EXAMINATION OF THE STRATEGY OF HUNGARIAN YOUTH FOOTBALL ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Youth education is of strategic importance for sport enterprises, as it contributes to long-term sustainability and competitiveness. A well-designed youth program supports the identification and development of talent, while the strategy adopted by sports organizations influences both athlete development and the long-term operation of the organization.

The research examined the entire vertical of Hungarian youth football. A well-structured strategy supports the efficient allocation of resources, the professional and infrastructural development of athletes, and the integration of home-grown players into adult teams. It can also contribute to economic stability by reducing transfer costs, supporting diversified sources of income and increasing the attractiveness of organizations to sponsors and investors.

The results highlighted that talent development, and training strategies differ between academies and lower-ranked organizations. The sample also revealed limited employee involvement in setting strategic goals, which may reduce employee engagement and the effectiveness of strategy implementation in practice.

INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive and well-developed strategy covering a number of key areas is essential for the success of youth sports organisations. These include talent management and selection, coaching methodology, economic sustainability, relationships and cooperation, education and mental development, and performance evaluation and career management.

A science-based approach to talent management and selection is important, taking into account the physical, technical, tactical and mental characteristics of athletes. This allows the development of long-term development plans adapted to the individual needs and pace of

development of the athletes. In Hungarian football, for example, youth training plays a key role in the development of the sport, where the identification and development of talent is essential [1].

In order to be economically sustainable, sports organisations need to diversify their sources of income, for example through sponsorships and tenders. In addition to the introduction of self-financed training models, it is also important to plan long-term investments, including the development of infrastructure and the continuous training of coaches [1]. In Hungarian football, the TAO support system plays a significant role in the financing of youth football, contributing to the development of the sport [2].

In terms of contacts and cooperation, close links with professional clubs and national federations help to provide career opportunities for talent. Building international relationships, such as organising training camps and competitions abroad, enriches the experience of athletes and enhances the reputation of the organisation. In addition, strengthening community relations and increasing media presence helps to expand the fan base and the circle of supporters [1].

In the field of education and mental development, dual career support is key to ensure that athletes can successfully pursue both their education and their sporting activities. Mental coaching and psychological support helps athletes to cope with competitive situations and maintain mental health. Life coaching also prepares them for the challenges of life off the field [3].

Another important area for follow-up and performance assessment is the use of data-driven decision making and continuous feedback systems to monitor athletes' progress. This allows for the continuous optimisation of training programmes and development plans, as well as supporting athletes' long-term career development [4].

Talent management and youth training play a key role in increasing the market value of players. The aim of the academy programme, initiated by the Hungarian Football Association, is to support the operation of domestic football academies and elite youth training organisations through in-depth situation analysis and diagnosis, thereby promoting the effective development of talent. Well-trained young players not only contribute to the professional success of clubs, but also represent a significant source of revenue through their subsequent sale [5].

As highlighted by the European Club Association study of youth football sport organisations, the ideal strategy for clubs to build relationships and collaborate with other clubs involves several key elements [6]. These include the optimisation of organisational structures, the integration of talent management and training processes, and the joint implementation of professional and infrastructural improvements

When optimising the organisational structure, it is important that the youth sports organisations operate as a business entity, which allows for more efficient management and better use of resources. Research by Szalánczi (2024) shows that sports sport organisations in the Hungarian pyramid system and in different categories can adapt more flexibly to changing circumstances and can more easily develop partnerships with other clubs [7].

Youth football strategies should address not only physical and technical development but also education, psychological well-being and preparation for life beyond sport. Dual-career support, mental preparation and career planning can help young athletes balance sporting and educational demands and adapt to transitions within and beyond professional football [8], [9].

METHODS USED

The study employed a quantitative questionnaire survey, as this approach enables the efficient analysis of data collected from a relatively large sample [10]. The design of the questionnaire was greatly aided by the use of the UEFA strategy for youth development by North [11], and the analysis of sport academies by Van Hoecke et al. and Double Pass [12], [13]. The aim of the research was to touch on key themes that help to explore the strategic vision of organisations. The questionnaire used in this research employed a five-point Likert scale.

The questionnaires were sent to the appropriate target groups after consultations with the State Secretariat for Sport of the Ministry of Defence and the Hungarian Football Association. A total of 326 respondents participated in the survey, which shows a high participation rate compared

to the target population. Respondents were exclusively drawn from the staff of organisations belonging to the three main training levels of the youth development system - Academies, Talent Centres and District Centres. The questionnaires were filled in by 175 staff from the academies, 79 from the talent centres and 72 from the district centres.

The survey was open to staff members who had an active employment contract with an academy, talent centre or district centre. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail, with the assistance of the National Sports Agency, to the heads of the institutions, who forwarded it to the employees.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data in the table shows that the perceptions of employees in sport organisations reflect the specificities of the talent selection and recruitment system in different types of organisations.

Table 1. Employees' evaluation of the selection process in the sports organisation (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
All players in the sports organisation's teams have the potential for a professional career	2,437	2,651	2,244	2,125
The sports organisation selects talent based on guidelines and profiles.	3,465	3,720	3,346	2,972
The selection and recruitment of talent works well in the sports organisation.	3,575	3,629	3,603	3,417
There are talented young people who are not selected.	2,772	2,834	2,872	2,514

Source: own editing (2025)

On the first criterion, which asks whether all players in the teams of the sports organisation have the potential for a professional career, respondents overall disagree with this statement (mean: 2.437). Those working in academies (2.651) see this as slightly more likely, while those working in district centres (2.125) are less realistic about the possibility of all players reaching professional level (Table 1). This suggests that at higher levels of the organisation, where selection is more rigorous, there is more confidence that players have a chance of a professional career.

The second aspect looks at how talent selection works according to guidelines and profiles. The overall average (3.465) suggests that this process is typically carried out along guidelines in sports organisations, although there is considerable variation. Employees in academies (3.720) believe that selection is structured and based on predefined principles, while employees in district centres (2.972) perceive it to be less so. This may suggest that the higher the level of a sports organisation, the more elaborate and conscious the talent selection process.

The third criterion, which assesses the effectiveness of talent selection and recruitment, received the highest average score (3.575), indicating that the majority of employees believe that this process is basically working well. Employees in academies (3.629) and talent centres (3.603) showed slightly higher satisfaction, while employees in district centres (3.417) perceive the system as slightly less effective. This is in line with the fact that organisations with more human resources and a broader structure use more sophisticated selection methods.

The final aspect looks at whether talented young people are being left out of the selection process. The overall average (2.772) shows that respondents somewhat agree with this statement. Employees in talent centres (2.872) are most likely to feel that there are young people who are being left out of the system, while this is less likely to be the case in district centres (2.514). This may suggest that the selection process needs to be improved, regardless of training classification.

Table 2. Analysis of drop-out rates in sport organisations by employees (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
Are there young people who are "lost" in training?				
Yes	89,23%	89,14%	85,90%	93,06%
No	10,77%	10,86%	14,10%	6,94%

Source: own editing (2025)

The responses (Table 2) of the employees of the sports organisations clearly show what they consider to be the priorities for player development.

Table 3. Employees' definition of the goals of the sports organisation (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
The aim of the sports organisation is to ensure that the player is professionally prepared for a professional career in sport	4,236	4,600	4,089	3,514
The aim of the sports organisation is to prepare the player for civil life after a career in sport (professional qualification)	3,862	4,029	3,823	3,500
The aim of the sports organisation is to prepare the player for integration into society (not only to be a good athlete, but also to be a good person)	4,460	4,451	4,456	4,486

Source: own editing (2025)

The sports organisation's objective of professional training is clearly being achieved (4,236), especially in the academies (4,600), where this is considered a priority. This is understandable, since the academies' main task is to prepare young people for a professional career in sport. This score is slightly lower in talent centres (4.089) and lowest in district centres (3.514), suggesting that the focus is less on elite sport and more on making people love sport (Table 3).

The second aspect assesses the preparation of players for civil life. Employees in academies (4.029) and talent centres (3.823) attach slightly higher importance to this, while in district centres (3.500) this value is the lowest. This suggests that the time spent at the lower levels does not yet give priority to preparing players for civilian life at an earlier age.

The highest average score (4.460) was given to the aspect that the sports organisation aims to help people integrate into society. Values are relatively balanced across organisations, with employees at academies (4.451), talent centres (4.456) and district centres (4.486) all saying that it is important for players to be not only sportspeople but also useful members of society. The fact that this score is extremely high in all categories shows that educational aspects beyond the world of sport are equally important in sports organisations.

The following table shows the extent to which employees in sport organisations perceive the awareness and structure of development processes.

Table 4. Employees' perception of the training strategy of the sports organisation (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
It is clear what style of play the teams of the sports organisation want to play	3,992	4,197	3,842	3,655
The sports organisation has a clear vision for player development	4,087	4,299	3,754	3,914
I know the development guidelines of the sports organisation	4,095	4,190	3,772	4,190
Coaches are aware of how to teach and train players (sports pedagogy, sports psychology)	3,730	3,796	3,719	3,586
A formalised career plan for talented players from the sports organisation to the adult team	3,373	3,642	3,105	3,000
Upward flow works properly	3,619	3,759	3,316	3,586
How consistent do you think your sports development programme is with the philosophy of the sports organisation?	3,969	4,008	3,898	3,942

Source: own editing (2025)

In terms of clear ideas about the style of play, the overall sample mean is 3.992, which is a relatively high value. For academies (4.197) this is clear, while the lower score for district centres (3.655) indicates that there is less clarity about the policy on the style of play of the teams (Table 4).

The existence of a vision for player development also received positive feedback (4.087), especially in academies (4.299). This suggests that a more detailed and elaborated development concept is available in higher level organisations, while it is less formalised in talent centres (3.754) and district centres (3.914).

Knowledge of development guidelines shows a mean score of 4.095 across the whole sample, which is the same for academies (4.190) and district centres (4.190). This suggests a relatively uniform level of awareness in this area, although the score is slightly lower for talent centres (3.772), which may indicate that the guidelines are less clear there.

Coaches' awareness of sports pedagogy and psychology (3.730) tends to be higher in academies (3.796) and talent centres (3.719), while it is slightly lower in district centres (3.586). This may indicate a greater emphasis on training coaches and employing specialists in academies and talent centres, but it also clearly raises financial differences.

The existence of a formalised career path for talented players shows an average value of 3.373, one of the lowest values of all the criteria analysed. The academies (3.642) have a better structure, while the district centres (3.000) have the least structure. This may suggest that in smaller organisations there is less opportunity for progression through the formal training system, with no output of training towards a professional adult team. The overall sample rated the proper functioning of upward flow with a mean of 3.619. This process is more noticeable in academies (3.759), while it is less pronounced in district centres (3.586).

Alignment between the sports development programme and the philosophy of the sports organisation scored one of the highest (3.969). Academies (4.008) and talent centres (3.898) scored slightly lower, while the sense of alignment was similarly strong in district centres (3.942). This may suggest that each type of organisation tends to adopt a development strategy in line with its own philosophy.

The data in the following table show how employees of sports organisations assess the role of their own organisation in the development of Hungarian football, their sustainability and the goals of their educational work.

Table 5. Employees' perception of the strategy of the sports organisation (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
The sports organisation contributes to raising the standard of the Hungarian adult championship	4,064	4,366	3,823	3,597
The sports organisation contributes to the international competitiveness of Hungarian football	3,929	4,343	3,532	3,361
The sports organisation is open to all talented players in the region	4,417	4,434	4,316	4,486
The long-term sustainability of the sports organisation depends on the continuity of public support	4,147	4,217	3,911	4,236
The most important task of the sports organisation is to identify and train talented players of junior age	4,488	4,617	4,354	4,319
The most important task of the sports organisation is to "produce" professional footballers, which ensures the economic success of the sports organisation	3,776	4,183	3,557	3,028

Source: own editing (2025)

According to respondents (Table 5), the contribution of sporting organisations to raising the standard of the Hungarian adult league is relatively strong (4.064), but academies perceive this the most (4.366), while district centres have the lowest (3.597). This is due to the fact that the majority of academies are the base of a professional first division team, while talent and district centres typically have amateur adult teams.

The contribution to international competitiveness scores lower (3.929), with academies (4.343) scoring highest, while district centres (3.361) score lower. This shows that smaller organisations see themselves less as building blocks for international success.

Accessibility to talented players was one of the highest scores (4.417) and is felt to be particularly strong in district centres (4.486), which is logical given the important role these centres play in attracting young talent to the region.

Dependence on public subsidies for long-term sustainability scores relatively high (4.147), and is perceived most strongly in district centres (4.236). This suggests that smaller sports organisations are particularly dependent on the continuity of public funding.

Organisations consider the identification and training of talented youth players to be the most important task (4.488), especially in academies (4.617), where youth education, the basis of professional football, is given a high priority. In contrast, the 'production' of professional footballers and ensuring economic success are less of a priority (3.776). This is high for academies (4.183) and particularly low for district centres (3.028), indicating that at lower levels, the main

objective is not primarily commercial success or training professional players, but rather laying the foundations for the sport.

The table below shows that employees in sport organisations are relatively well aware of their organisation's long-term and short-term strategies, but their involvement in planning these is rated lower.

Table 6. The strategic planning process of a sports organisation (n=326)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
I know the long-term strategy of the sports organisation	4,101	4,137	3,873	4,264
I know the short-term (annual) action/professional programme of the sports organisation.	4,359	4,354	4,203	4,542
The organisation has been involved in the planning of these objectives	3,321	3,160	3,202	3,861
The sports organisation has set realistic goals	4,160	4,160	3,987	4,347

Source: own editing (2025)

For long-term strategic knowledge, the overall sample average is 4.101, indicating that the majority of respondents are aware of the organisation's vision (Table 6). This score is highest in district centres (4.264) and lowest in talent centres (3.873), which may suggest that strategic communication is clearer in smaller centres or more accessible to employees due to a shorter communication chain created by smaller human resources. Knowledge of short-term, annual professional programmes scored even higher (4.359), and is felt to be particularly important in district centres (4.542). This may suggest that employees in lower level organisations have a better insight into day-to-day operations, while in larger organisations this is less evident.

However, employee involvement in planning the organisation's objectives scored significantly lower (3.321) and is moderate (3.160), especially in academies, but higher in district centres (3.861), which may suggest that in smaller organisations, staff are more likely to be consulted or involved in decision-making.

The reality of the goals set by sports organisations was rated positively by respondents overall (4.160), with the highest score again for district centres (4.347). This may suggest that the goals set are perceived as more achievable in lower level organisations, while in larger centres they may be perceived as more ambitious.

The data from the study show that the vast majority of sports organisations have domestic cooperation agreements, while foreign links are much less common, especially in lower level organisations.

Table 7. National and international cooperation of sports organisations (n=258)

Viewpoint	Overall sample mean	Average by classification of organisations		
		Academy	Talent Centre	District Centre
Does the organisation have formal cooperation agreements with national sports organisations?				
Yes	92,16%	95,83%	83,33%	84,21%
No	7,84%	4,17%	16,67%	15,79%
Does the organisation have formal cooperation agreements with foreign sports organisations?				
Yes	46,51%	70,42%	22,03%	12,28%
No	53,49%	29,58%	77,97%	87,72%

Source: own editing (2025)

For domestic partnerships (Table 7), 92.16% of the total sample indicated that their organisation has formal cooperation agreements. This percentage is highest for academies (95.83%), while it is slightly lower for talent centres (83.33%) and district centres (84.21%). This indicates that academies play a prominent role in the national sports professional network and are better embedded in the national system.

However, there are significant differences in terms of cooperation abroad. Just 46.51% of the total sample reported having such partnerships. The academies stand out in this respect, with 70.42% of them having foreign agreements, compared to only 22.03% of talent centres and 12.28% of district centres. This suggests that the maintenance of international relations is primarily the prerogative of academies, while it is more difficult for lower-level sports organisations to cooperate with foreign clubs.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

Based on the research, several important areas can be observed in the work of Hungarian youth sports organisations. Overall, talent selection and development is working effectively, especially in academies, where these processes are rated the highest. However, the perception is less positive in the district centres, suggesting that talent management is less organised or effective. It would therefore be a priority to focus more attention on standardising the selection and development of talent, particularly in the case of district centres, where the ratings were lower. To this end, the development of standardised guidelines and their consistent application could help to increase efficiency.

In terms of the objectives of the organisations, the most important task is the training of youth players, while the development of professional footballers is less emphasised as a factor for economic success. At the same time, the long-term sustainability of sports organisations is seen as heavily dependent on the continuity of public funding, which clearly poses a risk for the future. It would be important for organisations to develop alternative sources of income to ensure economic stability, for example through sponsorship partnerships, international networking or better market positioning of youth training.

Employees are generally aware of the development guidelines and short-term professional programmes of organisations, but are less involved in strategic planning. This is particularly the case in academies where, although many are aware of the long-term strategy, employee participation in the development of objectives is lower. Taking account of staff experience and suggestions could improve decision-making processes and strengthen commitment to organisational goals.

Partnerships with national sports organisations are almost ubiquitous, with a particularly high proportion of academies. However, there are significant differences in terms of cooperation abroad: while the majority of academies have links with international organisations, such cooperation is almost non-existent in talent centres and district centres. This suggests that smaller centres are less able to engage with the international sporting scene, which could be a long-term handicap for their development. It would also be important for lower-ranked organisations to seek to develop partnerships with foreign sporting organisations, which could provide opportunities for professional development, international experience for players and increased competitiveness of domestic football.

Finally, more emphasis should be placed on preparing athletes for life off the field, especially in district centres where this is less of a priority. The provision of post-career opportunities (e.g. through vocational training) could contribute to improving the long-term career and quality of life of athletes.

These steps can help Hungarian sports organisations to operate more efficiently, be more competitive at international level and ensure the long-term success of both players and organisations.

SUMMARY

Feedback from employees shows that selection and recruitment is effective, but the system is not structured in the same way everywhere. Employees in the academies perceive the processes as most conscious and policy-driven, while in the district centres the structure is less visible. At the same time, some talented youngsters are not included in the selection system, according to respondents, suggesting that although the processes work well, there may be players who do not have the opportunity to prove themselves.

In terms of training and education, those working in academies perceive the most thoughtful and structured processes for sport development, while in district centres the guidelines are less clear in some areas. However, the formalisation and upward flow of the youth system at all levels offers scope for further improvement. The data show that the main priority is to promote the social integration of players, while preparation for a professional sporting career is also a priority, but tends to be more focused in academies. Training for civil life after sport is the least emphasised, which may suggest that there is room for improvement in this area.

The strategic theme revealed that academies feel that they have the greatest impact on both Hungarian and international football, while regional centres are more likely to provide access to talent in the region, but at the same time have a stronger need for state support. While proper training and education is the primary objective at all levels, the economic development of professional players is less dominant, especially at lower levels, which could cause sustainability problems in the long term if any reduction in aid intensity occurs.

An examination of organisational communication and planning revealed that employees are well informed about the strategy and operations of sport organisations, but their involvement in planning objectives varies significantly between organisational levels. In the district centres, employees feel most involved in decision-making and objectives seem more realistic to them, while in the academies, participation is more limited.

As far as partnerships are concerned, overall, cooperation with domestic sports organisations is dominant at almost all levels, but relations with foreign organisations are mostly limited to academies. For smaller organisations, building international links remains a major challenge, which may also affect player development.

Overall, the work of Hungarian sports organisations is characterised by both strengths and areas for improvement. Talent management, professional programmes and domestic cooperation work well, but further efforts are needed to improve long-term sustainability, strategic planning and international relations.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest to declare in relation to the research presented in this paper.

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