



THE JOURNEY FROM THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL YOUTH LEAGUE TO PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

A research study quantifying the proportion of Australian National Youth League (Y-League) players who transitioned successfully into the professional football pathway

INTRODUCTION

“FFA said the decision to close the CoE was to put A-League and the second tier National Premier League (NPL) clubs at the heart of player development. All nine Australian based A-League clubs have established youth academies, as they take the onus for [developing] the next generation of Socceroos”. (Football youth development in Australia is fragmented and different to world leaders - by Amanda Shalala, 2/7/18)

In recent years the Australian National Youth League (*now known as the Y-League*) has been much maligned as a football competition due to its failure to consistently produce professional footballers. This perception however, has not fully been tested on a quantifiable basis.

Therefore this study aims to obtain an anecdotal insight into whether the National Youth League plays a significant role in developing Australian youth football talent. Further this study examines whether the National Youth League sets up a pathway for Australian youth football talent to progress to professional football.



OBJECTIVES

- To ascertain whether playing in the Australian National Youth League is an effective pathway for youth players to transition to professional football.
- To identify which A-League clubs and FFA CoE youth programs from the 2015/16 and 2016/17 National Youth League seasons contributed in developing a significant number of professional footballers.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The player **data** analysed by this study concerned **20** National Youth League squads (cohorts) from the **10** clubs which participated in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 league seasons. A total of **312 players** were considered.

These two seasons were chosen as they provide a window of 3 to 5 years for youth players to transition to professional contract pathways whilst allowing us to conduct effective and measurable research in 2020.

The **method** used to assess a player's youth and current playing status was based on research from following scouting and player platforms:

- Wyscout
- Instat
- Transfermarkt
- Sports TG – National Premier League database
- Y-League.com.au

Pathway modelling research was also considered:

- Quantifying a youth transfer's impact on talent development – Stirr Associates (Belgium)



SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS – THE AUSTRALIAN PATHWAY



Current players with an A-League youth professional or A-League senior professional contract

The research study identified that **60** National Youth League players (**19%**) from the seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 have currently either an A-League youth professional contract or a A-League professional contract.



National Premier League (NPL) players

The research study identified that **206** of the National Youth League players (**66%**) from the seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 are now playing in the NPL leagues across Australia. This is an overwhelming majority of the players studied as part of this research.

Please note that the NYL, Y-League, former A-League clubs, AIS and NSL logos featured in this report 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 the Football Federation Australia and other football entities

FINDINGS – THE INTERNATIONAL PATHWAY

Professional contract with an international club in the 1st or 2nd division



The research study identified that **13** players (**4%**) from the National Youth squads of 2015/16 and 2016/17 are currently playing at international clubs competing in the 1st or 2nd division of their respective country's leagues.

This calculation also includes players who are playing for the B-team or the Second team (II) of the international club.

The research study identified that **10** players (**3%**) from the National Youth squads of 2015/16 and 2016/17 are currently playing at international clubs competing in the 3rd or 4th division of their respective country's leagues.

It should be noted that several of the international 3rd and 4th division teams identified in this study are not fully professional clubs or are not offering a fully professional contract.



Professional or Semi-professional contract with an international club in the 3rd or 4th division

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH



Players who have played more than 10 professional matches

According to Wyscout of the players researched, **50** NYL players (**16%**) had played more than **10** A-league or international club professional matches



Players who played less than 5 A-League matches as a professional then were released

An adverse observation ascertained from the study is that **27** NYL players (**8.5%**) had played just **1** to **5** A-league professional matches and where then subsequently released from their clubs



FFA CoE players who attained an A-League club professional contract

Only **12** FFA CoE (AIS) (**32%**) scholarship players out of a total **37** researched in this study managed to transition to A-League professional contracts



Players who transitioned to the USA college scholarship pathway

A total of **8** NYL players (**2.5%**) who did not obtain an A-League or international professional club contract ended up playing USA College Soccer on scholarship. None so far transitioned to MLS.

The research study also identified that **9** National Youth League players (**2.8%**) from the seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 whom played between **6** and **65** A-League games have now been released by their club and are now playing in the NPL

CLUB BY CLUB SUMMARY #1

<i>Clubs</i>	Western Sydney Wanderers	Melbourne Victory	Melbourne City	Sydney FC	Brisbane Roar
Youth Squads selected for study	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17
Number of Players	21	31	31	28	19
Players who are currently playing in A-League as a professional	8	5	6	6	5
Players who are currently playing for professional 1st or 2nd division clubs internationally	1	3	0	2	0

CLUB BY CLUB SUMMARY #2

<i>Clubs</i>	FFA Centre of Excellence (formerly AIS)	Adelaide United	Central Coast Mariners	Newcastle Jets	Perth Glory
Youth Squads selected for study	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17	Squads for National Youth League seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17
Number of Players	37	47	27	36	35
Players who are currently playing in A-League as a professional	7	12	6	3	2
Players who are currently playing for professional 1st or 2nd division clubs internationally	4	1	0	1	1

FURTHER ANALYSIS AND TRENDS

- **Adelaide United** has developed (*compared to all other A-League clubs*) the most professional players who are playing in the A-League from its National Youth League 2015/16 and 2016/17 squads.
- **Brisbane Roar** in preparation for the 2016-17 A-League season undertook an initiative to immerse a select cohort of its youth players into pre-season A-League senior training. The **7** players were *Joe Caletti, Joseph Champness, Nicholas D'Agostino, Nathan Konstandopoulos, Jayden Prasad, Mark Rodic* (the majority are now playing professionally as identified by this study). This form of player development initiatives gives Y-League players the opportunity to showcase their abilities in pre-season and may be beneficial for A-League clubs to assist in developing playing talent.
- **In the Western Sydney Wanderers** 2019/2020 season A-League squad there are **11** players who have come through the Western Sydney Wanderers football academy Y-League team.
- **The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS)** Football program has developed many players to represent the Socceroos at the FIFA World Cup and professional football. As a consequence of the closure of the AIS and the recent shift to an A-League academy/NPL participation model, it is becoming evident that there has been somewhat of a downturn in player talent development in Australia as was recently discussed by Mark Viduka and former AIS head coach Ron Smith on SBS TV (April 2020).

OTHER ONE-OFF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL PATHWAY PROJECTS

- **The Nike Academy (based in England)** provided a pathway for the winners of the Nike Academy Australian edition '*The Chance*' (now ceased) into professional football. From the Australian perspective as a player development program, it has had a mixed outcome with Tom Rogic still being a current professional, whilst Cameron Edwards, Emilio Martinez, Dejan Pandurevic were all professional but now play NPL, Darcy Burgess plays NPL, Domenic Nascimben and Ryan Blumberg have ended up in USA College scholarship system.
- **Melbourne Heart FC (now Melbourne City FC)** had the status as a nursery for Australia's next football generation. In 2012, Heart participated in a '*Hawaiian Islands Invitational tournament event*' against other professional clubs. Boasting a squad consisting largely of National Youth League players and the best of the Victorian Premier League (now NPL), Heart were very competitive against more fancied opponents. Recently, Y-League players have not had many of these developmental tournaments and trialing opportunities.
- **As a future project** just like the old *Copa America* initiative, the FFA should consider having a Y-League player group selection to be based in Europe for 3 months to partake in mid-week games against UEFA Youth League teams (whilst the group phase is on) in order to develop and benchmark Australian youth talent against the best under 19's players in Europe. In order to choose the select group, the FFA and the Y-league should implement a youth player ranking system similar to the Spanish youth player ranking system as exemplified at <https://www.futboldraft.com/votaciones-hombres-2018>.

CONCLUSION

The scope and results of this study show that the A-League club driven National Youth League (Y-League) has had a mixed degree of effective player development outcomes. In fact the **overall finding interpreted by this study is that 73 players (23%) from the 20 NYL cohorts examined are playing fully professionally as at 31 January 2020.**

There may be various reasons for this result including:

- the lack of A-League opportunities as there are only **3** youth professional spots per club;
- lack of enough meaningful matches as the Y-League has an **8** or **9** match season; and
- there is no professional Australian 2nd division to continue developing players (players generally complete their development by 23yo).

Finally, in terms of the bigger picture there is a concern about the scarcity of exciting young Australian footballers on the world football stage. This concern must be addressed by FFA and all stakeholders by implementing a more rigorous and strategic approach to youth player development.





THANK YOU !



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