

Practical Dilemmas and Optimization Strategies in the Workforce Development of Youth Football Coaches in China

Haochen Zhang *

Shanxi University, Taiyuan 030000, China

* Corresponding Author Email: zhc13633111269@163.com

Abstract. This study employs documentary analysis and logical deduction methodologies to systematically examine the current developmental status of youth football coaching professionals in China, analyze the constraining factors impeding industry advancement, and propose optimization pathways. The research posits that establishing a multi-tiered training system would enhance coaching competencies, refining incentive mechanisms could strengthen professional appeal, balanced resource allocation would facilitate rational talent mobility, and innovative sports-education integration models would standardize school football development. Through multidimensional optimization, this approach promotes the systematic development of youth football coaching teams, elevates youth training quality, and ultimately enhances China's competitive performance in football.

Keywords: Football, Teenagers, Coaches, Integration of Physical Education and Academic Education, Training System, Social Recognition.

1. Introduction

Football holds extensive grassroots foundations in China, with the revitalization and development of the sport constituting a fervent national aspiration. At the strategic level, the Outline for Building a Leading Sports Nation explicitly outlines a "Three-Phase Strategic Plan," positioning football reform as a central task within competitive sports breakthrough initiatives. The progress of this revitalization directly correlates with the realization of China's sports powerhouse ambitions [1-2]. Within this context, youth football coaches—functioning as the "pivotal transformation mechanism" in the football talent supply chain—undertake core functions such as transmitting athletic skills, cultivating tactical awareness, and shaping professional competencies. These professionals play an indispensable role in advancing football development and nurturing future football talent.

However, the current construction of China's youth football coaching workforce faces multifaceted practical challenges. On one hand, the rapid expansion of school football programs and youth training systems has intensified the demand for specialized, high-caliber coaches, who increasingly seek robust support in career advancement and professional development. On the other hand, systemic barriers—including fragmented training frameworks, constrained career progression pathways, and inadequate social recognition—impede the healthy growth of this critical cohort. Against this backdrop, this study conducts a systematic analysis of the contemporary landscape of youth football coaches in China, dissects existing industry malpractices, identifies root causes, and proposes targeted countermeasures. The findings aim to provide theoretical insights and actionable references for optimizing the developmental trajectory of China's youth football coaching sector.

2. The Practical Value of Youth Football Coaching Workforce Development

2.1. Policy Orientation for Youth Football Coaching Workforce Development

Amid the steady advancement of China's sports powerhouse strategy, youth football—as the foundation of football development—has gained increasing prominence, with youth football coaches assuming a pivotal role in this ecosystem [3]. In recent years, national policies have provided substantial institutional support for the professional growth of youth football coaches. The issuance of documents such as the Comprehensive Plan for Chinese Football Reform and the Medium- and Long-Term Development Plan for Chinese Football (2016–2050) reflects a clear policy orientation

toward specialization, systematization, and long-term planning for football talent cultivation. These initiatives position football revitalization as a critical component of national sports development and a strategic pillar for achieving sports powerhouse status, emphasizing the expansion of coaching teams, enhancement of training systems, and improvement of football pedagogy.

Furthermore, policies like the Guidelines on Deepening Sports-Education Integration to Promote Youth Health Development and the Implementation Opinions on Youth Football Reform underscore the imperative to strengthen sports-education integration, optimize youth training systems, and advance coaching professionalization. Collectively, these policies safeguard the sustainable development of youth football coaches across multiple dimensions, offering not only a roadmap for specialization and systematization but also a visionary framework for the long-term future of Chinese football. Through robust policy implementation, the coaching workforce is poised to expand in both quantity and quality, thereby catalyzing the vigorous growth of youth football.

2.2. Economic Benefits of Youth Football Coaching Workforce Development

As a burgeoning growth driver in the national economy and a core engine for sports powerhouse construction, the sports industry is experiencing unprecedented opportunities. Football, with its extensive industrial chain value and societal influence, has emerged as a catalyst for high-quality development in sports. Modern football encompasses diverse sectors such as event operations, youth training systems, equipment manufacturing, and media communication, while undergoing technological transformation through big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. Innovations like wearable data collectors, smart footballs, intelligent stadium systems, and football analytics platforms are revolutionizing international competitions, injecting new vitality into the industry [4].

From the coaching perspective, the professionalization of this workforce exerts profound economic and social impacts. Sports-education integration has heightened parental emphasis on holistic youth development, driving demand for structured football training and positioning professional coaches as central figures in market expansion. Simultaneously, scientific talent identification and cultivation reduce training costs, while elite players entering professional leagues generate substantial economic returns through transfer fees, tournament prizes, commercial endorsements, and derivative product development. These dynamics not only enhance football's cultural influence but also amplify its economic spillover effects. By optimizing talent development frameworks and expanding football's industrial footprint, youth football coaches serve as critical enablers of both athletic excellence and economic prosperity.

2.3. Social Value of Youth Football Coaching Workforce Development

Football, as the world's most popular sport, commands unparalleled global enthusiasm, boasting the largest participant, spectator, and professional base across all sports disciplines. In China, football carries unique cultural and historical significance. The ancient game of Cuju, originating during the Warring States period, is recognized as a precursor to modern football and has been officially acknowledged by FIFA as the sport's origin [5]. This deep-rooted cultural heritage has fostered a profound national aspiration for football excellence. Historically, Chinese football achieved remarkable milestones between 1974 and 2004, nearing Asian championship titles and notably qualifying for the 2002 FIFA World Cup, which ignited nationwide fervor. Despite recent fluctuations in competitive performance, football retains immense societal attention due to its extensive grassroots participation and cultural resonance.

In this context, youth football coaches serve not only as custodians of football culture but also as cultivators of the next generation of talent, bearing the critical mission of revitalizing Chinese football. Strengthening the coaching workforce aligns with both industry development needs and broader societal imperatives. Investing in youth coach development transcends football's future—it represents a strategic pillar in advancing China's ambition to become a global sports powerhouse.

3. Practical Challenges in Building Youth Football Coaching Teams

3.1. Deficiencies in Coaches' Professional Competence and Shortage of Qualified Instructors

Professional competence is a critical criterion for evaluating football coaches. The development pathways for football coaches generally fall into two categories: those transitioning from high-level retired athletes and those from sports-related university programs.

Retired Athletes:

While they possess rich competitive experience, particularly in technical-tactical knowledge, on-field adaptability, and professional ethics, their practical experience and technical demonstration skills profoundly influence youth football players. However, due to lower educational attainment and a lack of formal higher education, they often lack theoretical knowledge in sports training and sports psychology. This results in training programs overly reliant on personal experience in load control and periodization planning, failing to meet the demands of modern youth football development.

Sports University Graduates:

These individuals undergo systematic theoretical training and possess strong knowledge of sports science. However, they face limitations such as weaker practical coaching skills and non-standardized demonstration techniques. During the skill acquisition phase, athletes' technical improvement heavily relies on coaches' demonstrations and imitation. Particularly at the youth level, mastering technical movements depends largely on coaches' standardized demonstrations [6]. Yet, due to insufficient football-specific technical and demonstration capabilities among sports graduates, there is an urgent need to enhance their specialized football skills to align with the requirements of modern school football development.

Additionally, the shortage of specialized football instructors in schools remains a persistent and entrenched issue hindering youth football talent development [7]. Most football-focused schools struggle to meet the "one school, one D-licensed coach" standard, with widespread problems of "unqualified instructors" and "one teacher handling multiple roles." Furthermore, retired athletes face challenges such as low cultural literacy and insufficient academic qualifications during their transition to coaching roles. Due to limited teaching positions, most retired athletes cannot meet employment requirements [8]. For elite retired athletes, transitioning to grassroots coaching involves significant disparities in social status and salary compared to professional coaching roles. The psychological and financial gaps lead them to prefer remaining in professional club coaching rather than engaging in grassroots education [9].

3.2. Lack of Social Recognition for Grassroots Football Coaches

For years, due to the underperformance of Chinese football, the men's national team has remained a lower-tier squad in Asia. This has turned Chinese football into a subject of mockery among fans and households, with derogatory terms like "stinky tofu national team" proliferating in public discourse. Such phenomena reflect widespread societal prejudice and a pessimistic outlook toward football development. The absence of a robust football culture and atmosphere, coupled with low social recognition, discourages talent from pursuing careers in football. Persistent negative societal evaluations have eroded coaches' confidence in their professional value and social standing, undermining their occupational commitment. Grassroots practitioners, in particular, struggle to gain commensurate respect and recognition for their contributions, leading to a gradual decline in professional confidence and enthusiasm.

Moreover, salary levels and benefits are the most direct indicators of a profession's appeal [10]. From a micro perspective, adequate income and performance incentives enhance coaching motivation and alleviate financial stress, allowing coaches to dedicate more energy to their roles. From a macro perspective, competitive remuneration strengthens the attractiveness of the coaching profession, fostering talent retention for long-term football development. However, the income status of grassroots football coaches remains concerning. A survey of coaches in local football institutions revealed that 60% earn a monthly income between ¥5,001 and ¥10,000, while 20% of part-time

coaches earn below the ¥5,000 basic threshold. Notably, only 20% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their compensation, with over 70% reporting a mismatch between income, occupational stress, and workload. This value imbalance has driven a continuous exodus of skilled professionals.

3.3. Inadequate Training Systems and Continuing Education Mechanisms

Current coach training systems suffer from rigid course structures and outdated content, failing to meet diverse and individualized learning needs. For instance, D-level coaching courses overly emphasize foundational theories, lacking age-specific teaching modules for youth players. Teaching methods remain predominantly lecture-based, neglecting practical approaches such as case studies and situational simulations. Furthermore, the continuing education mechanism lacks mandatory requirements and effective incentives, resulting in delayed knowledge updates. Surveys indicate that only 35% of grassroots coaches have participated in professional training over the past three years, compared to over 70% in football-leading nations. The certification system also faces issues of poor hierarchical articulation. For example, advancing from C-level to B-level requires retesting all subjects, a redundant process that discourages continuous professional development.

4. Optimization Strategies for Building Youth Football Coaching Teams

4.1. Constructing a Multi-Tiered Training System and Diversified Access Pathways

In the process of sports talent development, it is essential to adhere to the strategic orientation of "sports-education integration" and establish a multi-tiered football coach training system. First, strengthen the disciplinary construction of football coaching programs in higher education institutions and deepen university-enterprise collaboration models. Through "tailored training programs," institutions can systematically cultivate composite coaching talents equipped with theoretical knowledge and practical capabilities. For example, the "Outstanding Football Coach Development Program" jointly implemented by Beijing Sport University and the Chinese Football Association adopts a "3+1" university-enterprise collaborative model, effectively integrating academic resources with industry platforms to provide innovative pathways for coaches' professional development. Second, refine the transition mechanism for retired athletes by designing modular training courses to address gaps in their knowledge structure. Enhance their theoretical proficiency in sports training and sports psychology while establishing streamlined pathways for professional certification. For instance, Shanghai's "Golden Whistle Program" combines specialized training with practical experience to facilitate retired athletes' rapid transition into qualified coaching roles. Finally, broaden avenues for societal participation by encouraging partnerships among professional clubs, youth training institutions, and academic organizations to establish integrated "industry-academia-research" coaching bases.

4.2. Enhancing Incentive Mechanisms and Career Development Channels

A robust incentive and security framework is critical to stabilizing the coaching workforce. Optimization should focus on three key areas: First, implement a dynamic compensation system featuring a composite structure of "base salary + performance bonuses + honor allowances," with targeted support for grassroots and remote regions. For example, Zhejiang Province's "Football Coach Spark Program" provides salary subsidies and career advancement incentives for coaches serving rural schools long-term. Second, improve social security systems by extending occupational injury insurance coverage to part-time coaches and exploring industry mutual aid insurance funds to mitigate occupational risks for non-staff coaches. Third, establish a multidimensional career development pathway integrating "teaching-research-training." Allocate dedicated research funds to support innovation in training methodologies and incorporate academic achievements into professional evaluation metrics. These measures will significantly enhance the profession's appeal and workforce stability.

4.3. Innovating Regional Collaboration Mechanisms and Resource-Sharing Platforms

Addressing regional imbalances in coach distribution requires cross-regional collaborative mechanisms. It is recommended that the General Administration of Sport lead the establishment of a digital platform for "East-West Coaching Partnerships," implementing a "Dual Hundred Talent Exchange Project" (annually dispatching 100 elite coaches from eastern regions to support western areas and 100 promising western coaches to eastern regions for advanced training). Simultaneously, create a "Football Coach Cloud Repository" to consolidate high-quality training videos, tactical analyses, and scientific training programs globally. Blockchain technology can ensure intellectual property rights protection and incentivize knowledge sharing. For instance, Sichuan Province's "Shudao Football Intelligence Platform" has enabled over 200 football-focused schools to share teaching resources, effectively narrowing regional educational disparities. Additionally, establish a compensation mechanism for talent mobility, offering tax incentives or youth training subsidies to institutions that dispatch coaches to central and western regions, thereby balancing regional interests.

5. Conclusion

Adolescents represent the future and hope of Chinese football, while youth football coaches serve as the pivotal force to nurture this hope. Through in-depth analysis of the developmental demands and restraining factors of Chinese youth football coaches, critical issues have come to light: shortcomings in professional competence and shortages of specialized teaching staff at the grassroots level, low professional attractiveness and social recognition, imbalanced regional distribution of talent, and lagging integration mechanisms between physical education and academic learning in campus football. These insights highlight the opportunities and challenges confronting this professional group.

Based on this understanding, strategies such as improving salary packages, refining training systems, optimizing resource allocation, and strengthening social support are vital for realizing the aspirations of Chinese football's future. Resolving these challenges requires collaborative efforts from the government, society, schools, and families. Governments at all levels should consolidate top-level design, introduce favorable policies, and increase financial investments. Social entities should actively participate by providing sponsorships and technical support to invigorate the market. Schools must ensure adequate facilities and time for training to harmonize athletic development with academic pursuits. Families should offer understanding and encouragement, acting as a steadfast backing for both children and coaches.

By fostering a supportive ecosystem for youth football coaches through multi-stakeholder cooperation, we enable them to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to cultivating young football talents. When every youth football coach can thrive in an ideal environment, the flourishing development of Chinese youth football will be assured, and the nation's dream of joining the ranks of global football powerhouses will no longer be distant.

References

- [1] Li, G. Q., & Fan, B. H. (2017). Xi Jinping's thought on building a strong sports nation. *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, 40 (4), 1 – 5.
- [2] Xi, L. Z., Mao, Z. M., & Wu, X. X. (2019). On the top-level design of "new campus football" (7): Ten success indicators and key implementation strategies for campus football. *Journal of Wuhan Sports University*, 53 (3), 76 – 80.
- [3] Wen, H. Z. (2013). Cultivation of coaches' comprehensive qualities in the context of campus football development. *Sports Science Research*, 17 (3), 86 – 89.
- [4] Li, Q., & Jiang, L. J. (2021). Development dilemmas and countermeasures of campus football in China under the background of building a sports power. *Sports Culture Guide*, (10), 103 – 109.
- [5] Wu, S. (2018). On the "self-confidence" of Chinese sports. *Sports Research*, 1 (2), 1 – 13.

- [6] Zhu, W., & Zhu, C. R. (2009). Laws of motor skill formation and research on physical education teaching methods. *Education and Vocation*, (35), 107 – 108.
- [7] Wen, Y. Z., Li, S. T., Jia, N., et al. (2024). Research on the resource security system for Chinese youth football from the perspective of integration of physical education and academic education. *Sports Culture Guide*, (11), 44 – 50.
- [8] Liu, S. B., Wei, Z. L., & Zhu, Y. C. (2024). Dilemmas and paths for retired football players to transition into school coaches under the integration of sports and education. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Sports Science Congress* (pp. 5). Organized by the International Bandy Federation (FIB), International Society of Chinese Athletes (ISCA), and Chinese Bandy Federation (CBF). Jilin Sport University Graduate School.
- [9] Wang, X., Wang, Y. C., & Zhang, L. C. (2014). A study on the psychological adaptation process of elite football players transitioning to coaches. *Journal of Xi'an Physical Education University*, 31 (5), 621 – 626.
- [10] Chen, H., & Wang, F. Q. (2023). An international comparative study on teachers' professional attractiveness and its influencing factors. *Shanghai Educational Research*, (7), 27 – 34.
- [11] Yang, X. F., Zhang, K., & Shi, B. (2010). Research on the flow of outstanding football talents in China. *Journal of Chengdu Sport University*, 36 (11), 70 – 74.
- [12] Yun, L., Qiu, M., & Wu, L. (2023). Spatial deconstruction of characteristic schools for youth campus football: Patterns, causes, and pathways. *Journal of Shandong Sport University*, 39 (3), 108 – 118.
- [13] Liu, H. Y. (2018). Development of youth campus football reform in China and reflections on current major issues. *Journal of Capital University of Physical Education and Sports*, 30 (3), 209 – 213.
- [14] Mao, Z. M., Liu, T. B., & Zang, L. H. (2015). On the top-level design of "new campus football". *Journal of Wuhan Sports University*, 49 (3), 58 – 62.
- [15] Duan, L., & Zhang, S. W. (2019). Realistic dilemmas and solutions for cultivating reserve football talents in campus football. *Sports Culture Guide*, (11), 92 – 96.
- [16] Yang, J. X., & Ren, D. M. (2023). Research on continuing education and training for football coaches in China from the perspective of action learning theory. *Bulletin of Sport Science & Technology*, 31 (7), 243 – 247.
- [17] Chen, B., Zhang, X. L., Liu, H. D., et al. (2017). Research on the cultivation of campus football teachers from the perspective of national strategy. *Journal of Chengdu Normal University*, 33 (9), 5 – 8.
- [18] Yao, Y., & Wang, W. Y. (2024). New exploration of sports culture communication under the rural revitalization strategy: Taking Guizhou "Village Super League" as an example. *China Radio & TV Academic Journal*, (10), 125– 128.
- [19] Tan, J. H., Chu, Y. J., Sun, Z. S., et al. (2022). Research on resource distribution characteristics and optimization strategies of national-level campus football characteristic schools in China. *Journal of Guangzhou Sport University*, 42 (6), 32 – 42.
- [20] Yang, L., & Liu, Y. L. (2025). Research on the "family-school-community" linkage development of campus football under the "double reduction" policy. *Innovation Research in Ice & Snow Sports*, 6 (1), 150 – 152.
- [21] Duan, L., & Zhang, S. W. (2019). Research on the cultivation of youth football coaches' teaching ability in China. *Journal of Shenyang Sport University*, 38 (2), 86 – 91+115.