

## Pathways to Professional Football: Developing Thai Youth Players for Japan's Football League

Puree Wattanasupt <sup>1</sup>, Assistant Professor Dr. Issadee Kutintara <sup>2</sup>, Assistant Professor Dr. Phennipha Phunsawat <sup>3</sup>

1. Department of sport and health management, Faculty of Sport and Health science, Kasetsart University, 1 Moo 6, Kamphaeng Saen Sub-district, Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, E-mail: puree.w@ku.th

2. Department of sport and health management, Faculty of Sport and Health science, Kasetsart University, 1 Moo 6, Kamphaeng Saen Sub-district, Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

3.. Department of sport and health management, Faculty of Sport and Health science, Kasetsart University, 1 Moo 6, Kamphaeng Saen Sub-district, Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 26 Dec 2024

Revised: 14 Feb 2025

Accepted: 22 Feb 2025

### ABSTRACT

Developing a model for Thai youth football players to transition into international professional football careers in Japan represents both a significant achievement and a considerable challenge. Currently, Thailand lacks an established framework for nurturing youth players to become professional athletes in Japan, making the creation of such a development model both intriguing and essential. Objective: This study aimed to create a development model for Thai youth football players aspiring to become international professional football players in Japan and to identify guidelines for developing or promoting Thai youths to achieve this. Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 key informants to gather information for the development model of Thai youth football players aiming for professional careers in Japan. Results: The results regarding the management process, which comprises Planning, Organizing, Leading, and Controlling, as factors affecting the development model for Thai youth football players to become professional football players in Japan, are as follows: Planning: Effective planning was found to be crucial for the development of Thai youth football players aspiring to play professionally in Japan. This involves setting clear goals, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and formulating strategies to achieve success. Organizing: Organizational structure and support systems play a significant role in player development. Clubs, academies, and federations need to provide resources, infrastructure, and coaching expertise to facilitate the growth of young players. Leading: Leadership within football organizations is essential for guiding and motivating players toward their goals. Coaches, mentors, and role models can inspire young players to excel and instill important values such as discipline, teamwork, and resilience. Controlling: Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to track the progress of youth players and ensure that they are on the right path toward becoming professional footballers. This involves assessing performance, providing feedback, and making adjustments as needed to optimize development. Conclusion: Effective planning, robust support systems, strong leadership, and continuous monitoring are essential components for developing Thai youth football players into professional football players. These elements work together to provide clear goals, structured pathways, guidance, and adaptability, ensuring sustained progress and holistic growth.

**Keywords:** youth football players, professional football, development model, management process

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### INTRODUCTION

At present, football is the most popular sport worldwide. Each country strives to develop its own football players to be knowledgeable, competent, and successful in every game. The long-term goal is to cultivate professional football players who can compete in international matches. Developing football players into elite athletes is a significant challenge today. Many European countries, such as England, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Germany, prioritize and begin developing football players at a young age (Ford et al., 2012; Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016; Taylor & Bruner, 2012; Zarei et al., 2020). A framework for developing youth football

players into professionals has been established (Ford et al., 2010; Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2013). Interestingly, research has indicated that the appropriate environment contributes to the successful development of youth football players into professionals. This aligns with numerous academic studies on youth football player development in England and Europe. For example, in England, talent development and advancement within the context of professional football players have been thoroughly examined (Ford et al., 2012; Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016; Taylor & Bruner, 2012; Webb et al., 2021).

It has been observed that the successful development of young professional football players in England is based on at least four aspects: discipline, commitment, resilience, and social support (Holt and Dunn, 2004). This is consistent with Mills et al. (2012), who discussed personal traits influencing the development of elite players, gathered from expert coaches working in English Premier League clubs. They identified five key attributes: resilience, goal-directed attributes (passion, professional attitude), awareness, sport-specific attributes (coachability), and intelligence, as well as environmental factors such as coaches, game culture (change of coaches), opportunity acquisition (injury), and provision (access to quality coaching). Moreover, many researchers have discovered that external factors, including vision and policy setting, development of players in different playing styles, long-term development models, operational guidelines, executives and technical directors, effective training programs, development systems in each phase, coaches, education and welfare, game style and position, sports science and medicine, program analysis, facilities, and budgets (Jadczak et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2016; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2015; North et al., 2014; Pau et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2018; Samur, 2019; Tokirie et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020), are of great importance for the development of youth football players to become professional players in high-level teams in the future.

The aforementioned information provides a broad overview of the approach to developing youth football players into professionals in Europe. In Asia, while the models or guidelines for developing youth football players to become professionals are not drastically different, attention is still paid to the factors mentioned above. Regarding outstanding male football players in Asia, Iran, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates are the top five most successful countries in male football. Japan is ranked number one (out of 47 countries) in the AFC CLUB COMPETITIONS RANKING (AFC, 2021: online). Japanese football players frequently play in European teams. For this reason, Japan is a primary target country for professional football players in Asia before potentially moving to European leagues. There are various pathways for professional football players to play in Japan, such as being national team players, club acquisitions, collaborations between clubs, sending youth football players to play in Japan, and utilizing the J-League quota for foreign players from designated countries. Players from these countries can register and play immediately without the usual foreign player quota limitations.

The countries included in this special quota are Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, and Qatar (Thai PBS, 2016: Online). This relaxed regulation has motivated players from these nine countries, presenting both an opportunity and a significant challenge to play in Japan. Another key motivation is the higher income potential for professional football players in the Japan Football League compared to other Asian leagues, although player income is regulated (Keiko, 2004). Currently, Japan has increased investment in European football clubs for five main reasons: nurturing players for profitable sales, developing Japanese football, fostering local football and community engagement, internationalizing brands, and personal and business connections (Bárbara Marin & Chungmi Lee, 2020). Consequently, playing in Japan can provide football players with new experiences and potential opportunities to move to European countries.

Furthermore, international collaborations offer another avenue for Thai youth football players to gain experience and potentially become professional players in Japan. For example, SCG Muangthong United Club established partnership agreements with Jubilo Iwata, Japan in 2010, and with Urawa Red Diamonds, Japan in 2022. BEC Tero Sasana signed an alliance contract with Shimizu S-Pulse, Japan. Chonburi FC signed an alliance contract with Vissel Kobe, Japan. Bangkok Glass FC signed a partnership agreement with Cerezo Osaka, Japan (Rattamanee and Teerasorn, 2018). In conclusion, the various approaches mentioned above can be utilized for developing Thai youth football players to become professional football players in Japan.

The preceding information outlines the current situation and strategies for sending football players to play in Japan. Developing a model for Thai youth football players to transition into international professional football careers in

Japan would be a significant achievement and a considerable undertaking. However, Thailand currently lacks a specific model for developing youth football players to become professional players in Japan. Therefore, identifying such a development model is both challenging and highly relevant.

The development of a successful model necessitates consideration of the operational structure and various elements such as resource management, management practices, and clear management outcomes. These factors will have a lasting impact on the sustainability of professional football players. This aligns with the concept of system theory (Draff, 2008), which posits that planning processes and managing available resources to achieve desired objectives require several components, including personnel, finances, materials, management, planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. This is consistent with a study by Ryan et al. (2018) titled “Developing World-Class Soccer Players: An Example of the Academy Physical Development Program from an English Premier League Team,” which found that crucial elements in the successful development of youth soccer players include operation, education/welfare, recruitment, coaching, and sports science and medicine.

Furthermore, the creation of a successful youth football system often begins with establishing Development Centers, followed by Pre-Academy, Foundation Phase, Youth Development, and Professional Development Phases. This sequential progression indicates a guideline for success in investigating the development model for Thai youth football players aiming for international professional careers in Japan. This is particularly important because Thailand lacks a clear development model, and there is a scarcity of research studies addressing the development model for Thai youth football players aspiring to become international professional players in Japan.

Therefore, this study aimed to create a development model for Thai youth football players to become international professional football players in Japan and to investigate the guidelines for developing or promoting Thai youths to achieve this. This encompasses the preparation and development of resources for the path to becoming professional football players, desirable qualifications of youths, policies and guidelines for youth promotion in various fields with a systematic management system, and the potentials and opportunities for Thai youth football players to become professional football players in Japan from a young age. This study will benefit relevant agencies by providing a development model for Thai youth football players aspiring to become professional players in Japan. The model developed through this research can serve as a framework for further enhancing the capabilities of Thai youth football players.

## MATERIAL & METHODS

The research process was divided into three steps.

### Step 1: Literature Review and In-depth Interviews

This step involved studying the guidelines for promoting and developing Thai youth football players to become professional football players in Japan. Documentary research was conducted, examining related concepts, theories, research studies, and information from relevant agencies in both Thailand and Japan. The document review included the following: 1. **Studying documents related to the development of Thai youth football players:** This involved analyzing national policies and the policies of related agencies in Thailand, such as national policies, policies of involved government and private agencies, the Football Association of Thailand, and news regarding football situations in Thailand and Japan. 2. **Studying documents related to the best practices of international youth football team management:** This involved examining foreign football associations that have been successful in developing youth football players into professional players in other countries. Following the review of relevant literature, key themes were identified to guide the in-depth interview process with experts possessing knowledge or experience related to the development model for Thai youth football players aspiring to become professional football players in Japan. The key informants in this step were 40 people which were consist of 12 people from the executives in the Football Association both in Thailand and Japan, 10 Football Team Manager, 5 Academic Experts, 3 Football Players, 5 Football Coach, 3 Football Agent, and 2 Parents of the Football Player

### Step 2: Focus Group

The research process in this step was divided into 2 phases

### **Phase 1: Presenting the draft of the development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan**

The data from the study results in Step 1, The researcher analyzed and synthesized the data obtained from the in-depth interviews to derive the findings the drafting the development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan. The draft of the development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan was present to the expertise in the focus group to verify the model.

### **Phase 2: Verifying the development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan**

The draft development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan was verifying by a purposive sample method was employed for selecting the participants with the 5 experts using the focus group discussion, and the appropriateness and the feasibility of the model were assessed.

The key informant in this step were 5 people which consisted of Academics Person, professional football player, Football club presidents, professional football managers with 5 years or more of professional football experience.

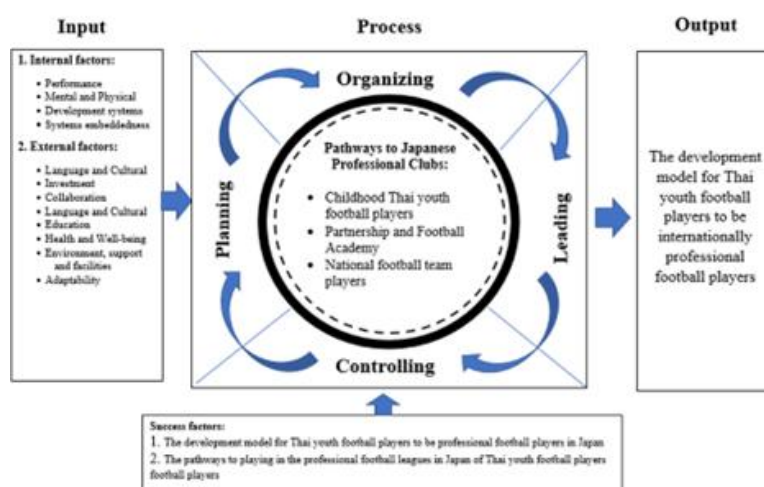
### **Step 3: A public hearing**

To evaluating the development model for Thai youth football players to be professional football players in Japan

In this step, a public hearing is conducted to ensure diversity and comprehensiveness in gathering feedback, with approximately 50 participants (Cochran, 1977). The participants are selected purposively from 10 groups which consisted of 10 representatives or officials with at least one Japanese football club playing in the J League Division 1, 10 representatives of the Football Association of Thailand under Patronage of His Majesty the King which had the position and role within the organization refers to individuals who have experience in professional football, experience in organizing national, 10 executives of professional football leagues with the position and role within the organization refers to individuals who have experience in professional football, experience in organizing national or international competitions, expertise in sports management and development, or a deep understanding of the structure and system of football leagues, 10 representatives of professional football clubs with direct involvement in managing or operating professional football clubs or have knowledge of team management, player development, financial management, and club strategy, 10 representatives of football academies with experience in coaching, training, and developing young football players or familiarity with structured training programs, talent identification, and athlete progression or Involved in the administration, operations, and strategy of a football academy, 10 representatives of the media with knowledge and experience in reporting on football, particularly in professional leagues and youth development, 10 representatives of Thai and Japanese football coaches with Knowledge of coaching strategies, styles, and development pathways specific to Thai and Japanese football or familiarity with the football systems, league structures, and training methodologies in both countries, 10 representatives of football player agents with knowledge of legal aspects of player transfers, contracts, and governing regulations in football or understanding of the football transfer market, player value, and trends in player recruitment, 10 representatives of the parents of the football players in Japan with direct experience supporting and guiding a child through the football development pathway in Japan, and 10 representatives of professional football players in Japan with the background in managing and representing professional football players in Japan.

## **RESULTS**

The researcher analyzed and synthesized the results from the in-depth interviews, which led to the development of the Model of Thai Youth Football Players to Become International Professional Football Players in Japan. The model was then used in a Focus Group and Public Hearing. The model was showed as follow:



**Figure 1:** Model of Thai Youth Football Players to Become International Professional Football Players in Japan

The Model of Thai Youth Football Players Aspiring to Become International Professional Football Players in Japan consists of the following factors:

### 1. Internal Factors, including:

- Performance:** The internal factor of performance that enables youth players to pursue a professional football career in Japan encompasses a combination of technical skills, tactical understanding, consistency in match performance, and the ability to adapt to high-level competition. These elements are crucial for standing out in both domestic and international football environments and securing opportunities in Japan's professional football leagues.
- Mental and Physical Development Systems:** The internal factor of mental and physical development systems that enables youth players to pursue a professional football career in Japan includes a structured approach to enhancing both mental resilience and physical fitness. This involves proper training programs, psychological support to build confidence and focus, as well as physical conditioning to ensure peak performance and injury prevention. A balanced development of these areas helps youth players meet the demands of professional football in Japan.
- Systems Embeddedness:** The internal factor of systems embeddedness that enables youth players to pursue a professional football career in Japan involves the integration of players into a well-structured football development system. This includes strong support networks such as coaching, mentorship, and access to training facilities, as well as alignment with professional clubs, academies, and national football associations. Such systems provide youth players with the necessary resources, guidance, and opportunities to progress to the professional level in Japan.

### 2. External Factors, including:

- Language and Cultural Budget Collaboration:** The external factor of language and cultural budget collaboration that enables youth players to pursue a professional football career in Japan involves providing support for language acquisition and cultural adaptation. This includes language training to overcome communication barriers and cultural orientation to help players adjust to life and football in Japan. Additionally, financial support and collaboration between stakeholders, including football academies, sponsors, and football clubs, are essential to facilitate this process and ensure a smooth transition for youth players into the professional environment in Japan.
- Language and Cultural Education:** The external factor of language and cultural education that enables youth players to pursue a professional football career in Japan involves providing comprehensive language training to ensure effective communication with coaches, teammates, and other stakeholders. Additionally,



cultural education helps players understand Japanese customs, social norms, and professional expectations, which is crucial for their successful integration both on and off the field. Such education prepares players to adapt to the Japanese football environment and fosters a smoother transition into their professional careers.

3. **Adaptability:** External factors such as adaptability are crucial for young football players who aspire to have a professional career in Japan. Adaptability allows players to adjust to different playing styles, coaches, and environments, which are key to thriving in competitive and diverse football leagues. This quality helps them overcome challenges and seize opportunities, whether adapting to new training methods or the cultural aspects of playing in Japan. By being adaptable, young players increase their chances of succeeding and advancing in their careers.
4. **Environment, Support, and Facilities:** External factors such as environment, support, and facilities are essential for young football players aiming for a professional career in Japan. A positive and conducive environment, including training grounds and local competitions, plays a key role in a player's development. Support from coaches, family, and football organizations helps provide the guidance and motivation needed to succeed. Additionally, access to advanced facilities and resources, such as fitness centers and medical care, ensures that players can enhance their skills and maintain peak performance, giving them a solid foundation for a successful career.
5. **Health and Well-being:** External factors such as health and well-being are vital for young football players aspiring to have a professional career in Japan. Maintaining good physical health through proper nutrition, fitness, and injury prevention is crucial for a player's performance and longevity in the sport. Mental well-being, including emotional resilience and stress management, also plays a significant role in handling the pressures of competitive football. By prioritizing both physical and mental health, players can ensure they are fully prepared to face the challenges of a professional career.

Furthermore, for Thai youth football players to achieve success, they should follow the POLC framework based on systems theory, which includes planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, as the interviewees indicated.

The POLC framework	Quote	Interviewee Number
Planning	<i>"From what we've seen, effective planning is really important for Thai youth football players who want to go pro in Japan. It's all about setting clear goals, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, and coming up with the right strategies to succeed."</i>	12, 20,33,38
Organizing	<i>"Organizational structure and support systems are key when it comes to developing players. Clubs, academies, and federations need to provide the right resources, facilities, and coaching expertise to help young players grow and improve."</i>	4,9,11,27
Leading	<i>"Leadership in football organizations is very important for guiding and motivating players to reach their goals. Coaches, mentors, and role models can really inspire young players to do their best and teach them values like discipline, teamwork, and resilience."</i>	3,9,14,20,44
Controlling	<i>"Having good ways to monitor and evaluate progress is key for keeping track of how youth players are doing and making sure they're on the right track to becoming pros."</i>	6,15,29,32,35

	<i>It's about checking their performance, giving feedback, and making changes when needed to help them develop better."</i>	
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## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, which highlights the leverage of the Development Model of Thai youth football players to become international professional Football players in Japan. Stakeholders from both the public and private sectors, including football associations and football clubs, need to adopt a unified management approach by developing programs for Thai youth. These programs should focus on training skills as well as managing both internal and external factors to meet the same standards as Japanese football players.

Effective planning is a vital element in the development of Thai youth football players who aim to pursue professional careers in Japan. This process begins with setting clear and achievable goals that provide players with a sense of direction and purpose (Ivarsson et al., 2015). By identifying their individual strengths and weaknesses (Morley et al., 2014), players and their coaches can tailor training programs to enhance specific skills while addressing areas that need improvement (Rong, 2024). Additionally, strategic planning helps in creating a roadmap that outlines the steps required to reach their aspirations (Sweeney et al., 2022), such as participating in high-level competitions, gaining exposure, and meeting the demands of international football (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). Proper planning not only ensures that players are well-prepared physically and mentally but also increases their chances of succeeding in a highly competitive environment (Tracey & Elcombe, 2015) like Japan's professional leagues.

In addition, organizational structure and support systems are fundamental to the successful development of young football players (Relvas et al., 2010). A well-organized structure ensures that roles and responsibilities within clubs (Hamil et al., 2010), academies, and federations are clearly defined, creating a cohesive environment where players can thrive (Mills et al., 2014). Support systems, including access to resources such as quality training facilities, advanced equipment, and sports science programs, are essential in enhancing football players' physical and technical abilities (Leonov et al., 2024). Additionally, having experienced coaches and mentors who provide expert guidance and personalized training is critical to nurturing talent and building confidence (Blake & Solberg, 2023). These systems also play a key role in fostering a supportive atmosphere where players feel motivated and encouraged to pursue their goals. By investing in strong organizational structures and robust support mechanisms, the football ecosystem can create a solid foundation for the growth and success of young players (Teeranuwat & Thithathan, 2021).

Moreover, leadership within football organizations is a cornerstone for guiding and motivating young players toward achieving their goals (O'g'li, 2024). Coaches, mentors, and role models play pivotal roles in shaping the mindset and performance of these football players by providing clear direction and consistent encouragement (Bateman & Jones, 2019). Effective leaders inspire players to push their limits, helping them realize their potential both on and off the field (Gould et al., 2007). Beyond technical skills, these leaders instill crucial values such as discipline, which ensures players stay focused and committed; teamwork, which teaches them to work cohesively with others to achieve shared objectives; and resilience, which helps them navigate setbacks and challenges. A strong leadership presence fosters an environment where players feel supported, motivated, and driven to succeed, laying the groundwork for personal growth and long-term success in their football careers (Van Tuyl et al., 2024).

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are critical tools for tracking the development of youth football players and ensuring they are progressing toward their goal of becoming professional athletes (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Regular assessments of players' performance during matches, training sessions, and fitness evaluations provide valuable insights into their strengths and areas for improvement (Drust et al., 2007). This data enables coaches to offer constructive feedback tailored to each player, helping them understand what they are doing well and what requires more effort (O'Connor et al., 2017). These mechanisms also allow for timely adjustments to training programs, tactics, or individual development plans, ensuring that players remain on a steady trajectory of growth (Mills et al., 2012). Furthermore, consistent monitoring creates a structured and transparent framework for

development, giving players and stakeholders confidence that progress is being made in alignment with long-term objectives (Bek et al., 2018). By fine-tuning these processes, football organizations can maximize the potential of young players and prepare them for the challenges of professional competition (Relvas et al., 2010).

Additionally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for ensuring that youth football players stay on the right track toward becoming professional athletes (Holte-McKenzie et al., 2006). These mechanisms involve systematically tracking players' progress through performance evaluations during training sessions, matches, and fitness tests (Teixeira et al., 2021). By gathering and analyzing this information, coaches and organizations can identify each player's strengths and weaknesses, allowing for a personalized approach to development (Larsen et al., 2013). Providing regular and constructive feedback helps players understand their progress and motivates them to improve. Additionally, these evaluations enable timely adjustments to training programs, tactics, or even support systems to better align with each player's needs and goals (Wright et al., 2014). This ongoing process not only optimizes individual development but also creates a structured pathway that maximizes their potential and prepares them for the challenges of a professional football career.

### CONCLUSION

The study highlights the importance of a comprehensive management process, including planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, as key factors in developing a model for Thai youth football players aspiring to become professional players in Japan. Effective planning is foundational, as it ensures clear goals are set and strategies are tailored to players' strengths and weaknesses, paving the way for structured progress. Equally important is organizing, where the provision of robust support systems, such as advanced facilities, coaching expertise, and structured pathways by clubs and federations, creates an environment conducive to growth and skill development. Together, these elements establish a strong foundation for nurturing young talent. Moreover, the leadership and control mechanisms are also critical to sustaining this development process. Strong leadership within football organizations, through coaches, mentors, and role models, provides the necessary motivation and guidance to instill essential values like discipline, teamwork, and resilience in young players. Simultaneously, effective control mechanisms, including regular monitoring and evaluation, ensure that players' progress is continuously assessed, feedback is promptly provided, and development plans are adjusted as needed. These interconnected elements of the management process collectively form a comprehensive framework that not only enhances the capabilities of Thai youth football players but also equips them with the skills and mindset required to succeed in Japan's competitive professional football landscape.

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