors’.

A clear picture of what ‘TTI’ means should also be explained in the blueprint and the development of these needs to be supported by additional programs that add value to this process. For example, ‘USSGs’ and a very ‘basic Practice at home’ programs should be the back bone of the foundation phase.

In a club like this, every player and team would be treated differently based on their age and level.

There are layers to the development process.

The foundation phase would be treated very differently, to the ‘learn the game’ (big number games) phase, which again is treated very differently to the ‘performance phase’. The win the game phase.

A club with a ‘player development’ philosophy would have a development time line that looks a little like this :

Development time line			
Space manipultor		**Duration**	**When**
Technique	Foundational	2-3 yrs	On going
Touch	Never ends	10 yrs	On going
Intelligence	Never ends	10 yrs	On going
Learn to move well	Foundational	2 -3 yrs	6-9 yrs old
Stability	Foundational	2 -3 yrs	6-9 yrs od
Speed	LTG	2 -3 yrs +	Teenage years + M&B
Strength	LTG	2 -3 yrs +	Teenage years + M&B
Endurance	LTG	6 weeks +	Teenage years + M&B
Neuro-athletic	LTG	1 yr +	Teenage years + M&B
Mindset training	LTG	1 yr +	Teenage years + M&B
Game Intelligence	LTG	10 yrs +	Always evolve
			M&B = Maintain and Build

What else should be added to this list?

What would you change?

If the goal is to be a player, you would need to show signs of potential in all of these areas within a relative short window (well before 16 years old). This opens doors. An enormous amount of progress can still be made between 16 and 20 years old if given the opportunity, which is why many pro’s don’t hit their stride until into their 20s.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

WHAT IS TECHNICAL TRAINING?

A clear picture of technical training

Before we wrap this up, one thing that is clear is that parents are not clear about what technical training means. So let's layer this up.

- **When a coach does lots of physicality training (fitness, strength, speed) and not much 'touch' training. This is not technical training.**
- **When a coach does lots of game specific training (what to do in a game etc) and not much 'touch' training. This is not technical training.**
- **When a coach predominantly does individual and small group ball work for a reasonable amount of time in the session, this is technical training.**

Not all technical training is the same.

An emphasis on 'control, pass , move' training [ie : 2 touch training] is designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness when playing. It is a very mature way to play the game. It also misses out a huge chunk of the game. It is a very common 'team' training approach as it is easy to coach to a big group. [Note : 1 'touch training and playing style' when young is not technical training. This is for advanced players only].

An emphasis on ‘control the ball, move the ball, pass the ball , move to a new position’ training is more holistic. It aims to maximize touches in most technical areas of the game. It is great for young players as it gives them more freedom but may not be as efficient and effective in games.

Small group game functional footwork training puts the focus very much on the individual and massively increases the amount of touches a player has in a session. Footwork, 1v1s and Ultra SSGs are a massive part of this ‘technical’ session. It is a very close to the ‘old school’ playing in the streets model. This training often fills in the gaps that team training misses.

Note : ‘Team based technical sessions’ will often lack footwork and 1v1 exercises as they do not nurture effective ‘team’ performances. Young teams play better when they have less tools to play with and are only allowed to use the tools that maximize effectiveness and efficiency (so they don’t stuff things up).

However, just because a team plays better as a team, it does not mean that the player’s long term deveopment is being fully nurtured.

Individual training. This should be fully technical and offer exposure and repetition to techniques and exercises that will never be covered in any meaningful way at team training (in a big group). Players who have 'weak' areas that need special attention may benefit from individual training.

On top of this, things like ball mastery, elevated ball mastery and advanced ball striking offer another level of technical practice.

Ball Mastery is footwork without any regard for space or pressure. It is great when developing a foundation but unnecessary when older.

Elevated Ball mastery will include juggling, spring rebounder work and wall work. Essential to develop as players mature.

Ball striking especially weak foot is another important technical areas that is often neglected at team training.

SPACE MANIPULATORS

BUILD A PLAYER

SPANISH OVERVIEW

Spain's football player development process is renowned for producing technically skilled, tactically astute, and versatile players, as evidenced by the success of its national team.

The system is built on a structured, long-term approach emphasizing technical ability, game intelligence, and cultural alignment.

Below is an overview of how Spain layers up its player development process:

Grassroots and Early Development (Ages 6-12)

- **Local Clubs and Community Engagement:** Local clubs and schools introducing children to the sport early. Small-sided games are common, fostering ball control, quick decision-making, and creativity in tight spaces.

- **Focus on Technique:** From a young age, players are trained to prioritize ball mastery—dribbling, passing, and first touch—over physicality. Coaches emphasize comfort on the ball through repetitive drills and games.

- Pro clubs run youth academies. Players with potential are scouted through regional networks.

Elite youth Academies (Ages 12-18)

- Academies focus on:
  - Technical Skills: Precision passing, ball retention, and spatial awareness.
  - Tactical Understanding: Players are taught to understand systems like 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1, with an emphasis on positional play, pressing, and transitions.
  - Mental Development: Coaches instill discipline, teamwork, and adaptability, preparing players for high-pressure environments.

- Competition: Elite youth teams compete in structured leagues and international tournaments, exposing players to diverse playing styles.

The above was extracted from ‘Grok AI’ after asking this question : ’How do Spain layer up their football player development process?’ Do this with other countries too. Croatia and Morocco seem to punch well above their weight - why?

How closely does a player's development journey in Australia mirror Spain? Obviously not much. Maybe it shouldn't. Maybe it can't.

Spanish developmental football immediately looks for players with potential and plucks them out of the community system and into the elite system.

In Australia this doesn't happen as the infrastructure for this doesn't exist.

So maybe Australia's best bet is to prioritize competition, to make every match a cup final and develop players this way. Or maybe it needs to focus on the team experience (coach the child before the sport) and not stress about how good players get. Or maybe it needs to totally rethink the current structure?

There is ultimately no right way or wrong way. Stakeholders just need to pick a way and be very transparent about it. Clubs especially need to stop winging it and put their philosophy in a blueprint for all stakeholders to see.

PART 3 : MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

PRODUCING WORLD CLASS PLAYERS IN AUSTRALIA

INTRO

In the next section we shift gears. We move away from the ‘space manipulators’ and start to focus on player development ‘macro factors’.

Producing world class players In Australia :

Why can’t we do it?

Let’s go !

PRODUCING WORLD CLASS PLAYERS IN AUSTRALIA

If you could design the ultimate football player from birth, where in the world would you start?

- **Brazil ? Spain? Morocco? Australia?**
- **Croatia? Nigeria ? England?.....etc**

Which did you choose? Ask yourself why.

As this player grows, what factors would you want present in their environment to shape their development to maximize their potential?

- **You can control every influence.**
- **What would you prioritize to give them the best chance of becoming the greatest player they can possibly be?**
- **What should clubs, coaches, team-mates, parents, players, schools, communities etc ideally be doing to help foster an environment that gives them the best chance of being the best football player they can be (whilst still loving the game)?**

Now compare this to what players are currently experiencing in your country / area?

SAME OLD EXCUSES

In Australia, when we ask why we can’t produce ‘world class’ players, the same excuses surface:

- **Players don't start young enough.**
- **Kids don’t play enough games.**
- **Not enough good coaches.**
- **The coaching isn’t good enough.**
- **Coaches not educated enough.**
- **Clubs do the minimum.**
- **The cost to play is prohibitive to many.**
- **The senior system makes grass roots football expensive.**
- **The jump from juniors to seniors is too big.**
- **Senior coaches don’t trust young players.**
- **Senior-level opportunities at a high level are limited.**
- **Almost no boys get the opportunity to go full time between 16 and 20.**
- **The governing bodies lack leadership or don’t put development first.**

That’s a lot to point the finger at, and to be fair, this list probably just touches the surface.

SHOULD CLUBS EVEN CARE ABOUT DEVELOPING WORLD CLASS PLAYERS?

Clubs may say we aren't interested in developing ‘world class’ players. We just want the average player, across the board, to be a little bit better so that every team at our club does a little bit better (whatever ‘better’ means). This is 100% reasonable.

But guess what : This is also how world class players are produced.

A rising tide floats all boats !!

If you get the average level of all players up across the board, it enhances the level of the very best players. This is how world class players are produced. The more great players you have, the more chance you have of producing a world class player.

So what is stopping Australia doing this?

Australia’s small population may in fact be the reason why we don't produce enough elite players, and so therefore can’t produce world class players : Let’s ask google AI.

Google AI : Does a country’s population size affect a country’s chances of having a Ballon d’Or winner ?

Google AI’s answer : Yes, population size does affect a country's chance of having a Ballon d'Or winner, as a larger population provides a broader pool of potential athletes and a greater number of individuals physically able to compete in football at a high level.

While there isn't a direct correlation where more people guarantee more winners, a larger population increases the statistical probability of producing world-class talent, though other factors play significant roles.

So it’s just a numbers game.
A simple math equation?

If only it was that simple.

AUSTRALIA VS CROATIA.

- **Australia population : 27 Million**
- **Croatia : 4 million [Smaller than Melbourne]**

According to google AI, Australia (Statistically) has a better chance of producing a 'Ballon d'Or winner' than Croatia? Well Croatia has a Ballon d'Or winner (and 3 world cup podium medals) and Australia doesn't. So maybe it is not population size after all. Maybe it is something else.

Maybe it is participation numbers

Do Croatian's simply play more?

- **In Australia there are 300,000 juniors playing between the ages 9-14 years old. Approximately 50,000 per age group.**
- **US Youth Soccer registers nearly 2.5 million players annually. [Let's say age 6-19 years old : Over 150,000 per age group].**
- **In Croatia : 90,000 players play between 6-19 : Approximately 6000 per age group.**

[Numbers taken from a simple google search].

Clearly it's not participation either.

It must be something else.

MAYBE IT IS GENETICS

Maybe Croatians are just more genetically gifted?

Google AI : While genetic factors contribute to athletic ability, and some populations show higher prevalence of certain athletic traits, there is no evidence that any country possesses a greater "natural innate athletic ability" overall. Instead, cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic factors play a much larger role in a country's overall athletic success.

It’s not genetics. So what is it?

Google AI : Croatia's football success stems from a unique blend of a culture that has a deep national passion for the game. A disciplined family-like team mentality is fostered by experienced coaches in a well-developed youth coaching structure. Their focus on early development and the national pride associated with football has enabled the small nation to consistently produce world-class players and achieve remarkable success on the international stage.

One thing mentioned in relation to Croatia's success was its ‘experienced coaches’.

Croatia is recognized as having one of the strongest coaching infrastructure at grass roots levels in the world.

In 2009, Football Australia, in an attempt to improve the level of coaching in Australia and catch up to the rest of the elite football world, introduced its coaching accreditation system.

16 years later, we are still not there and the coaching level in Australia is still cited as a reason why Australia lags behind a tiny nation like Croatia.

16 years on, Australian coaches still find it hard to put long term development ahead of competition.

16 years on, Australian coaches still find it hard to coach in a way that is contrary to their culture.

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

CULTURE

CULTURE.

In a true football culture — football is life.

In a true football culture:

- **Everyone lives and breathes the game.**
- **It is everywhere.**
- **Football is in the streets and in the school yards.**
- **Main stream media is saturated by it.**
- **Role models are everywhere you look. From elite players, to family members, to the local baller !**
- **Football is embedded into everyone's identity. This is not a conscious choice. It’s just existence. Football is not separate to you. It is a part of you.**

Australia will never have this!

FOOTBALL STARTS AT HOME

The “football starts at home” philosophy gets a ‘duh’ to those immersed in such cultures—it’s obvious.

It is so obvious you wouldn't even notice it. It’s like telling a fish they are surrounded by water or telling you, you are surround by air.

There is no doubt that the ‘football starts at home’ has merit, but it only truly ‘starts at home’ or ‘at school for some’ in a non - football nation. In a football culture, football doesn’t start anywhere - it just exists - you just need to tap in to it. And once a player does this, the long term impact on a players development can be massive. This is Croatia.

In a non football culture, any work done at home at an early age can be easily undone by peers at school (or vice versa). When a football culture doesn't exist, whether a kid becomes a footballer or not, is a very much hit and miss, and often swayed by chance. This is Australia.

So here is the claim : Culture is the #1 driver of ‘player development’. “Anecdotal evidence please” I hear you ask !

BALLON D'OR WINNERS

These are the countries who have had a Ballon d'Or winners in the last 30 years :

- **Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, Czechia*, England, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Ukraine,**

Look at the countries that have won the World cup :

- **Argentina, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Uruguay :**

It comes as no surprise to find that :

The number one sport in each these countries is overwhelmingly football (soccer), with only 1 country* having competition from another sport. [Google AI search]

And in Australia : There is no single number one sport but rather two dominant sports with regional differences : Australian rules football (AFL) is the most popular spectator sport by attendance and is dominant in southern states, while Rugby League (NRL) is the most popular on TV and is dominant in Queensland and New South Wales. Australian rules football and cricket are both considered national sports. [Google AI search]

Football doesn't even get a mention. In football's defense, it is maybe the most played sport by juniors, but as already mentioned, high participation numbers isn't enough to produce a significant number of elite level players. Let's face it : **Australia simply does not have the culture to produce world class players.**

There was a time however when Europe's top leagues were littered with Australian players. (Check out the 2006 Australian world cup squad). **What happened? What changed?**

In a period of time when we were meant to be taking the player development process to a whole new level (thanks to the FA's 2009 lorded curriculum which promised better coaching and a football system that would compete with the best in the world) we have got worse at the highest level? At about the same time, the FA coincidentally obliterated the cultural talent hotbeds that breed the class of 2006 by literally stamping out cultural heritage clubs. The FA took the most important thing - Culture - and destroyed it ! Singularly the most damaging thing the FA have done to the game in this country. If the FA, the biggest stakeholder in the country, continuously gets it wrong, what hope has everyone else got?

CULTURE AND VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

Culture has a massive impact on young children, and this impact forms the base of all future development potential.

Without this base, the overall average level of players is lower at all ages, and this ultimately shows itself in the qualities of the national team. A process 20 years in the making.

There is a saying : A rising tide floats all boats. Culture is that tide ! By enhancing the base : That is : By getting the very youngest children, as a collective, on board through cultural osmosis, eventually produces better players at the highest level.

The broader the base the higher the peak.

In Australia, finding a 2 year old outlier with natural talent and loving it (due to football starting at home) doesn't mean much if they go out into the big wide world and find there is no one else on the same level.

Sure they will look like a superstar for a while, but their ceiling will be capped by the players they play with and against.

THE SAD TRUTH

In Australia - stakeholders can do nothing to change the culture in the country as a whole. Australia is not and probably never will be a football nation and is the main reason why Australia has not got close to producing a world class player.

But can we still produce elite players?

Let’s hope so!

Moving on : Let’s look at the second most important ‘Macro Factor’ in the process of producing a world class player.

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

THE PLAYER

#2 : The Player.

There is a belief in clubland that if players are provided with everything needed to become a good player, then they will become a good player.

For example : If a ‘non-football’ person sees a young player who can’t control a ball, or pass a ball, or dribble a ball, or shoot, they instinctively go to these solutions :

- **Get them a better coach.**
- **Give them more training sessions.**

If only it was this simple. The reality is that some players ‘do not want to or can’t’ get better !

This seems wrong to many but it is true !

‘You can lead a horse to water
but you can’t make it drink ‘

To get better at anything requires a number of ingredients. If the only thing that mattered was just the quality of information given and the opportunity to apply that information, then all players would be superstars.

Consider this hypothetical :

You have 2 groups of young players.

Group 1 are very athletic with a natural talent for sport, learning and competition. They love competing against themselves and each other and always push each other. The don't have a coach and are never coached. All they can do is play 1v1, 2v2, 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5 in a small space and do this every day for a few hours.

They can make up their own games and rules within this constraint. They grew up in a football culture and can watch football on TV together as much as they want.

They play on a terrible surface with whatever ball is handy but they love it ! They think about the game endlessly and are constantly thinking about how to get better.

They can also practice on their own as much as they want. Each players does a couple of hours a day of extra practice, learning new techniques and refining their touch.

They do this from 5 years old to 15 years old.

Group 2 are the complete opposite.

Not athletic with little natural talent for sport, learning and competition. They don't compete against themselves or each other and don't really care about much at all. They play because they are made to do a team sort. They have never lived inside a football culture. They don't watch football on TV and don’t give the game a single second of thought between sessions.

However they are coached by a great coach (they can have Pep or Jurgen if they want) and train 1 to 4 times a week and play once a week. The Australian standard.

They practice with 11 v 11 (normal rules) in mind under a results based model. They do an enormous amount of passing and first touch drills. They do lots of shooting and work a lot on tactics and positioning etc. However if they are pushed too hard they lose interest and switch off. Players don't hang out together outside of training. If they do, they talk about the latest PC game they all play. Football is never mentioned.

They do however play on a great surface, have the best equipment, the best kit and look great! They do this from 5 years old to 15 years old.

At 15 years old : The 2 groups play each other. Who do you think wins?

For the next year : Group 1 now gets all the advantages Group 2 had. They even get Jurgen as their coach.

At 16 years old : The 2 groups play each other again. Who do you think wins?

Then, Group #1 go full time (16-20) and start playing against other full time pro's.

At 20 years old : We then measure the difference in levels between group 1 and group 2. What do you think the difference will be?

We believe group #1 players will be far better at 20 years old than group #2, despite having zero coaching up to the age of 15. You may have a different opinion.

This obviously can't be proven in a study (so it is an opinion based on anecdotal experience) but is this not what happens in football cultures verses non football cultures at its extremes?

It's not the coaching. It's not the number of training sessions. It's the players !

If a club is providing 2 training sessions a week, a game, a coach and players still can't do the fundamentals well (assuming they are not a beginner), will offering another session or a better coach really make a significant difference?

At this point, it is the players

Players who care about 'how good they are and how good they want to be' will use training to develop. They will practice at home. They will take responsibility for their improvement.

Players who don't care will be quite happy to stay where they are. Players who don't care will never do the work required to bridge the gap.

Clubs often make the mistake of offering more training sessions and more coaching, thinking it will make a massive difference in the development process. It won't. Not for players who don't truly care.

If a player isn't using the current number of team training sessions to improve, and isn't practicing at home to improve - they are telling you something, and more of the same will not have the impact you want.

LEARNING NEEDS URGENCY

(**Andrew Huberman, Neuro-scientist, PHD**).
‘There is a strong sense of urgency involved in the learning process. It has been proven that if learning is necessary in order to get ones ration of food (that is : survive), then plasticity is rapid and massive’. **All truly good players tap into this ‘necessity to survive’ like their life does depend on it.**

Players who do not have this urgency develop slowly. The common belief is that if players get extra training then they will develop more, but the truth is, only the players who really want to develop will be willing to put themselves through the discomfort of true learning.

Players who care

Players who care, use the conscious mismatch between what they want to accomplish and what they are currently doing as the signal by which the nervous system recognizes the need to rewire its own circuits. Those ‘errors’ inform the nervous system of exactly what needs to change. Players who don't care, don't go through this process no matter what is provided for them.

Perhaps the lack of culture means that there are simply not enough players who truly care about their development.

WHAT ELSE DO THE VERY BEST PLAYERS DO?

They practice at home. Why? Because practicing at home can be the singularly most important aspect of development.

They also use ultra small sided games to learn to apply the technique and touch they are developing.

They use team training as a learning opportunity.

They slowly spend time on all the space manipulators

They see the game in an increasingly advanced way.

Simply put they care and players who truly care know that they are their best coach.

Marco factors : What’s next?

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

PLAYERS MAKE PLAYERS

PLAYERS MAKE PLAYERS.
THIS IS MASSIVE.

A quick recap : The #1 macro factor putting a ceiling on players ultimate level is Culture. #2 is the player themselves and #3 is the 'players a player plays with'.

- **A player's peer group sets the ceiling for their potential (within reason). Players with the most potential in a group will always be held back by the players around them, especially if the overall level is too low.**
- **If a group includes 1 stand out player, that player needs to move if the goal is to be as good as possible.**
- **If you want better players across the board, then players need to be training and playing with others who challenge and inspire them. Trials and Grading are done for this reason.**

A group should also not include players who are under a minimum level. This player also needs to move for their own benefit if nothing else. Paradoxically a weak payer will not be lifted if they are playing too far above their true level.

[Many parents make this mistake. They try to put their child into a level that is clearly too high for their child thinking it will help them improve. If the gap is too big - it doesn't].

IT ALL COMES BACK TO CULTURE

In a football culture there will be 1000s of amazing young players all competing against each other for years in a sink or swim environment.

It is like a ‘whack-a-mole’ game with a twist.

The best players keep popping up and are then either able to jump up a level, or get whacked back down (and hopefully given the opportunity to try again. Eberechi Eze, Arsenal is a great example of this).

In a non football culture, if a player pops up, then what. There is a point where there are simply not enough players at the right level to compete with. The development ceiling gets hit, and player development is stifled. Plus if a player is deemed not good enough, it is hard to get a second chance.

In Melbourne (Aus) the population is about 5 million and there are 2 (active) pro clubs (2026). In Greater London (UK) (population : 9 million) there are 17 men's professional clubs and a lot more semi-professional teams. Can you imagine how much these clubs, teams and players push each other.

It doesn't have to be ‘pro’ clubs either. A culture that promotes the idea that ‘players make players’ will produce players !

A particular area of Paris (France) is a renowned talent hotbed. A combination of strong youth development programs, large immigrant population from football cultures, and hours of street football (players vs players) in competitive environments offer the perfect football development environment.

Les Ulis

Football legend Thierry Henry played on the streets of Les Ulis as a child. Les Ulis is known for producing footballing talent despite its challenging environment. This environment helped hone his football skills before joining the Clairefontaine Academy at age 13.

So #1 is Culture. #2 is players : #3 Peers.

Surely #4 is coaches !!!

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

CLUBS

#5 Clubs :
Shout out or do more?

Clubs (committee's / volunteers) do an incredible amount of work to make sure a club simply runs. It would be massively unfair to say anything negative about the contributions they make to the sport.

However when you compare what they do, against what they could do, you'll find a massive list of missed opportunities.

At the moment clubs on the whole offer just a team experience. However, this just skims the surface of what a player truly needs to become elite. The club / team experience In Australia) offers a peak inside, at best.

If the goal is to produce better players, and maybe one day a world class player, then clubs in Australia need to do even more. At the moment they are simply working really hard to do the bare minimum.

Clubs have an enormous amount of leverage over their players. They need to use it more.

What is the bare minimum?

Maybe it is this.

Level #1 Club

- This is a typical community level club.
- A team. A dad coach doing his best. Training once a week (a bit of fitness, some tactics & positional play, very little technical development).
- No off season or pre-season.
- For most payers this is fine. They don't want to do more. They probably don't have time.

Level #2 Club

- A club might use a TD to try to improve the quality of the coaching.
- Or start using ‘non-dad coaches’ who they may also pay.
- Training might be 2 times a week now.
- There might be a pre-season too, but no off season.

Level #3 Club

- Has a TD and qualified coaches throughout the club.
- Training is 2 or 3 times a week.
- Pre-season is full on and there is an off season program.
- Tournament football is a big thing.

Level #4a and b clubs

- Have a football department, a number of TDs (juniors, girls , boys) and qualified coaches throughout the club.
- They are trying to offer more, and are very keen to raise the level of their players.
- They want to be a magnetic club, not a feeder club.
- Training is 3 times a week but sometiimes 4. However, it is much of the same type of training though - all centered around winning matches and pragmatism. Results matter, league position matters, winning tournaments matter. Players get a very skewed exposure to the game. These clubs don't advertise it but they trial with ‘winning’ in mind. They look for ‘big , strong fast’ players at trials. ‘Technique touch and intelligence’ takes a back seat unless it is exceptional and can have an impact. It is all about impact.
- Pre-season is full on and there is an off season program. Tournament football is a thing.

Level 4a - is a magnetic club. Level 4b - are feeder clubs for the level 4a clubs.

This is where club football ends in Australia. [Then the ‘proper’ pro club programs kick in].

Level #5 Club

- This is where all the elite junior players should be. Perhaps the pro team junior NPL programs come close to this. The Problem in Melbourne however is that there are only 2 of them (Western excluded).
- These clubs are in full control of all the space manipulators.
- They take care of developing physicality factors (strong and fast particularly) without ignoring TTI.
- They look for and develop fundamentals and first principles, by using small side games to ensure a player's 'TTI' is as advanced as possible.
- They link this to systems and tactics to ensure they are competitive in leagues.
- They are always looking to promote players up (age groups) as soon as a player displays the need for it.
- They nurture 'mindset and attitude' to practice, training and playing.
- They promote 'technique and touch' practice at home.
- They engage in communities and try to contribute to building better culture.

The challenge for level #4 clubs -
why get to level #4 and stop?

Shout out : Melbourne City （2025 NPL program) might be the only club close to being a level #5 club. In the A-League 2023 - 2024 Melbourne City gave 796 minutes of playing time to players 18 Years & Under. At least 52 academy players have gone on to play in the A-League, and over 25 academy graduates have made their senior debuts for the club. In 2025, two 15 year olds at Mel City made their senior debut. **This is typical of a level 5 club.**

Melbourne Victory only gave 165 minutes of playing time to players 18 Years & Under 2023-2024. **Is this a reflection of their priority at young age groups (pre 2025). That is : Win leagues at junior level (picked players and adopted tactics that helped achieve this). On paper they look like they are the most successful junior club, but if they don't have the players coming through to the seniors, how successful have they really been. Melbourne victory have to massively disappointed with the number of young players coming through the system to senior level. Melbourne Victory have been the epitome of the Australian development system Some will see this as a good thing, others not so much.**

BARE MINIMUM : If you are at a club and your club hits one of the levels above (excluding level #5), then as a club you are doing the bare minimum. That's not to say you are not doing an enormous amount of work in the process, but just that it is the bare minimum.

Be a cultural force : To help the parents, clubs need to become the cultural force when an actual cultural force doesn't exist. As far as I can see, this is step too far for almost all clubs. I would love to proven wrong.

Aspiring players need an **holistic development environment** with their club at its heart. Clubs are not anywhere near offering this.

So what could clubs do that they don't do already?

Each club should have a football department, that is not governed by the committee. A football department should be responsible for implementing a fully holistic development program, and should not need to ask for committees approval to run this, as long as it is in line with the 'club blueprint' and is within the financial means of the club.

HOLISTIC TRANSPARENCY

If ‘a parent / a player’ ask for a blueprint outlining the club identity, and how players are going to be treated and nurtured over a 15 year period then the football department should have one. They currently won’t.

At the moment, committee’s simply trust the ’experts’ to know all the answers (and yet maintain control over the ‘experts’. Nothing happens without committee approval’). In many cases it is the blind leading the blind for the blind.

Maybe it is a case of :

- **We don't know what we don't know.**
- **This is the way it is always been done.**
- **We can only do so much.**

And this fine, but a club can’t then turn around and say we want to improve the level of our players across the board and then do nothing significantly different.

So clubs need to make a choice

Offer a nurturing team experience for your players and not stress about the level of your players. Or do it properly and thoroughly, with no stone left unturned.

Do it properly and thoroughly : The football department goes down the list of the 'space manipulators' and makes sure players at the club are getting everything they need at some point.

Consider age based development : Each age band (2-4 : 6-8 : 8-11 : 11-14) needs a different focus : What is the clubs focus at each age?

Consider developing TTI : This is a massive topic. Team training for most players is not a very good environment to develop TTI, and yet this is all clubs provide on the whole. What are clubs going to do to fill in the gaps?

- **Footwork and touch** practice could be linked to a practice at home program.
- **Ultra small sided games** Program : 1v1s, 2v2s, 3v3s, 4v4s, 5v5s could be used to develop touch and the ability to play in tight spaces.
- **Futsal** should be a compulsory part of the club development process up to 12 years old. There should be intra/inter club comps! The fact that every club does not use futsal (pre-teen at least) as an essential development tool is honestly negligent.
- Creating a **culture** should also be a priority.

Clubs development philosophy : What is it? Does the club run team training predominantly based on ‘first principles and intelligence’, or ‘pragmatism and results’?

Physicality training : Is there a strong belief in ‘faster fitter stronger’ and is your aim to win games by maximizing these factors (through training and selection) and then get a coach who has the skill to motivate. If this is your philosophy own it. Don’t hide it.

Local schools : Clubs invested in the long term development of players should engage with local schools using an Ultra SSG model - make it engaging. 2v2 gala days for example between local schools would be great ! [Clubs should run this ! But clubs, please don’t do the normal school clinic thing. They are tedious for most young children who have no idea what football even is. We want to drive the culture - not send it to sleep! The art and beauty of the game is in the ‘playing’ not the practice].

Introduce a Benchmark model : Why isn’t there a ‘benchmark’ database across all clubs at all levels. In the data age it is crazy how in the dark we are.

We know these factors affect a players level:

- Height, strength, speed, endurance.
- Speed on the ball.
- Passing accuracy.
- Juggling level (proxy for touch)

And all these can be objectively measured.

What if you could give each player a score that encapsulated this information at any point in time.

Players could compare themselves to each other. An aspiring club player could check their score against a Melbourne City player, or even a Manchester City player and see the difference.

Players could be tracked through there developmental phases and make it possible to truly see the correlation between physicality when young and the level when older.

Teams could also have a collective score to see how close the teams actually are on paper. Make it possible to see if a heavyweight is playing a featherweight.

Winning can’t be the only benchmark!

Reward based development :

Very young players cannot see the long term picture.

All they can see is the result of the game, and the league position. Their is nothing wrong with this, but does this have to be all there is?

At an individual level, there are so many factors they could be looked at and rewarded.

It is well know at the highest level, that the hardest working players reach the highest levels.

Would it be useful if players were rewarded in other ways if it produced better players, rather than the reward just going to winners.

- **We want players to be able to juggle?**
- **We want players to be able to move quickly?**
- **We want players to .....the list goes on.**

How do we reward players for their efforts in reaching milestones? Does it even have value?

If you are a level #5 club, then these are the sort of innovations that should be thought about and implemented.

CLUBS ARE IN THE BEST PLACE TO STEP UP

Clubs and coaches use leverage on players all the time.

- **Clubs run trials for team selection. If you dont trial well you won't get picked.**
- **If you don't train well you won't play.**
- **If you are late you won't play.**
- **If you miss training you won't play.**

Clubs use leverage all the time to try to get more out of their players. So why not use this leverage elsewhere :

- **The leverage to Practice at home.**
- **The leverage to promote futsal.**

If clubs want better players - then they need to create a matrix of learning - and leverage the team experience to get everything. Not just the bare minimum.

DEVELOPMENT CLUBS

There are clubs who see themselves as development clubs, but have no choice but to compete against teams whose aim is to destroy their work.

Should there be a development club only competition for at least part of the year with different rules regarding how winners are declared. This will ensure an even playing field, provide a meaningful alternative for players who want something different. This will also put genuine pressure on other clubs to up their game with respect to development or risk losing their most talented players to the alternative pathway - the exact opposite of what currently happens.

The key : In order to provide a credible alternative to the current system, development clubs need to align and then clearly communicate what the alternative path can offer .

So : #1 Culture : #2 Players : #3 Peers : #4 Clubs : Surely Coaches is #5.

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

COACHES

Coaches : Sorry, you come close to last !!!!!

That’s not to say you are not important and don’t have an important role to play in developing players, you clearly do, you are just very replaceable. You can’t be that important if you are easily replaceable, but i will give coaches an opportunity to step up in importance if they can do one thing that sets them apart (discussed later).

A player with potential and all the attributes needed to be an elite player, will move past a coach way before the coach gets the chance to blink. Players make players not coaches. A coaches job in most cases is to simply not to stuff it up.

Without doubt, having a good coach is better than a bad coach, but an elite player will develop despite the coach and a low level player will usually stay a low level player regardless of the coach.

But having said this, a club would always want to choose a good coach over a bad coach.

SO WHAT DEFINES A SUCCESSFUL / UNSUCCESSFUL COACH?

You would think a good coach and a poor coach is easy to identify. If only it was that simple.

THIS IS A TRUE STORY.

At an Australian club, a coach was given an predominantly underage team (6 out of 10 players playing up a year) in an A grade (Kangaroo's) league. The players were not physically blessed, but showed potential. To the clubs credit the boys who were picked by the club TD (not the coach) were technical and had potential. It was clearly a development team. The team started off slowly but improved a lot. They didn't win a game all season but started to get better results as the season progressed (some draws, and near wins). The players (and most the parents) learned lots, improved lots and most importantly enjoyed it. As the season progressed the team were often complimented on their style of play and improvement. The training was ball based. There was zero 'match' specific training.

At the end of the year the coach got sacked.

He was told (by the club president) that he was a good technical coach, but not a good game day coach (where, according to the president, the priority should be to get a result). The president delivering this feedback with a voice of authoritative expertise.

The age of the players : U7 and U8s.

The aftermath : The team broke up as a result of the coached being sacked and players moved on to other clubs. 2 players in that team went on to play for Mel City / Mel Vic junior NPL teams.

A year of ‘bad’ coaching didn’t hurt them. It never will.

Get to the point !

This coach was deemed a ‘bad and unsuccessful’ coach. However, the club philosophy and expectations weren’t made clear at any point (to the coach or parents) and this is the point. At no point was the coach told that at the U7/U8 level, results mattered to this club. The coach thought his job was to nurture a love for the game and the ball in promising players. The club had other expectations.

This is the mistake here. Not the philosophy, not the coach, but the communication of the philosophy. A club needs to have a very clear picture of what they want from a coach and a strong belief that any coach they employ can coach according to this model. Being a good coach then becomes relative to the expectations of the club, and most importantly these expectations should be clearly stated in the blueprint. In an ideal world a coach is only ever as good as their ability to coach within the clubs philosophy. When the aim is too produce players with technique and intelligence, then coach accordingly. If it is to win games, then that requires a very different coaching approach. When clubs don't have a clearly laid out coaching expectation model, then getting a 'good' coach is a subjective minefield and almost always ends badly for someone. So whether a coach is a good or bad coach rests largely on whether expectations are met.

A good club and good coach should go together: A good coach at a poor club is better than a poor coach at a good club whilst understanding that 'good/poor' is subjective.

Note : A good club will make it clear to you exactly what type of coach you will get so a good club should have good coaches (who do not coach differently to what you expect).

WHO ARE THE BEST COACHES?

Is the best coach the one who can create a cultural force amongst players regardless of the philosophy. Do the best coaches inspire players way beyond what occurs naturally.

If you coach like this, especially in a non-football culture, then i will elevate your importance. Hats off to you.

The best coaches aren't the ones that know the most, nor have the most experience, or have played at the highest level, or tell the best jokes ! The best coaches, create a culture of importance and urgency to do better that inspires players.

I was once asked by a very experienced coach this question : 'Do you think it's possible to know too much'. I thought it was crazy question. I thought you could never know too much. I was wrong. When you know too much it is very hard to not coach everything you know, and it is very easy to lose sight of the fact that the culture you create is more important than the knowledge you share. I am not sure many stakeholders know this. This isn't taught on coaching courses. Maybe it can't be taught?

IS THIS THE COACHES MOST IMPORTANT JOB?

So coaches become much more important if they can create a football culture mindset (regardless of the development model) in the players they coach. That is, a mindset that leads to more 'practice at home' and develops a long term love for the sport. (The holy grail of development surely).

This long term love may have generational impact on the game which could be argued is far more important than what philosophy you coach under.

DANGERS OF MINUTIAE

How often do coaches get lost in the minutiae of the game and forget that developing culture and developing a love for the game matters the most.

Probably all the time.

Is this where coaches stuff it up the most?

How many coaches are guilty of the following.

- **Yelling and screaming like a toddler. [Grown adults should know better].**
- **Over coach : PASS! SHOOT! To the point players never get to make a decision.**
- **Over coach : Information overload that confuses and demoralizes players.**
- **Under coach : Don’t do anything. No culture. No game education. Nothing positive. Players get nothing out of the whole experience.**
- **Overly critical : Can’t find the positives. Nothing is good enough.Players feel awful after every session and game.**
- **Coach to win to the point you have players getting ‘Zero / minimal’ game time!**
- **Coaching mismatch : The coach wants the players to do X - while the players want do Y.**
- **The list is long !**

Almost all coaches have been guilty of all of this. And despite all this, the game goes on and players still play. This perhaps proves that coaches can’t be that important if they can constantly stuff it up and the players still play !

Too many cooks : Sometimes it is not even the coaches fault. Technical Directors tell coaches to make sure players play 2 touch for example. So coaches, with the best of intentions, now feel under pressure. When players fail to follow these ‘simple’ instruction they very quickly feel like they are coaching badly. So to compensate, they forget to coach the child (who maybe is barely able to control and pass a ball properly) and instead start to yell and scream at the players because they are making him look like a bad coach in front of the TD.

Parents can be a terrible influence on coach behavior too. Imagine a coach with the best of intentions, being ganged up on by a few very opinionated parents [Why aren’t we winning? Why are you playing that child in that position? Why are you so quiet? You should yell and scream more? Just pump it ? We should be working on set pieces and shooting] whilst also yelling and screaming on match day. Parents who have never played the game or coached kids are all of a sudden experts.

Coaches egos, TDs, and parents can easily do more harm than good.

Does it need to be like this !

In Australia

You could argue that the importance of coaches is artificially elevated in Australia. Why? Because currently coaches are responsible for probably 100% of a players practice time and contact with a ball. A coaches impact should be way less than this. Culture, the players, practice at home, the extras should be the dominant factors. Not coaches. In a football culture and with better and better developing players - the coaches impact reduces massively, even though ironically the quality of the coaching is probably better, maybe because there is less pressure on them.

Also the better the players - the less the need for coaching (to some degree). The very best players coach themselves most the time, and probably just need a few pearls of wisdom every now and again - rather than constant braining washing. Theirry Herny, for example, was made to do exercises (when young) where his speed became irrelevant. His coach didn't 'coach' him, he just helped Thierry coach himself.

This is coaching at the highest level. (Not stand here! Run there! Pass !! Shoot !!)

GREAT COACHES

Great coaches, who develop culture first, as well as being good at other espects of coaching, are worth their weight in gold no doubt !! But average coaches and even bad coaches can still do a job that players can benefit from.

If you want to put coaches higher i will allow it, but ask yourself these questions first :

Is a coach more important than :

- **The culture they live in?**
- **The players they coach?**
- **The club they work for? [Probably , if the club doesn't know what its doing].**

Where Coaches can have an impact

In general, very young players won't naturally hold position, won't naturally be aggressive and won't naturally look to pass. It is biology. These are therefore areas of the game where coaches can have a massive impact on young players and teams. But just because they can - should they? Letting kids be kids on a football pitch is a very difficult thing for most adults to do. The urge to interject and fix things is massive.

So if a coach can take over a very young team and get them to ‘steal the game away from the opposition, hold some form of ‘shape’ and pass like a mini prime barca team’ then the coach looks like a genius.

This style of coaching however, reduces autonomy, reduces decision making ability, reduces creativity, steals the game from the opposition and produces robotic players rather than players who truly understand the game.

In Australia, it is these types of coaches that get the most respect. Is this because these sort of coaches are exactly what’s needed in a ‘non football culture’ like Australia.

Maybe the more nuanced coach is not what Australia actually needs.

This is where we are at : Whats next?

- **#1 Culture : #2 Players : #3 Peers :**
- **#4 Clubs : #5 Coaches : #6 Next?**

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

PARENTS

SHOUT OUT TO PARENTS

In Australia, football (that's right 'the whole game') does not not exist without parents! Is this the case elsewhere in the world? Probably not. That's why we have put them at #6 in world terms, but in Australia they should probably be at #1.

I know that in the UK, it used to be possible to play without any parent involvement. I got to a professional level without parental involvement. I walked to training and home matches. For away matches, I sometimes ran if it wasn't too far, or jumped on a bus or the coach picked me up. Does this exist today? Probably not.

Logistics aside - there is another reason why playing football in Australia is massively dependent on parents. THE PAY TO PLAY MODEL. Without parents footing this bill then kids don't play, and the sport doesn't exist. It's that simple.

Parents are single handedly keeping the game alive in Australia.

IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO CULTURE

Other major soccer nations (like Brazil, Spain and Germany[Google AI]) have a different system. The game is more accessible to working-class families. Playing the game has minimal cost or is free at many levels of the game.

In a football culture there will be opportunities to play everywhere, and a young player without any input from parents could become a player.

In Australia - without a parent - it is impossible. That's why parents are so high up on this list in Australia. In Australia, parents are not only the bank and chauffeur, they also need to be the collective cultural force that fosters a love for the game. If Australia ever produces a world class player, then we will have to give the parents of all players a huge shout out for keeping the game alive.

And yet we often expect parents in Australia do even more!

PARENTS DO A LOT ALREADY.
CAN WE EXPECT THEM TO DO EVEN MORE?

Many clubs have a football department, a TD, qualified coaches. They have ‘experts’ in the field and are in the perfect position to cover all things an aspiring player needs, but clubs currently offer little more more than the bare minimum. Meanwhile parents, who want to help their child get the right opportunities, open the right doors and hopefully become the best they can be, have to be educated in all facets of the development process and be proactive about making sure their child is covering all the different developmental areas. In Australia parents realize that being part of a team is not enough. In other countries (with strong football cultures) parents may not even make the macro factor list .

PARENTS AREN’T ALWAYS PERFECT

I am sure the same types of football parents occur all over the world. These are some common types :

- The narcissistic parent who tries to manipulate the environment for the own and their child’s benefit. They always recruit other parents to do their dirty work and change clubs constantly.

- **The magic wand parent who thinks that every problem to solve should be as simple as waving a magic wand. They don’t believe a magic wand doesn't exist so they keep looking for it.**
- **The hyper involved parent constantly micro coaches their child (despite the age) during the game (and even training), trying to make every decision for them. They have no regard for other players or parents.**
- **The ‘kick up the backside’ parent who raises their voice only when they feel their child is not meeting their standards of effort.**
- **The cheer squad parent who is super supportive and gets invested in the drama of the game.**
- **The ‘expert’ coach who stays relatively quite but can always do a better job than the actual coach and is happy to chat to anyone who will listen to their opinions This parent is unlikely to have played at a high level.**
- **The ex-pro : You will barely hear a sound from these parents. They rock up, watch the game, say well done to everyone and go home.**

Which parent is the worst?
Which is the best?

Maybe finding out which parent 'pro academies' want, answers these questions?

'Parental Engagement in European professional football (soccer) academies generally do not allow parents to actively engage by shouting instructions, coaching advice, or negative comments from the sidelines once a training session has started. This policy is widespread across countries like England, Sweden, and others in the UEFA ecosystem, driven by child welfare guidelines, codes of conduct, and a focus on minimizing distractions for young players (typically aged 5-18).'

At the end of the day though, all parents want the best for their kids, work really hard doing what they think is best and without them the game is dead.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD

Parents would be fully aware of what needs to be done to develop an elite level player. However there is ZERO education (as far as i know) offered to parents by clubs or governing bodies on what research and science says on this matter.

An increased level of parental education (e.g. a mandatory induction program for all parents about what needs to be done should hopefully lead those parents to demand better quality programs from the clubs where their kids are at. This wil thel force clubs to be more accountable with respect to the programs they deliver and to communicate better on how they're delivering with their stakeholders. [Club Blueprint]

Currently, parents mostly focus on the quality of the facilities where the training and matches take place and how successful the club appears (i.e. are they a Div 1 club?; how many trophies do they have in the cabinet? Etc.).

So it is not surprising that clubs choose to focus on what their clients demand from them (i.e. nice grounds and lots of winning all the time).

Should clubs take control and do better in this regard, or should the governing bodies be doing more?

So : #1 is Culture : #2 is players : #3 Peers : #4 Clubs : #5 Coaches : #6 Parents : Next?

Are governing bodies and clubs/committees (in general) either incompetent, ignorant, disingenuous or gas lighting the football community.

They are clearly not interested in producing world class players (or able to) but would never let parents know this. Clubs need to take control and they do need to market their ideals to death.

MACRO FACTORS

BUILD A PLAYER

GOVERNING BODIES

#7 GOVERNING BODIES

Question: How important are governing bodies in the ‘player development and world class player development’ process? I guess it depends on which country we are talking about. Let’s talk about Australia. Governing bodies (in Australia))are the least significant factor in developing world-class players (according to our subjective ranking).

Football Australia claimed their ‘new’ (2009) curriculum would produce world-class players. But it has become clear over time that player development is not even their primary objective. Football Victoria (FV) has introduced a fully results-based model across all age groups, describing it as a "best vs best" approach that optimizes player development [or as they put it ‘Support stronger technical development outcomes’]. However as discussed, a short term results based model suits a certain type of player and puts a ceiling on the ultimate level of the best players. Not that Football Victoria advertises this. Maybe they are unaware, which would be concerning if true. Or are they being disingenuous? Equally troubling. All in all, this is a far cry form the lofty goals of the FA curriculum

THE DINOSAUR COACHES

The Australian coaches who still believe player development is a long term process, and work towards producing world class players (regardless of who they coach), are the dinosaurs now. Those that still believe youth development is about nurturing true long term potential (with world class players in mind) are sadly increasingly disillusion.

The Governing Bodies should just put these coaches out of their misery. They should just admit they are not interested in the 'quality' of the very best players anymore but instead are simply embracing Australian culture. Australian stakeholders love 'win at all costs' games more than anything. So buying into the 'winning now is what matters' mindset makes sense.

It's not wrong - they just need to own it.
That's all.

As it stands governing bodies and clubs/ committees are clearly not interested in producing world class players (or able to) but would never let parents know this. As a result parenst follw the experts like sheep thinking they are on one path, when in fact they are on another.

CREATING WORLD CLASS PLAYERS

If the Governing Bodies truly aimed towards helping Australia produce world-class players, you'd expect them to take certain actions.

#1 CREATE THE CULTURE

The A-League, launched in 2004 by Football Federation Australia, aimed to establish a inclusive football brand distinct from the National Soccer League (NSL) which was historically defined by its ethnic-based clubs. New "free-floating" clubs like Melbourne Victory and Sydney FC were formed in a clear attempt to stamp out the ethnic affiliations that had previously shaped Australian football.

In hindsight it is now clear that this decision dismantled the 'cultural' foundation of football in Australia. A foundation that nurtured probably the best elite talent Australia has ever produced.

If the governing bodies truly aimed to help Australia produce world-class players, you'd expect them to take actions that brought back the culture that they tried to destroy.

To Football Australia's credit, the ban on ethnic-based clubs was repealed in 2019 by Football Australia (FA). Clubs are now allowed to revert back to their traditional ethnic names and symbols if they choose. Hopefully the damage done is not irreparable.

Going round in circles : Always.

This happens repeatedly : Governing Bodies make decisions, only to reverse them a few years later, reverting to past practices while touting them as a "new and improved" model.

Remember the Old Super League at the junior level in Victoria (prior to the new 2009 Curriculum)? It was abandoned as a flawed developmental model. Yet, 20 years later, we're back with a Super League on steroids! It goes round in circles.

The A-League's latest development

In 2025, Football Australia, after years of lobbying by clubs (supported by the Association of Australian Football Clubs) the National Second Tier competition was introduced.

This a step forward towards so many things.

- **At a cultural level It is good.**
- **In regards to player development and player opportunities it has huge potential.**

When a positive thing happens in regards to developing a cultural force, it should be applauded. So well done !

But some would argue they have started at the wrong end of the development journey.

Untapped potential : The untapped potential of building relationships with primary schools is arguably the true key if the goal is to produce world class players. In a true football culture 'football just is' but Australia's football culture doesn't exist when players are young. To enhance the level of the very best players you first have to make the very youngest players the priority.

Don't the Governing Bodies already work in schools? Yes : Football Victoria (FV) provides primary school students in-school programs that focus on developing skills, physical literacy, and an enjoyment of the sport. So what's the problem?

Is this enough? : From my experience : No.

Firstly they do it wrong : They think they need to be teaching technique : How to pass. How to control the ball. How to run with the ball. The core skills. When in fact they need to be building 'culture'. Kids who don't know football, don't care about skills. Only those who are starting to love it, care.

PLAY FIRST : TEACH LATER !

Ignoring who organizes this (for now), primary school students between the ages of 4 - 9 should be doing nothing but 2v2, 3v3 and 5v5 comps. This should be both intra and inter school and heavily graded to make it fair. Kids should be doing this twice a week.

There are even ways to build little 2v2 pitches relatively cheaply at schools so players can play before school, during break time, and after school. It is about playing because they want to - not teaching them because we want to. If the governing bodies truly aimed to help Australia produce world-class players, you'd expect them to take actions that built the culture from the ground up, not the other way round.

PLAYERS AND PEERS

In very simple terms, players are their best coach. They can do more for their development than any other factor. They can do way more work on their own. Team training is just the tip of the iceberg. Players can study and learn the game far quicker than any coach can teach them (if they want to). If Governing Bodies were keen on developing 'world class' players they would surely tap into this.

PRACTICE AT HOME :
The #1 technical development vehicle.

We just talked about 4-9 year olds playing at school, falling in love with the game at younger and younger ages and getting to an age where they decide they want to be a player ! What's next.

If the governing bodies were serious about producing world class players, they would find a way to maximize the amount of touches a player gets a day, a week, a year and in a decade. But where are the 'practice at home' programs aimed at players aged 9-15 who have decided they want to be a player.

Imagine more and more players developing their touch and technique in their own time, rather than just doing it passively at team training.

There are free ‘online resources’ built with this in mind. [We even built one. It is decent and free to everyone]. **But governing bodies and clubs aren't interested in using resources like this, or even promoting ‘practice at home’. Why is this? Why would they gate keep like this?**

Imagine Governing Bodies, like Australian Professional Leagues (APL), using the leverage of the A-league clubs and professional players to create a culture that embraced practice at home.

Imagine clubs using a practice at home model to elevate the technical level of their players !

Imagine the difference this would make.

If the goal of the governing bodies was to help Australia create world class players, you would expect every player to have access to a ‘practice at home’ platform driven by the culture nurtured at schools and clubs.

What about 16-20 year olds.

If you argued that ‘culture’ or a lack of ‘practice at home’ wasn’t the biggest issue holding back players, and instead said it was the fact that between the ages of 16 - 20 barely any players get the chance to go full time*, I might have to agree with you.

Something happens between the ages of 16 - 20 that happens at no other time during the development journey. Exponential growth kicks in. The results of years of compound development final come to the fore. This is why you need to give as many players as possible the chance to go full time at 16, as you have no idea which one will pop out the top as the best player at 20.

[*There are exceptions of course : Melbourne City at the start of the 2025/26 season had one 15yo, three 16yo, three 17yo, five 18yo, and one 19 yo in the pro squad (I assume all these players train full time - the may not). Melbourne victory had two 18yo and one 19yo. This is 16 players over 4 age groups (ignoring 15s). 4 players per age band on average playing full time (16-20yo) in a population of 5 million people].

WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?

It is in this period when super elite players really start to take off. It is here that players put all the jigsaw pieces together. An elite level touch, elite level intelligence, elite physicality and mindset all begin to fully combine. This is when world class players are made.

So to give an average of 4 players per year the chance to go full time at 16 is laughable. To gamble on 4 players at 16 and say these players will remain the best players (at the same age group) for the next 15 years (if the same opportunities were given to all players with potential) again is laughable.

It is very difficult to disagree with those who argue that this is the biggest reason why we no longer produce super elite players.

If the goal of the governing bodies was to help Australia create world class players, you would expect that during the phase when world class players are made, a lot more players would be given the chance to go full time.

So what solves this massive issue?

Hubs of Excellence

What is a Hub of excellence : These hubs offer full time football for players aged 16-20 who have the potential to go onto an elite level. The scenario : Each hub would take in 20 players per year. Victoria for example, would have 10 hubs to get the critical mass of competition needed to create the right developmental environment. That is 600 players, ages U17, U18 and U20, going full time. Talk about providing the right culture, the right environment, the opportunity to master all space manipulator areas of development.

If the goal of the governing bodies was to help Australia create world class players, you would expect that during the phase when world class players are made, a lot more players would be given the chance to go full time. If we cant provide this, then let's just admit it. As a nation we are all about quantity, not quality, and any attempts to raise the level of players in Australia is futile.

Obviously the logistics required to make this a reality are extremely difficult to implement.

But at least have the conversation.

Hubs of excellence would also solve so many major issues in the current set up.

Currently there is massive gap between seniors and juniors. This means not only do young players not get the chance to go full time, they are also not given opportunities to step up. Senior (NPL) coaches are not interested in player development. Senior coaches don’t have the patience for a young player with potential. What benefit does it serve them?

So there is always a bottleneck of opportunities at senior level in Australia. There are way more players with potential than opportunities for that potential to be nurtured.

Yes, the NPL program introduced U23s in an attempt to bridge this gap. But again it served no real purpose. U23s stayed as an U20s effectively. No gap was bridged. At NPL level if a player at 20 isn’t stepping up into the seniors then they probably won’t be doing it at 23 either. NPL clubs would have been better off sistering with a state club, and sending players out on loan to help bridge the gap.

Back to the Hub of Excellence concept.

The demands for this In Australia would be huge !! (Players already spend a fortune going to Europe to get this experience). But there would be road blocks.

Who is going to pay for it ! Lets look at that later.

What about school !! What about it! Most serious players at 16 don't care about school anyway. They are wasting their time at school. Spending time in a holding cell when they have so much more to offer.

Why not let them leave school for a greater purpose. It would be very easy to make it possible to go back to study at 20. Do year 11 and 12 at 20 (condensed into one year maybe). Go to Uni at 21 or 22. This is not too old - not in today's world !

I played professional football until i was 21. I went to university after this. Started work at 24. If it was possible in the 90s - it is possible now. When i was 16 i was a terrible student. When I was 21 - i was a different person. This would suit most players.

PLAYERS NEED THE HOLISTIC PACKAGE

At 16+, more players with potential need the holistic package that only a Hub of Excellence can offer. Players need the the chance to fully study the game, their game and maximize the impact of everything about their game and themselves as a person.

AND AT THE END

The goal of the ‘hubs’ is to produce world class players : Obviously most will fall short. After this the hope is that as many players as possible go pro. Part of the programs role would be to open doors and make this possible. Failing this, the hope would be to develop people capable of achieving great things in whatever they choose to do. Some would argue this is the most important thing.

Linking communities and building Culture

We talked about building a culture at primary schools using ultra small sided game ‘ play play play’ model . These programs can be run by the ‘Hubs’ in conjunction with local clubs.

Win Win Win.

BUT HAVEN'T WE ALREADY DONE THIS ?

The AIS soccer program was a highly successful Hub of Excellence, producing a generation of elite professional players like Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell. Players who went on to have massively successful careers.

The Australian Institute of Sport soccer program, ended in 2017, as its cost soared. [Football Victoria advanced player pathway also short down in 2025 due to a financial issues. Perhaps governing bodies and advanced player development don't mix well].

In the defense of closing down advanced player pathways, Australia now has more professional players in Europe than ever before. So do we even need a Hub of Excellence? Or does this actually highlight an important point?

Quantity over quality.

In 2006 Australia had 7 players playing Premier League football, with another handful playing in La Liga and Seria A.

In 2023/24 — Only 1 Socceroo featured in a top-five European league.

COST IT

It wont be cheap : If it is so costly that nothing is possible then let's just throw in the towel. Let's stick with the quantity over quality model. Let's cap the level of our very best players. Let's accept that player development will simpy be a consequence of competition.

How much would it cost to Run?

- **Facilities : Coaches : Equipment : Other?**

How much would income could be generated?

- **Is it a player funded model?**
- **Can it be a fund raising model?**
- **Will there be revenue from players going pro / getting paid to play?**

If some one could find a way to cut costs, and increase income (to the point it pays for itself) is it worth doing?

If the goal of the governing bodies was to help Australia create world class players, would you expect that every player, with the potential to go pro at 16, got the opportunity to play full time between the ages of 16-20?

Have the conversation!

Governing Bodies cannot do this alone : So should they be be finding other ways to lift the level, or continue along their current path?

A Governing Body that was keen to develop world class players would be having conversations, investigating what's possible, what's ideal and offering a blueprint on how to to do all these things.

They would be working with clubs and hubs of excellence to make sure, 'primary schools' and 'practice at home' programs became a cultural force.

The fact that they devise systems that suit them, rather than players [2026 NPL format which is a logistical dream], perhaps suggests they aren't interested in raising the level of players (leading to the development of the world class players) and it is really about quantity rather than quality.

Do we just have to accept that this is the future of the Australian football landscape.

PART 4 : SUMMARY

BUILD A PLAYER

THE NEXT STEP

DEVELOPMENT CEILING.

I am not convinced that stakeholders truly understand how difficult football actually is or recognize that each player has an inherent ceiling—both in their rate of development and their ultimate potential.

Stakeholders often assume that ramping up training hours and hiring a top-tier coach will magically transform players overnight—like waving a magic wand. In reality, a player's true potential reveals itself long before any extra sessions or elite coaching kicks in.

But this doesn’t mean players can’t improve—we simply need to recognize that achieving meaningful gains requires a substantial increase in time and effort and that 1 extra training session a week won’t be enough.

For players at every level, team and group training is the bare minimum (if the goal is to produce significantly better players). Team training is passive development—like a boat being carried along only by the river’s current. Generally speaking, it offers no accelerated growth.

Accelerated Development : Hiring a superior team coach who packs more into each session, or adding one extra weekly practice session (especially if it is not more of the same), can modestly accelerate development. That is : make the boat move a bit faster than it otherwise would.

We understand space manipulators and macro factors (like culture). We know the ‘extras’ — what to add, when to add it, and how. However what we may underestimate is the sheer effort required to implement those extras over a significant period of time. Where very small but consistent boosts in accelerated development compounds powerfully over time.

Could this be why these factors are routinely overlooked in Australia's pursuit of developing world class players? It is simply too much?

Producing world class players.

For those aspiring to develop world-class players in Australia, it is clear we're only scratching the surface of what's possible. It is also clear that past efforts have fallen short—so what's the next step?

Firstly : Understand the building blocks needed to build a world class player.

Get the culture right. Australian children are 1000s of hour behind other parts of the world. The Australian emphasis on a "big, strong, fast" playing styles creates early opportunities for physically dominant players at a very young age. Additionally, the pay-to-play model can disadvantage those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Players produce Players : Hope that there are enough gifted players to play with and against (using ultra small sided games when young and a full time ‘hub’ when older).

Get clubs, coaches and parents all working together, to help drive the development philosophy and development framework.

Development Philosophy : Always be competitive without reverting back to pragmatic results based coaching that pollutes the long term development goals. Let the big picture develop slowly.

This alone guarantees nothing,
but it would be start.

USE A 3 STAGE PROCESS AS A WORLD CLASS PLAYER PATHWAY:

Goes without saying : Never discourage competitiveness. Nurture it without letting it pollute the development process. Always create culture before anything else.

Stage #1 : The primary school stage (Ages 4-9) : Build a lifelong love for the game. Capture the top young athletes before rival sports do. Make them fall in love with the game through a pure "play, play, play" approach. Keep it simple—avoid big organized games. Steer clear of grumpy old coaches who kill the fun. This wrong path drives kids away before they ever get hooked.

Make a small pitch. Play 2v2.
It is that simple.

Governing bodies, clubs, and hubs must collaborate to ensure a football culture is created. Begin with a 2v2 format, progress to 3v3, then adopt 5v5. Clubs may offer additional activities (for the ones who really want it), but club football should not take priority, and should certainly not pollute the developmental goals of this stage

Stage 2

At about 10 years old clubs take over. Club football now matters ! Clubs can do what they have been doing. Matches, leagues, competition. Clubs can do what they do best. Run teams ! Hopefully the relationship they have built with local primary schools brings in a flood of talented players, who are desperate to learn more and take their love for the sport to the next level. **But clubs also need to do more.** They need to build on the USSG model (making Futsal a big part of development), introduce a comprehensive 'practice at home' model and start developing the space manipulators (including physicality factors) for those players with ambitions to move to stage 3. Clubs need to take control of this as much as possible if the goal is to produce 'better' players.

Stage 3

Introduce Hubs of Excellence at 16. Offer full time football to players with potential. This is a 4 year project to master the game. Touch, intelligence, game intelligence, speed, agility, explosiveness, endurance.

This when players bring everything together.

Have an educational back up plan at 20 :

Be in an environment where doing year 11 and 12 at ‘20’ is accepted as OK. Still play - semi pro at least : Get paid to play while you study. For boys especially, study when you are ready, not when you are told !

Have the conversation

We are talking about creating an environment that leads to an increased number of elite players coming through the system, more players playing in the highest leagues in the world and who knows maybe one day a Ballon d’Or winner. Whilst also making the game enjoyable for players at all levels.

As it stands however we using a ‘results’ based model to develop players, which is fine if this is what we want, but in the process we are putting a cap on the highest level our players will play, and watching players have terrible experiences in the sport.

The question :

Is this what we want?

SUMMARY

BUILD A PLAYER

MACRO FACTORS IN AUSTRALIA

Macro Factors Summary

AUSTRALIA VS THE FOOTBALL WORLD

This is a summary of the macro factors, subjectively ranked by importance, in countries that consistently produce world-class players.

- **Culture**
- **Players**
- **Peers**
- **Clubs**
- **Coaches**
- **Parents**
- **Governing Bodies**

Australia is a long way from this. In Australia, the current order of impact maybe as follows :

Parents - In Australia, the game dies without parents. The pay-to-play model means that parental support is crucial for a player's involvement. Without financial backing from parents, even the most talented players will find it almost impossible to play the game at any meaningful level. While an unsupportive coach can be overcome, unsupportive parents often spell the end of a player's journey. In this system, parents are indispensable

The flip side to this is that parents (maybe) get more involved on the sidelines than in other parts of the world. They see over coaching and sideline coaching as good coaching. Maybe it is in Australia.

PLAYERS :

The old adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," rings true in football. A player's potential hinges enitirely on their intrinsic desire and natural aptitude for the game. No amount of training can transform someone into a player if they lack the passion or genetic predisposition. Contrary to what many outside the sport believe, footballing talent isn't solely shaped by coaching—it's a complex blend of drive, ability, and instinct that can't be easily engineered.

PLAYERS MAKE PLAYERS :

A player's development hinges on the quality of peers they train and compete with, a factor that remains constant across the world. In Australia, the lack of football culture and collective 'playing style and mindset' produces solid but not elite players at the highest level. Finding the right group of peers to elevate development to the highest levels in Australia can be challenging.

CLUBS :

In Australia, clubs (and the competitions they take part in) create a reason to play. Australians wouldn't play otherwise. This is in stark contrast to other parts of the world where the game would have no problem existing without clubs. The good news for players in Australia is that clubs, although important, are not irreplaceable. If a player wants to move clubs, they can. If a player wants to play futsal only, they can.

COACHES :

Let's not get it wrong, a 'good' coach is worth their weight in gold. This is even more true in Australia, as they quite often have the biggest impact on a players development journey. (Although perhaps too much and leads to over coaching). If a player has a bad year with what they perceive to be a bad coach, then it is relatively easy to move (with a bit of patience). Plus don't forget, many players simply ignore their coach and develop regardless. They tolerate coaches knowing that when the game starts they get to play. For many players that is all that matters. For this reason coaches (in general) are easily replaced and on the whole not as important as the are perhaps persevered to be.

Having said this, bad coaches should be avoided if possible. So we are not saying that the coach doesn’t matter. It definitely does !

Good coaches simply need to add value somewhere. They will never be perfect though. They will always have strengths and weaknesses. If you are looking for perfect, you will be disappointed 100% of the time.

Often the best coaches (at a junior level) simply polish and inspire. Although in Australia coaching like this is not looked at with too much respect. In Australia, coaching needs to be ‘seen to be’ a lot more hands on.

DEVELOPMENT CEILING

In Australia, coaches also naturally gravitate towards a ‘results’ based development model. This is fine as long as it is also recognized that when this is done by most coaches, a ceiling is being placed on the very best players. Their ultimate level will be inhibited.

THIS IS THE DILEMMA?

Is a great coach today,
the best coach for the future?

GOVERNING BODIES

Do we need them? Would the game continue if we didn't have them? Probably. If they disappeared it would be chaos for a while, but alternatives would pop up. Church leagues, futsal comps, school games already exist and have nothing to do with the ‘main’ governing bodies. Plus look at what they currently do. They prioritize logistics over ‘long term’ player development, value quantity over quality, inhibit the level of the very best players, foster a culture of competition over long term growth, and make token gestures in regards to culture and advanced development pathways.

It is also interesting to note that governing bodies care about player development the most when they can make money from it. (Coaching accreditation's, for example).

If a governing body disbanded, but the ‘ultra small sided schools’ program and the ‘hubs of excellence’ program were in force. The community would work out the middle bit.

CULTURE :

In Australia, football is played despite its culture rather than because of its culture.

Australians could move countries. Many do. But simply changing culture will never be enough to bridge the gap. Culture has to hit all players, not just the ones who move.

If moving countries isn't an option, Australian parents who want to 'produce a player' need to also be careful about where they live (suburb) and what school their child goes to. It is very easy to do all the 'football starts at home' work only for this to get 100% undone when a child starts school ! If a child goes to school and no one players football and all their friends play basketball and footy - good luck winning that fight! [Note : The opposite can happen too - a school football culture can introduce the game to children too - but maybe 6 years later than ideal].

On a national level all these factors put a cap on how good the very best players can be. Do stakeholders accept it or fight it

There is no right or wrong.
It is just a choice.

SUMMARY

BUILD A PLAYER

DOES IT MATTER?

As discussed, these are the macro factors in force that impact the development of world class players.

We have also asked the questions :

- **Can Australia improve?**
- **Can Australia become a football culture?**
- **Can Australia produce world class players?**

However, what about this question :

DOES ANY OF THE ABOVE EVEN MATTER?

Who really cares if ‘we’ invest a huge amount of time and resources into producing world class players when the truth is that barely anyone will be meaningfully affected by this.

- **Maybe we get a few more professional players. (A slightly bigger ridiculously tiny percentage of the players who play).**
- **Maybe the Australian national team plays differently or does a little better overall.**
- **Maybe one or 2 players become truly elite.**

But in the big picture - so what?

Who is it for?

Maybe it’s not for those with the most potential. Maybe it’s done for every one else. Maybe it is done to help an average player be a slightly higher level of average (over time) than they otherwise would have been? This player might find the game more enjoyable if they step up a level in their team. For example, they might get more playing time, play in the position they enjoy more, or help their team get better results. Nothing wrong in working hard to improve for these reasons. Or we are talking about getting improving to step up a level (where the football will be more challenging (relatively speaking)). Nothing wrong in working hard to improve for these reasons. But note, working hard and getting better doesn't guarantee more enjoyment. Getting yelled at by a coach at any level sucks. Getting a hard time from a parent at any level sucks. Get criticism or a feeling of inadequacy at any level sucks.

Plus, if everyone is getting better at the same rate, is anyone actually getting better at a relative level at all?

So think carefully : Who is it really for ?

Maybe we have to care.

We are the ones making decisions about a young players potential at a very young age after all.

When we make decisions for young players, what should the lessons we want them to learn be?

- **Is it that competition (winning and losing) is the driving force behind development and self worth. That the game is only about winning and losing?**
- **Should the lesson be that 'quick fixes to get quick results' is what we want players to learn from team sports?**
- **Or should the lessons be that hard work gets rewarded in some way and that the journey is more important than the actual destination?**

In simple terms it might be :

Are we coaching the child first,
or are we coaching the sport first?

Why do we even play team sports?

Here is a list of key benefits that children get from playing team sports. [google AI for full details]

1. **Physical Health Improvements**
2. **Social Skills Development**
3. **Emotional and Psychological Growth**
4. **Discipline and Responsibility**
5. **Leadership and Teamwork Skills**
6. **Cognitive and Academic Benefits**
7. **Character Building**
8. **Long-Term Life Skills**

In other words, team sports offer a structured, fun environment where children grow holistically (physically, socially, and emotionally) while learning values that extend far beyond the playing field.

COACH THE CHILD BEFORE THE SPORT.

How often in Australia do we put the sport before the child? Maybe too much. If we are going to develop players (regardless of the philosophy) maybe it should built on these foundations.

SUMMARY

BUILD A PLAYER

WHAT’S NEXT

WHO NEEDS THIS PIECE?

All stakeholders, but especially clubs, need this piece : In my experience, many clubs (committees, TDs, coaches, parents)—require guidance in this area. If a club believes it doesn’t need help, then they should produce a clear development blueprint that defines their current identity and future vision.

If a club can’t or won’t, why not?

Too often, players and parents are left in the dark about a club’s direction.

- **Players attending trials at 12 years old, only to be told they’re technically skilled but “too small” while their dad is 6 foot tall.**

- **Selected players spending entire seasons on the bench because they haven’t physically matured because the coach (unbeknownst to the player) has chosen a ‘results first’ development model.**

- **Clubs offering extra training sessions (to win more games) without understanding that the the number of training sessions a player has, (after a certain point), aren’t the problem.**

- **Clubs chasing short-term results without transparently communicating that this focus may inhibit long-term player development.**

WHAT PHILOSOPHY SHOULD CLUBS FOLLOW?

This piece doesn’t advocate for one specific approach.

Instead, it emphasizes the importance of clubs having a clear direction. One they can articulate and share with everyone involved in the club (from trialists to parents).

Governing bodies, clubs and coaches need to be very transparent about who they are, what their goals are, what development philosophy they are adopting, what sort of ‘people’ they want to help develop, what type of players they are looking for now and what type of players this will produce in the future.

Far too many players and parents go to a club expecting one thing and get another. It has got to the point where ‘having a terrible time playing club football’ is simply expected by many parents and players.

This is 100% avoidable.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Originally, this piece was hoping to do the following:

- **Establish the key questions that a club should ask itself (based on space manipulators and macro factors) in order to develop a clear development blueprint that tells the world who they are.**
- **Detail what a 'template blueprint' might look like for clubs so they can use it as a starting base.**

These topics will now be covered separately as they represent the next level of insight.

We are also keen to do a deep dive in to:

- **Space Manipulators Development.**
- **How to work with schools.**
- **Touch and Technique development at home.**
- **Hubs of excellence**

The aim now though, is that this piece creates a discussion and develops ideas that leads to the rewriting and development of this piece.

The 'build a world class player [Australia 2026] project' is now in your hands.

SUMMARY

BUILD A PLAYER

BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND INFO

The writer : Darren Carr : Under the 'Technical Football Tuition banner' [Creator of a Free Online development resource : tft-tube.com]

Coaching Experience : 25 years full time coaching experience in Melbourne, Victoria.

Clubland : (2003- present) :

- **Extensive team coach experience. TD and a committee member experience. Coached all ages and levels.**
    - **From players 5 years old to seniors.**
    - **From beginners to internationals.**

Non-Clubland: (2006-present) :

- **Technical development program [Technical Soccer Tuition (TST). Est 2006].**
- **Strong focus on private and small group coaching, touch, footwork, 1v1 and USSGs.**

Life :

- **Actuary - London (93-2000) :**
- **Maths Degree - Loughborough Uni - (90-93) :**
- **Professional football : Crystal palace (89/90):**
- **Semi professional : Various clubs (86-88) :**
- **Grew up in England.**
- **Lived in Australia since 2002.**

What qualifies someone to write an opinion piece and expect an audience?

I believe my experience and perspective gives me the foundation to contribute to this conversation. Whether readers value my insights is up to them, but the goal here is to spark meaningful dialogue and to make the football landscape less murky.

This opinion piece is a starting point, designed to encourage interaction among all stakeholders—players, parents, coaches, clubs, and governing bodies in Australia.

Through collaboration, we can refine this perspective into a practical ‘development’ model, tailored to the unique needs of specific clubs, players, and communities.

The aim is to ensure players get what they truly want from their time in the game.

Right now, players often place blind trust in governing bodies, clubs, and coaches. But the critical question remains : Are these entities always acting in the best interests of the players?

What do you think?

BUILD A PLAYER.....TBC.