Problems with Chinese Soccer Development and Corresponding Solutions

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Abstract. China women 's soccer has an increasing influence on Chinese football and the notability of the team had risen significantly. However, there is low participation of women in football in China due to several reasons including lack of sports engagement, lack of education in schools, lack of broadcasting of women football, and lack of funds for development. This essay presents numbers of ways can China Football Association, Government, and social media to execute to encourage more participation of women's soccer. In terms of China Football Association, encouraging more competition can attracts audience and build positive female model to teenagers. As for government, subsiding schools that lack of money for facilities and education. Turn to social media, broadcasting women's soccer to different platform can allow more people to notice it. Some previous data shows that these ways can effectively facilitate the development of women's football in China.

Keywords: Chinese soccer development; Youth training; Popularity of soccer.

1. Introduction

Since 2002, China's international competence in Soccer has been less than desirable both for men and women soccer. This has recently changed as China women soccer won the most recent Asia Cup 2022, a long-waited championship after 16 years. In the most recent FIFA listing, China's women soccer also climbed up the ladder to 16th internationally. These are evidence for the positive development and increasing influence of China women's soccer team. However, for development in both women's and men's soccer in China, the main issues are the lack of effort in the basic pattern in soccer development which is the importance to the cultivation of young reserve talents, lack of investment to the development of Chinese soccer and the problem of league soccer matches. The main purpose of this article is to came up some suggestions that could be use to address theses problems during the development of soccer in China.

2. The current situation of youth training in China

Youth sport training is the preparation and training for young athletes to attend in sports competition through both physical preparation and teaching sport-specific skills through practicing and coaching. This is a kind of early sport specialization (ESS) that brings various benefits to both youths and sport's development. However, the youth training in China had faced number of issues.

2.1 Lack of competition between youths

Seeing the achievements of Vietnam's youth training, qualified for the Final Four of the U19 Asian Youth Tournament in 2016; participation in U20 World Youth Championships in 2017; reached the Final of the AFC Under-23 Championship in 2018 and went into the Final four in Asian Games. Turn back to China, the last competition China's Youth Team participated is the U20 World Youth Championship in 2005. This data reflects the lack of matches for youth training in China. As soccer is a team sport, only focus on individual training of specific skills are not enough for teenagers to have a great understanding of the sport. It is essential for teenagers to participate in numbers of competition to build the sense of team cooperation and various tactics that should be used under different situation in order to become a member in China's soccer team. Also, due to Covid-19 pandemic, group activities are banned in China which aggravate this problem.

2.2 Lack of quantity and quality of coaches

Furthermore, the reason why it is hard for China to find new strong player in soccer is the lack of outstanding coaches for youth training. Coach Molina in Spanish, who used to work for Shanghai Shenhua team, said Chinese youth coaches only teach running, shooting and strength. They didn't even teach the basic tactics and cooperation between members, while Spanish teenagers are learning spacing and straight passing to others at the same time [1]. The problem that many foreign coaches said is that Chinese coaches always instruct player to act in their way which prevent their own thinking in the sports. This is serious as players now become marionettes of coach and for unexpected situation during competition, they cannot have found the right way to handle.

After World War II, Helberga, the head of coaching at the BundesFA, came up with the slogan "Start with 100 good coaches and then let each coach leads to 100 more coaches." As the result, Germany won the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland. For Japan, after the enlightenment of German, they proposed the plan of training 9000 of C-level coaches in 5 years in 1994. The result was still positive as Japan reached the World Cup finals for the first time and has since become a regular team in the tournament after 4 years the plan was brought up [2]. These all shows the importance of the number and quality of coaches for youth training in soccer.

Seeing China, Chinese Football Association (CFA) launched the 'five systems in one, two hearts and one game' youth training development program. The five systems include professional club youth training system, provincial sports bureau youth training system, urban youth training system, combined sports education and campus youth training system and social club youth training system; 'Two hearts' refers to the joint promotion of both domestic and foreign youth training centers; 'The game' refers to the youth Super League launched by the CFA. Also, more schools are encouraged to involve soccer in students' activities. However, according to data from CFA, there were only 27,745 coaches at D level, 9,983 at C level, 2027 at B level, 899 at A level and only 142 at professional level. This reflected that for the current situation of youth training in China, there is a shortage of supply of coaches. In fact, majority of coaches are taking teenagers in professional clubs and only a small part of them popularizes soccer in schools. In December 2017, during the Chinese Football Association Coaches Conference, Li Fei who is the director of the technical department revealed a set of statistics: 'In Germany, there are now 3,700 people with A-level coaching certificates. In Belgium, 2,600 people have A-level coaching certificates.' So, for Germany, there is one A-level coach for every 20,000 people and for Belgium, there is one A-level coach for every 4,000 people. For China, according to the latest data by CFA and the National Bureau of Statistics, there is only one A-level coach for every 1,546,162 people. The youth training is one big issue to the development of soccer in China, however in the recent interview in the program <Soccer Night>, a well-known commentator, Zhang Lu, said that the more serious problem is the low popularity and lack of talented teenagers being found [3].

3. Reasons for low popularity of soccer in China

After losing to Vietnam in 2022, Zhang Lu, the domestic famous soccer professional, claimed that there are only about 5000 people that gained soccer career training. However, in Vietnam the number is 600,000, the population of teenagers that take part of youth training is more than 100 times than China. In this case, Vietnam's soccer has a greater possibility to find new players for the country [4]. This phenomenon is mainly the result of insufficient government funds and lack of broadcasting of the sport in China.

3.1 Insufficient government investment

China pays more attention to individual sports like badminton, table tennis and so on. This is because government see higher potential for getting medals in these sports instead of soccer, so less money and effort are spent on creating a strong soccer team in China. Lu Yu, the director of National Youth Campus Football Leading Group, revealed that German Football association (DFB) has a campus soccer office which has a budget of 70 million euros per year and it has a population of 50

million. However, in China where the population is 1.3 billion and has over 300 million youth, for the 5000 schools across the country, each school may not even receive 5,000 yuan in funding. The consequences of the shortage of funds are negative, many schools especially in rural area did not have a soccer court or facilities to carry out the sport in school. Wang Dengfeng, the director of the Department of Physical Education, Health, and Art Education of the Ministry of Education, said that till September 2018, there were more than 120,000 soccer fields. However, there was only an average of 0.5 pitch for each school which is a shortage of courts compared to the population in primary and secondary school [5]. Also, if campuses do not have equipment like gloves, soccer shoes and have professional coaches to teach students, it is quite easy for teenagers to get hurt during the activities. If this have accidentally happened, it will prevent more youth that have interest in soccer to try and their parents to agree their children to participate in the sport.

3.2 Incorrect concepts of schools and parents

Another reason that there is a low number of children can take part in soccer in school is the concept of. parents and schools. Even if there are comprehensive facilities, teachers will think soccer games affect students' learning and grades, especially in public school. But in fact, it is found that soccer can facilitate children to understand some knowledge in class and that the health condition and physique become better through training and have a more imitate relationship with friends. Many selective schools focus on children's scores and may not promote soccer. According to Chinese culture which see education as the most essential part for children, parents always think taking standardized tests and schoolwork is the only way to become success in the future. It is difficult for every child to play professionally in soccer for their country, large amount of training is needed, number of obstacles to overcome. However, the returns do not balance the effort they paid. For GuangZhou Evergrande which is one of the top clubs tend to have a high average salary of $1 million USD in 2014. But for some lower clubs, the average salary decreased significantly. Therefore, most people think soccer is not a reliable career.[6] Since there is a positive relationship between parent's tangible and intangible supports from parents and the sports participation [7], the wrong concepts of parents lead to the low participation of teenagers in soccer and thus lower the popularity of soccer. Furthermore, for hockey in Canada, the youths are less specialized than those older players. This is due to the Hockey Canada long term development model which claims that investment in both time and funds should be provided for training and matches when younger players come to the last stage of their maturation process [8]. Same for soccer, more effort is paid for youths that are in the later period of adolescence. However, research have shown that younger players aged from 13-15 are distinguished by skills rather than age [9]. So, resources should also be invested in junior high school to discover talented players for future competition.

3.3 Lack of marketing and broadcasting

Furthermore, the popularity of soccer is even lower than basketball due to lack of marketing and. broadcasting in China. For basketball, people were attracted to seeing the tournament due to famous sport star Yao Ming who is popular in NBA. Also, there are many brands that related to mostly basketball like Nike. Although there are soccer-related products, Nike is famous for its basketball series of products and bring up the popularity of basketball in China. Therefore, for Chinese soccer, the popularity only increased when China women soccer had won the first place in the Asian Cup. (Patrick He, 2016) So, the reason for the low popularity is that China soccer has not been commercialize. Also, China had insufficient investment in broadcasting. Seeing the successful sporting nation like European and US, the TV channel Sky Sports that has a high number of subscribers paid more than 4 billion euros for broadcasting Premier League matches in 2016-2019, while China only has one national broadcaster which is China Central Television channel 5 (CCTV5) [10], which means less people can notice soccer through social media and leads to the low popularity of soccer in China.

4. Ways to improve soccer development in China

4.1 Provide opportunities for competition

In terms of lacking tournaments for children, China can take Japan as an example as Japan is good at combining school and professional sport in soccer. There are three kinds of teams that teenagers are from, the school teams, the amateur clubs, and professional clubs. However, they are integrated with each other instead of being independent. There are area leagues, regional leagues, and national leagues. Therefore, teenagers are constantly exposed to competition which bring a strong team. So, for China, CFA can encourage more competition between schools and regions by providing fields and funds. It is also beneficial if Chinese youth soccer teams can compete with teams from other countries as they can learn from each other by exchanging different skills and tactics. Also, Chinese coaches can see how coaches from other countries process the youth training and improve themselves and come up with a better training program.

4.2 Encouraging new coaches

According to Cai HuiQiang, a soccer coach and commentary, '80 per cent of soccer coaches in the UK have never played a professional tournament, so we should not put all effort in retired professional players. The growth rate is not quick enough for Chinese soccer to develop.' China can allow coach training open to the whole society where there are no more additional requirements such as the career background. Therefore, more people will choose to learn youth training and get coach certificates. Also, government should subsidize soccer clubs to give higher wages to coaches, this is an income incentive for people to choose the career. As for CFA, they can provide a series of videos that involve the coach training of youth soccer which can increase the notability of more individuals and more convenient for them to learn. CFA can also improve the quality of coaches by increase the difficulty of getting the certificate, so even if they have no professional background, they are still specialized in youth training. Providing opportunity for outstanding coaches to go to countries that are strong in soccer like Britain and France for overseas training program can effectively improve the quality of coaches [11].

4.3 Implementing new training system

Also, China should find a better training system to cultivate youth to become strong players for the country. The suggested one will be the Soccer Skills Pro system (SSP). This system created 7 stages at different ages from 5 to 19 years old with various objectives which is the most appropriate at the specific ages. For example, before 9 years old, most training are based on games to stimulate their interest towards soccer. Between 9 to 10 years old, children are taught about tactics and exposed to competition with others because during this age, their concentration increases and become more ambitious. When children reached the age of 15, training will be based on showing different positions in a match and improve their strength [12]. The reason why China should choose this system is that it set different training goals for various stages and provide an appropriate schedule for coaches to teach children, which means youths are more likely to learn soccer in an effective way and become a professional player in the future.

4.4 Providing funds and establishing policies

There are numbers of way to address the low popularity of soccer in China. We should find the solution of each cause of the problem. Firstly, government and CFA should provide more funds for building fields in schools and providing basic equipment including soccer shoes, gloves, jersey and so on. For those schools that have spare area for soccer field, futsal standard court can be provided for schools with less population while an eleven player Stadium for schools with large population. For those schools that are too small and do not have space for a soccer court, government can use a public area for building a court for citizens to use. With these facilities being provided, more students can get to the sport and are more likely to become interested.

As for the problem of parents' and schools' concepts, government should alter the thinking that only a high academic score is successful. What China have done is that the government put physical education involving athletics, soccer, basketball, and so on in gaokao which is the National College Entrance Examination in China.

This action did help more youths to get to sports through learning basic skills, but the main aim is to let students learn in a healthy way. Therefore, it did not raise teenagers' interest toward soccer and cannot cultivate a professional player. One suggestion is that government can establish policies like lowering the score students need to reach for gymnastic special students and the tuition fees for palestra to encourage them become sports students and gain professional training for future development.

4.5 Use of social media

Seeing the popularity of basketball in China, CFA can refer to some of the ways they used. Firstly, in China, there is only a few soccer players that is popular among social media and that the popularity of Chinese soccer increased when there is an outstanding achievement. In this case, CFA should encourage Chinese soccer team to attend more tournament and gain attention from people while being a positive model for youths. Also, star players can promote the popularity of soccer through their individual fans [13]. Since people will attend to more soccer games not only on the spot but also via social media, the popularity of soccer will increase in China. For those players that are well-known in social media like Zhao Lina, the goalkeeper in China women's soccer team, she could cooperate with different brands in the form of taking part in advertisement or become the spokesperson can let her appear on more places and will bring up her popularity. Therefore, more people will tend to notice Chinese women soccer and to Chinese soccer. Moreover, famous sport stars can carry out actions for public benefit, for example, collaborate with sports brand for providing equipment for sports, visiting different schools to popularize soccer through amusing classes and organizing competition between each team to raise their interest. With the help of social media, where the experience of visiting schools can be record as a program, this not only will increase the popularity of stars but also the popularity of soccer among schools.

4.6 Lower price of broadcasting rights

As for the issue of insufficient broadcasting, government can lower the price of broadcasting rights for professional league soccer competition. This will encourage more platforms to present matches to larger audiences and increase the popularity of soccer. However, the problem with this solution is the loss in revenues from selling broadcasting rights to professional soccer clubs that could be used in development. Also, as social media have pervaded in every aspect of our lives, broadcasting using various kinds of media like TikTok, Bilibili and Weibo is favorable to address the low popularity of soccer in China.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, youth training including lack of quantity and quality of coaches and lack of tournament with other teams, popularization of soccer due to lack of funds from government and right broadcasting are the two main problems in the development of Chinese soccer. However, there are corresponding solutions for different parties including CFA, Government, and professional soccer players to address each cause of the problems.

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