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Structure and operation of a football academy and its impact on sports careers

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Abstract

This study analyses the impact of the structure and operation of the St. Louis Academy of Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké (USSK) on its sporting performance and the careers of its young players. Using a mixed-methods approach (questionnaires and interviews), the results show that USSK stands out for its rigorous internal organization, comprehensive support, and effective talent identification policy. However, despite sporting successes and some international placements, the center remains limited by a lack of post-training follow-up, financial constraints, and the absence of a coherent national policy to support talent. The study concludes that structural reforms are necessary to better realize the potential of young players trained in Beninese academies.

Keywords: Structure; Operation; Football Academy; Sporting Careers; Union Sportive De Sèmè-Kraké; Sporting Performance

1. Introduction

Since the 19th century, sport has evolved from an educational and moral activity to a fully organized and media-driven spectacle with major economic stakes. Football, in particular, has established itself as the "sport of the century," not only as the most widely practiced discipline but also due to the significant budgets allocated to it by African governments. In Africa, and more specifically in Benin, football mobilizes a large amount of collective energy, but the results remain disappointing. Despite the existence of numerous training centers and the subsidies granted, Beninese teams struggle to advance beyond the early rounds of continental competitions, and no major trophy has yet been won. This paradox raises a crucial question: where has the benefit of the efforts invested in these academies gone? Our study focuses on one of the best training structures in the country, the St. Louis Academy of the Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké, to analyze how its structure and operation influence its sporting results and the careers of its young players. We also examine the policy adopted by this academy to support the personal and professional development of its talents, in accordance with international standards. After a presentation of the general context and the problem, our work sets out the methodology, then the results and their analysis, before proposing avenues for improvement to optimize the role of training centers in the future influence of Beninese football.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative study using questionnaires administered to U17 players at the St. Louis Academy of Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké, and a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews conducted with the center's managers and coaches. The target population includes regularly registered

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players, members of the administrative and technical staff, as well as former club members. Purposive sampling was used to select the most relevant participants for the study. Data were collected via questionnaires, recorded and transcribed interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. The analysis of this data aims to evaluate the impact of the academy's structure and operation on its athletic performance and on the career development of young players.

3. Results

The results show that the St. Louis Academy of Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké (USSK) is recognized as the leading football training center in Benin, thanks to its high-quality facilities and the expertise of its coaches. The center prioritizes talent identification and the integration of promising young players, combining free training with paid registration fees to foster the emergence of high-potential players. Despite its sporting successes and the recent signing of players abroad, the center faces several major challenges: insufficient follow-up of young players after competitions, significant financial constraints, a lack of regular competitions, and shortcomings in the management of age groups, including the absence of formal contracts for coaches and a lack of planning. These weaknesses affect the performance of youth teams and the career development of players, limiting their progression to higher levels and international professionalization.

4. Discussion

Our study on the structure and performance of Beninese football reveals that, despite significant progress, particularly improvements in the level of play and investment in sports infrastructure, the national championship remains largely perceived as unsatisfactory by the players themselves (65%). This negative perception aligns with the findings of Adegounté and Djihouénou (1990), who argue that socio-environmental conditions remain a major obstacle to the development of local football. While commendable, efforts such as the creation of sports clubs and the implementation of subsidies appear insufficient without a more profound structural reform, including the reintroduction of a multi-division competitive system and the revival of the Benin Cup. These recommendations, voiced by both players and observers, echo the analyses of Akakpo (2000) and highlight the importance of a coherent, stable, and better-coordinated national sports policy. Furthermore, an analysis of the operations of the Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké (USSK) training center reveals an exemplary internal structure, with comprehensive sports and medical support, high-quality facilities, and a talent-focused recruitment policy (76% of players recruited through scouting). This organization, based on a strategy of exporting young talent, has allowed the center to distinguish itself regionally, as confirmed by testimonials and results obtained in international competitions. However, this ambitious policy faces major obstacles, such as the low international recognition of Beninese football, the practice of age-reduction, the lack of federal monitoring of young talent, and a critical shortage of financial support (less than 15% of needs covered). These structural limitations call into question the second hypothesis of our research, highlighting that, while USSK constitutes a model of micro development, the systemic constraints of Beninese football prevent the full realization of the potential of the young players trained, as Faist (2000) and Poli and Dietschy (2006) have highlighted in their analyses on transnational mobilities and structural inequalities in African football.

Despite structural advances such as stadium construction and the gradual professionalization of clubs, 65% of players consider the Beninese league unsatisfactory. This observation echoes the analyses of Adegounté and Djihouénou (1990), who highlight the socio-environmental deficiencies of Beninese football. While the league is progressing in its organization, reforms remain urgent, notably the reintroduction of the Benin Cup and a divisional system to stimulate competitiveness. These shortcomings remind us, as Akakpo (2000) states, that the success of football depends on organization, public policy, and the support of partners. At the micro level, the USSK center illustrates an exemplary structure: recruitment through talent identification (76%), comprehensive coaching, modern infrastructure, and a focus on exporting talent. This model, in line with the work of Poli and Dietschy (2006) and Faist (2000), aims to integrate players into transnational circuits. However, several limitations hinder its effectiveness: low international recognition, reduced age limits, lack of federal oversight, and negligible financial support. Thus, despite its performance, the center's sports policy faces systemic obstacles, jeopardizing its ability to sustainably nurture young talent.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study aimed to analyze the impact of the structure and operation of the St. Louis Academy of Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké on its sporting performance and the career paths of its players. The results show that while the center's structure fosters notable sporting performances, its career management policy remains insufficiently effective, limiting the emergence of talent at the national and international levels. Thus, only the first research hypothesis is confirmed. In light of these findings, reforms are necessary to strengthen the professionalization of training centers,

improve the mentoring of young talents, and establish sustainable partnerships with foreign clubs. The implementation of coherent, transparent, and long-term sports policies, combined with improved governance, appears to be an essential condition for the development of Beninese football.

In conclusion, the study highlights the positive impact of the structure of the St. Louis Academy at Union Sportive de Sèmè-Kraké on its sporting performance, while also underscoring the limitations of its career management policy. To foster the emergence of talent at the national and international levels, it is essential to undertake reforms aimed at further professionalizing training centers, strengthening the support provided to young players, and establishing sustainable partnerships within the framework of coherent and long-term sports governance.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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