Experience and Implications of Japan's Youth Football Talent Development from the Perspective of Sport–Education Integration

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Abstract. In April 2009, the General Administration of Sport of China, together with the Ministry of Education, issued the Notice on Launching the National Youth Campus Football Program and established the National Youth Campus Football Leading Group, thereby initiating a period of rapid development for campus football in China[1]. The General Administration of Sport's proposed 15th Five-Year Plan regards consolidating the "three major ball sports" as a foundation for development, includes them among the revitalization objectives, and calls for continued football governance reform. Youth football should receive high priority: campus football should continue to expand; the number and quality of coaches should improve at the same time; the five-level youth training centers should develop substantially; the system of competitions should be designed around young people; a Chinese Youth Football League should be established; professional football clubs should operate in a sound manner; and professional leagues should develop healthily[2]. Japan and China are geographically close and have broadly similar population physical fitness, yet their overall football development still shows a clear gap. Japan's rapid progress and successful rise in football are reflected not only in its higher FIFA ranking but are also closely related to its highly developed youth development system and professional leagues. Its football development did not rely on short-term campaigns; rather, it was achieved gradually through a longer-term approach and a complete system. Starting with youth development, supported by professional leagues, and using organizational development as the means, Japan ensures a continuous emergence of talent. Over recent years, China has begun to promote the integration of sport and education and campus football, and the national U17 and U23 youth teams have achieved phased breakthroughs in the Asian Cup. Campus football itself and the supporting youth-training system have also made some progress. However, various issues involving pathways for talent development, coach quality, and campus–professional coordination remain unresolved. From the perspective of sport–education integration, this paper systematically summarizes the main experience of Japan's development of youth football talent, examines the difficulties confronting development of youth football talent in China, and proposes optimization pathways in light of China's football development reality, with the aim of providing a reference for developing reserve youth football talent in China..

Keywords: Japanese football; youth football; youth development system; sports-education integration.

1. Major Experiences in Japan's Youth Football Talent Development

1.1. Japan's Youth Development Philosophy: "Education of the Person Comes First"

Japan's rise in football has developed on the basis of a clearly tiered system for developing youth football talent with a coherent internal logic. At the center of this arrangement is a two-layer structure of "laying a foundation through popularization and raising standards through the development of elite players," supported by a scientific development philosophy that runs throughout the entire system.

At the level of development philosophy, the Japan Football Association (JFA) has consistently maintained the principle of placing the physical and mental development of young people at the center, using interest as its guiding principle and treating performance as a secondary consideration, and assigning greater importance to "educating people" than to "developing skills" [3]. This philosophy is put into practice in training designs for separate age groups. Children under 12 focus primarily on ball sense, basic skills, and interest, without emphasizing tactical results or wins and losses; between

12 and 15, individual offensive and defensive tactics are gradually introduced; and systematic overall tactical training is not introduced until after the age of 15[4]. The Japanese football community generally believes that the core task during youth is not to produce professional players, but to use football to shape sound character and cultivate an awareness of rules and team spirit. Introducing specialized and utilitarian training too early can instead stifle players' longer-term development potential.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

From the perspective of popularization, the JFA has adopted the "football family" as its development plan and made corresponding arrangements for all age groups. For young children, it provides itinerant guidance in kindergartens; in primary schools, it encourages participation through low-difficulty formats including football festivals and small regional competitions. According to figures released by the JFA in 2015, approximately 5 million people nationwide were actively involved in football, including more than 600,000 participants at the primary-school level [5]. Such a large population base and broad participation create favorable conditions for identifying promising players and cultivating elite talent.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

From the perspective of elite-player development, Japan has established a four-level selection system consisting of "school grassroots programs—prefectural training camps—regional training camps—national training camps—JFA Academy." After 2006, the JFA began using Fukushima, Kumamoto Uki, Sakai, and Imabari as national pilot sites for football academies. Young players are selected according to national standards and undergo comprehensive residential training, while necessary time is also ensured for cultural education [6]. Regular selection and training activities are arranged for separate age groups, and screening is conducted a certain number of times each year by region, allowing talent to be managed dynamically. The chief value of this progressively tiered selection is that it can effectively prevent the loss of "late-maturing" talent: players who develop later and only emerge in high school are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their abilities through the multilevel selection process.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

To summarize, with "education of the person comes first" as its core philosophy, Japan combines popularization with the development of elite players and dynamic selection with continuous tracking. This mechanism has both expanded the football population base and improved the overall quality of elite talent development, laying a solid foundation for the sustained development of Japanese football.

1.2. Building a Dual-Track Development System Coordinating Schools and Professional Clubs

Japan now treats both school football and youth training affiliated with professional football clubs as development channels [7]. These two approaches are not used in isolation; they cooperate with and complement each other, thereby forming a relatively comprehensive and secure approach to developing domestic football talent.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

School football should provide the foundation for talent development. At this stage, most primary and secondary schools have incorporated football within their regular curricula, schools have ball-game teams, and national school leagues operate effectively; more than 4,000 secondary schools alone participate in relevant competitions each year [6]. The broad promotion of school football by the state can not only increase the football population and provide young people with equal opportunities to train and compete but also ensure complete cultural education. It prevents schooling from being neglected because of training, fundamentally alleviates the conflict between study and training, and puts in place the conditions required for balanced development at an early stage. Nearly half of the professional players in the J.League come from high-school campus football, which clearly demonstrates the stable, longer-term supply function of the school system for the professional arena.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

Youth training is conducted by professional football clubs centers on cultivating elite talent. The J.League has imposed mandatory requirements on every club to establish tiered U12–U18 teams, and completion of the youth-team structure is part of the admission requirements. Unlike China's centralized youth-training model, Japanese youth players generally attend school according to the

regular education system and train after class and on weekends [6]. This approach has two practical implications. From one perspective, complete school education means that a player's future is not limited to the sports field; even if the player does not achieve outstanding results during the playing career, an academic qualification can facilitate employment, greatly reducing the livelihood risk linked to failure in youth training. From another perspective, clubs send professional coaches to nearby primary and secondary schools, bringing professional resources into schools and helping address the shortage of specialized expertise among school-based staff.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

The two systems are now connected through a mutually linked selection mechanism. Each year, clubs use special selection procedures to determine outstanding young players in high-school and university leagues and incorporate them into professional training programs. The university league itself provides a platform through which the J.League can recruit graduates. If traditional sports schools pursue competition results excessively, they may neglect cultural education; relying only on school sports cannot provide high-level training. The dual-track system helps alleviate these problems and gives different types of talent more room to develop.

The dual-track development system, in which school football and youth training within professional football clubs develop in coordination, effectively integrates educational and competitive resources. It not only broadens the pathways for development of young players but also balances cultural education with athletic training, providing a guarantee through institutional arrangements for a sustained supply of reserve talent to Japanese football.

1.3. A Mature Football Competition System and Support Mechanisms

A well-developed system of competitions and systematic mechanisms providing support are important pillars of the sustained and healthy development of Japanese football, providing young players with sufficient practical competition opportunities and institutional support.

With respect to competition, Japan has built an integrated, all-level competition network ranging from children's football to professional football. At the primary-school level, there are four types of leagues and the U-12 National Football Tournament; at the junior-high-school level, there are three types of leagues and the Prince Takamado Cup U-15 League; and at the high-school level, there are two types of leagues, including the National High School Championship. U-12 uses eight-a-side small-sided leagues, which gradually transition to eleven-a-side football from U-15 onward, and a three-level promotion system—prefectural, regional, and national—has been established. The reason competitions are organized by age and advanced step by step is that the physical and mental characteristics and training objectives of separate age groups are completely different: small-sided fields and numerous matches at younger ages ensure frequent contact with the ball and a sense of participation, while the three-level promotion system at older ages gradually increases competitive intensity. This approach avoids the hasty promotion of children into adult-style football while also maintaining continuity in talent selection [6].错误!不能识别的开关参数。

For coach support, Japan has established a five-level licensing system ranging from D to S and added specialized qualifications for separate age groups, including U-12 and U-15. The training content covers tactics and techniques, youth physiology, sports psychology, injury prevention, and educational theory. By 2014, Japan had more than 76,000 licensed coaches, including 411 S-level coaches [8]. The core logic of this age-specific and broad-based training system is to define youth coaches as educators rather than merely technical instructors. At the youth stage, the most important goal is not to develop the best possible skills, but to train scientifically in accordance with developmental principles; coaches must therefore understand scientific training and at the same time value individual differences.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

From the institutional and financial perspectives, the JFA and the J.League have a clear division of responsibilities: the former is responsible for promotion and the overall design of youth development, while the latter focuses on market operations. The association uses income from advertising, broadcasting rights, and related products to maintain longer-term revenue and then invests those proceeds in grassroots development. The model described here as "the association

manages popularization and the league manages the market" treats youth football as a public good. During the popularization stage, a purely market-based approach might deprive ordinary children of opportunities to play football; however, if public finance bears the entire burden, the motivation for longer-term development may be lacking.

A mature system of competitions, a standardized system for coach development, and stable mechanisms providing support together constitute the institutional foundation of Japan's sustained youth football development and are important reasons why its reserve-talent development system has remained dynamic over the long term.

2. Practical Difficulties Facing Youth Football Talent Development in China

2.1. The Utilitarian Tendency of the Development Philosophy

China's campus football has expanded rapidly under policy support, and the total number of schools with distinctive football programs has exceeded 30,000[9],错误!不能识别的开关参数。

But with respect to the current scale, an overly utilitarian development approach still cannot resolve the bottleneck in quality.

The conflict between study and training is the most prominent manifestation. Under an evaluation system dominated by admission rates, physical education has long been marginalized, and playing football is often regarded as a choice that interferes with study. More than 70% of promising football players give up training at the transition from primary to junior high school, and the phenomenon of "retirement at age 12" has become widespread [10]. Even though the admission pathway for students with special talents has been opened, places at high-quality universities are limited and the requirements for cultural courses are strict. For most families, playing football therefore remains a relatively risky attempt with no guarantee of success.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

A deeper cause lies in the utilitarian orientation at the social level. Influenced by traditional educational concepts and pressure from academic advancement, some families attach greater importance to cultural education and have an insufficient understanding of the educational value and character-building function of football, which has affected young people's enthusiasm for participating in longer-term football training. Some parents and coaches pursue competitive results excessively and neglect the laws governing the physical and mental development of young people, thereby aggravating the utilitarian tendency in youth training to a certain extent. Urban residents at present face the practical problems of a fast pace of life and limited leisure time. The shortage of time resources has greatly compressed the space available for public participation in sports activities. Grassroots football activities, represented by community competitions and amateur leagues, are difficult to conduct on a regular basis. The channels available for ordinary residents to participate in football consistently are relatively limited, and integrating football into residents' daily leisure lives remains subject to certain obstacles.

2.2. Weaknesses in the Development of the Coaching Workforce

The professional level of the coaching workforce directly determines the overall quality of youth football development. At this stage, the coaching staff for campus football and youth training in China has clear deficiencies in its competency structure, career-development mechanisms, and resource distribution, making it a core bottleneck restricting improvements in talent-development quality. By contrast, Japan established long ago a complete and strictly controlled system for coach development. Coaches must complete tiered qualification training and regular in-service professional development, and grassroots coaches generally possess systematic professional backgrounds in youth development. Their overall level of coaching standardization and awareness of scientific training is relatively high [11].错误!不能识别的开关参数。

To begin with, grassroots coaches have insufficient professional competence, and the degree of coaching professionalization is relatively low. At this stage, the coaching of primary- and secondary-

school football teams is often undertaken by ordinary physical-education teachers alongside their regular duties. Such teachers generally lack systematic experience in specialized football youth training and have limited command of professional matters including technical standards for young players, the construction of tactical systems, and the control of training loads. As a result, the scientific basis and relevance of school-team training are difficult to guarantee [12]. Even when some schools cooperate with external youth-training institutions, they face the problem of uneven coach qualifications. Many grassroots practitioners have not obtained official coaching certification and arrange training largely on the basis of personal experience, making it difficult to meet the standard requirements of formal youth training [13].错误!不能识别的开关参数。错误!不能识别的开关参数。

A second issue is that channels for continuing education are still inadequate, and coaching concepts are updated slowly. In current training for coaches in China, the problem of "emphasizing qualification acquisition while neglecting sustained competence improvement" is relatively widespread. After obtaining a level certificate, grassroots coaches often lack regular further study or professional teaching and research exchanges [14]. Many coaches have not made the necessary innovations in training methods, possess limited knowledge of youth fitness, modern youth development, and sports psychology, and are unable to adjust training plans dynamically according to players' age characteristics and developmental stages. This directly has an influence on the players' longer-term development potential. Compared with Japan's regular, age-specific system for coach development covering all levels, China's knowledge-updating mechanism for grassroots coaches has obvious shortcomings.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

A third issue is that the total supply of teaching staff has a substantial gap, and regional distribution is uneven. As the total number of national campus football characteristic schools has expanded rapidly, the supply–demand gap for full-time football teachers has continued to widen, and most schools find it difficult to equip themselves with football teachers who possess professional competence [15]. At the same time, regional differences in staff allocation are highly pronounced. Relatively high-quality coaching resources are concentrated in eastern coastal cities and economically developed areas, whereas schools in central and western counties and rural areas generally lack professional football teachers. In some remote areas, even regular football training cannot be guaranteed, and the basic gap in youth development between regions continues to widen.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

2.3. Insufficient Coordination within the Talent Development System

The development system on which Chinese football relies is at present fragmented and non-unified. Institutional barriers exist between sport and education, and there is also a lack of connection among popularization, youth training, and professional football, limiting the overall effect on talent development. To begin with, the management systems of education and sport are separate, and their resources cannot be integrated effectively. Campus football has long been managed by the education system, whereas youth training within professional football clubs and professional football are led by the sports authorities or the football association. The two systems operate independently and lack a unified approach to competition arrangements, registration procedures, and talent development [16]. At the competition level, campus football leagues organized by the education authorities and youth competitions organized by the sports authorities are incompatible, preventing players from competing across systems and causing duplication and waste of competition resources. At the registration level, two registration systems operate in parallel, with qualifications not mutually recognized and player identity management in disorder, seriously restricting the movement of talent across systems. Ambiguous management responsibilities and institutional barriers make it easy for "multiple authorities to manage the same matter without clear responsibility" during policy implementation, reducing the governance efficiency of youth football development.错误!不能识别的开关参数。

A second issue is that the connection between campus football and professional football is not smooth, and the pathway for talent advancement is narrow. As the main platform for football popularization, campus football lacks an effective mechanism for connecting talent with elite

professional development [17]. From one perspective, campus football is constrained by teaching staff and training time, and its degree of training professionalization is insufficient. The competitive level of high-school and university leagues differs substantially from that of professional teams, making it difficult for players from campus football to meet the competitive requirements of professional leagues [18]. From another perspective, the youth-training systems of professional football clubs have long been disconnected from school education. Many teams adopt centralized, closed training models in which players leave regular school education and follow an isolated "sports-school-style" development pathway. This separation prevents the large talent base of campus football from being effectively transferred into the professional system, while the professional system cannot use campus football to expand its talent pool, resulting in a divided situation in which "popularization belongs to popularization and development of elite players belongs to development of elite players." 错误!不能识别的开关参数。错误!不能识别的开关参数。

Taken as a whole, development of youth football talent in China still faces problems including dispersed sport–education resources, inadequate connections throughout the development chain, and impeded talent mobility. These factors jointly restrict improvements in the overall quality of development of youth football talent.

3. Implications of Japan's Youth Football Talent Development Experience for China

3.1. Returning to the Essence of Education and Unifying the Philosophy of Youth Development

The JFA's player-centered development principle offers important guidance for reversing the utilitarian tendency in grassroots youth training in China. China should establish the core principles of giving priority to education, guiding interest, and proceeding gradually, placing the physical and mental health and all-round development of players first. In light of the actual development of campus football in China, the popularization approach of Japan's "football family" can be adopted by extending football initiation to kindergartens and lower primary grades and expanding the participation base through low-threshold formats including fun football festivals and class leagues, while avoiding elite selection and high-intensity adult-style training at too early a stage. The sports and education authorities should jointly formulate a unified national youth football training syllabus and define training boundaries by age group: below the age of 12, emphasis should be placed on interest development and basic technical refinement, with less emphasis on win–loss assessment; after the age of 15, systematic tactical training can be introduced gradually, and training loads should be arranged in strict accordance with physical and mental development to protect players' development potential at the institutional level [19].错误!不能识别的开关参数。

3.2. Improving the Coaching System and Raising Grassroots Coaching Standards

Japan's mature experience with five-level coach certification and age-specific training provides a useful reference for improving China's grassroots system for coach development. Progress should be made in three directions. To begin with, channels for two-way movement of teaching staff between the sport and education systems should be opened. Coach-level certification should be incorporated into the professional-title evaluation system for physical-education teachers, and retired professional players and specialized coaches should be encouraged to teach in primary and secondary schools, filling the shortage of professional grassroots teachers. A second issue is that coach-training content should be optimized by adding courses related to youth physiology, sports psychology, and injury prevention, setting specialized training directions for separate age groups, and establishing regular continuing education and teaching-and-research exchange mechanisms to alleviate the problems of rigid concepts and outdated methods among grassroots coaches. A third issue is that support for teaching staff in central and western counties and rural areas should be increased. Regional gaps in

coaching standards should be narrowed through itinerant guidance, online professional development, paired assistance, and other approaches. Only by establishing a grassroots coach-development mechanism covering admission, training, assessment, and continuing education can the overall quality of development of youth football talent in China be improved.

3.3. Integrating Competition Resources and Building a Tiered Competition System

Japan's system of competitions, which runs across all age groups and connects schools and clubs, offers a useful reference for integrating youth competitions in China [20]. Efforts should focus on building an integrated system of competitions with reasonable tiers and smooth connections. At younger ages, the emphasis should be on popularization. Five-a-side or eight-a-side small-sided formats can be used to lower the participation threshold and ensure that everyone has the right to take part and the opportunity to play. At older ages, competitive content can be increased appropriately, and promotion and relegation can be incorporated into competition design to stimulate vitality. At the same time, sport- and education-based competitions should not operate independently. School teams should be allowed to make short-term attempts within the professional system, and cross-system competitions should be arranged to generate high-level opposition. Players' ability to make decisions under match conditions can be developed through the principle of promoting training through competition or running competition and training in parallel, and this can in turn alleviate the problem that young players in China receive much training but have little practical competition experience.[错误!不能识别的开关参数。]

Building a system of competitions that combines popularization with competition and connects schools with professional football is an important guarantee for the development of youth football talent.

3.4. Deepening Sport–Education Integration and Smoothing Talent Development Pathways

The division of responsibilities reflected in Japan's principle that "schools promote popularization and the football association develops higher-level ability" offers clear guidance for clarifying the respective responsibilities of China's sports and education authorities. The scope of responsibilities of the education and sports authorities should be defined, and an institutionalized and routine form of cooperation should be established. Standards should be consistent and resources should be shared in matters concerning players, competitions, and talent, rather than allowing the two systems to become separated and operate in isolation. Campus football and youth training within professional football clubs should complement each other, with "primary school—junior high school—high school—university—professional football" forming a complete talent-development chain. Consideration may be given to incorporating outstanding campus players into professional-team youth-training programs so that talent mobility has institutional support. Both academic study and training should be valued. The cultural education of youth players should not be neglected; the elimination rate in the process of football development should be controlled; and a development structure with multiple forms of support and greater tolerance for setbacks should be established, so that popularization and higher-level development can advance together.

4. Conclusion

The substantial progress achieved by youth football in Japan was not caused by any single factor. It was realized gradually through the coordination of philosophy, institutions, and support. The education system and the football association each have their own responsibilities; campus football and professional training develop at the same time; and coach grading, competition arrangements, and institutional details are coordinated. Together, these elements form a stable foundation in which talent continues to emerge and developmental connections remain intact.

After years of effort, campus football in China has achieved some results with respect to popularization, but progress in quality still needs to be strengthened. The separation between sport

and education has not been eliminated completely; teaching resources are either lacking or used inefficiently; and the relationship between competitions and talent development is not yet fully smooth. Japan's experience is a case that can be learned from, but it should not be adopted wholesale. Reform should be considered in light of China's own educational conditions, with education of the person as the core objective. From the perspective of longer-term development, sport–education integration should continue to advance, with simultaneous attention to philosophy, the allocation of teaching staff, competition design, and pathways for talent development. Only by avoiding haste and the abandonment of fundamentals, and by making all preparations in a realistic manner, can the foundation for football talent development be properly established.

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