Continuous selection at youth international age groups does not influence success at senior UEFA European Football Championships

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Introduction

European football associations fund youth international level football with significant amounts of money in the belief that continuous youth age group experience may lead to greater success at UEFA's European Football Championships (UEFC), held quadrennially. However, the importance of returnee players (players without continuous youth international experience) is unknown. The aim of this research was to quantify the different player-types selected in a squad and the affect they have on a nation's success at UEFC between 2012-2016.

Methods

Squads for every nation at the UEFC in 2012 (16 nations) and 2016 (24 nations) were collected; a total of 920 players (368 in 2012, 552 in 2016). Each player was assigned to one of three groups: Survivor (youth international UEFC appearance in every age group), Newcomer (no youth international age group experience), and Returnee (missed at least one youth international age group). Squads from the prior youth international UEFC were obtained from 2002 until 2015 for Under 17s, 19s and 21s. Nations were assigned a tournament end result ranking at the 2012 and 2016 UEFC; lower score indicated better tournament result. A linear regression was completed to determine if any player grouping contributed to a nation's success at UEFC. Additionally, youth international appearance totals (caps) were calculated in order to determine if these had any effect on success.

Results

Of the 920 players, there were 593 newcomers (64%), 9 survivors (1%) and 318 returnees (35%). A typical UEFC squad contained 0 ± 0 survivors, 8 ± 2 returnees and 15 ± 2 newcomers. Only returnees were statistically significant in predicting a team's success at UEFC ($P = 0.03$). An average UEFC squad consisted of the following youth international caps: 3 ± 0 caps at U17, 3 ± 0 caps at U19, 6 ± 2 caps at U21 and 9 ± 1 caps at first team level prior to 2012 at UEFC. There was no significant evidence that youth international caps effected a squad's success at the UEFC.

Discussion & Conclusion

Continuous selection throughout youth international programmes does not influence a nation's success at UEFC. Successful squads predominantly consist of players who either haven't made a youth international cap or intermittently collected caps. A limitation of the research is UEFC squad selection is depending on player availability and injury status, potentially affecting success at the tournaments. Additionally, the effect of players playing up an age group may potentially account for some of the returnees which could be interpreted that these players prosper in this added challenge of jumping up an age group early. Current form and fitness levels should be considered as a greater asset in national team selections over incumbent experience. Although there is significant investment towards this pathway the evidence suggests players with non-continuous youth international experience should be considered equally.

Key Words: UEFA European Football Championships; Returnees; Survivors; Newcomers; Football