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## Grassroots soccer development and national team performance: Lessons from global models and implications for the United States

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Grassroots football plays a crucial role in developing young talent and fostering a passion for the game through community initiatives, youth academies, and local clubs. Successful soccer nations like Germany and Spain have leveraged structured youth development systems to produce elite players, contributing to their international triumphs. In contrast, the United States faces challenges in translating its widespread grassroots participation into global success, largely due to the restrictive pay-to-play model, which limits access for talented players from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This study examines effective grassroots development strategies from Europe, South America, and Africa to provide recommendations for enhancing the U.S. system. By adopting a more inclusive and structured approach to talent identification and development, the U.S. can improve its national team performance on the global stage.

**Materials and Methods:** This study adopted a systematic review technique following PRISMA criteria to guarantee a controlled and rigorous assessment of grassroots soccer development. A comprehensive search across various databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar, revealed 1,942 relevant publications, which were refined through a rigorous selection process, eventually selecting 158 high-quality sources. Inclusion criteria centered on peer-reviewed research published between 2010 and 2023, while exclusion criteria removed opinion-based studies and those lacking a clear emphasis on grassroots soccer. Data extraction using a standardized pro forma, and analysis was accomplished through story and theme synthesis. To guarantee validity and reliability, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist were applied, along with inter-rater agreement evaluations. Bias was minimized using multi-database searches, independent reviewer evaluations, and consensus talks, producing a robust and trustworthy systematic review.

**Results:** The primary challenges with American soccer originate from structural and financial restrictions that hinder talent development and accessibility. The pay-to-play approach restricts chances for lower-income players, diminishing diversity and the total skill pool. Unlike successful worldwide models, the U.S. lacks a cohesive academy structure, resulting to fragmented player routes and variable development standards. Coaching education and license are not as stringent or supported as in leading soccer nations, hurting training quality at all levels. There is also a restricted culture of unstructured play, which inhibits creativity and technical ability in young players. Infrastructure discrepancies also increase the disparity, with impoverished populations having less quality training facilities. Additionally, there is insufficient synergy between grassroots academies, professional clubs, and the national team structure, making it difficult to migrate players successfully. Addressing these difficulties demands institutional improvements to make soccer more inclusive, organized, and development-focused.

**Discussion:** The conversation stressed that effective grassroots soccer development relies on established academies, good coaching education, financial accessibility, and seamless connection between clubs and national teams. Countries like Germany, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria, and Senegal have proved that investing in young development through well-organized systems, informal play settings, and talent reinvestment boosts national team success. In contrast, the

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U.S. has issues owing to its pay-to-play economy, fragmented growth routes, and lack of infrastructure in marginalized neighborhoods. To strengthen its system, the U.S. must reduce financial obstacles, expand coaching education, invest in grassroots facilities, encourage unstructured play chances, and build a uniform academy structure. Strengthening ties with premier foreign clubs and reinvesting talent-generated cash can further promote long-term player development. By implementing these improvements, U.S. Soccer can develop a more inclusive and efficient structure that optimizes talent potential and promotes national team performance.

**Conclusion:** Global grassroots soccer models give vital insights for strengthening the U.S. system. Europe stresses organized academies and club-led development, South America thrives on casual play and strong club structures, while Africa benefits from private scouting and European relationships. The U.S. has problems like as the pay-to-play market, variable coaching standards, and a fragmented growth route. Adopting effective worldwide tactics may build a more inclusive and competitive soccer framework, increasing talent development and national team performance.

**Keywords:** Grassroots Soccer Development; National Team Sport; Human Capital Theory Social Learning Theory

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## 1. Introduction

The foundation for developing young talent and a strong love of the game is grassroots football. Emphasizing fun, skill development, and social inclusion, it includes community-based initiatives, young academies, and local clubs introducing the game to kids and teenagers (Fadare et al., 2023). These projects are essential in building a large base of players that then fuels more intense competition including professional leagues and national teams (Chapman 2023). For example, FIFA's grassroots programs illustrate the global relevance of such projects by trying to give youngsters all around the chance to play soccer in a controlled yet exciting surroundings (Sihamba, 2021).

The significance of grassroots initiatives in creating national team performance is obvious in the developmental tactics utilized by great soccer nations (Duncan, Noon & Seabra, 2023). Countries like Germany and Spain have invested considerably in structured youth development systems, resulting in a consistent flow of great players for their national teams (Edwards, 2023). Germany's reform of its youth development program in the early 2000s, which included the formation of required academies for professional clubs, culminated in their 2014 FIFA World Cup win. Similarly, Spain's emphasis on technical competence and possession-based play, imparted from a young age through grassroots programs, was important in their consecutive European Championship titles in 2008 and 2012, and their World Cup triumph in 2010 (Norbäck, Olsson & Persson, 2021).

In contrast, the United States has had difficulty in turning its grassroots soccer involvement into international success, particularly in men's soccer (Blumberg & Markovits, 2021). The pervasive pay-to-play model has been noted as a serious barrier, limiting access for talented persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and potentially excluding a big pool of untapped ability (Greyser, Cortsen & Fernández, 2021). This method often results in a lack of diversity among the player pool and may impair the overall competitiveness of U.S. national teams on the global stage (Schmidt, 2021). Addressing these difficulties needs a thorough evaluation of successful international models to develop adaptable techniques that can enhance the U.S. grassroots soccer framework.

This study intends to analyze the impact of grassroots soccer development on national team performance by analyzing successful methods from Europe, South America, and Africa. By identifying critical components that contribute to the effectiveness of these programs, the research intends to give recommendations for increasing grassroots soccer development in the United States. The ultimate goal is to better the performance of U.S. national teams by developing a more inclusive and effective grassroots structure that emphasizes talent identification and development.

### 1.1. Research Questions

The fundamental research question underlying this project is to explore the relationship between grassroots soccer development and national team performance by evaluating effective methods from Europe, South America, and Africa. It tries to identify essential components of effective programs and give solutions to boost grassroots soccer development in the United States. Hence, the followings questions were raised:

- What are the successful grassroots soccer development models in Europe, South America, and Africa?
- How do these grassroots development strategies effect the performance of national teams?
- What major components contribute to the effectiveness of grassroots soccer programs?
- What recommendations may be made to boost grassroots soccer development in the United States?

Answering these study questions is valuable since it provides a full picture of how grassroots soccer development effects national team success, bringing insights into best practices from globally successful models. By comparing development structures in Europe, South America, and Africa, the study highlights critical components—such as coaching quality, infrastructure, accessibility, and talent identification—that contribute to effective grassroots initiatives. This expertise is vital for influencing strategic decisions in the United States, where soccer development faces structural challenges. Addressing these concerns enables the formulation of focused recommendations to increase grassroots programs, ultimately increasing player progression and strengthening the competitiveness of U.S. national teams on the global stage.

## 1.2. Research Objectives

The major purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between grassroots soccer development and national team performance, leveraging insights from successful methods across different areas. By analyzing best practices from Europe, South America, and Africa, the study tries to understand the structures, policies, and developmental techniques that have contributed to the success of national teams in these regions. These models frequently feature well-structured academies, government and corporate sector investment, community engagement, and methodical scouting methods that ensure continual player development. Examining these tactics will provide a full picture of how grassroots soccer serves as the foundation for long-term success in international competitions.

Additionally, the study attempts to examine the direct and indirect influence of these grassroots approaches on national team performance. This will involve reviewing key performance indicators such as player progression from young levels to senior national teams, the impact of structured youth leagues in talent development, and the influence of grassroots initiatives on technical and tactical development. Understanding these aspects can help identify the important elements that contribute to effective grassroots initiatives, including coaching quality, infrastructure, accessibility, and finance channels. Based on these findings, the study will offer strategic recommendations for improving grassroots football development in the US with the goal of strengthening the player development pipeline and increasing the competitiveness of the U.S. Men's and Women's National Teams on the global stage.

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## 2. Review of The Literature Sources

### 2.1. Understanding Grassroots Soccer Development

Grassroots soccer development is a multidimensional notion that spans several definitions stressing distinct aspects of early-stage football activity. Prabhakaran (2021), characterized grassroots as the initial phase where children are introduced to soccer, underlining the significance of ensuring that this experience is exciting and engaging, focusing around child-friendly soccer to create a love for the game. O’Gorman (2018) supports inclusivity, believing that players of all ages and abilities should have the chance to enjoy the game of soccer and grow as participants and people. Potrac (2018), focused on early involvement, emphasizing that until age six, children should be immersed in active everyday play, leading to acquiring essential movement skills in both structured and unstructured situations. Howie and Allison (2018) highlighted systematic training, characterizing their grassroots program as one where children learn with trained instructors and engage in weekend games, stressing development. Howell (2023), stressed the role of coaching, stating that grassroots licenses aim to help coaches guarantee pleasant, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate environments for their players. Collectively, these categories underline the need of early engagement, inclusivity, enjoyment, and structured development in grassroots soccer.

Grassroots soccer serves as the base for national football growth. A structured and well-supported grassroots system guarantees that players are brought to the sport with the necessary foundations in technical skills, teamwork, and an understanding of the game (Nash & Moşoi, 2023). It helps find and promote talent from varied socioeconomic origins, thereby allowing the sport to be accessible to everyone, regardless of income or social standing. Countries that invest in grassroots development tend to see better levels of success at the international level, as these systems produce a steady flow of skilled and well-rounded players.

In many successful soccer nations, grassroots programs are linked with educational institutions and local community organizations. Countries like Germany, Spain, and Brazil have highly acclaimed youth academies and grassroots programs that play a crucial part in creating world-class players. In Brazil, for instance, many elite players originate from favelas, where local clubs and schools provide free access to training and competitions (Uehara et al., 2021). This inclusivity is crucial for the sport’s growth and success, ensuring that talent is found and fostered from all parts of society.

Moreover, grassroots growth is not confined to technical skill acquisition but also encompasses physical fitness, social-emotional learning, and sportsmanship. It gives youngsters with an opportunity to learn vital life skills such as discipline, leadership, teamwork, and resilience, which are valuable both on and off the field. Furthermore, grassroots efforts frequently focus on coaching education and the importance of child-centered development, which guarantees that coaches establish a pleasant and supportive atmosphere where players can prosper at their own speed (Petrie et al., 2021). By promoting fun and enjoyment, grassroots soccer decreases the risk of burnout, encouraging long-term participation in the sport.

Ultimately, grassroots soccer development serves as the foundation for establishing competitive national teams and professional leagues (Smolianov et al., 2015). It is about nurturing the sport at the community level and ensuring that potential is accessible to all (Sihamba, 2021). Strong grassroots programs empower future generations of soccer players to compete at the highest levels, fueling the expansion of the sport globally. In essence, grassroots soccer development refers to the foundation of a country's football organization, focusing on the early engagement of players, generally at the youth level, and nurturing a lifetime love for the sport. It promotes inclusivity, accessibility, and skill development from an early age, ultimately providing a pipeline of talent that can be developed through more competitive levels up to professional leagues and national teams. At its foundation, grassroots soccer is about offering opportunity for children and young people to play, enjoy, and improve at the sport in a supportive and developmentally appropriate setting.



<https://www.uefa.com/development/grassroots/overview/>

**Figure 1** Grassroots Week: How UEFA Football in Schools benefits millions of students

The Figure 1 depicts a grassroots soccer scenario where young children are actively engaged in learning how to play soccer. The youngsters in the photograph are divided into two teams, wearing different-colored jerseys, and are engaged in a regulated yet joyful atmosphere that supports both physical and cognitive growth. This form of training is vital for cultivating future potential, since it gives core abilities such as ball control, passing, and teamwork while also encouraging social interaction, discipline, and confidence. Grassroots soccer programs serve as the entry point for many ambitious athletes, laying the framework for long-term participation in the sport, whether at the amateur or professional level. Additionally, such projects play a key role in encouraging inclusion and community engagement in sports.

## 2.2. Understanding the Idea of National Team Performance in Soccer

National team performance in soccer refers to the overall success and efficacy of a country's representative team in international events (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2020). It is impacted by various elements, including player quality, coaching, tactical methods, infrastructure, and grassroots growth. Evaluating national team success entails examining multiple criteria such as FIFA rankings, tournament performances, win-loss ratios, and the development pipeline of players from junior to senior levels.

One significant driver of national team success is player development, which starts at the grassroots level. Countries with excellent youth systems, like as Germany, Spain, and Brazil, have continuously produced high-performing national teams owing to their investment in organized academies and young tournaments (Gholipour et al., 2020). The existence of well-established leagues and a clear transition route from young to senior levels boosts the national team's capacity to compete at the top level (Halldorsson, 2021).

Another key issue is tactical and teaching techniques. Teams who adopt current football techniques, such as heavy pressing, positional play, and flexible formations, tend to perform better. For instance, Spain's supremacy from 2008 to 2012 was predicated on the "tiki-taka" style of play, which emphasized quick passing and movement (Beissel & Andrews, 2021). Similarly, France's 2018 World Cup success was ascribed to a well-balanced group with a blend of defensive sturdiness and offensive fluidity (Ravel & Comeau, 2021).

Moreover, infrastructure and investment in soccer development play a key role in maintaining long-term success. Countries like England and Belgium have altered their young development programs by stressing technical skills and competitive exposure, resulting to increased national team results (Edwards, 2023). In contrast, countries with underfunded leagues and limited training facilities frequently struggle to compete at the international level.

For the United States, national team performance has been variable, especially on the men's side. The U.S. Men's National Team (USMNT) has failed to reach the final rounds of international competitions despite having a big skill pool. Critics believe that the pay-to-play system in American youth soccer restricts access to top-tier training for bright but financially disadvantaged players, thus reducing the national team's depth (Greyser & Cortsen, 2021). On the other side, the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT) has been a dominating force internationally, partly owing to the broad involvement of women in college and youth soccer, together with major investment in player development (Narayanan & Pifer, 2023).

National team success in soccer is defined by a country's dedication to young development, tactical change, infrastructure investment, and accessibility to the sport. Successful soccer countries have adopted well-structured grassroots programs, defined player routes, and contemporary coaching methodologies, resulting in consistent high-level results. For the United States, removing structural hurdles like the pay-to-play paradigm might increase national team competitiveness, especially on the men's side.

### **2.3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by two theories namely; Human Capital Theory and Social Learning Theory

#### **2.4. Human capital theory**

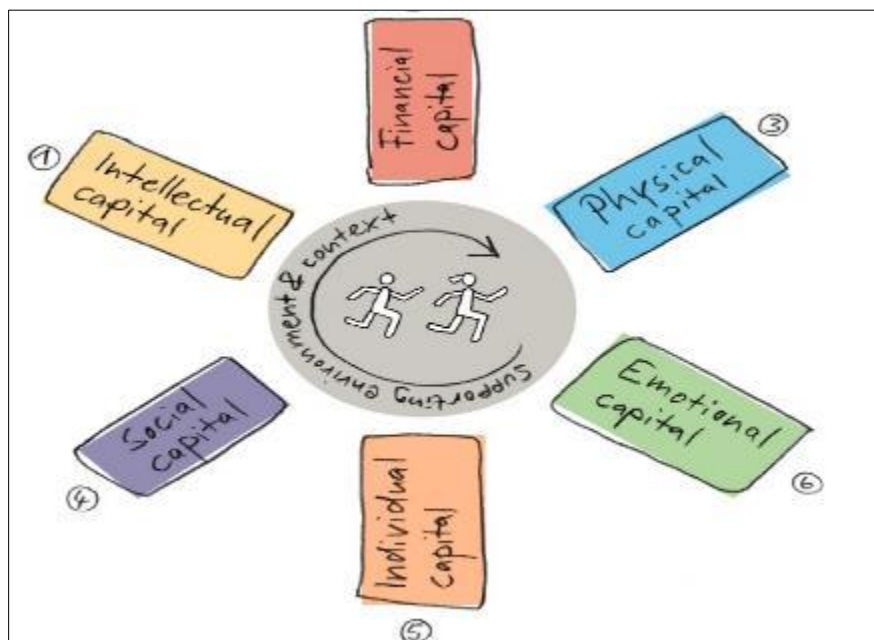
The theory was largely established by economists like Gary Becker, Theodore Schultz, and Jacob Mincer in the mid-20th century. Becker, in particular, is largely credited with popularizing the notion in his landmark book, "Human Capital" (1964), where he argued that expenditures in education, training, and health might be viewed as investments in capital that give returns over time, just like physical capital. Schultz further elaborated on this theory by highlighting that knowledge and skills, as types of human capital, are vital to economic progress and individual achievement (Strober, 1990). Mincer contributed by concentrating on the link between human capital and wages, illustrating how higher levels of education and job experience lead to increased income potential.

The main principles of human capital theory revolve on the premise that people may boost their productivity and worth via investments in education, training, and other types of skill development (Cañibano & Woolley, 2015). These investments boost individuals' talents, which in turn contribute to greater salaries, better employment possibilities, and improved economic results (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). The idea also underlines the relevance of human capital for organizational success and national economic development. It claims that by developing a talented workforce, countries may boost innovation, productivity, and competitiveness (Towse, 2015). Moreover, the theory has consequences for policy, arguing for increased expenditures in education and workforce development to achieve long-term economic growth.

In the framework of this study the theory plays a crucial role in understanding how young players learn skills and information, which is important for the overall performance of national teams. This theory is anchored on fundamental psychological frameworks, particularly those produced by Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and B.F. Skinner, which give vital insights into the cognitive and behavioral processes involved in learning (Towse, 2015). Piaget's model of cognitive development stresses that children learn best when they are actively involved in hands-on activities. For soccer, this

implies that young players grow their technical and cognitive abilities by practicing on the field, making errors, and honing their skills in real-time circumstances. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underlines the significance of social contact in learning. It argues that players attain their greatest potential when they are assisted by more experienced persons, such as coaches or mentors, who give direction while pushing the player to move beyond their existing skills. This idea is especially significant in grassroots soccer, as experienced coaches help youngsters overcome new hurdles and gain confidence. Additionally, B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory highlights the role of reinforcement in molding behavior. In soccer development, positive reinforcement—such as praise or awards for strong performance—encourages desirable behaviors, while critical criticism helps players fix errors and grow.

When applied to grassroots soccer programs, these learning theories imply that early-stage training has a substantial effect in the long-term success of soccer players, including their future performance at the national team level. Grassroots soccer programs, by integrating active learning, social contact, and reinforcement, enable young players improve not just their technical talents but also their collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving ability. These are all key components of success at higher levels of competition, including the national teams. In the unique context of the United States, where soccer has not historically been as prominent as in other places, there is a chance to expand grassroots programs by incorporating these learning concepts more effectively. By doing so, it is anticipated that the U.S. may promote a more comprehensive player development pipeline, eventually leading to improved performances from both the U.S. Men's and Women's National Teams. Therefore, this research attempts to examine how grassroots soccer development, founded in these psychological learning theories, might be adjusted to increase the performance of U.S. national teams on the international stage.



The Human Capital approach Accessed from, <https://www.sportetcitoyennete.com/en/articles-en/the-power-of-physical-activity-the-human-capital-approach>

**Figure 2** The Power of Physical Activity:

The figure demonstrates many types of capital—intellectual, financial, physical, social, individual, and emotional—that contribute to human capital development, notably in grassroots soccer. Intellectual capital reflects the information and techniques provided to young players via coaching, training, and tactical instruction. Financial capital refers to investments in infrastructure, equipment, and scholarships that provide access to excellent training. Physical capital comprises infrastructure, medical care, and nutrition programs that support player development. Social capital stresses the value of networks, mentoring, and community support in generating opportunities and collaboration. Individual capital focuses on human traits like discipline, resilience, and leadership, which are vital for athletic and personal progress. Emotional capital indicates psychological well-being, confidence, and mental tenacity required to manage the trials of elite soccer.

At the center of the picture is the supporting environment and context, which plays a vital role in integrating these many types of capital for successful grassroots soccer growth. A healthy developmental ecosystem—including systematic coaching, parental support, and policy backing—ensures that young athletes may maximize their potential. By harnessing various types of capital, grassroots soccer programs may generate skillful, well-rounded players who contribute to national and professional soccer performance. Ultimately, human capital in grassroots soccer is molded by a mix of investments, personal traits, and a supportive environment, all of which are vital for fostering potential and maintaining long-term success in the sport.

## **2.5. Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory, created by Albert Bandura, stresses the significance of observation, imitation, and modelling in learning. According to this theory, individuals learn not just via direct experience but also by seeing the activities of others and the effects of those acts (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). Bandura claimed that learning happens in a social setting and that people may acquire new actions, attitudes, and emotional responses by observing others (models) and then copying them (Abdullah et al., 2020). This process requires attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Individuals are more prone to replicate actions that are reinforced or rewarded, whereas they may avoid activities that are penalized or lead to bad results.

The theory underlines the role of cognitive processes in learning, stating that humans do not merely repeat what they perceive but actively evaluate and absorb the information (Xu, 2021). Social Learning Theory also combines the notion of self-regulation, where people monitor their own behavior and alter it depending on social input or internal norms. This idea has been extensively used to different domains, including education, psychology, and media studies, explaining how people learn information, behaviors, and social norms via contact with their environment and others. It also set the framework for explaining problems like violence, addiction, and moral growth via social factors.

Social Learning Theory, as presented by Albert Bandura, is particularly significant in the context of the research on stresses the significance of observation, imitation, and modelling in the learning process, arguing that people learn by witnessing the activities of others, especially role models or more experienced individuals. In the context of grassroots soccer, young players are not only acquiring technical skills via direct teaching but also by observing their coaches, experienced players, and peers. This process of observation and imitation helps players to adopt successful methods, enhance their talents, and learn how to behave both on and off the field. The interaction between players, coaches, and mentors in grassroots programs therefore creates a fertile environment for the development of crucial soccer-related skills, including as collaboration, leadership, and decision-making, which are required for success at the national level.

Moreover, Social Learning Theory underlines the relevance of reinforcement and feedback in the learning process. In soccer, positive reinforcement—such as praise for strong performance—motivates players to continue training and developing, while critical feedback helps players perfect their abilities. Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism, which suggests that behavior, personal factors, and the environment mutually influence one another, can be seen in grassroots soccer programs where the environment (training sessions, team dynamics, etc.) shapes the behaviour of players, and their behaviors also influence the environment around them. In the instance of the United States, applying Social Learning Theory to grassroots soccer development might lead to more successful coaching tactics that not only boost individual performance but also build a culture of learning and cooperation among teams. By witnessing and emulating the proper actions, young players are better suited to move to higher levels of play and eventually contribute to the success of national teams.

## **2.6. Key Benefits of Youth Soccer Development**

Youth soccer development has several advantages that extend beyond the playing field, contributing considerably to the holistic evolution of young persons. One of the key benefits is the enhancement of physical fitness. Engaging in soccer boosts cardiovascular health, develops muscular strength, and improves coordination and flexibility (Luo et al., 2023). Regular involvement in soccer activities helps youngsters develop endurance and agility, creating a basis for a healthy lifestyle. Soccer is a high-energy activity that involves constant movement, which aids in strengthening lung capacity and cardiac function. Additionally, the activity works numerous muscle groups, boosting total body strength and minimizing the risk of obesity (Castillo-Bellot et al., 2019). According to Luo et al. (2023), soccer needs endurance, agility, coordination, and balance, which are vital components of physical fitness. These physical advantages foster a lifetime commitment to healthy living and avoid lifestyle disorders such as diabetes and hypertension in adulthood.

Beyond physical health, young soccer promotes vital social skills that are necessary for personal and professional growth. The sport stresses collaboration, communication, and cooperation, since participants must work together to

attain shared objectives. This collaborative setting teaches youngsters the value of supporting one another and fosters connections that may last a lifetime. Through the process of learning how to plan, communicate effectively, and trust teammates, young players build interpersonal skills that will serve them in all facets of life, including school and future employment. As highlighted by Salva et al. (2023), soccer is the ultimate team sport, where youngsters learn the significance of working together, communicating well, and supporting one another. Additionally, involvement in team sports builds leadership abilities as players take turns leading exercises, making choices during competition, and inspiring teammates.

Participation in young soccer also helps to mental and emotional development by boosting psychological resilience and cognitive abilities. The obstacles posed by the sport, including as competitiveness, overcoming failures, and the need for strategic thinking, help youngsters develop resilience, discipline, and problem-solving abilities. Soccer players learn how to manage pressure, adjust to dynamic circumstances, and create personal objectives, all of which add to their mental toughness. Furthermore, playing soccer produces endorphins, which aid in lowering tension and anxiety. Price et al. (2023) stressed that via friendly competition, collaboration, and physical exercise, youngsters have the chance to acquire new abilities, develop self-confidence, and build character. This mental fortitude built via soccer translates into higher academic success, as children learn to stay focused, manage time efficiently, and remain motivated to reach their objectives.

Furthermore, youth soccer acts as a forum for cultural interchange and inclusion, promoting a feeling of global knowledge and acceptance. The worldwide appeal of soccer brings together persons from varied backgrounds, encouraging understanding and acceptance among young players. In a multicultural culture, knowing how to communicate with peers from varied ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds is a beneficial experience. Soccer gives a unique chance for youngsters to overcome social boundaries and learn the significance of diversity, equality, and inclusion. This exposure to diverse cultures and ideas strengthens children's social experiences and prepares them for a multicultural world. According to Griffiths (2021), young soccer leagues provide social advantages, including developing relationships, fostering diversity, and addressing social concerns, which play a significant part in molding well-rounded, socially capable people. Moreover, grassroots soccer programs generally combine community-building activities that emphasize civic responsibility and volunteering, further reinforcing beneficial societal values.

In summary, youth soccer development is crucial in cultivating physical health, social skills, mental resilience, and cultural awareness among young folks. The activity not only promotes physical fitness but also builds collaboration, leadership, and problem-solving ability, all of which are crucial for personal development. Additionally, soccer acts as a vehicle for inclusiveness and diversity, teaching young players the significance of respect, teamwork, and understanding in a globalized society. By engaging in soccer, children receive vital life skills that extend beyond the sport, helping to their entire development and preparing them for future difficulties. As more communities engage in youth soccer programs, they create an atmosphere where children may grow physically, socially, and emotionally, assuring a better future for the next generation.

## **2.7. Emerging Issues in Youth Soccer Development**

Youth soccer development has various developing difficulties that impact the effectiveness of training programs, talent identification, and overall player improvement. One important concern is the increased commercialization of young soccer, which has led to the pay-to-play model in several nations, particularly in the United States (Cocco & Spencer, 2019). This paradigm presents challenges for skilled players from low-income homes who may struggle to afford club fees, equipment, and travel expenditures. As a result, many bright young athletes are denied access to premier training facilities and coaches, reducing their possibilities of professional advancement. Addressing this issue requires alternate funding mechanisms, such as sponsorships, scholarships, and community-based programs that give equitable opportunity for all children to engage in soccer development programs.

Another big difficulty is the early specialization trend, when young players are pushed to focus completely on soccer at an early age, often at the detriment of general athletic and psychological development (Myer et al., 2016). While early specialization can assist refine technical skills, it may also lead to burnout, overuse injuries, and lower long-term commitment in the sport (Feeley et al., 2016). Studies imply that multi-sport engagement during youth builds well-rounded athletic talents and minimizes injury risks. Therefore, youth development programs should emphasize a more balanced approach, encouraging young athletes to participate in numerous sports before committing entirely to soccer specialization.



The rising influence of technology in youth soccer training and performance analysis brings both opportunities and concerns (Herold et al., 2021). Video analysis, wearable technology, and data-driven coaching approaches have transformed player development by providing insights into movement patterns, stamina, and tactical awareness (Araújo et al., 2021). However, there is a growing fear that excessive dependence on technology may overshadow traditional coaching practices, lessening the emphasis on creativity and instinctual decision-making (Heilig & Scheer, 2023). Moreover, access to new technology tools is generally limited to well-funded academies, creating gaps between elite and grassroots programs. To promote equal development, youth soccer groups should integrate technology in a way that complements, rather than replaces, essential training methods.

Mental health and well-being have also become key factors in youth soccer development. The pressure to achieve at high levels, along with intense competition and high parental expectations, can significantly damage young athletes' mental health (Reverberi et al., 2020). Anxiety, stress, and burnout are becoming more widespread among youth soccer players, particularly those in elite development programs. Coaches and parents must promote a supportive environment that fosters psychological resilience, self-confidence, and pleasure of the game (Kuettel et al. 2021). Incorporating mental health awareness into training programs and offering access to sports psychologists can assist young athletes manage stress and retain a positive view on their soccer journey.

Finally, youth soccer development must adapt to the rising emphasis on inclusivity and diversity (Cunningham, 2019). While soccer is a globally popular sport, access to structured development programs remains uneven, particularly for girls, children from marginalized groups, and those with disabilities (Spaaij, 2020). Efforts to make youth soccer more inclusive should include expanding females' soccer programs, granting scholarships for impoverished youngsters, and ensuring facilities are accessible for differently-abled players. Additionally, grassroots initiatives can play a crucial role in bridging disparities in participation by developing community-based soccer programs that offer equal opportunity for all young athletes.

In conclusion, rising difficulties in youth soccer development require proactive solutions to promote sustainable and equitable growth. Addressing commercialization, early specialization, technology inequities, mental health concerns, and inclusivity challenges can help develop a more successful and supportive young soccer ecosystem. By implementing strategic policies and fostering community-driven initiatives, stakeholders may boost the long-term development of young soccer players, ensuring the sport stays accessible and useful to all.

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### 3. Materials and Methods

This research employed a systematic review strategy following the PRISMA standards to ensure an organized and accurate investigation, simplifying the discovery of pertinent data. The papers included in this study underwent a comprehensive selection procedure encompassing identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and final inclusion. A preliminary literature review was undertaken utilizing numerous electronic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar. To enhance the breadth of prospective publications, the search method utilized subject-specific phrases together with Boolean operators. The principal keywords employed in the search were "grassroots soccer," "grassroots football," "national team performance in soccer," "national team football," "football development," and "soccer development."

The inclusion criteria for this review were: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters; (2) publications in English; and (3) research published between 2010 and 2023 to assure the inclusion of fresh material relevant to modern breakthroughs in soccer development. Exclusion criteria comprised: (1) opinion-based publications or research papers and (2) studies concentrating on football without explicit emphasis on grassroots development. The bibliographic database search originally yielded 1,942 possibly relevant documents. After deleting duplicates, 1,473 records remained for screening. Two independent reviewers reviewed the titles and abstracts, removing 527 publications that did not match the inclusion requirements owing to irrelevance. A second analysis found 369 more papers that either lacked congruence with the study's aim or did not offer adequate quality data. Ultimately, 158 sources were included in the final systematic evaluation.

From a methodological standpoint, data extraction was accomplished using a standardized pro forma, which recorded crucial facts from each study, including research goals, methodological methods, participant information, major results, and implications for grassroots soccer development. The retrieved data were evaluated using both narrative synthesis and theme synthesis methodologies. This dual method permitted the discovery of repeating themes, developing trends, and noteworthy patterns throughout the literature, including findings from both qualitative and quantitative investigations.

To verify the validity and reliability of the included research, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was used for empirical publications, while the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist was used to systematic reviews. These techniques helped filter out low-quality research, hence boosting the credibility and robustness of the final analysis. Several steps were taken to minimize bias and improve the validity of the review process, including conducting searches across multiple databases to reduce publication bias, involving two independent reviewers in the screening and eligibility assessment, and calculating inter-rater agreement using Cohen's  $\kappa$  coefficient. In situations of disagreement, talks were conducted until a consensus was formed, and if required, a third reviewer was contacted to settle conflicts.

### 3.1. Global Models of Grassroots Soccer Development

Grassroots soccer development plays a critical role in influencing the future of national teams by providing a foundation for young players to improve technical, tactical, and physical skills. Different areas have devised diverse approaches to foster talent, reflecting their cultural, economic, and infrastructural settings. In Europe, established academies and federation-led programs have been crucial in generating world-class players. South America, recognized for its rich footballing legacy, relies on community-based training and unstructured street soccer to develop natural talent. Meanwhile, Africa has witnessed a boom in grassroots efforts, frequently driven by local clubs, non-governmental groups, and international alliances. This section covers the various approaches of grassroots soccer development in Europe, South America, and Africa, noting their strengths, problems, and influence on national team success.

### 3.2. Grassroots Soccer Development in Europe

Highly regimented youth academies, club-led talent development programs, and significant federation participation in developing young players define grassroots soccer development in Europe. Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands among other nations have created thorough plans stressing early talent discovery, methodical training, and slow career development into professional football. These countries have effectively integrated strategic development strategies with technical brilliance to guarantee a consistent supply of top players for national teams as well as for clubs. Their focus on robust governance and organized young academies has set the standard for grassroots football all over (De Ste Croix et al., 2020).

Deeply ingrained in Germany's national plan is Germany's approach to grassroots football development, with the German Football Association (DFB) central in importance. After the nation's underwhelming late 1990s performance, the DFB rebuilt its young development program, therefore all professional teams had to create academies (Kou-Herrema, 2023). This led to the construction of over 50 top football facilities around the country, guaranteeing that young players get high-quality coaching and instruction. Combining local clubs, colleges, and regional centres, the DFB also developed a national talent discovery program to give young athletes a clear road from grassroots to professional football (Schroepf & Lames, 2018). Germany's 2014 FIFA World Cup triumph benefited much from this strategy as it generated tactically intelligent and technically brilliant players like Thomas Müller and Mario Götze (Schmidt & Stegmann, 2016).

Inspired mostly by the concept of La Masia, FC Barcelona's well-known academy, Spain's grassroots football program is known for stressing technical skills and possession-based play. Focusing on young players with outstanding ball control, vision, and tactical intelligence, La Masia has developed world-class athletes such Lionel Messi, Xavi Hernandez, and Andrés Iniesta (Hughes, 2018). Spain's football federation (RFEF) has also played a crucial role in providing a unified coaching philosophy across all levels, stressing short passing and positional play (Barreira et al., 2014). Club-led programs, notably by clubs like Barcelona and Real Madrid, have been essential in establishing disciplined training conditions where young talents may blossom. This systematic approach to young development contributed considerably to Spain's domination in international football, resulting to their World Cup success in 2010 and back-to-back European Championship titles in 2008 and 2012 (Triana-Toribio, 2016).

The Netherlands has a long-standing reputation for its structured and inventive youth development programs, with Ajax Academy being one of the most recognized organizations in sport. The Dutch style, greatly influenced by Johan Cruyff's theory of Total Football, stresses adaptability, technical skill, and tactical awareness from a young age (Rajaofera, 2021). Ajax Academy, along with other prominent academies like Feyenoord and PSV Eindhoven, employs a progressive training philosophy that emphasizes on player intelligence and adaptation (Ford et al., 2019). The Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) plays a significant role in standardizing teaching approaches and ensuring that grassroots football stays accessible to all (Nogueira, 2021). The country's focus to youth development has continuously produced world-class players like as Johan Cruyff, Dennis Bergkamp, and Frenkie de Jong, maintaining the Netherlands' image as a powerhouse in player development despite its relatively small population.

Ultimately, grassroots soccer growth in Europe is driven by a combination of organized youth academies, club-led initiatives, and strong federation monitoring. Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands have each built unique but effective models that promote technical and tactical brilliance while offering clear paths from grassroots to professional football. These nations' success underlines the necessity of a well-organized youth development system in sustaining high performance at both club and national team levels (Lazarević, 2020).

Grassroots soccer development in South America, particularly in Brazil and Argentina, is deeply rooted in informal play, structured club academies, and the exportation of talent for financial reinvestment. The continent has produced some of the greatest footballers in history, with its developmental system blending unstructured play with organized youth academies. The unique combination of street football, technical refinement, and strong scouting networks has enabled these countries to maintain a competitive edge in global football (Cacho-Elizondo & Álvarez, 2020).

### **3.3. Grassroots Soccer Development in South America**

One of the distinguishing elements of South American grassroots football is the frequency of unstructured play. Street football, regionally known as *pelada* in Brazil and *potrero* in Argentina, plays a significant role in improving young players' technical ability, inventiveness, and improvisation (Kittleston, 2014; Lovell, 2003). Unlike formal juvenile academies, street football allows youngsters to play freely without tactical limits, promoting individual brilliance and ball mastery. This milieu has traditionally produced world-class players like Pelé, Diego Maradona, Lionel Messi, and Neymar, who polished their abilities in informal settings before migrating to professional academies (Prabhakaran, 2017). The absence of formal coaching at an early age stimulates spontaneous play, which subsequently becomes a key quality in professional football (Rossing et al., 2020).

Despite the prominence of unstructured play, South American football also includes well-structured club academies that polish raw talent. Brazilian teams like Flamengo, São Paulo, and Santos have complex youth academies that focus on technical, physical, and tactical development (Uehara et al., 2021). In Argentina, teams like River Plate and Boca Juniors have world-renowned youth systems, producing talents like Juan Román Riquelme and Carlos Tevez (Rossing et al., 2020). These academies serve as essential bridges between unstructured play and professional football, putting bright youths into a disciplined training environment. Unlike European academies, which stress tactical discipline early, South American academies concentrate individual skill development before teaching sophisticated tactical principles (Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015).

Moreover, talent discovery in these nations is primarily reliant on vast scouting networks. Brazilian and Argentine teams employ scouts around favelas and rural areas to uncover talented players who may lack access to official training facilities (Teoldo et al., 2017). This rigorous scouting procedure guarantees that raw potential is not missed due to socioeconomic limitations. Once recruited, young players receive extensive coaching and exposure to competitive matches, preparing them for professional football (Sweeney et al., 2021).

A significant part of South American grassroots soccer growth is the transfer of talent to European teams. Due to economic discrepancies between South America and Europe, many young players are transferred overseas at a young age, producing enormous financial resources for their parent clubs (Teoldo et al., 2017). For instance, Neymar's transfer from Santos to Barcelona in 2013 and Vinícius Júnior's move from Flamengo to Real Madrid in 2018 provided large cash to their home clubs, enabling investments in young development (Küpper, 2023).

The financial model of exporting players has both advantages and downsides. On the bright side, it helps clubs to preserve financial stability and invest in infrastructure and scouting programs (Sweeney et al., 2021). However, the early movement of outstanding talent might undermine local leagues and impair long-term growth at the national level (Teoldo et al., 2017). Some observers suggest that the South American football business has grown excessively reliant on player sales, typically preferring short-term financial gains above sustainable league competitiveness (García et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the ongoing exporting of talent guarantees that young players from economically disadvantaged homes have the potential to establish a brighter future while contributing to their national teams via international experience (Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015).

South America's grassroots soccer development is a dynamic combination of casual play, organized academies, and player exporting. While street football provides a natural training ground for creativity and technical ability, club academies polish this potential within a controlled framework. The ongoing exporting of players to Europe serves as both a business model and a developmental plan, sustaining the region's supremacy in worldwide football. Despite the

hurdles connected with player movement, the South American model continues to produce world-class players, proving its success in talent discovery and development (Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015).

### **3.4. Grassroots Soccer Development in Africa**

Grassroots soccer development in Africa, notably in Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana, is molded by a combination of grassroots academies, private talent scouting, and European club affiliations. Despite confronting various hurdles, these countries have built excellent player development programs, creating world-class players who have triumphed on the global stage. The expanding effect of structured youth academies, strategic scouting networks, and relationships with European clubs has greatly contributed to Africa's football growth (Ungruhe & Schmidt, 2020).

Grassroots academies and private talent scouts play a significant role in finding and fostering talented footballers across Africa. Unlike in Europe, where national football federations and elite clubs dominate youth development, private academies and individual scouts play a key role in Africa's talent pipeline. Nigeria, for instance, has witnessed the growth of independent academies such as Pepsi Football Academy, Kwara Football Academy, and Midas Football Academy, which have nurtured players like John Obi Mikel and Joseph Yobo. Similarly, Ghana's Right to Dream Academy has produced noteworthy players, such as Mohammed Kudus and Kamaldeen Sulemana, by mixing football instruction with formal schooling to create a comprehensive development model (Acheampong, 2019). These academies give young prospects with systematic instruction, exposure to competitive events, and access to foreign scouts, enhancing their chances of getting professional contracts overseas.

Senegal's Generation Foot Academy ranks as a notable success story in African grassroots football development. Established in 2000, Generation Foot has nurtured some of the continent's finest players, including Sadio Mané, Ismaïla Sarr, and Papiss Cissé. The academy's affiliation with French club FC Metz has enabled a direct pipeline for Senegalese players to European football, with FC Metz often recruiting and developing talent from Generation Foot before selling them to bigger teams (Rofe & Krasnoff, 2020). This concept has been incredibly productive, allowing Senegal to establish a strong talent pipeline that feeds into both club football and the national team. The success of Generation Foot has spurred similar agreements between African academies and European teams, enhancing the importance of private development in Africa's football environment (Ejekwumadu, 2022).

Despite these advances, grassroots soccer development in Africa confronts enormous difficulties. Limited financial investment, poor infrastructure, and the absence of well-structured national development programs hamper the progress of many young players (Mthombeni, 2022). In Nigeria, for instance, inadequate upkeep of training facilities, lack of sufficient coaching education, and administrative inefficiencies within the football federation have hindered the development of youthful talent (Ingigi, 2022). Ghana likewise issues with uneven youth regulations and budgetary restraints, causing many young players to rely on private academies for opportunities (Acheampong, 2019). Additionally, the commercialization of African potential has led to exploitative scouting tactics, when unlicensed agents attract young players with false promises of European contracts, only to dump them in other nations with no legal protection. Addressing these difficulties demands higher investment from African football federations, improved regulatory frameworks for talent scouting, and closer relationships with international football organizations to ensure ethical talent development.

The effect of European club partnerships has been a double-edged sword in African football development (Kinyili, 2021). On the one hand, agreements between African academies and European teams have offered young players with access to high-quality training, competitive leagues, and financial possibilities. Clubs like Ajax Amsterdam, RB Salzburg, and FC Metz have formed close links with African academies, constantly scouting and acquiring young prospects. On the other side, the early movement of African players to Europe has led to worries about "talent drain," as local leagues struggle to keep their top players, weakening domestic tournaments and restricting prospects for local football growth. Additionally, European clubs typically emphasize financial benefits above the long-term development of African players, leading to examples where young footballers are transferred several times without stability or effective career planning (Esson, 2015).

Grassroots soccer growth in Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana highlights both the promise and limitations of African sport. Private academies and scouting networks have played a significant role in cultivating young talent, while successful models like Senegal's Generation Foot demonstrate the benefits of organized development and European collaborations. However, difficulties like as financial instability, insufficient infrastructure, and unethical scouting techniques continue to limit advancement. To sustain long-term growth, African football federations must create comprehensive youth plans, manage talent movement, and invest in local leagues to guarantee that grassroots football

remains a viable pathway for young players. While European club relationships offer tremendous possibilities, a balanced strategy that stresses the overall development of African football is crucial for the continent's continuing success in the global game

### **3.5. Keys Success Factors in Grassroots Soccer Development**

Successful grassroots soccer development relies on numerous essential aspects that establish an environment for recognizing, developing, and moving young talent into professional football. Among these variables, early talent discovery and defined paths are vital in guaranteeing a constant supply of competent players. Effective scouting techniques at the grassroots level aid in spotting youthful talent at an early age, allowing for adequate training and development. Countries with excellent development systems, such as Germany and Spain, have built clear paths from grassroots football to professional leagues, ensuring young players receive proper coaching, education, and competitive exposure. These organized paths frequently involve progressive training programs, talent assessment processes, and competitive young leagues that gradually prepare players for higher levels of competition (Gammelsæter et al., 2023).

A well-developed grassroots system is also dependent on coaching education and licensing regulations. Quality coaching strongly impacts a player's development, making it vital for grassroots coaches to have sufficient training and certification. Federations in successful football nations impose tight coaching regulations, ensuring that even youth coaches possess recognized licenses and adhere to best practices in player development (Bullough, 2021). In contrast, nations with inadequate coaching rules generally suffer with uneven player development, since unskilled coaches may emphasize short-term success over long-term ability enhancement (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017). The adoption of continuing education programs for coaches, as observed in European football associations, boosts the overall quality of grassroots soccer by encouraging modern training methodology and player-centric approaches.

Financial sustainability is another key component of effective grassroots development, since developmental fees and financial models define the accessibility and reach of youth activities. In many nations, grassroots soccer is sponsored by a combination of government subsidies, club investments, and commercial sponsorships. However, models like the pay-to-play system in the United States have been criticized for restricting access to brilliant players from lower-income backgrounds, decreasing the variety and competitiveness of the player pool (Goel & Handa, 2020). By contrast, nations such as Germany and Brazil rely on club-funded youth systems, where professional clubs reinvest earnings into young academies to guarantee talent development remains a priority (Nash et al., 2014). A sustainable finance framework that eliminates financial obstacles to participation is crucial in realizing the potential of grassroots soccer and guaranteeing equitable opportunities for all players.

Infrastructure and training facilities also play a key role in grassroots soccer development. Adequate fields, contemporary training centers, and availability to vital equipment considerably determine the level of training young players get (Hammami et al., 2018). Countries with rich football histories prioritize investing in grassroots infrastructure, ensuring that youngsters have access to well-maintained grounds from an early age. For example, the Dutch football system guarantees that local clubs are supplied with artificial and natural grass grounds to support year-round training (Güllich, 2019). In contrast, poorer nations generally suffer with substandard infrastructure, forcing young players to train on unsuitable surfaces, which can impair technical skill acquisition and physical development (Darby, 2013). Increasing investments in grassroots infrastructure is a significant objective for federations looking to boost long-term player development.

Government and federation policies impact the overall efficacy of grassroots soccer initiatives by defining strategic goals and guaranteeing adequate regulation. Successful football nations establish regulations that require youth development systems inside professional clubs, ensuring that talent development is an intrinsic component of the football ecosystem (Ford et al., 2021). The German Football Association (DFB), for instance, implemented required youth academies for Bundesliga clubs, resulting to the formation of a highly talented generation of players (Nash et al., 2014). Similarly, Brazil's football organization has laws forcing teams to devote money for youth development, assuring a consistent supply of players for both domestic and international football (Meylan et al., 2017). On the other hand, inadequate governance structures in several African and Asian nations have led to discrepancies in policy execution, resulting in fragmented youth systems that lack long-term planning (Darby, 2013). Clear, well-enforced policies by national federations are crucial in maintaining an organized approach to grassroots growth.

Club and league integration into national team programs is another essential aspect in facilitating the seamless transfer of youthful players into the professional and international levels. Countries with effective grassroots programs have good coordination between youth academies, local leagues, and national teams, offering a clear growth pathway for

players (Williams & Reilly, 2020). For example, Spain's young teams play a comparable possession-based style as their senior national team, ensuring that players develop through the system with a consistent tactical knowledge (Güllich, 2019). In contrast, nations with disconnected youth systems generally fail to build a unified footballing identity, resulting to challenges in moving players from grassroots to top levels (Ford et al., 2021). Ensuring a well-integrated structure between clubs, leagues, and national teams increases player development and strengthens national team performance in international events.

Overall, successful grassroots soccer development depends on the interplay of numerous elements, including early talent discovery, coaching education, financial sustainability, infrastructure investment, solid governance, and integration with national teams. Nations that stress these characteristics create an atmosphere favorable to creating world-class footballers who contribute to both club and international success. Addressing difficulties such as financial obstacles, inadequate coaching standards, and poor infrastructure remains crucial for countries wishing to better their grassroots development programs and achieve long-term footballing success

### **3.6. Grassroots Soccer Development in the United States: Overview**

The U.S. Soccer Development Model has grown dramatically over the past few decades, with organized grassroots initiatives attempting to promote player development and build a sustainable talent pipeline. The U.S. Soccer Development Academy (DA), which was founded in 2007, played a vital role in standardizing top young soccer training until its dissolution in 2020 (Bowman et al., 2020). It was superseded by MLS Next, a program aimed to offer a defined development route for young players within Major League Soccer (MLS) academies and connected teams (Nogueira, 2021). Additionally, efforts like U.S. Youth Soccer and the Elite Clubs National League (ECNL) offer competitive venues for youth players outside the MLS structure. These programs attempt to provide structured training, competition, and scouting chances for young athletes hoping to play at higher levels, including college soccer, professional leagues, and the national team.

While the U.S. development model has made gains in professionalizing young soccer, it still has major strengths and shortcomings. One of its benefits is the systematic coaching and attention on long-term athlete development, which allows players grow through well-defined age groups and competitive levels (Johnson & Whitehead, 2021). Additionally, the combination of data analytics, sports science, and tactical training has boosted player development, with U.S. Soccer and MLS academies adopting sophisticated approaches utilized by elite European teams (Bowman et al., 2020). However, a fundamental problem is the fragmented character of the system, as various competing leagues and organizations produce inconsistencies in talent development (Dunn et al., 2022). Unlike European and South American models, where national federations manage centralized youth development frameworks, the U.S. system lacks standardization, resulting to variances in coaching quality, player exposure, and overall skill growth (Woitalla, 2019).

Talent discovery and retention continue to be important difficulties within U.S. soccer. The country's large geographical breadth and different soccer ecosystems make it tough to scout and develop players in a systematic manner (Shortridge et al., 2022). While MLS academies and national scouting systems have improved talent identification, many players still fall through the cracks owing to financial hurdles, lack of access to elite-level coaching, or the restricted reach of scouting networks in non-traditional soccer markets (Dunn et al., 2022). Additionally, the collegiate soccer pipeline, which has acted as a bridge to professional soccer, typically hinders player development compared to European and South American systems, where best players turn professional at younger ages (Johnson & Whitehead, 2021). The difficulty of keeping talented players interested in the system remains a major worry for U.S. Soccer.

One of the most contentious features of the U.S. Soccer Development Model is the pay-to-play system, which substantially effects player accessibility and total skill depth. Unlike in Europe and South America, where youth development is predominantly club-funded, many American youth players must pay considerable fees to enrol in elite academies and travel leagues (Woitalla, 2019). This financial burden disproportionately impacts lower-income households and limits chances for bright players who cannot afford the fees associated with high-level competition and training (Shortridge et al., 2022). The reliance on financial contributions from families rather than club or federation support causes an exclusivity problem, as soccer is increasingly viewed as a sport for the rich (Dunn et al., 2022). Although MLS academies provide free development for chosen players, the whole system still problems with inclusion, decreasing the pool of potential talent that may contribute to the national team and professional leagues.

Addressing these difficulties demands a more integrated strategy that boosts accessibility, improves talent identification, and decreases financial constraints. Increasing investment in community-based initiatives, boosting scholarship options, and building club affiliations with local schools might help bridge the gap between elite and

grassroots soccer (Johnson & Whitehead, 2021). Additionally, increased collaboration between U.S. Soccer, MLS, and independent youth groups might provide a more integrated development pathway, ensuring that young players have equitable chances regardless of their socioeconomic background (Bowman et al., 2020). The U.S. boasts a tremendous talent pool, but tapping its full potential will require institutional adjustments to build a more inclusive and efficient development model

### 3.7. Comparative Analysis: Lessons for the United States

The United States may take vital lessons from successful grassroots soccer programs in Europe, South America, and Africa to strengthen its own development framework. One significant lesson from European models, notably in Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands, is the focus on structured youth academies and club-led development programs. These nations have effectively integrated grassroots soccer into professional club systems, ensuring that potential players receive top-tier training from an early age (Cacho-Elizondo & Álvarez, 2020). In Germany, the development of required academies for all professional clubs in the early 2000s contributed to the rise of a technically gifted and tactically disciplined generation of players, culminating in their 2014 World Cup win (Holt & Morley, 2020). Spain's La Masia and the Netherlands' Ajax Academy illustrate the significance of long-term player development above short-term competitive outcomes, concentrating on technical skill and game intelligence from a young age (Duarte & Sanchez, 2021). The U.S. might benefit from a similar approach by enhancing its club-academy structure and developing a single player development pipeline.

South America provides another intriguing paradigm, notably via Brazil and Argentina, where informal play and club-based academies form the cornerstone of talent development. Street football plays a critical role in promoting creativity, technical ability, and improvisation—qualities sometimes absent in the more regimented U.S. development system (Baluja & Coelho, 2022). While the U.S. stresses structured leagues and rigorous instruction from an early age, South American nations allow players to develop organically before perfecting their talents inside club academies. Furthermore, the export of talent from Brazil and Argentina to top European leagues has developed a sustainable paradigm where financial reinvestment from transfer fees improves local clubs and grassroots initiatives (Rosso & Medrano, 2020). The U.S. may adopt similar techniques by improving possibilities for players to participate in unstructured play and enhancing scouting tools to find raw talent outside of established club organizations.

Africa provides another essential perspective, particularly in nations like Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana, where private grassroots academies and European club relationships play a vital role in player development. Senegal's Generation Foot, for example, has successfully coached elite players through direct collaborations with French club FC Metz, allowing local talent to segue effortlessly into European football (Teoldo et al., 2017). In contrast to the overly marketed U.S. system, several African academies promote accessibility by decreasing financial obstacles for young players. The dependence on private talent scouting also guarantees that talented players are discovered based on skill rather than financial capacity (Sweeney et al., 2021). The U.S. might emulate components of this approach by establishing international collaborations, lessening the financial load on young players, and introducing scholarship programmes that allow low-income talent to attend elite training conditions.

To overcome the structural difficulties within U.S. grassroots soccer, numerous reforms are essential. First, a more coherent and centralized approach to youth development is necessary, with improved cooperation between the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF), Major League Soccer (MLS), and independent youth groups (Teoldo et al., 2017). The existing fragmented structure leads in inequalities in coaching standards, competition levels, and player opportunities. Establishing a uniform national structure for young soccer, comparable to Germany's academy mandate, would assure consistency in talent development across all areas. Second, increasing investment in accessible, high-quality infrastructure is needed, particularly in underprivileged regions where soccer remains an expensive and sometimes inaccessible activity (Johnson & Whitehead, 2021). More free-to-play academies and community-based programmes might help democratize access to top training, allowing talent to flourish without financial restraints. Policy suggestions for the U.S. Soccer Federation and MLS should focus on boosting accessibility, strengthening coaching standards, and promoting interaction between grassroots programmes and the professional game. First, eliminating or considerably decreasing pay-to-play expenses should be a key focus. This might be done by corporate sponsorships, government support, and MLS teams accepting additional responsibility for youth development spending (Kinyili, 2021).

Second, coaching instruction must be standardized and broadened to guarantee that youth players at all levels receive high-quality training. European nations demand strong coaching license criteria, but the U.S. still issues with variations in coach education and qualifying requirements (Shortridge et al., 2022). Implementing a national coaching curriculum

and funding licensing programmes would improve player development outcomes. Finally, improved synergy between youth academies, professional clubs, and the national team programme is required. MLS Next and U.S. Soccer must collaborate more closely to build a direct talent pipeline from grassroots levels to the senior national team, minimising reliance on the college system, which typically slows top player development (Woitalla, 2019).

By adopting best practices from worldwide models and executing required structural reforms, the U.S. can establish a more inclusive, effective, and competitive grassroots soccer system. A dedication to accessibility, technical proficiency, and seamless integration with professional leagues will eventually increase the success of U.S. national teams on the world stage.

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#### 4. Conclusion

Studies of worldwide grassroots soccer development models shows crucial insights that can considerably boost the U.S. system. European nations like Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands prioritise organised youth academies, technical coaching, and club-integrated development, whereas South American countries like Brazil and Argentina benefit from unstructured play, strong club academies, and a sustained talent export strategy. Africa, particularly states like Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana, highlights the significance of private scouting networks, European alliances, and cost-effective talent development. The U.S. must address significant structural problems, including the pay-to-play system, variable coaching standards, and a fragmented development route that inhibits top player improvement. By implementing strategic changes inspired by these successful models, the U.S. can build a more accessible and competitive soccer development structure that develops talent from all backgrounds and boosts the national team's international performance.

#### *Recommendations*

- **Remove or Lower Pay-to-Play Obstacles** – The existing pay-to-play model limits access to skilled players from lower-income backgrounds, creating an exclusive system that inhibits diversity and potential talent pools. To make top soccer development available to all, greater scholarships, corporate sponsorships, and government financing should be adopted. Establishing financial aid programmes and community-based sponsorships may ensure that no talented athlete is excluded due to financial concerns. In addition, collaborations with professional teams and non-profit organizations can assist cover fees for meritorious young players.
- **Create a Unified National Academy System** – The U.S. presently lacks a unified, uniform academy framework, resulting to variations in player development. A unified national academy system should be formed, encompassing uniform training courses throughout all academies. This system must specify clear growth paths from grassroots levels to professional leagues, guaranteeing that athletes get uniform high-quality training. The academy architecture should also connect with the national team setup, ensuring that prospective players are discovered and groomed efficiently.
- **Strengthen Coach Education and Licensing Requirements** – High-quality coaching is crucial for player development. The U.S. should implement rigorous coaching education programmes that include certification requirements at all youth levels. Financial subsidies and government-funded programmes should be developed to make coaching licenses more accessible, ensuring that all levels of grassroots soccer benefit from well-trained experts. Investing in continued education for coaches, including mentoring programmes with outstanding international coaches, can further boost training quality.
- **Encourage Informal and Street Football Culture** – Some of the world's top players, notably from South America and Africa, have honed their abilities via unstructured, street-based football. Encouraging free play chances in parks, schools, and community areas may promote creativity, technical abilities, and improvisational ability. Municipalities and soccer groups should invest in building public soccer areas that foster spontaneous play and allow young players to perfect their abilities in natural, unsupervised situations.
- **Improve Infrastructure in Underserved Communities** – Soccer development should not be restricted to affluent neighborhoods or privileged populations. More cheap, high-quality training facilities should be created in underprivileged communities to promote equal access to soccer development programmes. Government efforts, public-private partnerships, and investment from professional teams should focus on creating and sustaining well-equipped training centers in low-income districts, helping to bridge the gap in soccer accessibility.
- **Foster Deeper Integration Between Clubs and National Team Programmes** – Stronger alignment between junior academies, MLS clubs, and the U.S. national teams is vital to build a smooth development pipeline. Clubs should cooperate together with the national federation to create scouting and talent discovery initiatives that



feed directly into national youth teams. Regular coordination between club and national team coaches may help guarantee that players develop within a structure that prepares them for international competition.

- **Expand International Partnerships** — Collaboration with prominent European and South American teams may offer American players with exposure to high-level training environments and competitive playing situations. International exchange programmes, where young American players learn overseas at premier academies, can expedite their growth and boost their adaptability to diverse playing styles. U.S. Soccer should actively pursue agreements with leading clubs and leagues globally to offer training camps, coaching exchanges, and competitive tournament possibilities.
- **Reinvest Revenue from Talent Development** – A sustainable grassroots soccer system demands regular financial reinvestment. Revenue gained from transfer fees, sponsorship deals, and commercial partnerships should be deliberately reinvested into youth development initiatives. Funds should be dedicated to upgrading facilities, extending scholarship options, enhancing coaching education, and supporting grassroots clubs. By adopting a reinvestment plan, U.S. Soccer can assure that financial benefits contribute to long-term player development and general growth of the sport.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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