CULTURE AMPLIFIES TALENT

Building a Framework for Golden Generations

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

LUCRF super

Prologue

THE FOOTBALL LOVE AFFAIR

I fell in love with football as I was later to fall in love with women: suddenly, inexplicably, uncritically.

Nick Hornby
Fever Pitch

I never fell in love with football. As far back as I can remember, the thread of football was sewn through my life and my world.

In my earliest memories, I was sitting in the back of a rusting Ford Falcon, surrounded by family, traveling to or from football. In the front passenger seat, would be my grandfather, Joe.

Joe arrived in Australia from Croatia in 1949, eastern European sensibilities, Clark Gable moustache. Eventually settling in unfamiliar Geelong, he knew he and other new arrivals needed an institution to provide cultural safety and social lubrication. So he started a soccer club.

To build the team for Croatia Geelong, every weekend he would do the ten-hour round trip from Geelong to the Victorian-NSW border, where the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre provided a pool of potential players.

Every weekend he would fill his car up with young men from all parts of Europe. Some could play football, and some couldn't. That wasn't the point. Football was a Trojan horse giving these young men the same chance to start a life in the new world.

At home, alongside photos of Joe on the boat to Australia would be photos of football teams. I would see the youthful faces of the now ageing men that I saw on the terraces or at church or at family weddings. I would see team photos that had my mum, as a young girl, in the background: another child born into this love affair with the game.

Driving the Falcon would be my dad. Upon arriving in Australia, he waited with my aunty and uncle at the baggage carousel for an hour before he thought to tell them he didn't bring any bags. He had nothing to pack. But he had football.

Whilst playing for Geelong Croatia in the early 70s, he would meet the same young girl in the background of those photos. They would be married and have three children, each of whom would, for better or worse, be pulled into football's orbit. One would go on to play in the Champions League for Ajax and the World Cup, and be interviewed for this study.

All this is to say I was a first-hand witness of the culture which is the subject of this work. For a special moment in time, thousands of kids like me and those we interviewed were practically born in love with football. For me it was more than a sport – it was a way of life. It was the glue that held our extended family together. To this day, every relationship in my life is shaped by football.

This study demonstrates that producing internationally competitive footballers goes 'beyond a curriculum' and is achieved through building a deep football culture where institutions such as clubs, the media and family work interdependently. It has demonstrated that immersion in the game – in all its wonderfully eclectic dimensions – is a condition precedent to achievement.

Our most successful players were developed at a moment when SBS beamed matches into the homes of working-class families from football-rich cultures, in a country investing billions into the Australian Institute of Sport and preparing to host an Olympics. The vignettes from John Aloisi, Simon Colosimo, Paul Okon and Josip Skoko we have included throughout this document paint the personal narratives on this backdrop.

Nostalgia will not recreate these conditions.

As an Australian football collective, our mission should be to build generations of footballers who can inspire generations of Australians. The starting point for this journey is to create an immersive football culture anchored in our shared love for all parts of the game.

My view is that each of our reasons for falling in love with football fits into one of five distinct themes:

- Relationships
- Society and culture
- Tactical and technical
- Soap opera
- Aesthetics

Whether it's watching Johnny Warren and Les Murray alongside your dad; discovering football through the flags of the world; marvelling at Guardiola's false 9; the *schadenfreude* of Jose being sacked (again) at Chelsea; feeling the hairs of your neck stand up as *La Bombonera* in Buenos Aires starts to shift under your feet; these five categories serve to capture the disparate ways which the essential bond with the game can be formed.

Consider how the Socceroos' exploits in 2006 inspired a generation through one glorious fusion of these five themes. The adventures shared by Australia's greatest exodus of people since World War II: families, friends, countrymen. The tournament's role in Germany reclaiming a national identity. The impact of Hiddink's coaching. The unadulterated drama of late goals by Cahill, Kewell and Totti. The sensory experience that lives on years later.

This was our virtuous circle in full flight: players with an intrinsic passion for football instilling that passion in the next generation.

If fostering a deep love for the game in 21st Century Australians is our collective North Star, these five themes are the points of that star. This is where we should all be aiming.

We hope that this document, by identifying a framework anchored in our past success, helps football's policy makers find a path to recreating an immersive culture that can once again take our most talented players – and in turn our national teams – back to the top of world football.

Shaping and nurturing this culture is a shared responsibility – as it was a generation ago. It is a challenge that transcends a curriculum or methodology and involves every part of our game. The tactical and technical dimension of our sport is but one theme and even the best coaching model or methodology will not, in isolation, deliver success.

Sustainable success will involve telling the stories of every point of our North Star.

John Didulica
Chief Executive

Contents

BACKGROUND

THE STUDY

THE PATH(WAY) FORWARD

Executive Summary

In seeking to better understand how many of Australia's finest football moments of the modern era were created, what emerged from interviewing some of our most accomplished players is a framework for the birth, nurturing and the crystalisation of football talent.

Passion. Family. Mentality. Environment. Practice. Pathway.

These are the six self-evident truths that drove the unprecedented success of Australian players in the world's most competitive sporting pursuit. Each of these themes will be explored in more depth throughout this study, but each truth is anchored in one overarching and fundamental concept – a player's love affair with the game.

PART I:
Background

1. Across the world, football talent's value is increasing rapidly. Global transfer spending has climbed from US$2.7 billion in 2012 to US$7 billion in 2018. In the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), of which Australia is a member, transfer receipts have grown from US$61 million in 2014 to US$148 million in 2018.

2. We are suffering from a recent decline in relative success within the men's game. The decline is defined by various metrics: our international performance at youth and senior levels, our representation in the world's best leagues, and the failure of our clubs' transfer revenue to keep pace with the growth across the globe or in our region.

3. The PFA's landmark Player Pathway Study catalogued and analysed all 3.5 million professional league match minutes played by Australian males between 2002/03 and 2015/16. The study confirmed the widely held belief that our players had become less internationally competitive over time, finding that minutes played by Australians in the 'Big 5' European leagues had declined from a peak of 29,735 in 2003/04 to 3,817 by 2014/15, an 87% decrease.

4. In the NSL, the link between age and success was positive, weak and stable, on average 0.18. In the A-League era, we see that the link is stronger – 0.38 on average – and rising. In three of the past four seasons, average age was nearly a proxy for the league table.

5. Our issue is not one of critical mass. By covering the global and domestic markets, these studies make clear that our net production of talent has declined over the past 10-20 years. Yet at the same time, junior participation rates among boys aged 5 to 14 have boomed, from 208,000 in 1997 to 531,000 in 2017.

6. As a collective, we ignore the broader sociodemographic ecosystem which impacts the players during and even before their time in organised football.

7. In undertaking this study, we decided to focus on the success stories and identify the important factors through reverse induction. We asked some of the best players from our best generation of players about all aspects of their younger lives. Obviously, the focus was on football, but we also explored topics from family dynamic to socioeconomic status. The intention was to discover what these players had in common which took them further than their peers and, on average, further than their successors.

PART II:
The Study

8. 'Golden Generation' participants were selected on two criteria: age and excellence. The sample ranged from Paul Okon born in 1972, to Nathan Burns, born 1988, but 13 of the 17 players were born in the decade between 1975-1984.

9. The absence of specific players does not undermine the research, since the intention was to discover the common features in the histories of that generation of players. Key themes emerged from the 17 interviews conducted which would have been broadly consistent across others from that cohort, whether they achieved a little bit more or less in their careers. In fact, responses already began to become predictable after the first half dozen interviews, so similar were the themes from each.

10. Victoria University researchers spoke with the participants throughout 2018, mostly face-to-face. Interviews lasted from 35-75 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, comprising 364 pages of text.

11. The primary function of the research was to identify common factors from the backgrounds of Golden Generation era players. But to bring these factors into focus, a comparison was sought. The research was extended to a small sample of five Australian national youth team players aged in their late teens in 2018. These players were interviewed using a similar format to the older players.

12. VU identified six key themes which repeated across the conversations with the players from the Golden Generation:

    Passion: *You need to fall in love with the game*
    Family: *Support and sacrifices*
    Mentality: *I was not the best, but I worked hard*
    Environment: *Just get out and play*
    Practice: *Free-play and structured training*
    Pathway: *Playing up*

Passion

13. All of the players indicated they started engaging in football activities from an early age with family in the back garden. This developed into a love for the game which was fostered through playing football, watching World Cups and highlights shows on SBS and engaging with the local football club. Players generally entered structured football club programs from the age of five, with these early experiences shaping football dreams about playing in the National Soccer League (NSL) and for Australia at a World Cup.

14. Players in both generations developed a deep love of the game through fun activities at a young age with family and friends with players generally entered local youth clubs from the age of five.

15. The advancement in technology has seen a shift in the exposure to global football – from relatively limited SBS coverage, to the now 24/7 access to football content. There has been a shift in the perception of professional football, with the Current Generation more aware of the global nature of football, and the potential social impact of a career in football.

Family

16. The family structure was an important factor during the players' development. The majority of the players were from a European middle-class background. Parents were key role models and provided support throughout their football journey. Parents also had to make significant sacrifices to support the player, including time and money.

17. Football was a key element of the family culture and identity for the Golden Generation, however, this is not the case for the Current Generation.

18. Across both generations, the family unit makes significant sacrifices to support the athlete's development and career progress. Both generations highlighted how parents worked hard during their childhood, but still provided time and support for their football.

19. For the Golden Generation, siblings were generally close in age and provided football play mates and friendly competition to encourage continual development of skills and abilities. The sibling roles have evolved for the Current Generation, with the players indicating that much older siblings provided support during their development by taking them to and from football training and games, when parents were unable.

Mentality

20. The players demonstrated 'grit' by working obstinately toward their goals and maintaining interest and effort in football over the years despite disappointments, hardships and plateaus. Recent research has demonstrated a positive relationship between grit and time invested in competition, training, football-specific play, and indirect football involvement.

Mark Viduka (left), Robbie Enes (middle) and Josip Skoko (right) representing the Australian Institute of Sport

21. Both Generations highlighted the need for hard work and dedication in their pursuit of a professional football career. Engagement in football activities was volitional in nature.

22. While both Generations highlighted an intrinsic drive to engage in football training, the Current Generation also highlighted the need for extrinsic factors, such as coach recognition. While the Golden Generation highlighted several setbacks within their football career which built resilience, none of the Current Generation identified or discussed particular setbacks.

Environment

23. The changing story of the club environment is at the core of this study. The Golden Generation players came up through the clubs which acted as the beating hearts of the newly formed communities of European post-war migrants. These clubs played a central role in the social lives of these players' families, and helped allow them to identify proudly with both Australia and their homelands. In a practical sense, this deep emotional and cultural connection facilitated hours of crucial football development because the players would spend entire days at the club kicking a ball with friends.

24. By contrast, the Current Generation chopped and changed clubs more as they progressed. By age 10 they had usually moved on to a "bigger" club with more qualified coaches, a relatively new phenomenon. Their relationships with their clubs were centred on their training and matches, rather than as a vehicle for social connection.

25. Both Generations highlighted the home back garden as one of the first places they were exposed to fun football activities. As the athletes grew, they expanded the football free-play environment from the back garden to the local park or school oval.

26. The majority of the Golden Generation highlighted the importance of the local ethnic club within their family culture, with this providing the family with a weekly social event, where the players were able to play organised games, and free-play with peers for extended periods of time. The Current Generation indicated the local club as a place for structured football practice, but this was not a key part of the family culture. Players were more likely to play or train with their team and then leave.

Practice

27. Free-play football activities were central to the players' development. These were just seen as fun activities with siblings or friends. They were unstructured in nature, with self-directed rules and goals.

28. The Golden Generation followed more of a sampling pathway, trying out various sports at a young age before settling solely on football later on. This type of diversified sporting engagement has been suggested to develop skills and physiological conditioning that may be transferable to their football career. The Current Generation specialised in football earlier, ignoring other sports aside from school-mandated participation.

Pathway

29. The talent pathway was at least slightly different for all participants.

30. All players played up an age group for their local club, which they saw as a positive influence on their development. Most were playing senior football – with men, against men – at a relatively young age. Players who moved overseas all reported that the first year abroad was extremely tough.

31. The Golden Generation mainly played for one local club with a pathway to senior competition, which they started playing in at approximately 15 years of age. The Current Generation played for several youth clubs, moving for greater challenges or opportunities with NPL or A-League academies.

Perceptions from the Golden Generation

32. The Golden Generation perceive the Current Generation as having access to relatively greater resources to pursue the professional football dream. There is some evidence to support the Golden Generation's perception that Current Generation players within Australia may be over-coached during their development.

Development History of Athletes Questionnaire

33. The Golden Generation did not specialise in football until age 14.8 years on average, which reflects the interviews which suggested they followed the Early Diversification Talent Development pathway. In further support of the interview data, the players reported making their senior club debut at 15.4 years on average.

34. The single activity Golden Generation players spent the most time doing between the ages of 5-18 was informal play with others, peaking at an average of 420 hours per year – eight hours per week – when they were 13 years old.

PART III:
The Path(way) Forward

35. The consistencies between the origin stories of our football superheroes were uncanny. In some cases the similarities were literal, where players from the same ethnic backgrounds came up through the same local clubs. It was telling that the same story repeated in different cities, with different ethnicities and different clubs involved.

36. The reality is that based on Australia's innate attributes, our performance today is probably 'normal', whereas for one golden moment in time, the stars aligned to create special conditions and special players. We have not failed since then. We have regressed to the mean.

37. There is little doubt their generation existed in a cultural environment which was set up to produce internationally competitive players.

38. We have seen that dramatic increases in participation rates have done little for elite talent – in fact, as the base has broadened, the pointy end of the pyramid has blunted. Purely from a development perspective, money should be invested in infrastructure which can facilitate the volume of free-play activities our Golden Generation players chalked up in the backyard or on the back pitch on those long Sundays at the local club.

39. Street football courts are such facilities. These public spaces, common across European cities, promote just the sort of player-guided, experimental, mixed age, ultra-competitive, resilience-building free-play which the Golden Generation has told us has gone missing from today's development pathway.

40. Migration to Australia has shifted from Europe to Asia and Africa, but these new communities, despite coming from football-loving countries, have not created clubs to centre their lives around in the same way post-war Europeans did. It follows that there is a missed opportunity to develop potential talent because the community space is not designed to facilitate it.

41. We should not limit our scope to what has worked here in the past or elsewhere in the present. To do so would be to attempt to keep up, rather than get ahead. To regain a competitive advantage, we should get creative and consider new and innovative ways to produce the outputs we want.

A young Nathan Burns during his formative years

PART I

BACKGROUND

The Talent Question

Talent is that elusive and precious resource on which modern sports are built. Talent is what wins trophies and entertains fans, separating the professional industry from the amateur pastime. Our football economy is structured around talent; the search for it, the cultivation of it, the appreciation of it and the competition over its scarcity.

Across the world, football talent's value is increasing rapidly. Global transfer spending has climbed from US$2.7 billion in 2012 to US$7 billion in 2018. In the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), of which Australia is a member, transfer receipts have grown from US$61 million in 2014 to US$148 million in 2018. Transfer fees are one way to value talent, but similar growth could be observed in investment in all aspects of acquiring and developing talented players, from salaries to training facilities.

The demand for talent is so strong because its utility is varied and immense. It can generate money as an entertainment product. It can generate credibility and esteem for countries, individuals and brands. It can inspire national pride when it achieves international success.

Talent is good – that much is obvious. But mystery surrounds its production. Unlike the materials and components which underpin other industries, talent cannot be extracted from the ground or assembled in a factory. It is the result of thousands of hours of time spent doing specific activities by special people. The science is becoming clearer about those activities and those people. But there is too little consideration given to what factors contribute to the person choosing to invest their time in such a way. What environmental, social, cultural and demographical parameters enable and motivate a high potential individual to become an elite player?

The PFA identified this as perhaps the essential question for Australian football, because it is evident that our game is suffering from a recent decline in relative success within the men's game. The decline is defined by various metrics: our international performance at youth and senior levels, our representation in the world's best leagues, and the failure of our clubs' transfer revenue to keep pace with the growth across the globe or in our region.

This shortfall creates a holistic negative impact across the game. Talent is what drives interest and inspires fans. It is harder for our professional league to thrive with less of this essential ingredient to work with. And football's position as a cultural institution is diminished by lessened success and relevance on the global stage.

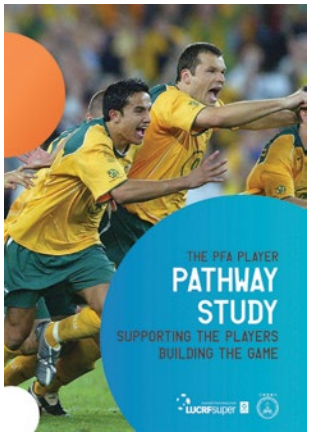
Regardless of the decisions made in the administration of Australian football, we will always face an uphill battle if we do not have enough talent in the system. This problem is exacerbated by the increasing divide between our expectations and reality. Due to our past success, we have become accustomed to being an Asian powerhouse, qualifying for and being competitive at World Cups, having players at the top clubs of Europe and enjoying their twilights on our own shores.

We have barely accepted that these outcomes are no longer the norm. However, unless we change the current trajectory, we may be bracing for a future as a peripheral football nation.

“Regardless of the decisions made in the administration of Australian football, we will always face an uphill battle if we do not have enough talent in the system”

Sequential approach towards policy

1



Defining the problem

2

Why did this happen?

3

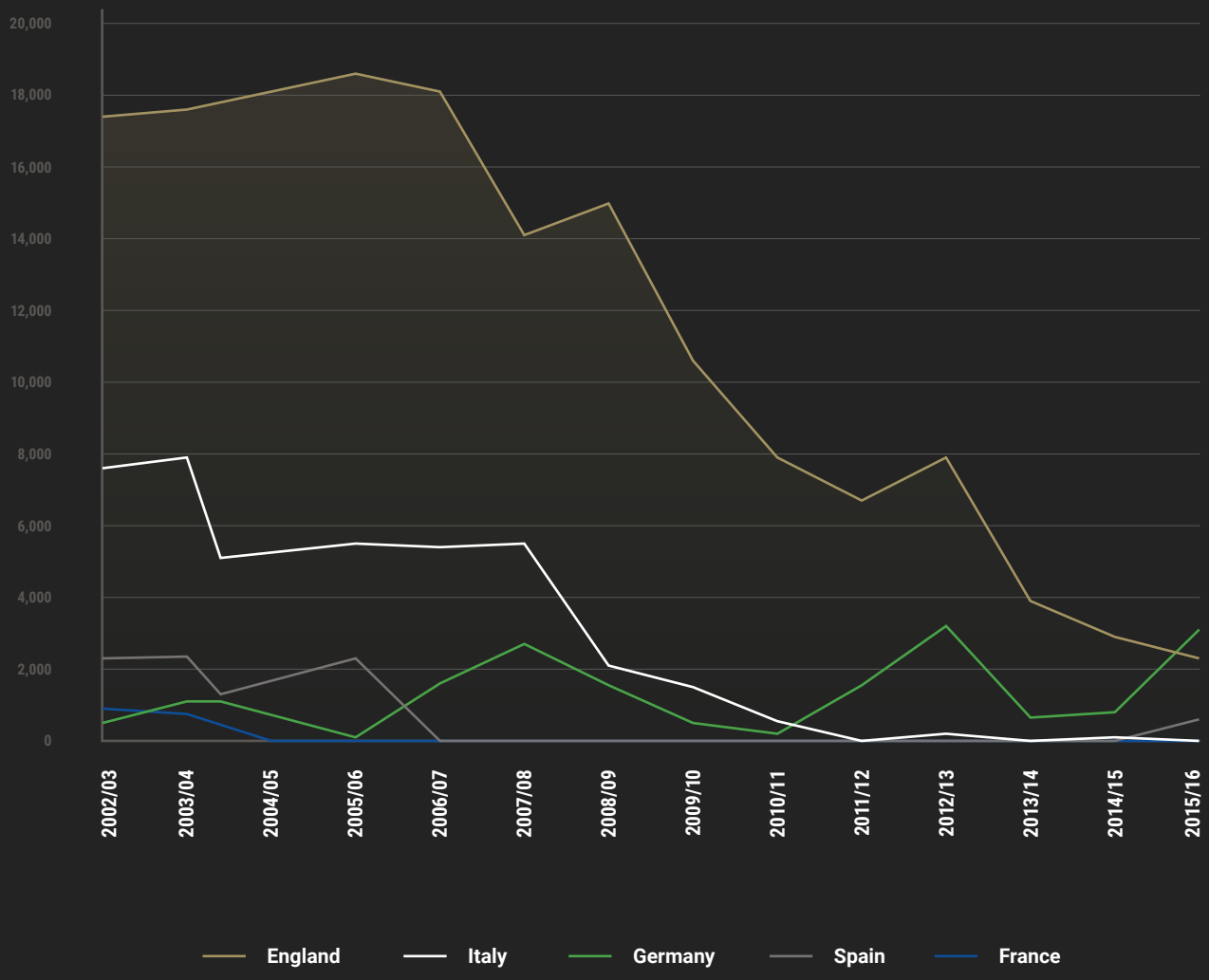
Whole of game solutions

The journey towards answers to the talent question started with the PFA's landmark Player Pathway Study, which catalogued and analysed all 3.5 million professional league match minutes played by Australian males between 2002/03 and 2015/16.

By tracking the careers of our professional male players in unprecedented detail, it was able to scientifically assess the widely held belief that our players had become less internationally competitive over time.

This assumption was resoundingly confirmed. For example, we found that minutes played by Australians in the 'Big 5' European leagues had declined from a peak of 29,735 in 2003/04 to 3,817 by 2014/15, an 87% decrease.

Minutes played by Australians in the 'Big 5'



The days of Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka, Mark Schwarzer, Tim Cahill, Mark Bresciano, Vince Grella, Lucas Neill and a dozen others playing regularly for the world's best teams – or at least in the world's best leagues – are well and truly over. Aaron Mooy and Mat Ryan have carried the flag in the Premier League in recent seasons, and Mat Leckie has become a Bundesliga ever-present, but it is more common now for our Socceroos to play for strong clubs from second tier leagues or throughout the leagues of Asia.

Due to the concentration of wealth in those leagues, it stands to reason that these premium competitions are becoming harder to crack. Domestically, however, challenges for young players achieving regular match minutes persist.

Age-success correlation in our national leagues

The conclusions of the Pathway Study are backed up by research we conducted this year, in conjunction with leading Australian football statistician and historian Andrew Howe, into the relationship between age and success in our national leagues.

Andrew produced two key data points for every team to compete in each of the 45 seasons of NSL and A-League since 1977: the average age, as determined by the ages of the starting XI and substitutes on every match day, and team success, defined as the percentage of the total possible league points the team won.

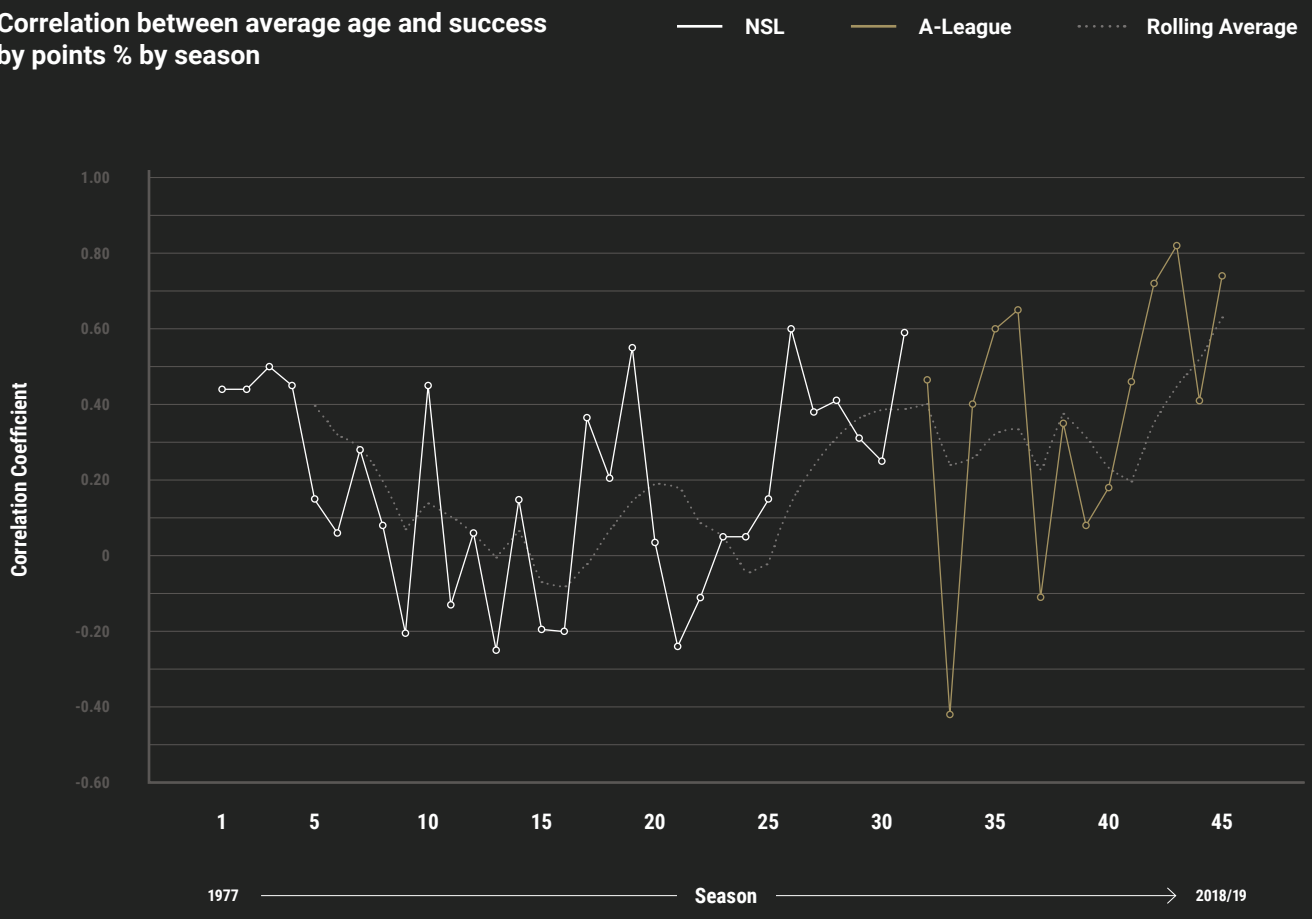
We measured the relationship between these two variables to produce a correlation coefficient for each season. This coefficient can range from -1 to 1, where 1 would mean a perfect relationship (the league ladder runs from oldest to youngest), -1 would represent a perfect negative relationship (the youngest team always wins) and something close to 0 means there is no link between the two.

The average of those 45 coefficients is 0.25, indicating that there is a weak positive relationship between older average age and more success within seasons. It's reasonable to assume this would be the case in most sports, if experienced players generally perform at their best, while young players are selected in part on their potential to improve over time.

It becomes interesting when we chart the data, highlighting the difference between the two eras of Australian football. In the NSL, the link between age and success was positive, weak and stable, on average 0.18. In the A-League era, we see that the link is stronger – 0.38 on average – and rising. In three of the past four seasons, average age was nearly a proxy for the league table.

John Aloisi, 14, playing for Adelaide City alongside brother Ross

Correlation between average age and success by points % by season

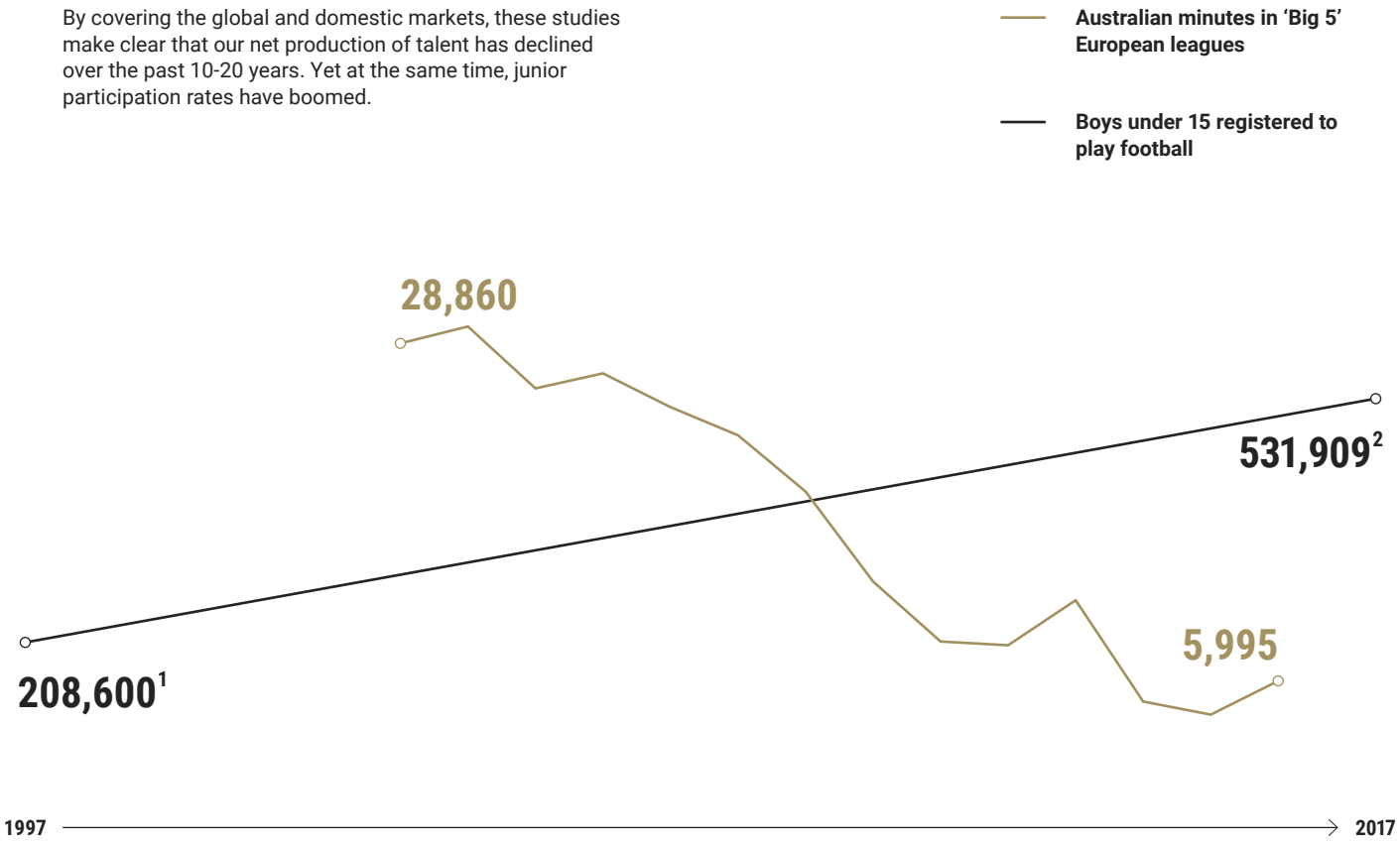


The trend suggests that older players who would previously be either losing their place in the team to a better younger player, or losing to another team with better younger players in it, are now able to keep playing and keep winning longer. The curve cannot keep climbing much higher, so the key detail is the timing of the upwards acceleration, which defines a step change in talent production: the end of the Golden Generation era.

Importantly, this finding helps pinpoint where the bottleneck in our talent pipeline is occurring. A lot of discourse has centred on the perceived lack of opportunities available to young players in the A-League. Policies are discussed to increase those opportunities, such as expansion, extended benches or direct regulation. But this research suggests that fewer young players are breaking through which is a statement from coaches that the requisite quality is not surpassing the incumbents. Ultimately, will the Australian game be better served by skewing its structure to provide more opportunities for a less accomplished pool of players, or by ensuring the production of players of world class quality in the first instance? And to what degree are the two factors interdependent?

Quantity versus quality

By covering the global and domestic markets, these studies make clear that our net production of talent has declined over the past 10-20 years. Yet at the same time, junior participation rates have boomed.



1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Participation in Sport and Physical Activities, Australia, 1996-97
2 Ausplay Football/Soccer State of Play Report, 2019

If all things had been held equal in our talent formula, the more than doubling of the number of registered players should have more than doubled the number of world class players we are producing. The fact that the pointy end of the pyramid has in fact declined as the base has broadened only reinforces the idea that something else has drastically changed in that formula.

This piece of the puzzle is useful to dispel the myth that an elite player is developed only as a result of individual characteristics. Yes, a world class player must have something special to rise above his peers. But something systemic is clearly at play.

Going backwards or standing still?

When we talk about international competitiveness, as the Pathway Study does, we are talking about an equation with two sides: our talent, and the world's talent. Technically, even if Australia's talent production remained constant, or even increased slightly, our international competitiveness would decline if the rest of the world was raising its game at a faster rate.

And the world is certainly raising its game. We are particularly under threat from Asian nations with massive populations beginning to make significant investments in football. As we discussed above, mass player numbers do not necessarily generate top end quality, or China would be in the World Cup final. But our structural competitive advantages are being eroded by rapid progress in our region, and we should not conflate that improvement with our failings. In one way, it doesn't really matter. Regardless of what the rest of the world is doing, we will benefit from more talent, so we should pursue whatever policies we think will best increase our output.

The reason to think about this equation is to make better decisions about how that gets done. In the search for solutions, it pays to understand that the world is developing independent of us, and that all nations are developing independent of each other. For example, if certain nations – be they Iceland or Thailand – appear to be improving more quickly than average, there may be lessons there about what works.

> *"...even if Australia's talent production remained constant, or even increased slightly, our international competitiveness would decline if the rest of the world was raising its game at a faster rate."*

Richard Garcia (left) challenges Arsenal's Samir Nasri (right) while the Socceroo was at Hull City in the Premier League

Beyond the curriculum

All this thinking led us to the start line for this project. Where to begin the search for answers? There are endless entry points. The majority of existing discourse centres around a narrow, insiders' view of what factors contribute to developing players: the coaching curriculum, talent pathways, and opportunities for young players at senior level. These are the factors under the immediate control of our industry, so it makes sense that they are front of mind.

But we have developed the view that our industry has failed to see the forest for the trees. Each coach, technical director and club administrator naturally focuses on the areas for which he or she is responsible and accountable. But as a collective, we ignore the broader sociodemographic ecosystem which impacts the players during and even before their time in organised football.

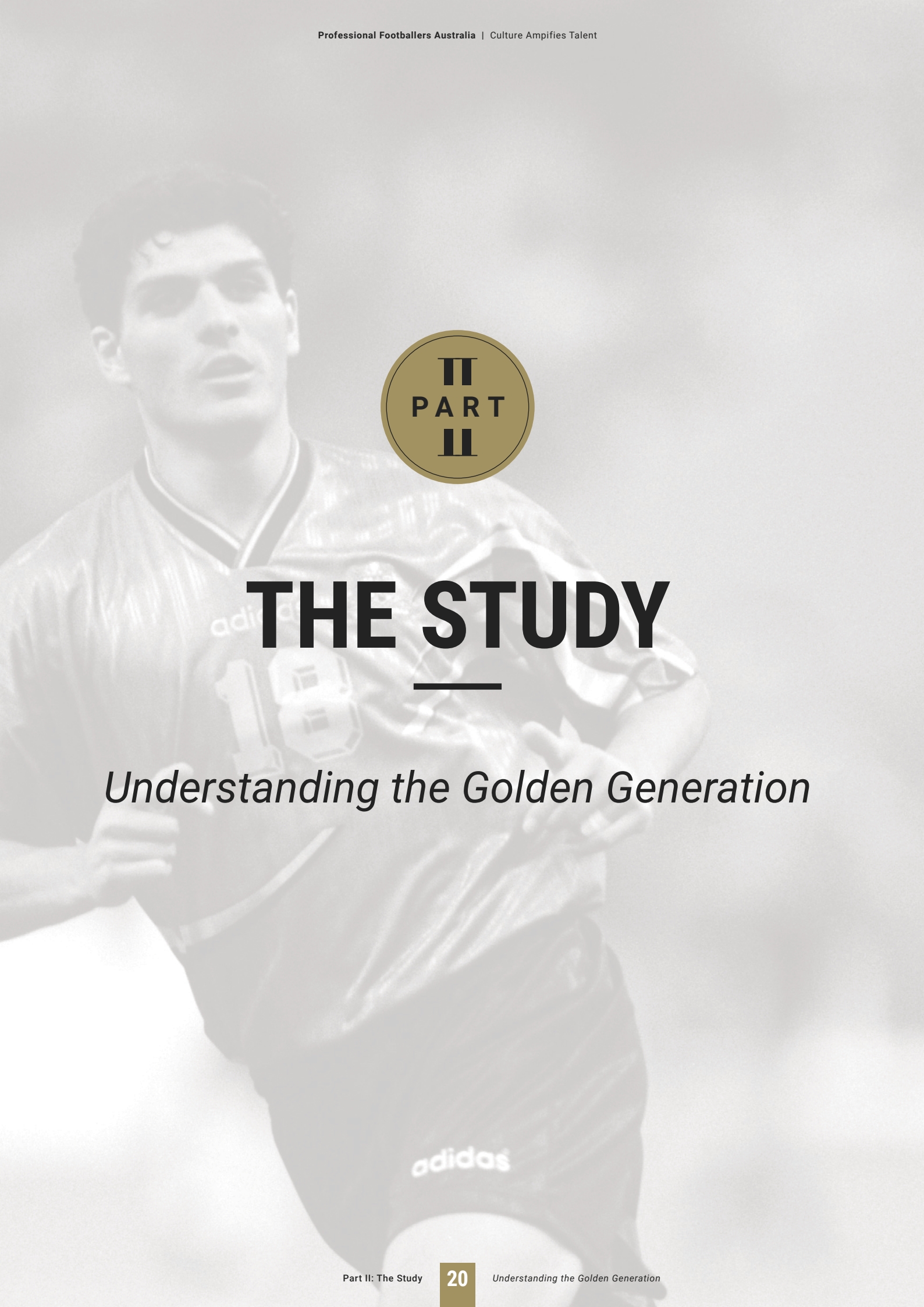
We wanted to look 'beyond the curriculum' at these wider cultural factors. If we were a nation which has never experienced success, the best thing to do might be to look at which similar countries were overperforming and try to import their secret sauce. But because we have been relatively more successful in recent history, we have the opportunity to look back, rather than out. We know it is possible to cook up world class football talent in Australia because it has been done before – we only need to rediscover the recipe.

So, what has changed? Again, there are so many threads to pull on, it is easy to become overwhelmed. For example, have backyards been shrinking or disappearing? Has screen time eaten into kids' free play hours? Are our boys as determined to get to the top as they once were? Even if we can quantify answers to these and a hundred other relevant questions, how can we possibly know what relative impact each of them has on net talent development? This piece of work is possible, but impractical.

Instead, we decided to focus on the success stories and identify the important factors through reverse induction. We partnered with Victoria University to undertake an unprecedented study of the development histories of some of the best players from our best generation of players. We asked these players about all aspects of their younger lives. Obviously, the focus was on football, but we also explored topics from family dynamic to socioeconomic status. The intention was to discover what these players had in common which took them further than their peers and, on average, further than their successors.

> *We know it is possible to cook up world class football talent in Australia because it has been done before – we only need to rediscover the recipe*

Simon Colosimo (left) challenges Ireland's Robbie Keane, alongside Vince Grella (right) during the 1999 FIFA World Youth Championships



PART II

THE STUDY

Understanding the Golden Generation

Methodology

RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Damian Farrow
Institute for Health and Sport
Victoria University

Dr Paul Larkin
Institute for Health and Sport
Victoria University, Maribyrnong Sports Academy

Associate Professor Michael Spittle
Institute for Health and Sport
Victoria University

The Victoria University (VU) research team worked in partnership with PFA staff to develop the approach, select the participants, design the interviews and survey, and interpret the findings. The VU team conducted and transcribed all interviews, and collected all survey responses.

Participants

'Golden Generation' participants were selected on two criteria: age and excellence.

Firstly, their careers had to span the peak of Australia's international competitiveness as defined by the PFA Player Pathway Study: around the early-to-mid-2000s. The sample ranged from Paul Okon born in 1972, to Nathan Burns, born 1988, but 13 of the 17 players were born in the decade between 1975-1984.

Secondly, they had to be amongst the best players of that generation. While there are undoubtedly some 'big' names missing from the sample who would have been ideal to include, such as starting members of the 2006 World Cup Socceroos, this was limited by accessibility. However, the absence of specific players does not undermine the research, since the intention was to discover the common features in the histories of that generation of players. Key themes emerged from the 17 interviews conducted which would have been broadly consistent across others from that cohort, whether they achieved a little bit more or less in their careers. In fact, responses already began to become predictable after the first half dozen interviews, so similar were the themes from each.

Australia competing at the 2005 Confederations Cup

Participants

Paul Okon
1972

Ante Covic
1975

Josip Skoko
1975

John Aloisi
1976

Joey Didulica
1977

Chris Coyne
1978

Simon Colosimo
1979

Dean Heffernan
1980

Richard Garcia
1981

Nick Carle
1981

Jonny McKain
1982

Michael Thwaite
1983

Alex Wilkinson
1984

Carl Valeri
1984

Nigel Boogaard
1986

Dario Vidosic
1987

Nathan Burns
1988

Interviews

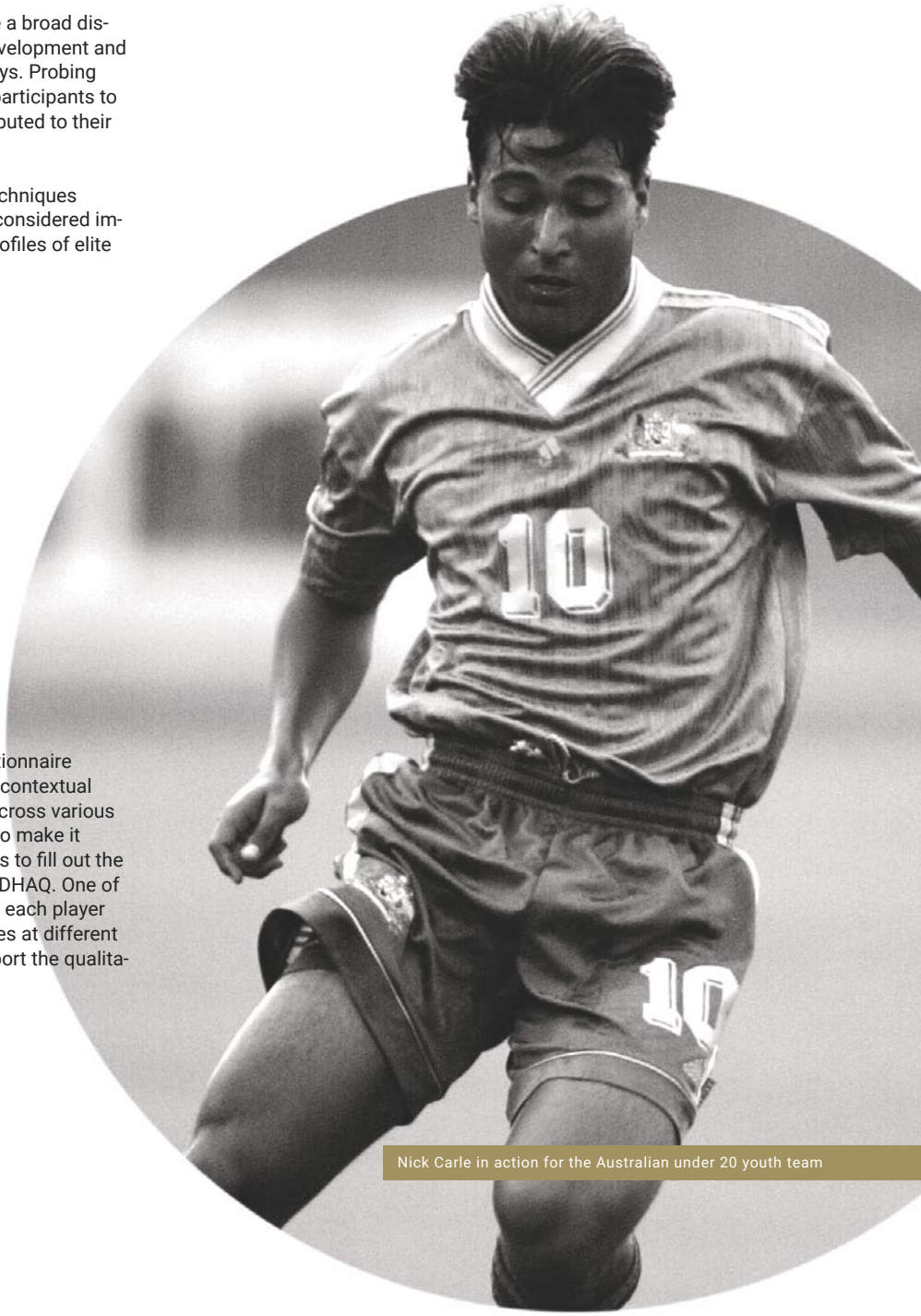
Inductive semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of inquiry. VU researchers spoke with the participants throughout 2018, mostly face-to-face. Interviews lasted from 35-75 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, comprising 364 pages of text.

Open-ended questions were used to promote a broad discussion relating to the participants' talent development and progression within the football talent pathways. Probing questions were also incorporated to enable participants to explain how their specific experiences contributed to their development as an elite professional player.

The researchers used analysis and coding techniques which led to the identification of six themes considered important to understanding the development profiles of elite Australian male footballers.

Developmental History of Athletes Questionnaire

The Developmental History of Athletes Questionnaire (DHAQ) is a tool which is used to assess the contextual factors in the development of elite athletes across various sports. The researchers modified the DHAQ to make it more football-specific and invited participants to fill out the survey online. Fifteen players completed the DHAQ. One of the key insights was the quantum of minutes each player committed to various football-related activities at different ages, providing quantitative evidence to support the qualitative findings.



Nick Carle in action for the Australian under 20 youth team

Current Generation

The primary function of the research was to identify common factors from the backgrounds of Golden Generation era players. But to bring these factors into focus, a comparison was sought. The research was extended to a small sample of five Australian national youth team players aged in their late teens in 2018. These players were interviewed using a similar format to the older players. None completed the DHAQ.

While this smaller sample does not provide as deep an understanding about today's development pathway as was got for the Golden Generation, that was not the intention. We simply wanted to see whether the themes that emerged from the Golden Generation had remained the same or changed, helping us identify which factors were unique to their time. Even though the five players interviewed came from different parts of the country and different sociodemographic backgrounds, their responses were largely consistent. Therefore, it is very likely this sample was largely representative of today's most successful emerging players.

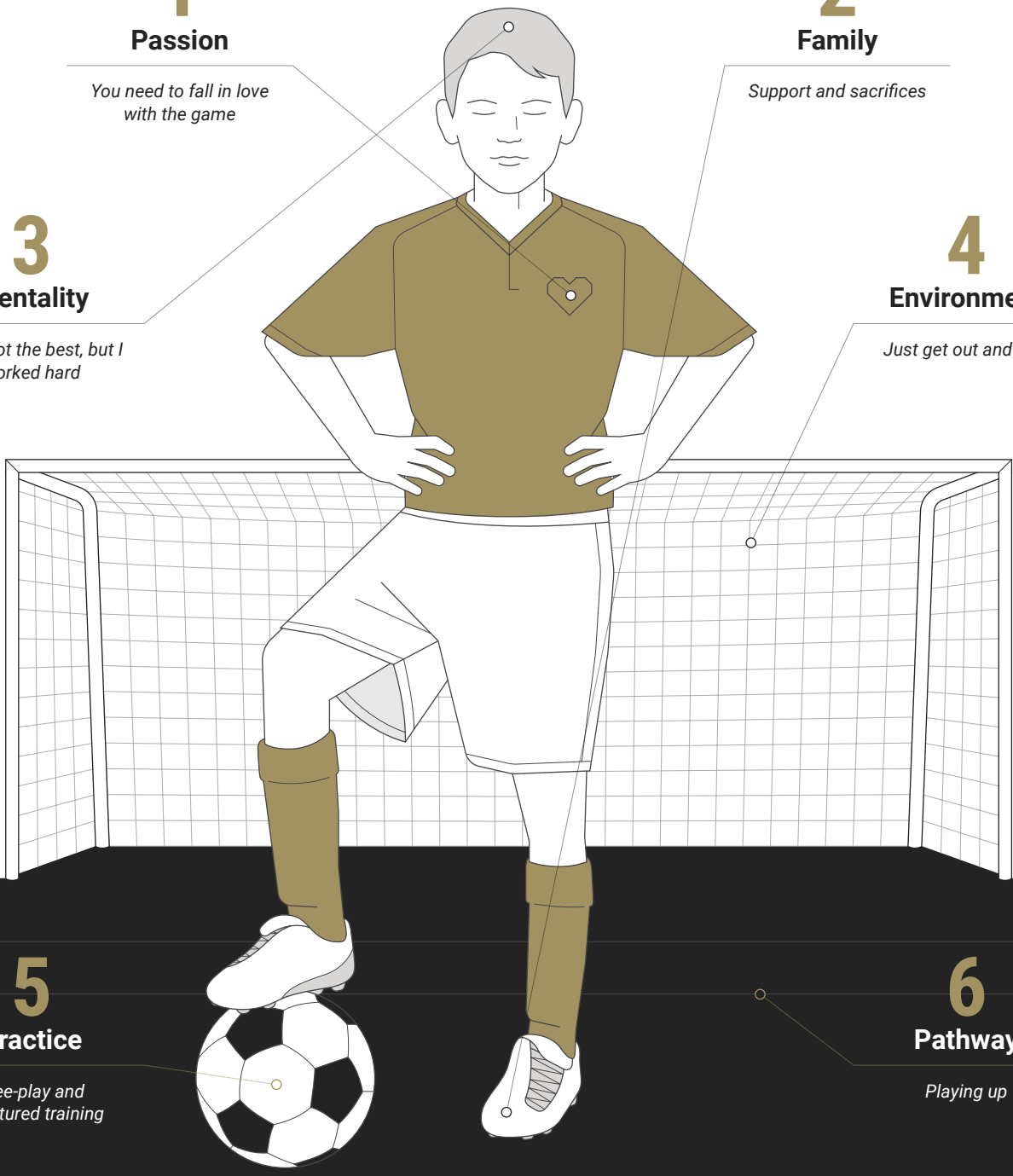
Findings

1
Passion
You need to fall in love with the game

2
Family
Support and sacrifices

3
Mentality
I was not the best, but I worked hard

4
Environment
Just get out and play



5
Practice
Free-play and structured training

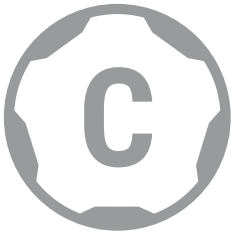
6
Pathway
Playing up

VU identified six key themes which repeated across the conversations with the players from the Golden Generation. They explored each theme with the sample of players from the Current Generation to highlight any similarities or changes which may have occurred over time. Their findings follow.

Note: VU's report to PFA has been slightly edited for this format. The content herein is a true and accurate representation of their findings.

1 PASSION

You need to fall in love with the game



Golden Generation:
Loving the Local Game

All of the players indicated they started engaging in football activities from an early age with family in the back garden. This developed into a love for the game which was fostered through playing football, watching World Cups and highlights shows on SBS and engaging with the local football club. Players generally entered structured football club programs from the age of five, with these early experiences shaping football dreams about playing in the National Soccer League (NSL) and for Australia at a World Cup.

Current Generation:
Loving the Global Game

Similar to their predecessors, these players indicated an early discovery of football with family in the garden or local park. Fun and casual beginnings developed into a passion for the game. They too joined their local club between the ages of 5-11. The main point of difference was the global nature of the football industry they looked up and out into to get inspiration. The English Premier League, La Liga, the UEFA Champions League and the A-League were all easily accessible. The players' perceptions of elite football were shaped by the globalisation of football and the potential impact it can have on one's life.

What does the research tell us?

An early development of a deep love of football was common across both generations. This is an important element in becoming elite in any pursuit, especially sports, because a passion for the craft will ensure the athlete invests the time required into associated practice and games to reach the highest level and navigate the highs and lows of the journey[1].

Both generations experienced similar introductions to the sport, engaging in fun games in and around the family home from an early age, often with siblings. In addition to their own contact with the ball, both generations highlighted the impact of engaging with football through televised media. However, this exposure was quite different for each group due to the changes in technology and broadcast available then and now. While kids today can access footage of nearly any team or player on demand, the Golden Generation was limited to what SBS offered. This included World Cups and highlights of European leagues such as Serie A.

It could be said that Golden Generation players had a global awareness but a local focus, while today's players have a local awareness but a global focus. This finding also highlights the important role SBS played in promoting the game before the rise of the internet[2].

Today's players have a greater exposure to all aspects of the game which may influence their development, such as different styles of players and teams and tactical models. They are also more aware of the potential positive lifestyle outcomes that comes with being a successful footballer[1].

Key Messages

- Players in both generations developed a deep love of the game through fun activities at a young age with family and friends
- Players generally entered local youth clubs from the age of five
- The advancement in technology has seen a shift in the exposure to global football – from relatively limited SBS coverage, to the now 24/7 access to football content
- There has been a shift in the perception of professional football, with the Current Generation more aware of the global nature of football, and the potential social impact of a career in football

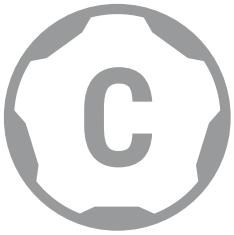
Chris Coyne, playing for Dundee United, tackles Celtic's Swedish forward Henrik Larsson in the Scottish Premier League

2 FAMILY

Support and sacrifices

Golden Generation:
Influenced by Parental Support

The family structure was an important factor during the players' development. The majority of the players were from a European middle-class background. Parents were key role models and provided support throughout their football journey. Parents also had to make significant sacrifices to support the player, including time and money. Siblings (older and younger) were just as important by providing both playmates and competition. However, the siblings were sometimes negatively impacted (had to make sacrifices) by the player's football pursuits. While football was generally engrained in the family culture, there were five instances (out of 17) where the family was not from a football background.



Current Generation:
Siblings Step Up

The family structure was again highlighted as an important aspect of the players' development. The majority of the players came from migrant families living in middle-class Australia. While parents provided a key role in supporting and enabling players to participate in football, the majority of the players acknowledged the important role older brothers played in their development. Both parents and older siblings had to make significant sacrifices to support the player, including investing time, money and taking time off work. Interestingly, four of the five players acknowledged that football was not a key part of their family identify, culture or of particular interest prior to them being talent identified.

FAMILY

What does the research tell us?

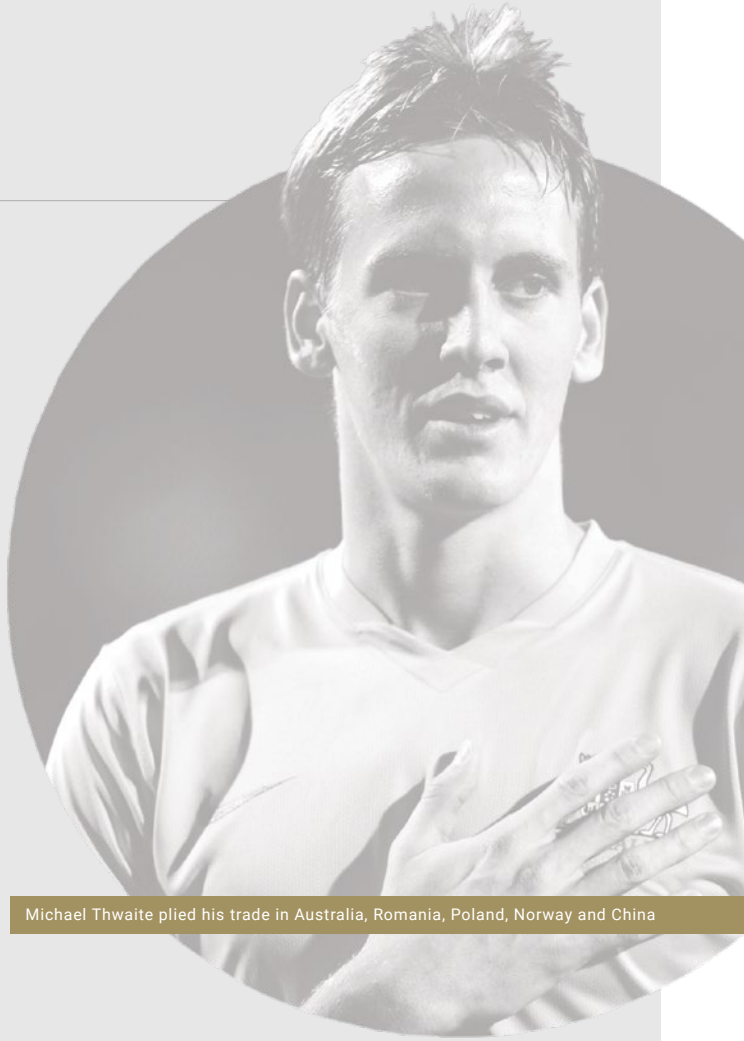
Parents play a pivotal role in introducing sport to their young children[3]. But while a clear majority of Golden Generation participants said football was already ingrained in their family culture, most Current Generation players said football was not prominent until after they began to excel.

In either case, all players felt unwavering support from their families, including personal and lifestyle sacrifices and investment of time and money. This reflects research which has shown that young athletes at all levels are dependent on their families to enable their involvement in their sport[1,4-5]. Further, in line with previous studies[6], the Current Generation of players reported that their families did not put pressure on them in relation to their sporting career, but rather engaged in a role of follower and supporter.

Both generations highlighted the role of siblings in helping them discover the game[7-8] and acting as role models[7] and practice partners[9]. But while the role of parents and siblings was distinct for the Golden Generation, the Current Generation flagged a crossover between the two, with siblings often being the ones to help them attend football activities. This shift is potentially due to changes in the family dynamic[5] and demands on parents to support the family. Increasing household work hours, with parents working longer non-traditional hours or second jobs, impact on 'family time' and the capacity for parents to make the sacrifices and commitments which the previous generation flagged as central to their success. To an extent, older siblings are picking up the slack. This trend highlights an obvious problem since family units are shrinking on average – so each potential young star is less likely to have a sibling to depend on.

Key Messages

- The football demographic has shifted in line with Australian immigration trends, from European to Asian and African
- Football was a key element of the family culture and identity for the Golden Generation, however, this is not the case for the Current Generation
- Across both generations, the family unit makes significant sacrifices (e.g., time and money) to support the athlete's development and career progress
- Both generations highlighted how parents worked hard during their childhood, but still provided time and support for their football
- For the Golden Generation, siblings were generally close in age and provided football play mates and friendly competition to encourage continual development of skills and abilities
- The sibling roles have evolved for the Current Generation, with the players indicating that much older siblings provided support during their development by taking them to and from football training and games, when parents were unable



Michael Thwaite plied his trade in Australia, Romania, Poland, Norway and China

In My Words

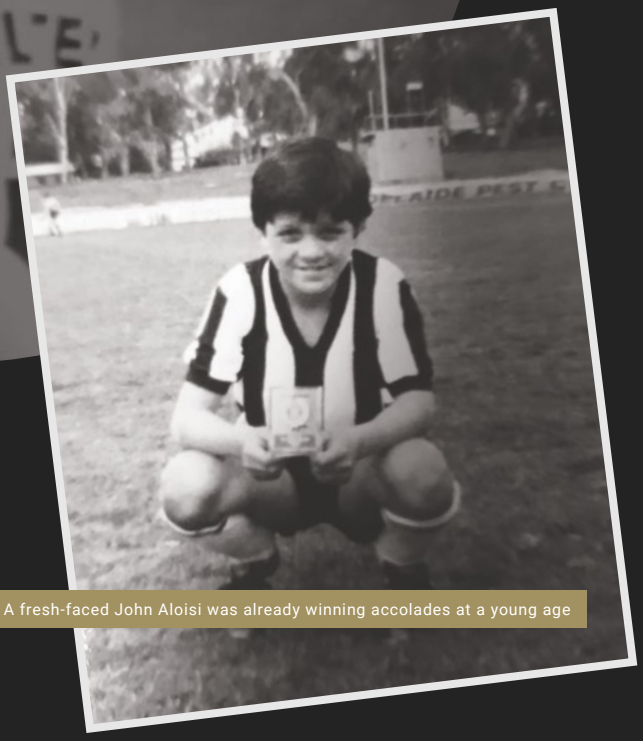
JOHN ALOISI

Dad told us to make the ball your best friend

I started playing when I was five and just enjoyed it straight away. My brother was three years older than me, and I used to kick the ball around with him in the backyard or in the house. My dad was a cabinet maker and he built us goals. We were able to play 1v1s and practice our shooting, like half-court basketball. But even if I wasn't with my brother, I would practice dribbling, shooting, hitting the ball against the wall as hard as you can and work on your touch when it comes back.

You're playing with your brother and your cousins and friends and kicking a ball whenever we can. Dad told us to make the ball your best friend. If you just have structured training, I don't think you're going to be the player you can be. Whether it's structured or unstructured, you just have to do something with a ball. And it wasn't only soccer. It was cricket. Table tennis. Playing other sports helped because of the hand-eye coordination, movement.

I remember watching the World Cup at the age of six because coming from Italian background, Italy won the World Cup. We bought the video recorder especially for the World



A fresh-faced John Aloisi was already winning accolades at a young age

Cup because the games were on during the night. Mum was the only one who knew how to use it. Then watching our own team play in the old national league, that was what we dreamed of doing one day. So in the back yard it was always to emulate one of the players that we went to watch on the weekend, and certain players that we remembered from the World Cup.

I feel sorry for my sisters because all they would hear about is football and it's still the same now. Dad used to work all week, and any time we got to spend with him was at football. It became our life. We just thought it was normal that we were only friends with people that liked football. We couldn't wait for the weekend to come around because we would have our games in the morning and then in the afternoon, we'd go watch the first team play. It was that whole day. After the game we'd be in the club rooms and then the older players that had just finished playing would come in, have a meal, and sign autographs. And we wanted to be like them.

My old man would never let us win in any sport. When you're good enough, beat me. He would never give up. Ever. We used to watch him play cricket. He was a fast bowler. One day in a final they were bowling all day but just couldn't take a wicket. The opposition team nearly made it. My old man's team needed six wickets still, and the captain, who was his cousin, came over and said, "look, I'm going to give someone that hasn't had a bowl a chance for fun since it's the last game". He goes: "If you take me off because you've given up, I'll walk off the field." And then he ended up taking one wicket, two wickets, and they ended up winning the game.

We never thought about what we need to do to get to the top. We just loved playing and loved winning. The times I didn't make the state team at an early age, I just remember being disappointed and crying. I'm not good enough. My dad was always saying "well you need to work harder, you need to keep improving". All I thought at the time was to be better, get better. He was coach of both the Adelaide City youth team and the state league team. It was a lot of pressure on him because we were playing with players he'd have to leave out. He always said we'd have to be better than everyone else. It was a lot of pressure for us, but we didn't think about it. We just thought, well we need to be better and we will be better.

My brother was older than me so he was a lot better than me. I was trying to beat him, trying to get as good as him, better than him. I started to think that I had a chance when I saw my brother represent the Australian Under 17 national team at the World Cup in Scotland. He would've been 16, so I would have been 12 or 13. If he can do it, then if I work hard enough, I'll be able to do it. That's when I started to feel my goal is to represent Australia.

I wouldn't say that it was the club environment that shaped me as a player. It was more that we had so many good players in that environment that I needed to do more to be better than them. So, I think what I did outside of the club was what helped me more than what I did inside the club. It was during the off season, when I was about 13 or 14. I did a lot of training in terms of skill work and when I came back to train with the team that I was playing with, they noticed it. The hours by yourself in the backyard, trying to hit the ball against the wall and turn away. That's when I really started to improve.

I wasn't as skilful as a lot of other players. Even my brother was a lot more technical than me. I just had a feel for where the goal was. I used to watch Italian soccer on Sunday mornings, on SBS, and want to be like the strikers. My favourite player was van Basten, and I used to watch his movements and how he'd take the ball in the box. When I used to go watch the old national league, instead of watching the whole game, I'd be watching the main striker, what he did well, and how to get into goal-scoring positions. I started to really feel that I could be a good striker when I played in the Under 15 national championships down in Tasmania and I scored in every game.

I was already training with the first team at Adelaide City when I was 14, 15. At the time Adelaide City had four or five Socceroos, so that helped my development a hell of a lot. When you're playing against older players you had to think quicker because they're physically stronger than you. You had to have that tactical awareness because you didn't want to get caught on the ball because they're just gonna yell at ya, you get kicked. So you had to be aware of where you could receive the ball, where your first touch had to go.

I went to the Australian Institute of Sport at the age of 16. I was only there for six, seven months but we had a really good group of players. Training was tougher than the game. Ron Smith used to do a lot of video with us. You would be watching the best players. I'd watch Gary Lineker in the '86 World Cup, scoring all those goals, and Ron Smith would go, how's he getting on those positions? Show me. That again helped a lot in my development. It made me think more about the game, whereas a kid, you're not really thinking about it, you're just going out there and playing. When I got up to 15, 16, training with those better players, having those people make you think about the game more, it helps your development a lot.

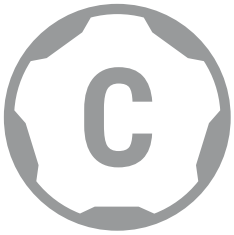
Another piece of advice I got as a kid: if a coach didn't like you, make him like you. Fight for the spot, be better than the others. It isn't totally in your hands. You have to go through those tough times. All players that have played overseas know what I'm talking about. I had no option to come back to Australia because it was semi-professional back then. And I didn't want to come back, I wanted to play professional football.

I never really looked at the money side. Every decision, I looked at what was the best for my football career. And then I was lucky my wife came wherever we went. Not once did she ever say I want to live here, I want to be there. It was always whatever's best for football. I didn't really have a plan B. It's probably that I was single-minded and confident that I was going to make it. When you think about Australians that make it overseas, it's not a high percentage, but I just believed that I was going to play professional football, and I've never thought about anything else.

I get asked about being in the Golden Generation, and is there ever going to be another Timmy Cahill? Well, why not? There should be better players than Timmy Cahill. We know what it takes, so it's up to us to pass on that knowledge. I would say the majority of players now are technically better than what I was. It's up to them to work even harder because the game's improved so much anyway, and just to have that belief and that real motivation to get to the highest level possible.

MENTALITY

I was not the best, but I worked hard



Golden Generation:
Hard Work and Setbacks

Players attributed their success to hard work and putting in more effort than others at every opportunity. This drive and motivation ensured they got the most out of their talent. Every player said they suffered setbacks which helped build their resilience and character. Hurdles such as being overlooked for representative squads were viewed, on reflection, as positives.

From a career perspective, all players indicated a level of control in the decisions they made. The factors which influenced these decisions changed over the course of their career; early on, the goal was to play at the highest level, while towards the end, money and family security took priority.

Current Generation:
Youth League Development

These players also highlighted hard work as a key reason for their success. In addition, the players wanted to gain coaches' approval, while the desire to give back to their families also motivated them to improve and reach the highest level.

In terms of technical and tactical development, the players indicated this accelerated in their mid-teens when they joined National Premier League or State Institute teams. These skills developed in the more professional environments, helped by resources such as video analysis. All players indicated they were encouraged by family to continue to study despite progressions though the talent pathway.

What does the research tell us?

Sporting pursuits are emphasised by the perseverance to practice and play, with an extensive body of literature indicating more accumulated hours of engagement in sport-specific activities positively correlate with skilled performance[10-12]. It is evident that both generations had a desire to work hard in their pursuit of their football goals.

This theme raises a challenge common across this research; we are selecting from the best players from both eras, so while this finding suggests consistency from one to the next, this study cannot detect whether there has been a decrease in the overall levels of hard work and resilience in, say, the average 10-year-old boy registered to a club.

The players demonstrated 'self-regulation'[13] – a trait common to elite athletes[14-16] – which essentially means they took personal responsibility for their individual development. They were engaged and proactive in their own improvement, regularly reflecting on their performance. They were disciplined in complying with the demands placed on them by themselves and their clubs.

In addition to this, both generations demonstrated they engaged in football activities on a volitional basis. They were intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated, meaning they played (and got better) for their own enjoyment rather than in pursuit of some external recognition or reward[17].

Putting this together, their expertise resulted from a combination of an in-built desire to play, and a natural inclination to think about how to get better.

The Current Generation diverged slightly from this by highlighting a need and want for extrinsic factors, such as feedback from their coach. This could be influenced by changes to the youth development system in Australia, with a stronger focus by more qualified coaches to identify and develop talented players. If current players are indeed more extrinsically focused, it is not necessarily a determining factor between the generations, but it is an interesting nuance.

A key aspect of the players' mentality related to whether they sustained this dedication to playing and improving when times got tough. The players demonstrated 'grit' by working obstinately toward their goals and maintaining interest and effort in football over the years despite disappointments, hardships and plateaus[18-19]. Recent research has demonstrated a positive relationship between grit and time invested in competition, training, football-specific play, and indirect football involvement[20].

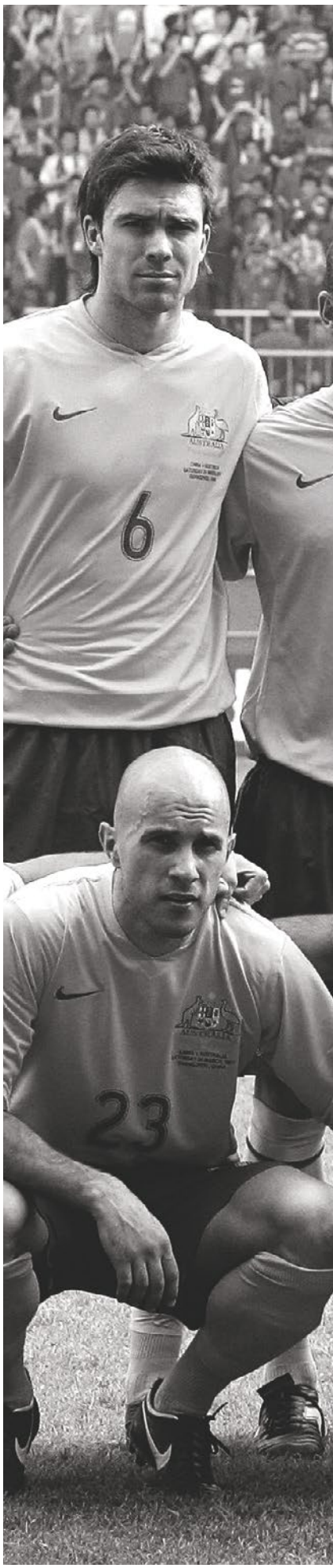
The Golden Generation players reported major setbacks throughout their histories such as injuries and being overlooked for selection. Setbacks have been found to build resilience in athletes[21-23]. The Current Generation players did not report such setbacks. This could just be a quirk of the sample, but it is possible that a filtering process has occurred. Other players from the Current Generation who ran into major obstacles saw them not as challenges to overcome but rather the ends of their journeys, leaving only those who had smoother paths to progress to the point where we surveyed them.

It is speculative to suggest younger players are simply giving up easier. It could be that the development pathway has changed such that it is harder to get back into the elite frame after being overlooked, not through a lack of effort but due to structural design. Further research is needed, particularly with young players who did have major setbacks.

Ante Covic ahead of the World Cup match between the Socceroos and Croatia at the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany

Key Messages

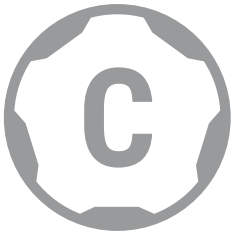
- Both Generations highlighted the need for hard work and dedication in their pursuit of a professional football career
- Engagement in football activities was volitional in nature
- While both Generations highlighted an intrinsic drive to engage in football training, the Current Generation also highlighted the need for extrinsic factors, such as coach recognition
- The Current Generation pursued their football dreams, but also were encouraged by family to progress in their studies to ensure they had a Plan B
- While the Golden Generation highlighted several setbacks within their football career which built resilience, none of the Current Generation identified or discussed particular setback



> *Engagement in football activities was volitional in nature*

4 ENVIRONMENT

Just get out and play



Golden Generation:
Ball as Best Friend

The players always had a ball with them, and they were never inside; they took every opportunity to play football. There were two major football environments the players described growing up: the home and the local football club.

The home environment was shaped by the back garden, with this providing opportunity for unstructured games and individual practice. Common structures such as a wall, garage door or fence palings provided targets or opportunities for developing striking and ball control skills.

In contrast, the local club environment was where formal football training sessions took place. These were mainly run by parent coaches, and incorporated game-based activities. Most of these players joined an ethnic local club which provided the family an opportunity to engage with this community; football days were seen as a social event for the family. Players recalled spending all day playing unstructured games with peers at the club while the senior matches were being played.

Current Generation:
Progression Through Formal Pathway

These players identified the same two major football environments: home and the local club. At home (or at the local park) they had similar anecdotes to their predecessors, playing with the ball alone or in small groups for fun rather than specific development.

The club environment evolved as the player progressed, from a local, community-based club with parent coaches, to a higher standard such as an NPL club, a state institute and finally an A-League academy. The professionalism of the environment and the qualifications of the coaches noticeably increased at each step up. In contrast to the Golden Generation, these players spent less time at their club outside their own scheduled training or matches.

What does the research tell us?

The findings provide a similar narrative for both Generations in relation to how they engaged in football within the home environment. They started playing with the ball with family or friends in the backyard for fun, and later often progressed to honing particular skills either alone or with a mate, using walls or other features as part of challenges and games. The local park or the school oval was commonly cited as a place to play larger games.

The changing story of the club environment is at the core of this study. The Golden Generation players came up through the ethnic clubs which acted as the beating hearts of the newly formed communities of European post-war migrants. These clubs played a central role in the social lives of these players' families, and helped allow them to identify proudly with both Australia and their homelands[2]. In a practical sense, this deep emotional and cultural connection facilitated hours of crucial football development because the players would spend entire days hanging around at the club kicking a ball with other kids. The Golden Generation said that most of the formal training was guided by parent coaches and based around games, until they were exposed to more qualified coaches in their mid-teens.

By contrast, the Current Generation chopped and changed clubs more as they progressed. By age 10 they had usually moved on to a bigger club with more qualified coaches, a relatively new phenomenon[24]. Their relationships with their clubs were centred on their training and matches, rather than as a vehicle for social connection. When asked about this, they said there were "other things to do on the weekend" or a lack of spare time. This confirms research which finds parents being time-poor as a barrier to children's sports participation[4]. It also confirms the Golden Generation's perception that football has become more of a 'drop off, pick up' structured activity for children today, rather than playing a larger role in the lives of its participants and their families. This shift could be negatively impacting the volume of hours spent in free-play football activities.

Key Messages

- Both Generations highlighted the home back garden as one of the first places they were exposed to fun football activities
- As the athletes grew, they expanded the football free-play environment from the back garden to the local park or school oval
- Both Generations indicated that early club football was characterised by parent coaches with minimal to no coaching experience or qualifications. However, the Current Generation were exposed to qualified coaches at club level several years before any of the Golden Generation players had qualified club-based coaches
- The junior careers of the majority of the Golden Generation was characterised by stability, playing at one club for long periods
- The majority of the Golden Generation highlighted the importance of the local ethnic club within their family culture, with this providing the family with a weekly social event, where the players were able to play organised games, and free-play with peers for extended periods of time
- The Current Generation indicated the local club as a place for structured football practice, but this was not a key part of the family culture. Players were more likely to play or train with their team and then leave

In My Words

SIMON COLOSIMO

> *I made every decision based on representing Australia. That's what I wanted to do, I wanted to play for the Socceroos.*

I grew up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, one of four siblings. My dad worked at least 60 hours a week. He didn't speak much English. At the time, my mum worked in a factory. We were just working class, trying to make ends meet. They weren't flush, but they always seemed to be flush for us kids.

My brothers were playing, my cousins were playing, our family friends were playing. We were all at one club. I'd play my game at 8am, then I'd watch my brother, then we'd go and have a kick, then the seniors would play. There was the formal game then the rest of the day you're on the pitch, there's no coach, it's just in and out. So our whole Sunday was centred around this Italian community. There was a genuine connection between the club and us.

(Coaches) were just parents who loved the game. They wouldn't be able to organise a session, but they knew the basic fundamentals of how to pass a ball and so on. But it never looked like it does now, where there's cones everywhere and it looks like Real Madrid's about to train. But the games were where you learnt it all. It was really just organised street football.

All our time was spent in the back yard kicking the ball, playing games with my brothers. We'd just shoot at each other, and broke a few windows along the way. The garage door didn't open after, because it took a beating. Those games were no different to when I went to the Australian Institute of Sport. The indoor centre there was exactly the same and we'd play the same sort of game there with my peers at that level.

Through summer there was a lot of cricket being played. A guy across the road was from the West Indies, he'd always pull the wickets out. Cricket, basketball – I played everything informally. I played one game of organised AFL for my school.

I remember the Under 12s state team went to Lismore and I almost couldn't go because we just couldn't afford it. I don't know what my parents did but they ended up getting it together and away I went. So those sacrifices were definitely there.

I never played for fun. It was fun winning and losing, that was the fun in it. Even if I was about to play for the Socceroos in four days' time, and went and had a kick with my brothers, we'd be kicking the shit out of each other, because we'd all want to win, that's just the way it was. And the same went with my peers. Every training session or game at the AIS was competitive, everything we did was competitive, but positively.

I'm a strong believer that if I'm the best player in my team, I'm the go-to guy and my mates were dependent on me being at my best, because I was going to be the difference whether we won or lost. I think they helped me along the way, because without knowing it, I'm already coping with pressures at a young age.

One thing that helped is that my parents didn't know what being a professional athlete was. They never wanted the career for me, it was purely just: "okay, you've got ability and you work hard, and away you go". It was on me. If I wanted

it, then I did it. Once I had made that decision I wanted to be a professional footballer, I ended up being a professional for the best part of 16 or 17 years, never taking no for an answer, always looking in the mirror, making my decisions and living and dying by them.

I made the under 12s state team then I never made the representative team until 15s. Then in quick succession, it was the VIS, AIS, Australian Under 20 World Cup team when I was 17,18. I captained the U20s in 1999, represented Australia at the Sydney Olympics, professional contract at Carlton, I'd already touched the actual national team at 19. So it all came really quickly, maybe too quickly. Then I had a major injury which was at that moment that I realised this is a professional career, and it could easily be gone.

My good friends like Vince Grella and Mark Bresciano had the same sort of trajectory. Early on, they weren't in the reckoning for representative teams. But then you've got guys like Harry Kewell and Brett Emerton who were identified from a young age. But I don't think any of us ever got told that we were good.

I made every decision based on representing Australia. That's what I wanted to do, I wanted to play for the Socceroos. I went to Manchester City but after one year, I wasn't playing much, so I cancelled the second year of a very good contract to go and try and find somewhere where I was going to play more. Back then whoever's playing at the highest level in Europe is getting selected and working my way back to the Socceroos after three years out is one of my biggest highlights.

I think setbacks are a positive. I think they're learnings. I don't think there's anything wrong with taking a backward step, and I think that builds resilience. I think resilience is built by a couple of hard knocks, having nothing given to you.

At the AIS, if I got beaten on a weekend in a couple of one on ones, I'd go and find the quickest guy in our team at training on Monday, and have him run at me half a dozen times". He's benefiting, because he's getting to run at me, but I'm benefiting trying to stop him. You took the teaching from the coach into your own stuff. Today no one's allowed to do that anymore because of loading. No one's getting 20 balls and just shooting at the goal, whereas Batistuta used to finish every session with ten shots from outside the penalty area. And he had to hit the net on the full, ten in a row – if he hit eight, and then missed the ninth one, start again.

I think we're developing better players. But I think the previous generation were better footballers. If we look at the 2006, 2010 World Cup, 95% of the squad were playing in the top eight leagues in the world. Today they're not. Opportunities are better now, and we have worked for better playing surfaces and training facilities and all that. But I believe that that's a hindrance on that resilience. I think I learnt all my best things because I had to deal with the concrete in the back yard, and wearing the same pair of boots for two seasons, that type of thing.

Parents now come up to me and say "my son's going to be a professional footballer". And the kid is sitting over there and I'm wondering what his views are. It's you, not your parents, not your mates, it's you as an individual. It's intrinsic.

Simon Colosimo rises for a header during a Socceroos training camp

5 PRACTICE

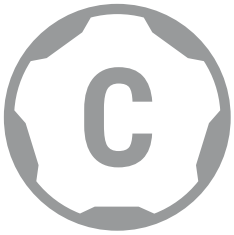
Free-play and structured training

Golden Generation: Early Diversification

Free-play football activities were central to the players' development. At the time, these were just seen as fun activities with siblings or friends. They were unstructured in nature, with self-directed rules and goals. Types of activities included 1v1s, small-sided games, crossing and shooting activities, and solo practice with the ball. Looking back, the players indicated these experiences had a positive influence on their development.

The players also indicated that formal training sessions at their clubs were fairly unstructured and based around games. Their coaches were usually just parents with limited coaching knowledge, so they let the game be the teacher and gave minimal technical instruction.

Finally, all participants indicated they sampled a variety of other sports during their childhoods, but there was always a focus on football.



Current Generation: Early Specialisation

The Current Generation repeated many of the themes of the Golden Generation. Free-play activities were central to both their technical improvement and burgeoning love for the game. Formal training was centred around game-based activities, but these were presumably designed and monitored by more qualified coaches as the players moved up through the pathway described in the section on Environment.

Like the Golden Generation, today's players sampled other sports, but this was mainly through school. Outside of school, they tended to specialise in football from a young age.

What does the research tell us?

There are two distinct types of activities for player development: free-play and structured club football. Most time spent with the ball will fall into one of these two buckets and these phases will overlap and intersect throughout a player's life.

Both generations spoke to the enjoyment of free-play activities with family or peers. Before we consider the role of free play in developing skill and creativity, it is important to note the fun aspect of such experiences[25-26]. Players need to commit thousands of hours to football to eventually reach the top. This commitment would not have been likely had they not developed an early enjoyment of the ball.

Self-designed games and challenges, often termed Deliberate Play[26], are thought to be a critical ingredient in the development of athletes[27]. Players are faced with challenging problems to solve, such as playing with children of different ages, and tasked with making their own decisions in an environment with no rules and no coach[28]. They have opportunities to experiment, to stretch their ability by failing without consequence. All the while, in the intrinsic pursuit of fun and play, they improve their technical ability through repeated contact with the ball.

There are competing pedagogical theories in the structured club environment. There is Deliberate Practice, which is defined by highly structured activities with the explicit goal to improve performance, which may not be inherently enjoyable[29]. Then there is Play Practice, which is also prescribed by a coach and intended to improve performance, but which also focuses on fun and games to keep the athletes motivated[26].

Both generations reported that their youth club experiences leaned towards Play Practice, with a focus on games and fun. Less enjoyable types of specific, isolated training were only found later in their careers. This consistent finding perhaps challenges a perception about how youth coaching has evolved over the years.

It also suggests that both Generations were exposed to generally effective coaching strategies for player development. Pedagogy research suggests the use of game-based activities for learning in general. In the sporting context, activities like small-sided games can enhance tactical and strategic thinking in addition to motor skills and technique[30-31]. Skill acquisition researchers believe these types of activities promote holistic athlete development[32-34] and better long-term learning and retention of skills compared isolated drill-based activities[35-36]. These games provide players with the opportunity experiment with their skills execution, by being able to interpret cues, explore different options, make decisions and execute technical skills, with the goal to identify appropriate competitive in-game decisions and actions[37].

There was a difference between the generations in their exposure to other organised sports. To understand these differences, we look to the literature and consider Côté's Stages of Sport Participation model[6], which consists of three stages: Sampling, Specialising and Investment. Sampling is about participating in a variety of sports from a young age (6-12), with an emphasis on fun and discovery. Specialising refers to an increasing focus on performance and specific development in one sport, usually from age 12-15. Investment follows later as training intensifies in one sport with a view to achieving elite status.

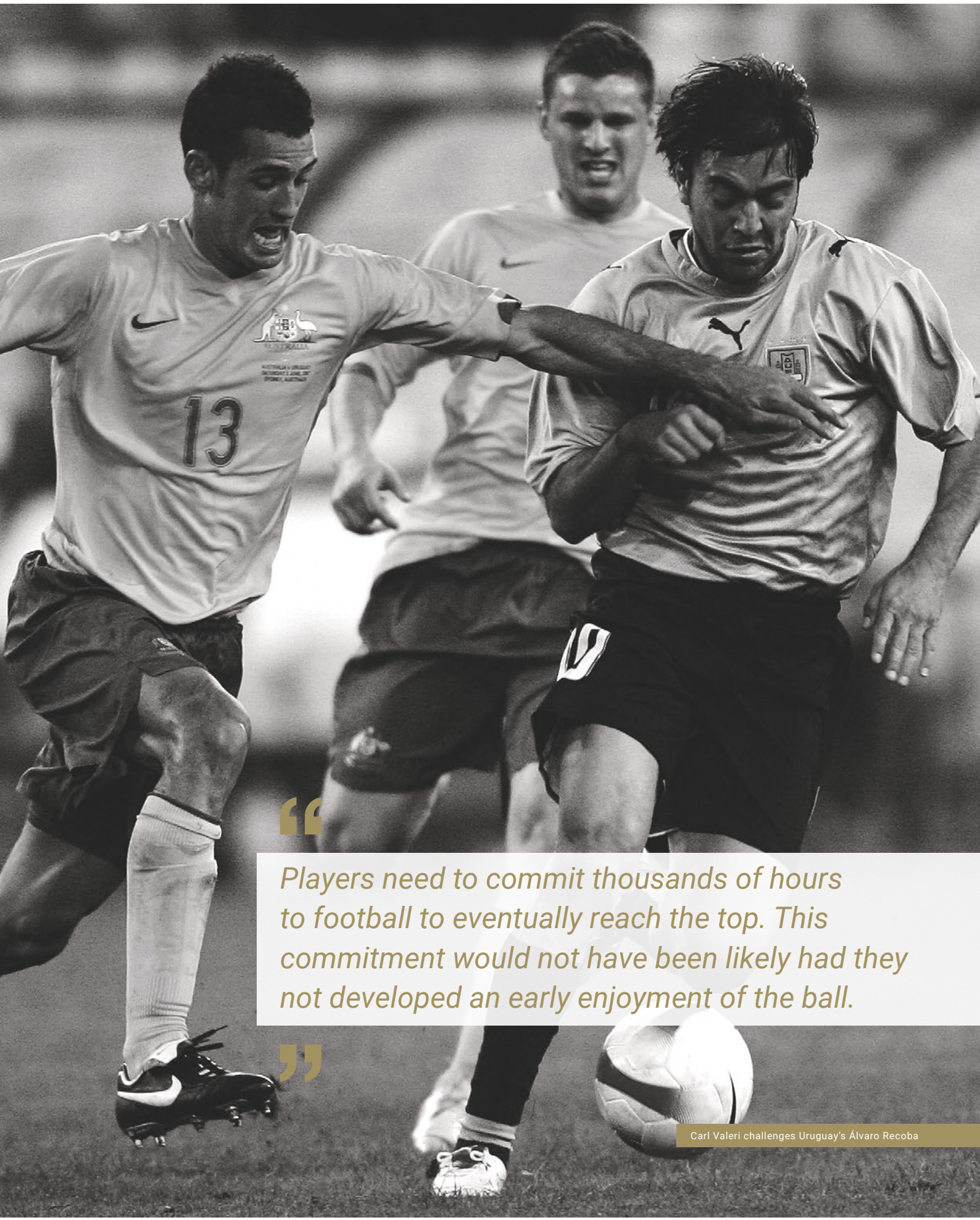
The Golden Generation followed more of a sampling pathway, trying out various sports at a young age before settling solely on football later on. The Current Generation specialised in football earlier, ignoring other sports aside from school-mandated participation. There is conflicting research about the pros and cons of early specialisation. On the one hand, it is suggested that the physical and psychological skills developed in different sports can be transferred to performance in the primary sport[38-39], and that trying and excelling at different sports can develop intrinsic motivation[40-42]. On the other hand, international studies have found that successful athletes focused solely on their sport of choice from the outset[43].

It is easy to mount intuitive and anecdotal arguments for either approach; this work does not seek to settle this debate, but merely present the facts and consider why this change has occurred. One possible reason is that families have increasingly limited time and resources, which restricts a child's opportunity to try out a variety of sports[4]. Another factor could be the increasingly demanding nature of football clubs, which seek to identify talented players and channel them into programs which require significant commitments[44-45]. Other social factors could also be at play.

Croatian international goalkeeper Joey Didulica playing Champions League with Ajax Amsterdam

Key Messages

- Both generations highlighted how they enjoyed unstructured free-play games with family and friends early in their development
- These activities included 1v1s, small-sided games, crossing and shooting activities, and personal individual practice with the ball (Deliberate Play)
- Both generations were consistent in their experience of enjoyable, game-based activities (Play Practice) in formal club training
- This approach is supported by research which suggests game-based activities provide players with the opportunity to develop holistically, experiment with their skills, interpret cues, and make appropriate game-based decisions and actions
- The Golden Generation took more of a 'sampling' pathway, whereby they indicated they participated in a range of different organised sports in addition to football. This type of diversified sporting engagement has been suggested to develop skills and physiological conditioning that may be transferable to their football career
- The Current Generation, took a more 'specialised' pathway, characterised by early investment in one sport, possibly due to limited time and/or money, or because football programs have become more demanding

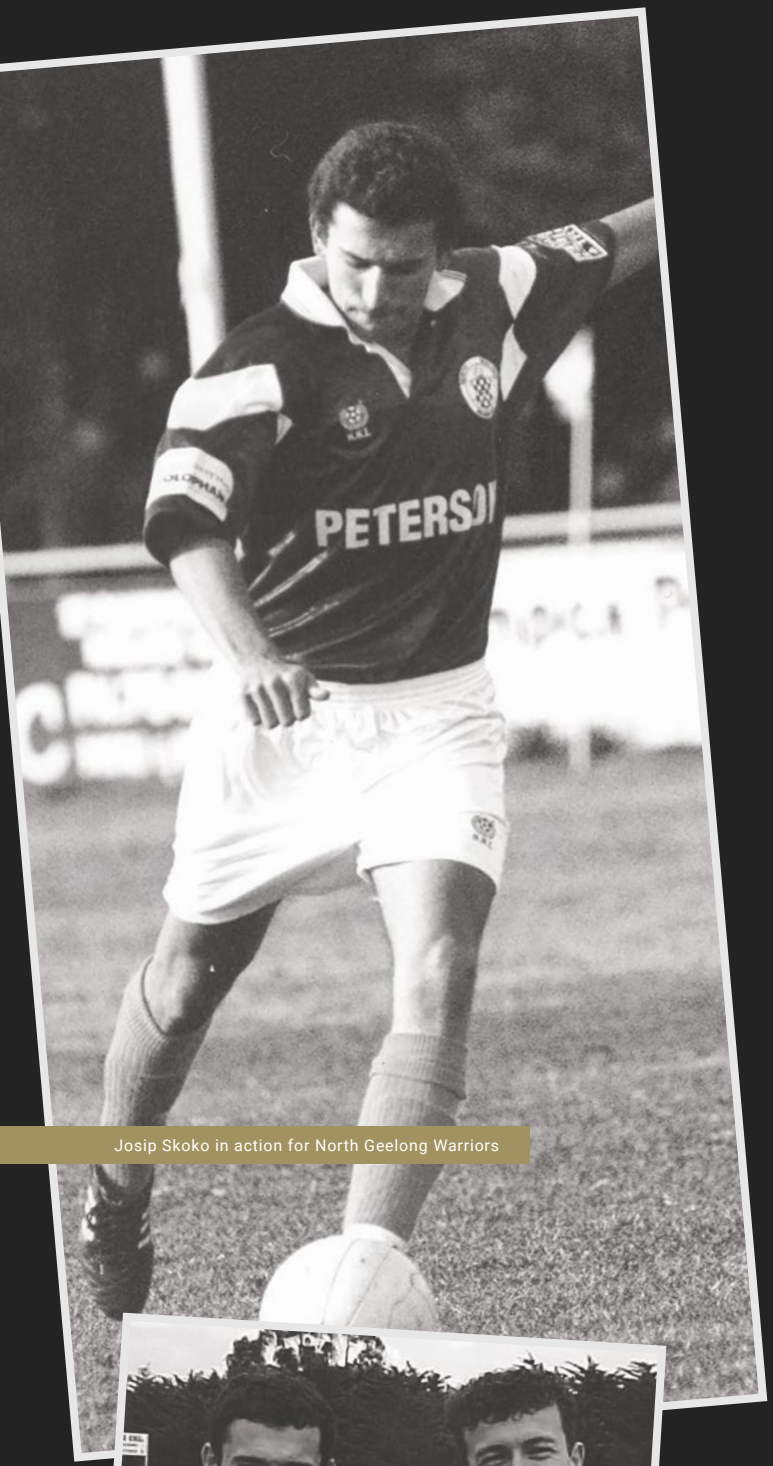


> *Players need to commit thousands of hours to football to eventually reach the top. This commitment would not have been likely had they not developed an early enjoyment of the ball.*

Carl Valeri challenges Uruguay's Álvaro Recoba

In My Words

JOSIP SKOKO



Josip Skoko in action for North Geelong Warriors

Josip Skoko with brother Ante

> *I think the successes you have are directly related to the negative things that happen*

My dad was associated with the Mount Gambier Croatia soccer club and from the earliest days I remember the games were like gala days. It was an all-day thing. And my brother and I were just kicking around the back yard. We did everything together and without that I probably wouldn't have developed anywhere near to where I was. I've got two boys who do the same thing, and that's invaluable. Maybe back in the day if you were one boy in the family and you had friends close by you could get away with it, these days it's a bit different. Dad played a bit, we can't really remember him playing but we know that was the influence. It wasn't just football. We were mad about all the different sports as an Aussie. But 70% was soccer.

We had a long driveway, so shots at the garage door. The balls might be your little floaty petrol station ones. We had two arches in our living room, and one would be a goal for my brother, one would be for me. As soon as the parents would go somewhere we'd be kicking around. We lived behind a school oval, so when we got bigger we'd go out the back there, maybe weekends more organised play with some friends. A lot of that was your classic keeper in goal, one crossing, and the other would be finishing. And you'd play that for hours. So that was a really huge part of it, and I can understand why kids now aren't at a skill level, because they don't do that as much as we did then. Everyone knows that, it's not a secret.

My perception of the elite was probably the senior team in Mount Gambier, which now, looking at it, was crap. But I re-

member going to senior games and the passion was there. From an early age it was instilled, being Croatian, playing against other nationalities. The big rivalry formed part of wanting to become better.

Yes, there were problems, fights, but that was because of passion. And you can't replace that artificially. They're trying to replace that artificially and they're wondering why we don't have quality. We don't have the passion. I think the amount of contributions these different nationalities have given to Australia through football is crazy.

In Mount Gambier there was only Under 10s, 13s and 16s. When I was maybe eight, I was helping out the 13s, and by ten, I was helping out the 16s in some games. There weren't as many kids there so you were forced up. It wasn't really by design, but you were always challenged.

(At North Geelong) structured training was two nights a week. Most of the time coaches were our parents, so there wasn't that much structure at all. Two laps, match. They'd send you for two laps, set up a game and you'd play, that would be your training.

My family made huge sacrifices. All the driving dad did from Geelong to Melbourne, at times two or three times a week. That's such a big commitment. And huge costs. I have three sisters and brother, and everyone wants to do something, but they spent a lot more time driving me around than the others. I didn't realise at the time, but that would have been influenced my development for sure.

I trialled for the Under 12s regional team and didn't make it the first time. The second year I made it and went from there, to state championships, national championships, 12s, 13s, 14s. Regional, state then to Canberra. It was a pretty good pathway. Canberra, next challenge, you know you were among 20 of the best players. You got an opportunity to train every day and learn about all types of things in a professional environment. With Ron Smith and Steve O'Connor there, it gave us awesome knowledge. I wouldn't have reached (as far) going forward it I didn't go through that program. I suppose every coach added a little bit, but Ron made by far the biggest influence in terms of thinking about football.

The decision to go the Institute was totally up to me. Dad was really supportive. I've got a boy who's that age now and that's tough for parents, to say "yeah, go away for two years". I can see how hard it would have been, but they really left it up to me and I couldn't not make that decision. A lot of the decisions early on were driven by me, then later on they were more career-based, maybe national team. I tried to go to clubs where I could play. Then towards the end, family-based.

(Missing out on selection) are the things that make you better because then you really get pissed off. At the time, I was crying. You decide, well, I've gotta train harder, maybe I'm not good enough, and make it the next year. I think the successes you have are directly related to the negative things that happen. Now people are just worried about the best pathway but they don't understand that the best pathways don't often give you the challenges that you may need.

When I moved to Hajduk Split we had a really good squad there. I only played 10 games and went on loan a bit. And that was probably best year for me because I had to work extremely hard, probably trained the most I've ever trained because I was young enough, fit enough, and I needed to find my way into a team. And then the following year I got a chance to play week in week out and I realised I'd already been through a lot. If I'd have known ahead what was coming, there's no way you would've gone. From getting lied to, cheated, not getting paid for 12 months, you saw everything. So those four and a half years set me up for everything after. I was never ready, but you don't need to be ready. Just have to be ready to work and take it all on board.

Being born in Australian doesn't prepare you for football at all. Everything's too easy, it's done for you. Countries that aren't well set up, they test you and prepare you better. Going to Belgium and the UK later, I laughed at some of their problems. I think we worry a bit too much about how things are set up here and try and make it too good. Most of the negative things growing up turned out to be positives. We trained on bad fields, so I learned to control the ball better. We only trained twice a week, so I trained at home. There was a bad coach, you learned how to do it another way. I don't think that if there was a better pitch or a better coach, I would have played at a higher level.

I don't believe I was naturally as talented as some, so I really had to work for everything. That was the key. Physically I wasn't big or strong, I wasn't quick at all. So I had to make up for it with intelligence and good passing, that sort of thing.

I think I was developing well before I knew what I was doing. The back yard and unstructured play was the biggest influence on my ideas. I don't know how many hours just brother in goals, me shooting. Curl the ball, bend it this way, bend it that way, strike through it. At the Institute that went to another level, all those really intricate things that maybe we weren't aware of. But outside of training certainly helped me more than inside training. My last stage of technical development was that first year in Croatia. We had an indoor hall and we kicked into the wall thousands, hundreds of thousands of times. It was just pure technique. I know there's a lot of talk these days about that sort of practice. People can say what they want, but if you don't practice like that, you won't get your technique up.

We had a list of probably 40 that were all playing at huge clubs in Europe, week in, week out. Now it's three, or five. We had so many more games in our legs at a higher level. I think that even our third starting XI back then could've fought with this team now. Even the strikers and players that you don't even talk about, they'd be the head striker today, like David Zdrilic, Paul Agostino, guys who played in top clubs in Europe. Whether the A-League is stronger now, or the NSL, it doesn't matter. Europe's a different level. Players go overseas and come back now because it's set up better here. When we moved overseas there was no A-League. Nobody was even considering coming back to a semi-professional league. So you just stayed there, you made it happen. There was no coming back.

There's so much more choice now. I see it because I'm coaching and I see what parents come up with. At the end of the day my answer is always the same to them: "Don't worry, just get them playing. Effort's gonna get you there. Doesn't matter where they're playing, doesn't matter what level at the moment. If they want it enough, they just have to keep going, they'll do it."

6 PATHWAY

Playing up

Golden Generation:
Local Clubs and Early Senior Experience

The talent pathway was at least slightly different for all participants. The most common pathway was the most linear: youth football with the local club, regional/state representative sides, senior club football and finally the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) program. But this experience was not universal. Some were overlooked for representative selection, which they later considered a blessing (see section 3: Mentality). Five indicated they created their own pathway, away from the 'traditional' steppingstones outlined above. Eight moved overseas at an early age and forged ahead there.

There were some similarities, however. All players played up an age group for their local club, which they saw as a positive influence on their development. Most were playing senior football – with men, against men – at a relatively young age (i.e., 15-16 years old). Players who moved overseas all reported that the first year abroad was extremely tough.

The players discussed how National Team selection was hard to come by due to the quality of their Australian peers at the time.

Current Generation:
Progressing through Several Youth Clubs

The small pool of players interviewed had similar trajectories, from the local club, to an NPL club, to state or national institutes (such as NSWIS or the now-defunct FFA Centre of Excellence) and finally into an A-League academy or National Youth League squad.

While the players recalled playing up an age group at their local youth club, there were key differences in their exposure to senior football. While the Golden Generation played with and against other men at age 15-16, the Current Generation met senior opposition at a later age, around 16-18, and this was in their institute youth teams, playing against men but alongside other boys. Once they made the senior set-up, they noticed the play was more physically demanding and faster than youth levels.

What does the research tell us?

The most immediate theme to emerge is that players across both generations played up against older players during their youth development, and they all perceived benefits from this experience. This finding is in line with recent 'relative age effect' research which demonstrated that players born later in the selection year end up having longer and more successful careers than those born earlier[46-48]. The challenge of competing against bigger, stronger and faster boys promoted the development of technical and psychological skills required to overcome these physical disadvantages[49]. The players all noticed that playing against boys their own age felt easier after they spent time playing up.

This exposure to more physically demanding, higher resistance football flowed through to the Golden Generation's early progress into senior club football. By age 15 or 16, those players were being forged in the crucible of the men's competitions, often among the country's best players in the National Soccer League (NSL)[50]. They had to quickly adapt technically, tactically and mentally to survive and thrive at this level.

This contrasted with the Current Generation players, who did not face men until they were aged 16-18, usually with the FFA CoE. This involved playing with their young peers against state level senior teams or the slightly older youth teams of the A-League clubs.

While the Golden Generation players generally followed the common path outlined above, a majority indicated they were overlooked for representative teams at different stages of their development, before 'catching up' later. In the section on Mentality, we discuss how these setbacks may have helped develop resilience and determination which carried them further in the long run.

A further difference between the generations was when they moved overseas for football. The majority of the Golden Generation moved overseas at an early age, after breaking into their senior club teams and making an impression[50]. Of the Current Generation players interviewed, only one had yet flirted with a move overseas, via a trial at a European club.

The first, most substantial reason for this may be the rules introduced by FIFA in 2001 which restricted the international transfer of players aged under 18. Most of the Golden Generation players in our sample were not affected by this restriction, and could have signed for a European club at a younger age (such as Harry Kewell's move to Leeds as a 16-year-old in 1995). Australian boys under 18 today could only sign for a European club if their parents moved to that country for non-football reasons.

To draw further conclusions would require further research. For example, it could be suggested that the semi-professional NSL only acted as a steppingstone for players to quickly progress to the fully professional environment in Europe, whereas the A-League can provide an elite, full-time environment here. Alternatively, if the quality of players emerging has diminished, the international demand for our talent may simply have decreased. In addition, many young Australian players do play abroad today; are they bypassing the A-League because they are too good for it or not good enough?

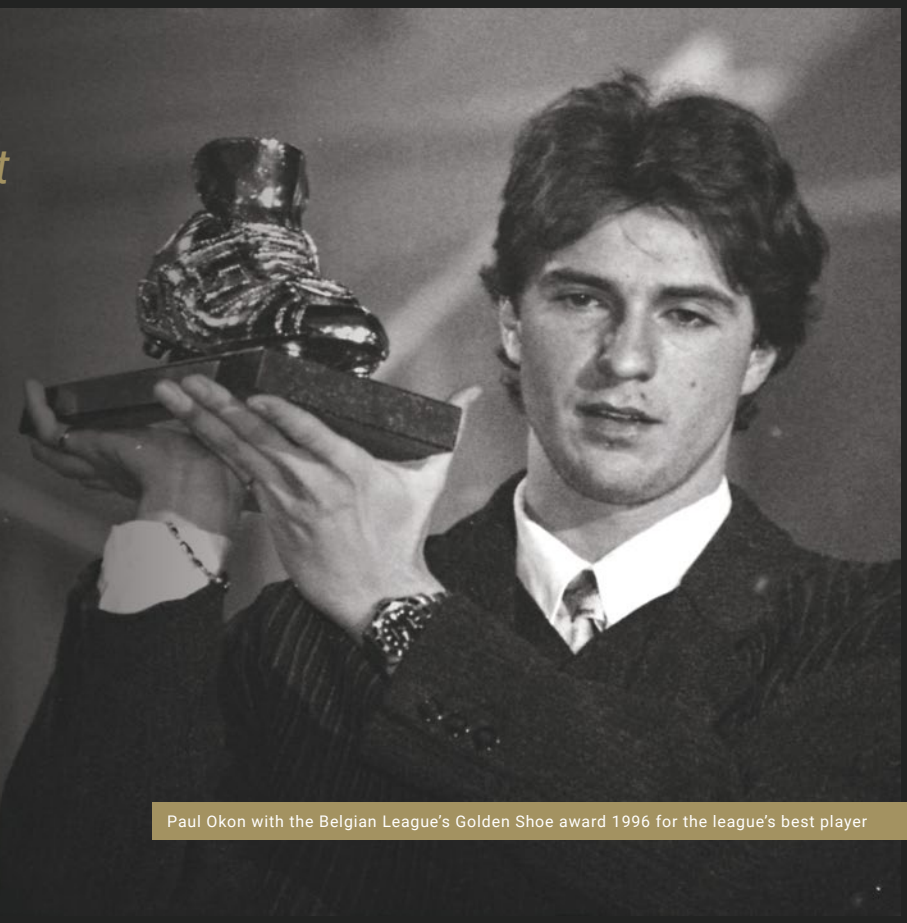
Key Messages

- During their youth career, both generations 'played up' age groups, which may have had a positive influence on their technical, tactical and psychological capabilities, due to the challenges associated with overcoming older and physically stronger players
- Both generations followed a fairly 'common' talent development pathway, however each were shaped differently according to the football landscapes at the time
- The Golden Generation mainly played for one local club with a pathway to senior competition, which they started playing in at approximately 15 years of age
- The Current Generation played for several youth clubs, moving for greater challenges or opportunities with NPL or A-League academies
- Due to the semi-professional nature of football in Australia at the time, the Golden Generation had to move overseas early to pursue professional football dreams
- With the creation of the A-League, an elite professional national competition, the Current Generation have a pathway to professional football without the need to move overseas at an early age

In My Words

PAUL OKON

I feel really lucky to have grown up in that period in Australia where society was a lot different. I think it helped not only myself but so many other Australian players get to a higher level



Paul Okon with the Belgian League's Golden Shoe award 1996 for the league's best player

I had a brother who was three years older, so my first memory was playing in his team. They used to just throw me on at the end there to have a bit of a run around. And just in the backyard as a four, five-year-old. We didn't have much in those days, but I had a big backyard, and an older brother, so basically when we had free time, that's where you would find us. It was a small house on a fair size of land. We used to have goals in the back. We had a garage shed that had a brick wall, so you know what's happening there.

Having a father that played football at a reasonable level, that was what we did. Most weekends, we would go watch my father play on the Sunday, then we would get a ball and play with it. So, that passion, that love for football, was passed on through my father. That's pretty much how it went for me, as a young kid. Father that played it, brother that played, and my mother loved the game. That was what we did, as a family. Obviously you need to get from training to home to training and back home and then home to the game so without the family it's impossible. I don't think for them it was ever a sacrifice, it was just them passing their love and passion for football onto their children.

My early memories of watching football on TV was the World Cup in 1978, then again in '82. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, sneaking behind the lounge, tryna watch the games. I wouldn't say it was an obsession, but it was a passion. Back then, there were no distractions. There were no TV games. So if you wanna do something, the only thing you really can do is play soccer, play with the ball. It was always something that I enjoyed doing, and I looked forward to doing it.

Back yard football, there are no cones, there's no lines, so it's you and a ball, or you and someone else and a ball. It wasn't structured. It probably wasn't even structured at training. In those days coaching was nowhere near what coaching is today. It was with more kids in a bigger area.

There weren't any restrictions in those days.

I did athletics at a state level. I played cricket, I played tennis, I always always enjoyed playing various sports. I played rugby league at school. I think it had its positives apart from socialising with different kids. I think the physical aspect of it, you know hand-eye, different movements. Soccer was always primary though.

When I got to about ten, the Marconi Club become a real focal point for my family. It was home. We moved from Fairfield, which was only 10km away, to 200m from the Marconi Club. I started playing for Marconi in the juniors then spent most of my time there before I ended up going to Europe. It's where the Italian migrants would go to socialise with each other. Our parents would be inside the club and we'd be outside kicking the ball around.

Sometimes I'll see at my son's SAP game that after the game, some kids will just go to a goal mouth, and they'll be playing with each other and their ball. In my mind, I'll say, "what those kids are doing now is more beneficial than what they've actually done for the last 40 minutes". All I remember was we just played with the ball, so wherever I went I took my own ball. Whenever we go out to watch one of my kids play, I say to the other boys "have you got your ball?" Subconsciously they're gonna connect with it, play with it, experiment. And then other kids will join in and they'll have that same unstructured environment where they're just kicking the ball around and then they'll decide what to do, they'll decide if they wanna play a little game or play shots at goal. For me that's where football is falling.

I knew that I was good. It was never about being better than someone else, it was always just trying to be as good as I could be and always continuously trying to be better every day. It was a little challenge to myself. It was just something that I just loved to do. This is what I do, this is what I am as a person. I played football, I love to play football.

Whenever the Socceroos would get together in Sydney to play a game my father would take me to watch them train. I knew some of the players because they'd come from Marconi and I'd already started to train a little bit with the first team as a 16, nearly 17-year-old. They were missing a number to play in training and have a full team. The guys said to the coach Eddie Thompson: "That kid there he can play." Eddie said: "Who is he? He can make up a number." I didn't have boots and they sent me back to the hotel across the road to get a pair of boots from one of the players. I walked into the kit room and I remember I saw the Australian tracksuit and my eyes lit up. I wanted an Australian tracksuit. I ended up playing the game and after the game Eddie Thompson said "I want you to be part of the squad for these two games. You're not gonna play 'cause you're too young but I want you." That's where you know that one day you want to play for Australia and it happened not long after.

I don't think any decision to move to another club was out of my control. Towards the end of my career it was more about family and the offer. As opposed to the early part, it's where's the best place to continue to develop to become a better player. I was pretty lucky that the steps I took, and the decisions that were made, were based around that and nothing else.

Those kids that went to the AIS grew up in that unstructured environment. They went to the AIS at the end and they refined those other things. People wanna bash and say we don't have the AIS anymore. No, because what was done before the AIS was the most important thing. The AIS had its place and absolutely I still believe that should be there because it gave the opportunity for the best boys at a certain age to go and refine before they were passed on to the real world of professional football. But the real work for those boys was done early.

(Club football) wasn't as structured as what it is now. Nowadays the pressure to win is enormous at a junior level and every parent's thought is "my son overseas, my son overseas". I think that has a negative effect on the child developing the passion and the love for it. If you've done the right things from a young age and you're serious and your attitude is good, you're in a good environment it's gonna happen regardless.

I think one of the biggest things that I had was being able to think of things before they happened. Read the play and paint a picture of what I wanted to do once I got the ball. How I developed that I don't know. It was never asked of me. When I was 16-17 I was already playing with older players and did that have an effect? Possibly, I'm not too sure.

Throughout my career, whether I was playing or on the beach, every day when I trained, I never trained with the handbrake on. I never wanted to waste a minute. I want to be the best player at training, I want to be the best player on the field. I played and trained with some of the biggest stars of world football and you'd maybe think that these guys were just good. They were, but they all wanted to be the best hard on it every day.

When I went to Belgium, the first 18 months were quite tough. But never did I have that thought in my mind that I was gonna fail or come back home. I always thought I was going to succeed. Not being picked, a couple of injuries, it pushed you even more. I had a big belief in what I could do. It wasn't that I was lacking anything. I just needed to continue to do what I've always done and that's continue to love what I was doing and just work hard.

I would always watch players on TV that played in my position and look at what they did, and then try to replicate that when I was training or playing. I was very much a visual learner so I would always watch football on TV and that's something I don't think kids do these days.

There were no distractions back then. Sometimes I think, would I be the same as what every other kid is today? When it's not available to you, you're not even thinking about it. So I feel really lucky to have grown up in that period in Australia where society was a lot different. I think it helped not only myself, but so many other Australian players get to a higher level. At that time, with the influence of migrants, it was the perfect environment. Unfortunately, sadly, that no longer exists.

It's detrimental: Internet, social media, gadgets, computers, iPads, PlayStations. The cost of living nowadays is astronomical so mum and dad both have to work, everyone wants the nice house and the nice car so when a parent is free, they're not really going to encourage their kids to play because it's their moment to relax. I don't wanna be harsh on kids today but I think there's a lot of other things that motivate them before that actual passion and that love for it.

CURRENT GENERATION

Perceptions from the Golden Generation

Golden Generation:
They should be better than us

When considering the Current Generation of talent, the Golden Generation players typically fell into two distinct perspectives. Half of them believed the Current Generation should be better players than they were, while the other half believed the Current Generation do not have the drive or ambition to succeed at the top level like they had.

The belief that the Current Generation should be better was based on the fact they have a greater amount of resources available to them, including qualified coaches and greater exposure to opportunities. On the other hand, some expressed a view the Current Generation are 'over-coached' and not provided the opportunity for free-play and experimentation.

In addition, all of the players indicated a lack of football time and technological distractions may have a detrimental impact on the Current Generation's development. Several players also indicated that they believed the creation of the A-League has provided a safety net for the Current Generation, in case they find it too hard overseas.

What does the research tell us?

All Golden Generation players were asked to share their general views on the Current Generation, in the context of this wide-ranging study. They highlighted a range of factors which they believe could promote or hinder the development of young players today, relative to them.

Most of the players identified the superior resources available to Current Generation players, such as more qualified coaches, better facilities and additional programs. There was a common belief that players today should be better because of this. However, some warned of another side to this coin. They believed today's players may be over-coached and encouraged to specialise too early[44-45]. This perception is supported by recent research which suggests that although coaches are using a constraint-led pedagogy through game-based training activities, sessions are marked by high amounts of instruction, becoming stop-start in nature[34]. It is suggested this type of coaching practice may limit the creativity, problem-solving and decision-making demands on the players[34].

The Golden Generation highlighted the potential negative impact of technological distractions on the development of the Current Generation. There is limited research exploring the impact of time invested on technology from a talent development perspective, however a recent study did find young players committing significant time into indirect football activities (such as television and computer games)[20]. The impact of such activities as a replacement or supplement to time spent with the ball is not fully understood.

Finally, the Golden Generation consistently highlighted the changed nature of the elite football landscape in Australia, from the NSL era to the A-League. Their perceptions of the impact of this change were varied. The more professional environment of the A-League provides some of the greater resources and opportunities discussed above. On the other hand, the players felt their own journeys, including challenging ventures overseas at a young age[50], were formative, so some focused on this as a key difference between the two generations.

Key Messages

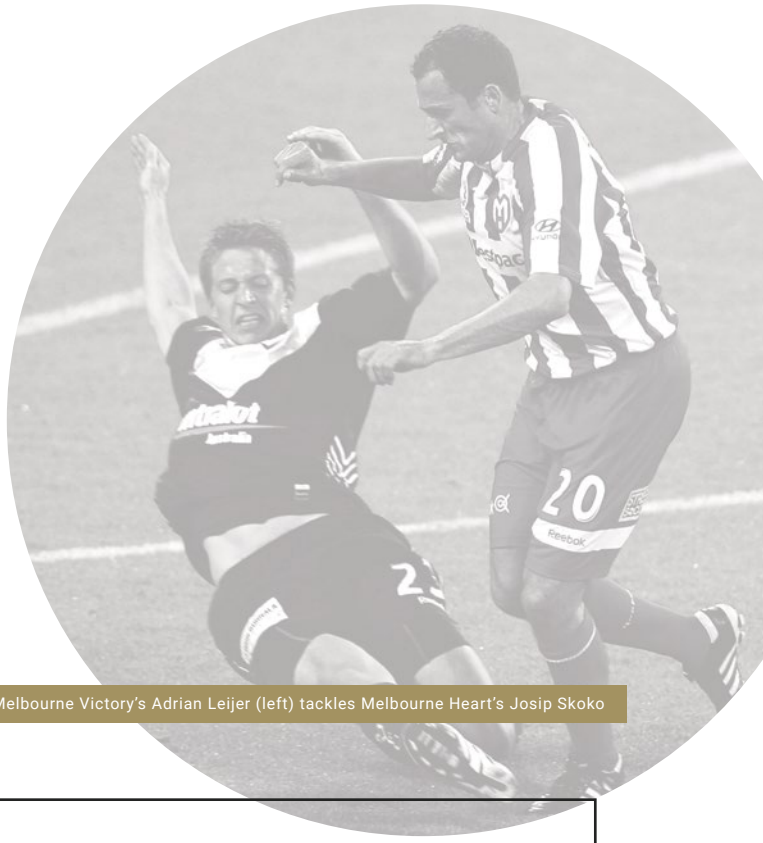
- The Golden Generation perceive the Current Generation as having access to relatively greater resources to pursue the professional football dream
- There is some evidence to support the Golden Generation's perception that Current Generation players within Australia may be over-coached during their development
- Professional football pathways have changed within Australia, and as such may influence the decisions of young players in relation to going overseas at a young age

Dario Vidosic during a 2008 Beijing Olympics qualifying match between Australia and Chinese Taipei in 2007

Developmental History of Athletes Questionnaire (DHAQ)

Fifteen players from the Golden Generation filled out the DHAQ, which was modified to include football-specific questions. The results provide an insight into the quantum of time investing in different types of football activities at different ages, as well as what ages players reached specific milestones.

For example, the Golden Generation did not specialise in football until age 14.8 years on average, which reflects the interviews which suggested they followed the Early Diversification Talent Development pathway[6]. In further support of the interview data, the players reported making their senior club debut at 15.4 years on average.



Melbourne Victory's Adrian Leijer (left) tackles Melbourne Heart's Josip Skoko

Football Milestone	Number of Players	Average Age
Specialised in football	15	14.8
Made a conscious decision to be a professional	15	15.7
Moved for football reasons	15	16.6
First represented a state team	14	12.9
First attended an overseas academy	2	17
First attended a 'big 5' European league academy	4	16.3
First played a senior state league match	11	15.4
First played a senior NSL/A-League match	10	18
First played in a senior match overseas	9	20.8
First played in a 'big 5' European league match	7	22.1

The data reveals that the single activity Golden Generation players spent the most time doing between the ages of 5-18 was informal play with others, peaking at an average of 420 hours per year – eight hours per week – when they were 13 years old. This was followed by formal team training sessions, which generally increased in volume as the player got older.

This data is provided as an illustration of the nature of the activities undertaken by the players as opposed to an exercise in aggregating (or accumulation of) time spent or seeking to validate the "deliberate practice theory".

In fact, as a point of contrast, the interview and milestone data from the Golden Generation actually points toward the players following a Diversification model of sport participation – as opposed to early specialisation - which has been supported by research as a "better" model for athlete development.

Further, another concern is the data comes from retrospective estimates of the players, and while this does provide an indication of the approximate hours of investment, it is not the accurate time spent in these activities. It is also an accumulation of the average time spent in a variety of football activities.

	5 Years Old (Average Hours)	**6 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**7 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**8 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**9 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**10 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**11 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**12 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**13 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**14 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**15 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**16 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**17 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**18 Years Old** (Average Hours)	**Total**
Informal Play with Friends/Family	312	284	284	320	346	397	408	412	420	412	404	439	276	233	**4,857**
Individual Informal Play	312	284	284	320	312	312	312	312	312	312	312	312	312	312	**2,652**
Total Informal	**442**	**448**	**467**	**502**	**557**	**620**	**639**	**654**	**670**	**619**	**578**	**504**	**437**	**370**	**7,509**
Playing Futsal			26	26	17	16	17	39	65	47	40	51			**345**
Football Team Training Sessions	84	70	106	110	118	125	169	209	233	268	305	444	435	385	**3,060**
Football Coach 1 on 1 Training Sessions	36	36	66	78	108	130	141	133	130	151	133	177	233	223	**1,776**
Football Team Training Without a Coach present	254	162	185	180	196	178	192	167	98	77	91	131	131	80	**2,120**
Individual Football Specific Practice	130	147	189	198	225	154	156	172	122	108	90	97	87	69	**1,947**
Total Formal	**503**	**415**	**573**	**592**	**665**	**604**	**676**	**720**	**648**	**651**	**659**	**900**	**886**	**758**	**9,249**
Football Team Physical Prep Sessions										35	40	87	105	113	**380**
Physical Prep 1 on 1 Coaching Sessions											13	52	129	123	**317**
Physical Prep Team Session Without a Coach									52	52	39	46	55	39	**283**
Physical Prep Individual Driven Session								52	52	43	76	61	55	69	**408**
Total Physical Prep								**52**	**104**	**130**	**168**	**246**	**344**	**345**	1,389
Total Annual	**945**	**863**	**1,040**	**1,094**	**1,222**	**1,224**	**1,315**	**1,426**	**1,423**	**1,400**	**1,405**	**1,649**	**1,667**	**1,472**	**18,146**
Cumulative Total	**945**	**1,808**	**2,848**	**3,942**	**5,164**	**6,388**	**7,703**	**9,129**	**10,552**	**11,952**	**13,357**	**15,006**	**16,673**	**18,146**	

PART III

THE PATH(WAY) FORWARD

From Evidence to Policy

Towards the end of the interview process, the PFA staff consulted with the VU researchers to ask if they needed access to any additional Golden Generation players. The response was that while a larger sample is always desirable, there was little need. The stories coming back from the players were so similar by now that each new interview was only treading the same ground as the previous ones.

The consistencies between the origin stories of our football superheroes were uncanny. In some cases the similarities were literal, where players from the same ethnic backgrounds came up through the same local clubs. However, it was telling that the same story repeated in different cities, with different ethnicities and different clubs involved. Specific details like Croatian and Italian, Melbourne Knights and Marconi, were largely interchangeable.

Little within this research will come as a shock to anyone engaged with player development in Australia. However, when we zoom out and consider the evidence with fresh eyes, our perception shifts entirely.

When was 'normal'?

The common view on the decline of Australia's talent pipeline is that we have failed in some way; that producing Viduka, Kewell, Moore and Emerton was to be expected, and due to some series of mistakes, we have now fallen short of that benchmark. The reality is the opposite. The reality is that based on Australia's innate attributes, our performance today is probably 'normal', whereas for one golden moment in time, the stars aligned to create special conditions and special players. We have not failed since then. We have regressed to the mean.

The themes identified by the Golden Generation players are those stars which aligned. It was not just the migrant influence, or the lack of technological distractions, or the easy access to competitive play-mates; it was all those things in combination, and others.

Of course, the players had to have some level of innate potential, and there were individual aspects to their stories which helped them rise to the top of their generation, such as parental influence. But there is little doubt their generation existed in a cultural environment which was set up to produce very good players. Statistically, it was likely that some would make that short leap to greatness.

Flipping that perspective in terms of what our 'normal' level should be is liberating. We can move away from trying to solve problems or fix mistakes in areas such as development pathways and the coaching curriculum. We can certainly forget about simply forcing more game time in the A-League for young players through regulation. Instead, we can focus on the winning recipe we once had, and which ingredients have gone missing.

Inputs and outputs

It is obvious we cannot turn back time and recreate the culture of the late '80s and early '90s. We cannot un-invent the iPad and Fortnite. We cannot, and should not, return to an era when little boys pursuits took priority over their little sisters'. It is not in our power to raise the birth rate in Australia, giving more boys older brothers to compete against, nor can we push back against the housing trends which make the big back yard a relic of a bygone era.

The good news is, we do not have to. To move towards policy, we need to separate the inputs and outputs from that culture. All the things listed above were *inputs* into the Golden Generation's development. They contributed to the *outputs* which made them great, such as the thousands of hours they spent with the ball, the easy access to playmates, and the determination to succeed. We must simply find new ways to create these same outputs, which are possible and relevant for the 2020s.

For example, the Golden Generation players generally harboured a deep passion for the game sparked by their families' connection with the local ethnic club. This passion inspired them to spend every spare moment playing with a football. They subsequently became very good at manipulating the ball. But if there is some other way to inspire the same desire to play with the ball – let's just say, some addictive app – then we spare ourselves the impossible task of recapturing the cultural dynamic of European migrant communities last century.

Access and hours

This is the moment to bring in international comparisons. Most developed countries are experiencing similar cultural trends to Australia. But iPads and smaller families have not stopped Belgium producing far better players than us from half the population. We can investigate why young players in such countries still clock up 10+ weekly hours of free-play activities despite the distractions and other barriers to access which are common here and there.

One answer might lie in facilities. Most discourse today about Australian football facilities relates to floodlights and pitches for grassroots clubs struggling to cope with record participation rates. These investments are important. But we have seen that dramatic increases in participation rates have done little for elite talent – in fact, as the base has broadened, the pointy end of the pyramid has blunted. Purely from a development perspective, money should be invested in infrastructure which can facilitate the volume of free-play activities our Golden Generation players chalked up in the backyard or on the back pitch on those long Sundays at the local club.

Street football courts are such facilities. These public spaces, common across European cities, promote just the sort of player-guided, experimental, mixed age, ultra-competitive, resilience-building free-play which the Golden Generation has told us has gone missing from today's development pathway. The documentary *Ballon sur Bitume* (Concrete Football) explored the culture of street football in *les banlieues* (the suburbs) of French cities, citing its role in developing the world-beating generation which graces the professional game today.

Significantly, street football is a vehicle for young migrants to connect with each other and their communities, in much the same role ethnic clubs played for the Golden Generation players. Migration to Australia has shifted from Europe to Asia and Africa, but these new communities, despite coming from football-loving countries, have not created clubs to centre their lives around in the same way post-war Europeans did. It follows that there is a missed opportunity to develop potential talent because the community space is not designed to facilitate it. Even schools, which the Golden Generation players talked about sneaking into on weekends to play with the ball, are now ringed by high-security fences.

The iconic 'Aloisi celebration' from a bird's eye view

And now for something completely different

We should not limit our scope to what has worked here in the past or elsewhere in the present. To do so would be to attempt to keep up, rather than get ahead. To regain a competitive advantage, we should get creative and consider new and innovative ways to produce the outputs we want.

Just for the sake of example, if development could be gamified through an addictive app, we might get kids back into the yard with a ball, with the added advantage of being able to identify individuals who are improving rapidly.

Such technology provides opportunities to track our playing population in unprecedented detail. We could discover development hotspots where groups of players are outperforming the mean. We could then zoom in and see what factors are working in those places. This is a systemic challenge, and tools exist which can help us analyse our system in detail and in real time.

The path(way) forward

But it is not this report's intention to 'lead the witness'. It is up to the industry to take this evidence into the next phase of policy development and decision-making. The game's resources are limited, and we should all be as informed as possible when we choose where the next dollar should go.

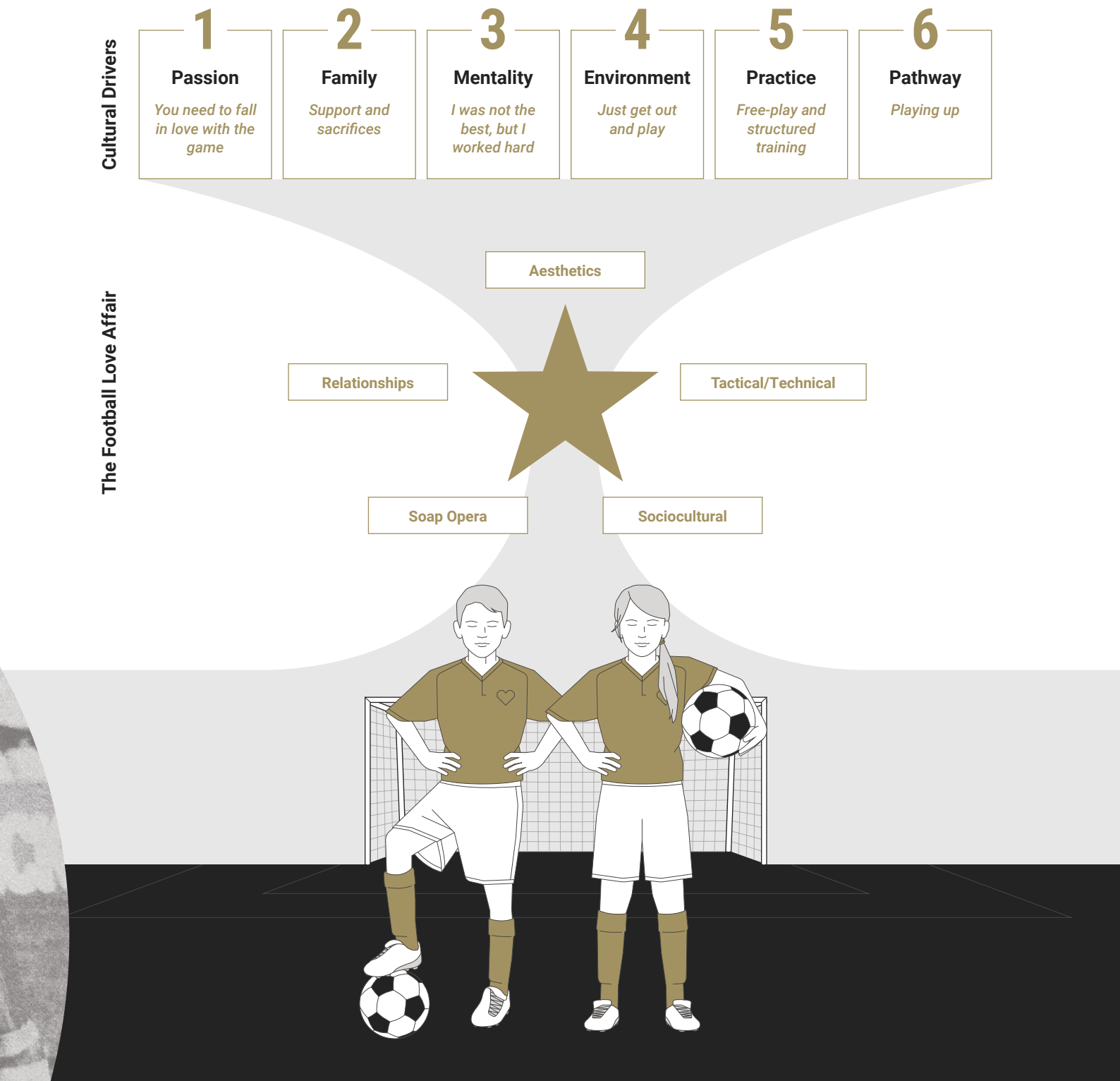
As we discussed at the beginning of the report, those resources can be grown by having more talented players to captivate fans and contest World Cups. Those resources fuel all areas of our industry, from professional to grassroots. FFA, players, clubs, states, government and fans: all stakeholders have a mutual self-interest to tackle this challenge. We hope this work provides a stronger foundation from which to pursue collective solutions.

Paul Okon lets fly for Marconi in 1991

Football Cultural Development Framework

In this report we have introduced two models for thinking about how young players engage with football. The Cultural Drivers are the six key themes Victoria University identified from the childhoods of our male Golden Generation. The PFA's five-point engagement model, The Football Love Affair, categorises the avenues through which people develop a deep connection with the game.

In combination, we can envisage a framework through which future policy could be imagined and tested - for the men's and women's games. As we reshape our football culture to recapture some of the magic which made our Golden Generation so great, we should always pause to consider the young players' perspective, and whether our reforms will more deeply entrench their connection to the game. In other words, it is not enough to remake our football culture; we must remake it such that the next generation of players immerses themselves in it.



Acknowledgements

This report is an unprecedented study into the conditions needed for Australian football to drive the international competitiveness of its footballers. It is the most significant undertaking the PFA has made in the area of football performance and involved an 18-month process of collaboration between a team of contributors with broad-ranging skills.

The process was led by PFA Research and Insights Executive, **Brett Taylor**, who in collaboration with the PFA's strategic partner, Victoria University, devised the theme and scope of the research.

The PFA team worked closely with Victoria University's research team to develop the research approach, select the participants, design the interviews and survey, and interpret the findings.

VU's research team, comprising Professor **Damian Farrow**, Dr **Paul Larkin** and Associate Professor **Michael Spittle** should be acknowledged for not only their role alongside Brett in collating the report, but in conducting and transcribing all player interviews and collecting the survey responses. Their work demonstrates the mutually beneficial relationship the two organisations have developed, amplifying the PFA's research efficacy.

A particular thanks must go to **Michael Clayton**, the Manager, Industry, Community and Sport Engagement, at VU who has helped foster the relationship with the PFA since the relationship was forged in 2017.

In tying the content of the report together, The Cornerstore Creative – graphic designer **Sam Alsop** – has helped to animate the findings of the report via informative and meaningful data visualisations, while **The Print Department** has helped transform the report into the physical article.

Thanks must go to Australian football historian **Roy Hay** and to **Getty Images** for the emotive imagery found throughout the report, as well as the players themselves who provided a host of photos that allow the reader an insight into their formative years.

Last but not least, the players themselves must be acknowledged for their significant contribution to the report. Without their personal vignettes, evocative accounts and perspectives on their footballing experience and the Australian player development landscape, the stimulus for systematic policy change would not exist.

References

1. Holt, N. L., & Mitchell, T. (2006). Talent development in English professional soccer. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 37(2/3), 77.
2. Hay, R. (2006). 'Our wicked foreign game': why has association football (soccer) not become the main code of football in Australia?. *Soccer & Society*, 7(2-3), 165-186.
3. Babkes, M. L., & Weiss, M. R. (1999). Parental influence on children's cognitive and affective responses to competitive soccer participation. *Paediatric Exercise Science*, 11(1), 44-62.
4. Hardy, L. L., Kelly, B., Chapman, K., King, L., & Farrell, L. (2010). Parental perceptions of barriers to children's participation in organised sport in Australia. *Journal of Paediatrics & Child Health*, 46(4), 197-203
5. Kay, T. (2004). The family factor in sport: A review of family factors affecting sports participation. Driving up participation: The challenge for sport, 39. Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. The *Sport Psychologist*, 13(4), 395-417.
6. Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. The *Sport Psychologist*,13(4), 395-417.
7. Nelson, K., & Strachan, L. (2017). Friend, foe, or both? A retrospective exploration of sibling relationships in elite youth sport. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 12(2), 207-218
8. Wold, B., & Anderssen, N. (1992). Health promotion aspects of family and peer influences on sport participation. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 21, 533-539.
9. Fraser-Thomas, J., Strachan, L., & Jeffery-Tosoni, S. (2013). Family influence on children's involvement in sport. *Conditions of children's talent development in sport*, 179-196.
10. Ford, P., Ward, P., Hodges, N. J., & Williams, A. M. (2009). The role of deliberate practice and play in career progression in sport: the early engagement hypothesis. *High Ability Studies*, 20(1), 65-75.
11. Ford, P., & Williams, A. M. (2012). The developmental activities engaged in by elite youth soccer players who progressed to professional status compared to those who did not. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 13(3), 349-352.
12. Ward, P., Hodges, N. J., Starkes, J. L., & Williams, M. A. (2007). The road to excellence: deliberate practice and the development of expertise. *High Ability Studies*, 18(2), 119-153.
13. Zimmerman, B. J. (1986). Becoming a self-regulated learner: Which are the key sub processes? *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 11(4), 307-313.
14. Eccles, D. W., & Feltovich, P. J. (2008). Implications of domain "general "psychological support skills" for transfer of skill and acquisition of expertise. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 21(1), 43-60.
15. Jonker, L., Elferink-Gemser, M. T., Toering, T. T., Lyons, J., & Visscher, C. (2010). Academic performance and self-regulatory skills in elite youth soccer players. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 28(14), 1605-1614.
16. Kitsantas, A., & Zimmerman, B. J. (2010). Comparing self-regulatory processes among novice, non-expert, and expert volleyball players: A microanalytic study. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14(2), 91-105.
17. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. New York: Plenum.
18. Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101.
19. Duckworth, A. L., & Quinn, P. D. (2009). Development and validation of the Short Grit Scale (GRIT–S). *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 91(2), 166-174.
20. Larkin, P., O'Connor, D., & Williams, A. M. (2016). Does grit influence sport-specific engagement and perceptual-cognitive expertise in elite youth soccer?. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(2), 129-138.
21. Galli, N., & Vealey, R. S. (2008). "Bouncing back" from adversity: Athletes' experiences of resilience. The *Sport Psychologist*, 22(3), 316-335.
22. Mills, A., Butt, J., Maynard, I., & Harwood, C. (2012). Identifying factors perceived to influence the development of elite youth football academy players. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 30(15), 1593-1604.
23. Rees, T., Hardy, L., Güllich, A., Abernethy, B., Côté, J., Woodman, T., ... & Warr, C. (2016). The great British medalists project: a review of current knowledge on the development of the world's best sporting talent. *Sports Medicine*, 46(8), 1041-1058.
24. Nash, C. S., & Sproule, J. (2009). Career development of expert coaches. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 4(1), 121-138.
25. Bloom, B. S. (1985). Generalizations about talent development. *Developing talent in young people*, 507-549.
26. Côté, J, Erickson K and Abernethy B. Play and practice during childhood. In: Côté, J and Lidor R (eds)

Conditions of children's talent development in sport. Morgantown: FIT, 2013, pp.9–20.

27. Coutinho, P., Mesquita, I., & Fonseca, A. M. (2016). Talent development in sport: A critical review of pathways to expert performance. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(2), 279-293.

28. O'Connor, D. & Larkin, P. (2015). Decision making and tactical knowledge, an Australian perspective to their development in youth players. In Terrence. Favero, Barry. Drust, and Brian. Dawson (Eds), *International Research in Science and Soccer II*. London, UK: Routledge.

29. Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological review*, 100(3), 363.

30. den Duyn, N. "Why it makes sense to play games." *Sports Coach*, 19 (1996) 6-9.

31. Pill, S. (2012). Teaching game sense in soccer. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 83(3), 42-52.

32. Davids, K., D. Araújo, V. Correia, & L. Vilar. (2013). How Small-Sided and Conditioned Games Enhance Acquisition of Movement and Decision-Making Skills. *Exercise & Sport Sciences Reviews*, 41 (3): 154–161.

33. Travassos, B., Araujo, D., Davids, K., Vilar, L., Esteves, P., & Vanda, C. (2012). Informatio na l constraints shape emergent functional behaviours during performance of interceptive actions in team sports. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 13(2), 216-223.

34. O'Connor, D., Larkin, P., & Williams, A. M. (2017). What learning environments help improve decision-making?. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 22(6), 647-660.

35. Lee, T. D., & Simon, D. A. "Contextual interference." In A. Mark. Williams and Nicola Hodges (Eds.), *Skill acquisition in sport: Research, theory & practice* (2004): 29-44. New York, NY: Routledge.

36. O'Connor, D. (2012). Challenges facing Youth Coaches. In J.O'Dea (Ed). *Current Issues and Controversies in School and Community Health, Sport and Physical Education*, (pp. 283-294). New York, USA: Nova Science.

37. O'Connor, D., Wardak, D., Goodyear, P., Larkin, P., & Williams, M. (2018). Conceptualising decision-making and its development: a phenomenographic analysis. *Science & Medicine in Football*, 2(4), 261-271.

38. Abernethy, B., Baker, J., & Côté, J. (2005). Transfer of pattern recall skills may contribute to the development of sport expertise. Applied Cognitive Psychology: *The Official Journal of the Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 19(6), 705-718.

39. Berry, J., Abernethy, B., & Côté, J. (2008). The contribution of structured activity and deliberate play to the development of expert perceptual and decision-making skill. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 30(6), 685-708.

40. Côté, J., Baker, J., & Abernethy, B. (2007). Practice and play in the development of sport expertise. In: Eklund R and Tenenbaum G (eds) Handbook of sport psychology. Hoboken: Wiley, pp.184–202.

41. Côté, J., Lidor, R., & Hackfort, D. (2009). ISSP position stand: to sample or to specialize? Seven postulates about youth sport activities that lead to continued participation and elite performance. *International Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*; 9: 7–17.

42. Côté, J., & Hay J. (2002). Family influences on youth sport participation and performance. In: Silva J and Stevens D (eds) Psychological foundations of sport. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, pp.503–519.

43. Güllich, A., & Emrich, E. (2006). Evaluation of the support of young athletes in the elite sport system. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 3(2), 85–108.

44. Anshel, M. H., & Lidor, R. (2012). Talent detection programs in sport: The questionable use of psychological measures. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 35(3), 239–266.

45. Williams, A. M. (2000). Perceptual skill in soccer: Implications for talent identification and development. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 18, 737–750.

46. Baker, J. & Logan, A.J. (2007). Developmental contexts and sporting success: birth date and birthplace effects in national hockey league draftees 2000–2005. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 41(8), 515–517.

47. Ashworth, J. & Heyndels, B. (2007). Selection bias and peer effectsin team sports: The effect of age grouping on earnings of German soccer players. *Journal of Sports Economics*, 8, 355–377.

48. Schorer, J., Cobley, S., Büsch, D., Bräutigam, H., & Baker, J. (2009). Influences of competition level, gender, player nationality, career stage and playing position on relative age effects. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 19(5), 720-730.

49. Gibbs, B. G., Jarvis, J. A., & Dufur, M. J. (2012). The rise of the underdog? The relative age effect reversal among Canadian-born NHL hockey players: A reply to Nolan and Howell. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 47(5), 644-649.

50. Georgakis, S., & Molloy, S. (2016). From old soccer to new football? Expert accounts of transformations on the world game in Australia post-Crawford Report. *Soccer & Society*, 17(1), 72-89.

The Young Socceroos ahead of a match against Israel in 1991

COURAGE
WORLD CLASS
INTELLIGENCE
TRUST
RESPECT

Professional Footballers Australia

2/55 Walsh Street
West Melbourne VIC 3003

1300 650 497 | info@pfa.net.au
www.pfa.net.au