

THE IMPACT OF AUSTRALIA'S NSL NATIONAL YOUTH LEAGUE ON PLAYER DEVELOPMENT AND PATHWAYS

A COMPARATIVE BENCHMARK REPORT

“Do I see in the Youth System now (In Australia) the way I was brought up? The way Viduka, was brought up? Emerton, Schwarzer, Kalac, Moore, Muscat, etc.? Not at all.....Let us express ourselves.” –

*Harry Kewell on the Daily Football Show
9 March 2017*

INTRODUCTION

National Soccer
League
v
A-League?

Having completed a research study in 2020 on how many former A-League National Youth League players transitioned to a full A-League senior professional contract, a further question continued to pique my interest. Did the former National Youth League (NYL), that ran in parallel to the National Soccer League (NSL) between 1984 and 2004 develop more senior players? Australian football stakeholders have long engaged in the debate as to whether the NSL provided better pathways (*or not!*) than the A-League for talented youth players to make the step up to professional senior football.

It was now time to pursue (*albeit a niche*), a benchmarked investigation into this fascinating and topical question.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fortunately for me in order to thoughtfully and insightfully research the National Soccer League's NYL effect on youth pathways, Roy Hay academic, historian and journalist (expert on the NSL's NYL), sent me an Excel spreadsheet with hard to find NYL player data for season 1995 – 1996 to complete my study. Further, my research (*on 241 players*) compared this dataset with the Oz Football net depository website to cross check both sets of player data. Subsequently, this data was compared to another data set from the A-League National Youth League from seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Other resources referred to:

- ❑ The Australian and British Soccer Weekly, Goal Weekly and the Football Fandom website @ https://football.fandom.com/wiki/FFV_NTC
- ❑ Football Victoria's National Youth League: 1984–2020 article @ <https://www.footballvictoria.com.au/the-story-of-football-in-victoria-11> and Juego de Posicion website, 31 July 2020 @ <https://juegodeposicion.wordpress.com/2020/07/31/lack-of-professional-pathways-in-australia/>
- ❑ South Melbourne FC sources @ <https://www.smfc.com.au/2004/03/29/canberra-deakin-claim-200304-national-youth-league-championship/> and https://smhellas.fandom.com/wiki/1985_South_Melbourne_National_Youth_League_season
- ❑ Werner, David, Optus Sport, 30 March 2023, 'Why are we not producing players like we did a generation ago?' @ <https://sport.optus.com.au/news/state-of-australian-football/os7404/state-of-football-youth-development>

Please note that the former NSL, PFA, AIS, VIS, SASI logos featured in this paper are solely being used for illustrative purposes and to remind us all of the rich tapestry of Australian football history ©. It is fully acknowledged that the copyrights belong to Football Australia, PFA, Australian Institute of Sport and other Australian football entities.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

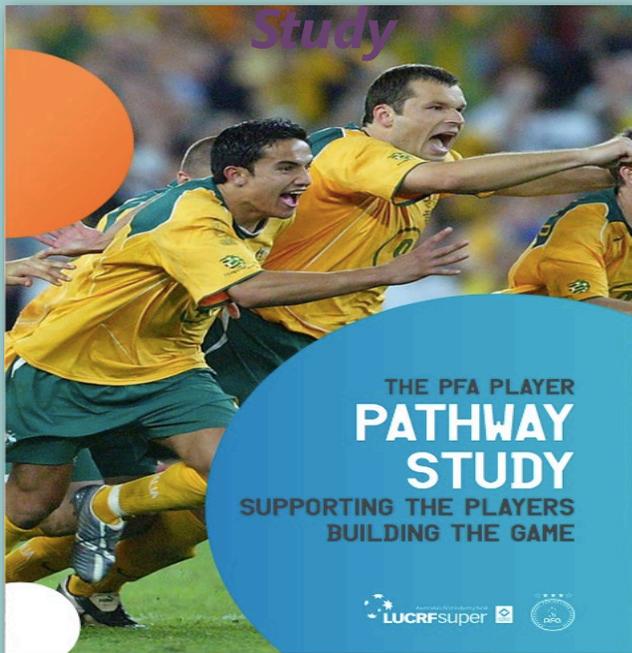
- ❑ To compare the NSL and A-League youth development pathways and outcomes (*The A-League National Youth League was established as a successor to the NSL NYL competition of the same name and commenced in August 2008*);
- ❑ To provide a snapshot in time of NSL player pathways and developments for season 1995 – 1996;
- ❑ To identify whether there was a trend that Melbourne, Victoria had better player development in the NSL era; and
- ❑ To ascertain if the Australian youth development ecosystem during the NSL was in effect world leading.

FEATURES OF THE NSL NYL

- ❑ The significant aim of the NSL National Youth League was to provide a pathway for young players to play regular high-level football.
- ❑ Several NSL teams like Marconi, UTS Olympic and Sydney United had both a NYL team and NYL Colts team (B-team).
- ❑ In 2007 there were 3 state divisions of the National Youth League being the New South Wales/Queensland, Victoria and South Australia divisions.
- ❑ The National Youth League included State institute teams such as the South Australia Sports Institute (SASI), Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS), Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), New South Wales Institute of Sport (NSWIS), Queensland Academy of Sport (QAS), Northern New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Academy.
- ❑ A full season was played being home and away rounds plus a finals' series.
- ❑ Most NSL clubs cared about their youth like Sunshine George Cross who made 4 NYL finals and were supportive of the dynamics of the NSL's player development strategy. In that players could either go overseas (full professional) and also transfer between NSL clubs.
- ❑ In 1998, Roy Hay stated that more players graduated to their senior teams than previous years.
- ❑ Most NYL matches preceded the NSL seniors match which gave Clubs and Agents scope to scout.
- ❑ Two non-NSL clubs made the NYL grand finals namely Whittlesea Stallions and Canberra Deakin, with Canberra winning the last edition of the NSL NYL.

KEY FINDINGS

The PFA Australian Player Pathway Study



The Results are in: after examining and assessing the player squad data from the 12 clubs in the Victorian NSL NYL division from season 1995/1996 and comparing them to A-League National Youth League player squads from seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 (a two decade gap):

- ❑ 31.5% of the NSL NYL players made a one or more NSL top league appearances compared to A-League Youth players with only 19% making an A-League appearance or getting a A-League scholarship or professional contract.

Conversely, the A-League National Youth League dial has never really moved up with only 20% of NYL academy players having gone on to make a senior appearance over the last years, according to the PFA's most recent study. The Victorian A-League NYL statistics are even worse when compared to the NSL NYL, as there are less Victorians making it as a professional player at this moment.

CLUB BY CLUB DATA

How many players from each Victorian NYL club transitioned to a NSL club senior roster from 1997:

Altona Magic - 1

Bulleen Lions - 4

Green Gully Cavaliers - 0

Heidelberg United - 12

Melbourne Knights - 14

Melbourne Zebras - 7

Morwell Falcons - 7

North Geelong Warriors - 4

Port Melbourne Sharks - 0

South Melbourne FC - 14

Springvale City Reds - 1

Victorian Institute of Sport - 12

From this cohort of clubs, 17 players went on to play overseas, 5 became Soccerroos, 5 became Australian Youth Internationals and several joined the AIS program.

A BEST v BEST NATIONAL YOUTH LEAGUE

The NSL's NYL was a mixing of the club traditional pathway and a successful development model. As former Socceroo Mark Viduka said 'not to underestimate the 'tradition of bringing players up (from youth), that went with the old National Soccer League'. Likewise Josip Skoko a former Socceroo, stated that 'when I played in the NYL at the (AIS), we had Northern and Southern divisions and they weren't all NSL clubs. North Geelong was in there for a period'.

Further, as Peter Dionisopoulos so effectively noted 'this (NSL's NYL) competition was the reason why Australia's under 17's Joey's dominated the World Youth Cup, finishing top four if not top 8 for several tournaments. The AIS was the backbone of that and the other NSL NYL teams always wanted to beat the AIS to show they are worthy as well'. So, the story went on.....

(Australia's under 17's reached the second round of the 1997 World Youth Cup in Malaysia and made the final in 2000 in New Zealand to ultimately lose to Brazil on penalties)

A BEST v BEST NATIONAL YOUTH LEAGUE LOST!

The demise of the NSL's NYL, featuring the best v best week in week out spirited youth player experience was disappointing. The competitive blend of the State institutes, the benchmark presence of the AIS, the NSL clubs, Colt teams and non-NSL clubs provided an aspirational canvas for all. In fact, the NSL NYL was a rare elite youth model and well admired football offering in the world at that time.

Interestingly, the hope was that the A-League NYL/Y-League would mimic the NSL's NYL by providing young players with the opportunity of impressing clubs into giving them their first professional contract. Unfortunately, a too short a season, ad-hoc league changes and varying A-League squad priorities and preferences - resulted in a outcome where many players who participated did not receive a professional contract with most returning to semi-professional football.

UNIQUE TEMPLATES

(OUTCOMES = A MIXED BAG)



After the demise of the NSL NYL, most new youth development initiatives did not succeed. For example, the second annual FFA 2010 State Institute Challenge held in Canberra with nine teams from the State Institutes and Training Centres lined up for an intense week of football with a few innovations added to promote the new National Football Curriculum. It did not duly provide the best outcomes.

Further, the move to A-League academies, although improving the situation – has meant the have and have nots!. In Melbourne ‘apart from Victory and City and Western United, who may have 20 players each that are being looked at for Australia’s youth national teams, what about all the other talent at other NPL clubs in that youth age bracket? A lot of these players are getting really disheartened because if they don’t get chosen by Victory or City or looked at, they lose that love and passion for the game because they don’t see a future’.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper is not all about proving that the NSL NYL was a better product or pathway than the A-League's NYL/Y-League as the landscape and factors were different. However, it anecdotally demonstrates and provides insights that the NSL NYL was a more effective youth development driven pathway. Maybe the A-League and Football Australia did not see the NYL and the AIS as long term sustainable projects therefore pivoted to a youth Academy focus. This maybe in line with the contemporary view expressed by former Socceroo Milan Ivanovic who said that 'a National Youth League is not that beneficial for young players because clubs are not using that many players from that league'.

Nevertheless, compared to the A-League youth offerings - the NSL NYL provided significantly more opportunities to talented youth players with its enhanced mixed framework of a best v best competition context, club passion, aspiration and positive prospects to showcase their game to key decision makers.

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