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Professional football training for Israeli children since the 2000s

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparison between management systems of children and youth football departments in England and in Israel. Following a series of football disasters, the British authorities were able to reposition football as a game based on aristocratic values like integrity and delicacy and create a well-organised management system. Israeli football, which is particularly inspired by English and European football, struggles to develop similar mechanisms due to a constant state of scarcity. A new programme in Israel, the Shield of Honour, offers a new model that facilitates and motivates football managers and coaches in youth and children departments to adopt more European-like management practices.

KEYWORDS Football; youth departments/football academies; management; educational programmes

This article explores the social and political context of Israeli football, which entails an inherent paradox: on one hand, Israeli football has been inspired by European football, particularly since the 1990s when Israel joined the European tournaments. The main influence comes from English football, which has been transformed in the late twentieth century from a working-class leisure activity to a semi-civilised upper-class sports branch.[1] It will argue that in recent years, Israeli football is stuck in a limbo. On one hand, managers aspire to position it as a civilised sport, which proudly represents Israel in the coveted European arenas. This process started in the 1990s, when the Israeli national team and local football clubs started competing in European tournaments. It was intensified with the growing exchange of football players between Israel and Europe, and the growing numbers of football fans who started watching and following European football leagues.

On the other hand, despite the English influence over Israeli football, the managing and supervising institutions in Israel fail to produce realistic work plans that resemble the British ones, even remotely. The differences are

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apparent in two main aspects. First, in Israeli professional football, like in English football, many efforts have been invested in reducing the level of violence in matches. Yet, while UK football got rid of violence and hooliganism through governmental practices of social inclusion, the discourse in Israel focuses mainly on enforcement and sanctions. Consequently, the efforts to reduce the level of violence in Israeli football fields might carry the opposite effect.[2]

As for football academies, there is no systematic management and development of children and youth departments in Israel, where the next generation of professional football players is supposed to be trained. The article compares the practices of English football academies since 2000 and the practices in Israeli youth departments since the 2013 (Zelicha Report). It will show that just like in professional football, children and youth departments have been trying in recent years to adopt more European-like work practices. The authorities, however, fail to create a systematic plan for training and education. Coaches and managers strive to copy European models, but they are in a constant state of scarcity,[3] which makes them focus on instant solutions instead of long-term learning and planning processes. Thus, the gap between the English and Israeli management culture was maintained or even expanded over the last two decades. This gap grew even larger since 2011, when the English Football Association presented the requirement that football clubs adopt a more supervised management system under the programs called Charter of Quality and EPPP (Elite Player Performance Plan).[4]

The comparison is based on a field study conducted in English football academies in 2006–8, when I conducted anthropological fieldwork in which I watched tournaments of Premier League clubs` academies and interviewed coaches and managers. The findings from this observation are compared with those found during my work in various children and youth departments in Israel in 2012–19. In 2012–13, I served as an outside counsellor to the Zelicha Committee, commissioned to investigate problems and offer solutions to local football. As a counsellor, I took part in dozens of meetings and authored two chapters of the final report, one of which refers directly to the subject discussed in this article. I also held interviews with coaches, managers and parents of young football players and analysed the laws, rules of conduct, books and other relevant texts about Israeli and English football.

The development of football academies in England

Football academies in England are the institutions that train young players. These academies have gone through an impressive transformation over the last few decades. The changes in the academies are related to social changes in football and in English society in general. English football has always been

a violent game. As early as the 14th and 15th centuries, we find royal orders that forbid football games due to the intensive violence. The industrial revolution of the 19th century changed the structure of British society and the nature of football. The great migration from rural to urban areas turned agricultures into daily workers and created a new nouveau riche class who challenged the aristocracy's legitimacy and control.[5] One of the ways to protect the upper-classes cultural and social capital was to establish primary schools for their children, which were defined as 'public schools'. These schools distinguished upper-class children from the rest of the population. Football, which was a popular game in rural areas, was imported to urban areas with the emigrating population. It was adopted by the elite public schools, which refined it and made it more suitable for their own norms. Delicacy and aristocratic ethics were highlighted.

Tischler, for example, claims that 'an element of civility was also cultivated, so that even the Rugby game, the most physical of all public-school versions of football, came to possess its own etiquette'.[6] Football matches in public schools were adapted to what Huizinga[7] and Guttmann[8] defined as a 'play', highlighting their aesthetic aspect. Bourdieu understood public school football in much the same way. He defined physical exercise in schools as activities that have their own purpose, which are gradually reduced into a functional enforcement and are entered into a specific timetable.[9] According to Bourdieu, football games were completely and utterly transformed by English public schools after being adopted by the aristocracy. The meaning and function of the game was changed, and it came to be associated with the aristocratic ethics, which highlighted values like fairness and delicacy. These values represented the habitus of upper classes.[10]

During the second half of the 19th century, English society has been radically changed. Blue-collar workers started demanding their own rights, and their wages and life conditions were dramatically improved. As early as the 1870s, a relatively short work week was adopted, with five and a half workdays per week. Workers 'discovered' the benefits of leisure activities, and on weekends, men would organise and play group sports, especially football, which, up until then, had only been played in public schools. By the second half of the 19th century, there were two types of football in England: Blue-collar workers would play football as a way of spending their leisure time and renew their energy before going back to their hard labour, and public school students, sons of upper-class families, would play as part of their curriculum, which stressed the values of delicacy.[11] The FA Cup was established in 1871. For the first time, teams of public school graduates and blue-collar workers competed in the same tournament. Neo-Marxist scholars argued that these tournaments represented a struggle over the game's ethos: While public school graduates played as amateur gentlemen, blue-collar teams played to win.

Over the first twelve years of the tournament, the winners were always upper-class teams. In 1883–4, Blackburn Rovers FC won the cup for the first time. This was the first time a team of blue-collar workers won the cup, and this victory was significant, as it reflected the growing status of working-class football clubs and the victory of competitive football over armature one.

The tournament games created a new phenomenon in the leisure culture of the working class. For the first time in the history of the game, the matches attracted fans who were only interested in watching the games from the stands. Entrepreneurs started investing in stadiums and sell tickets to matches. Football turned became a 'game' rather than a 'play'.[12] During that period, the national era and the constantly improving print technology made education more accessible for lower classes, and public schools were no longer the only source of knowledge. The changing nature of the game caused many of the upper-class players to abandon it, and football became a working-class game: Result-oriented, competitive, rational, and stigmatised as violent by the upper classes.

Since the 1950s, football clubs started opening youth departments, with the aim of training the next generation of players. Yet, until the end of the 20th century, these departments never tried to define a clear vision and work methodologies. Until 1984, these youth departments were called 'schools of excellence', where children aged nine or more would train. Since the mid-1980s, the British Sports Ministry and the English Football Association started promoting the establishment of football academies, which trained children aged six or more. The goal of these academies was to train local children, so they could fit into professional teams and particularly the English national team (Manager of Arsenal academy, personal communication). The focus was the team, while players sometimes suffered physical and mental damages. Young players from the youth academies were incorporated in the professional teams relatively early, even though sometimes they were not fit enough to handle the physical strain and the demanding lifestyle. The academies were result-oriented. The children were raised to be good players and win games.

The physical, result-oriented game affected the audiences as well. During the 1980s, three major tragedies happened in football arenas: The Bradford City Stadium fire (1985), the Heysel Stadium Disaster (1985) and the Hillsborough Disaster (1989). Following the latter, the parliament appointed Judge Lord Peter Taylor to head an investigative committee. The Taylor Committee recommended some dramatic changes in the football world, including the construction of new football stadiums and up scaling conditions for football fans. Overall, the recommendations encouraged the managing institutions to make the system more organised and coordinated. The key message of the report was that football should be treated like a genre of

elite culture, like theatre or cinema. This way, Taylor and his colleagues repositioned football as an aristocratic game.

The large majority of the recommendations from the Taylor report were implemented. Today, football fans get a cultural, almost sterile experience in the arenas. The fans are dressed in their best cloths, they order healthy food in the canteen, they sit in pre-marked seats and enjoy a cultural event, like a concert or a play.[13]

Football academies were transformed accordingly. The change in the social positioning of football raised the stakes, particularly since the establishment of the Premier League in 1992. Football clubs became more profitable, and the monetary value of football players (i.e. the cost of the 'player card', which normally belongs to the player's club, in addition to the player's wages) was raised accordingly. The academies became more profitable as well, as every player who was sold to another club was worth millions of pounds. Hence, since the early 2000s, the academies started investing large funds in improving the conditions for their students. Today, every academy offers a well-equipped gym, a swimming pool, kitchens, computes and many different staff members: coaches, psychologists, social workers, dieticians, medical staff and more.

Since the 1990s, the Premier League started supervising the training of young football players more closely. A detailed set of rules was formed, aiming to define the status and rights academy students. The guidelines define the number of outdoor fields where children can practice. The academy must provide an area for homework preparation, computers and internet connection. The academies are obligated to take care of the children's educational, academic and social welfare, and allocate enough time for studies outside of football. Thus, for example, some academies invite external teachers to teach the children how to play chess or build flying models. To help children who study in general schools in the mornings, the rules state that only children who live up to a 90 minutes' drive from the academy can study in it.[14]

The football clubs themselves understood their commitment to the children's welfare in every aspect. Hence, for instance, the Arsenal Academy issues an annual booklet with the goals set by the academy and the goals the children should set for themselves. The first and most important goal stated in this booklet is for the children to enjoy the practices and the games. Next come goals that refer to proper diet, safety, enough sleep hours and so on.[15] The entrance to the Chelsea Academy boasts eight words: Excellence, pride, style, professionalism, desire, integrity, unity and leadership. These values are very similar to the ones taught at 19th century public schools in England.[16] In the 21st century, football academies raise children based on values like pride, style, integrity and leadership. This way, the game is an educational tool as well as a professional sport. It is based on values while also being effectiveness oriented.

In 2011, the Premiere League presented two new work schemes. The first is called Charter of Quality, which defines the standards for buildings and facilities in every football academy. The second is called Elite Player Performance Plan – EPPP. The goals of this plan are: To annually increase the number of in-house players who get professional contract, create more practice time, improve practice conditions and methods, implement quality measurement methods and improve investment-result rates. The EPPP presents tools that can help clubs develop their vision, values, game philosophy, scouting strategy, training methods and more. As part of the program, academies are required to measure their own success through empirical studies, which opens the gates of football academies for academic scholars. This way, training becomes more measurable, rational and scientific.

Football academies hold friendly matches between them, and the results are not registered. Youth teams play games with other teams every week, and the goal is not to win, but rather to practice what they have learned over the week`s training. The terminology of the game reflects this perspective as well. The teams meet to play *with* rather than play *against* each other. The main goal of the game is for the children to enjoy themselves. Every match starts with handshakes between the players of the two teams, and the matches are based on values like mutual appreciation, respect and friendship.

While Israeli football strives to be more like its English counterpart, the situation is vastly different. Israeli department managers would like to develop UK-like programs, with long-term vision, health care, professional training and more, but they feel they are trapped in a constant struggle for survival, and the gaps between Israeli and UK football keep expanding all the time.

Israeli football academies

In August 2007, as part of my fieldwork in London football academies, I accompanied a children's team from the Israeli Maccabi Tel Aviv football club on its tour through a number of friendly matches against local English teams. On the first day, the team played Chelsea FC academy; over the next few days, they played with Watford FC, West Ham FC and Layton Orient FC. They got a good result against Chelsea: 2:2. When the game ended, Chelsea players approached Maccabi players and tried to shake their hands. The Israeli players, who were not familiar with the English custom, ran to the busses and avoided the handshakes. The next day, the Israeli team won against Watford. Despite the loss, the British players insisted on shaking hands with the Israelis, complimenting them with 'good game, good game'. On the third day, they got an embarrassing result of 1:11 against West Ham FC boys. Yet, the Israeli and English players shook hands, took photos and even had lunch together, according to the local tradition.

Two months later, on a visit to Israel, I got to Maccabi Tel Aviv's home field to watch them play against M.S. Ashdod. At the end of the game, the Maccabi Tel Aviv players approached the guests and shook their hands. Ashdod players, who were unfamiliar with the gesture, were obviously embarrassed. This story demonstrates how Israeli players, who look up to their English peers, 'imported' a ceremonial gesture after an international encounter. These cases of imitation are extremely powerful. Many Israeli coaches travel to the UK and Europe in general for educational tours and come back with insights and ideas of how to promote Israeli sport. One coach told me: 'Every summer, we travel abroad for tournaments. During these tournaments, I try to meet local coaches, visit local academies and ask interesting questions'.

No doubt, many Israeli players and coaches look up to West-European football academies as role models. In Israel, as in the UK, football has been considered a working-class sport for most of the 20th century. Unlike other places, Israeli sports club originally had a political affiliation. Political parties and movements started establishing sports clubs of their own even before the state of Israel was established, as part of their effort to instil their ideologies. And so, Hapoel sports clubs are affiliated with left-wing, socialist parties and represent the working class, while Beitar clubs represent right-wing parties and Elitzur clubs have been associated with the national-religious community in Israel. Towards the end of the 20th century, some clubs were purchased by private entrepreneurs, and the historical political division was somewhat blurred. Yet, Israeli football remains full of interests, corruption, emotions and violence.

Since the 1990s, the Israeli national team has been competing in European tournaments. The intensive interactions with European football increased the Israeli desire to create a more professional, European football. The terminology was changed to fit the European model. For example, children and youth have traditionally been trained in 'children and youth departments'. In recent years, the terminology was changed and some of them are now called 'academies', according to the European model.

But these changes – the handshakes, the different names – are spontaneous developments that were initiated by coaches or players. I would like to argue that Israeli sports management institutions failed to create systematic, organised mechanisms for the management of youth football departments. Thus, managers and coaches find it difficult to create high-quality content and stop at the level of meaningless imitations. There is no mechanism in Israel that defines the roles of children's departments and their best practices, which leaves managers and coaches to deal with too many tasks on their own. Without any institutional help, they are sucked into a state of 'scarcity'. They focus on survival, and they have no time to learn, write long-term programs or examine their work.

Over the years 2011–12, Israel saw a series of violent clashes in football fields. Players and staff members were involved in these incidents, and some of them included fans as well. Following the events, The Culture and Sports Minister at the time, Limor Livnat, appointed an investigative committee headed by Prof. Yaron Zelicha. Like the Taylor Commission in the UK, the Zelicha Commission was asked to discuss a wider scope than the specific violent events, and offer a large set of solutions for Israeli football. The Commission was inspired by European models. The report suggests, for example:

> The Commission found that UEFA, as well as professional European leagues, use license criteria to define basic conditions for entering competitions, thus promoting the game in every aspect. As part of these criteria, priority is given to the training and cultivating of young and promising players, proper management and organization …. Yet, the Israeli licensing criteria for football clubs (and in fact, their regulation) is basic and a very different from the requirements presented to clubs that take part in UEFA tournaments, as well as the requirements of football clubs in developed countries.[17]

This quote represents the view of Europe as the role model for Israeli football. The Zelicha Report presented a series of solutions in different management levels, starting with referees of children and youth games, parent involvement, quality of facilities, ownership and proper management, involvement of fans, rights of coaches, budget monitoring, ticket prices, field preparation and the establishment of an association to manage the football league. Some of the recommendations were implemented, and particularly the decision to separate the competitive league from the football association and establish a new administration for the league. Another recommendation that was implemented was to reduce the power of politically affiliated sports centres.

As for children and youth departments, the committee provided the following recommendations:

- Forming 3–7-year development plans for youth departments and submitting them to the coordination and budget committee. The plans should include goals, objectives, organisation, administration, operation, infrastructure development, financial resources, educational plan, medical issues, assessment and feedback.
- Competitive matches should not be held for children under 12.
- Refereeing system for children and youth departments should be changed, and referees in these leagues should be trained as education professionals.
- Fields and facilities should be adapted to safeguard the personal and physical safety of children, parents and professional team. Basic

facilities for parents and families in the fields: public toilets, seats and shading.
- Removing the fences between the fields and the stands to reduce the sense of alienation and the feeling of competition and resistance.
- Ensuring the social benefits and rights of coaches, including insurance, pension, etc., as required by the Israeli law.[18]

The Zelicha Committee reflects a strive to upgrade Israeli football and bring it closer towards the European standard. Yet some of the recommendations were not implemented or even presented in the press, and remained unknown to managers and coaches in children and youth departments. Coaches still struggle for their social benefits, physical improvements of infrastructure depend on municipalities and have no budgets, yearly plans are not written or submitted to the football association. Competitiveness was reduced in children games up to the age of 10 by eliminating the official declaration of a winning team. In practice, however, coaches and players follow the league and strive to finish the season in the first place.

In the 2017/18 season, the Youth Department of the Football Association decided that every match should start with handshakes, according to the European costume. The ritual was successfully implemented in Israeli games. It remained, however, a technical action without adding the necessary ideological training and implementation processes behind it.

The Zelicha Report failed to change Israeli football, and had little influence over children and youth departments. No other long-term plan was drafted for the Israeli football after the Zelicha Report. In 2015, the State Comptroller published a detailed report about the Sports Administration, the Council for the Prevention of Sports Violence and its function in preventing violence. This report refers to the children and youth departments as well. Among other problems, the report states that:

> The Council is responsible, among other things, to draft plans for the prevention of violence in sports among children and youth. This role is critical, no doubt. Yet, the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the Council and the Ministry of Education did not form any plan or completed any project of those discussed by the Council during its six and a half years of activity … The basketball and the football associations failed to implement the majority of the Council's recommendations concerning the commitment of parents whose children are athletes to avoid violence and encourage integrity in children games, including the requirement that parents sign a 'decently convention' and be incorporated as ushers during games. The football association completely ignored the recommendations in the Zelicha report concerning the optional ways of mobilizing parents to the effort of reducing violent behaviour in children and youth leagues outside of schools.[19]

As the Football Association and the Sports Administration keep failing in creating long-term work plans for children and youth football departments, the managers and coaches are left to fight on their own, handling an overload of work and responsibility which leaves them little time, if any, to think about long-term plans. One of the managers told me: 'You are asking about Europe. Let's talk about it in five years from now. Currently, I am struggling to survive. I have so many things to do, and I don't know where to start'. A professional manager told me: 'I cannot change Israeli football. This is the nature of football, it is violent. If I am not violent, I will lose'. In a conversation with a children's coach in the periphery, he explained his motivation to win every game: 'I compete against another team in this city. If I lose and they win, the children will want to go there'. Another coach from a different club in central Israel presented a similar argument: 'If I don't win, the children will go play at the other club. I have to be better than them today'.

These quotes resonate Mullainathan and Shafir's arguments about the impact of scarcity over the ability to make long-term plans.[20] In their book *Scarcity* as well as in other papers they argue that people who are bothered by the lack of time and/or money are cognitively less able to make long-term plans.[21] The pressure affects people in distress in a number of ways: it makes them think about the present and neglect the future; it makes them look for 'shortcut' solution to problem instead of investing the time an effort and thinking about alternative solutions that might help them over time. This argument explains the position of these managers and coaches. Despite the vast knowledge of managers and coaches about children, youth and professional training, the shortage of time and their many tasks force them to go for shortcuts and short-term solutions. Only a handful have the time to consult academic studies to expand their knowledge and find more long-term solutions. The fact that most of them do not enjoy the full range of social benefits defined by law adds to the feeling of scarcity and problematic nature.

Mullainathan and Shafir argue that families in distress often give up on exhausting their rights and benefits if they have to deal with complex bureaucratic processes.[22] Hence, the state must proactively help underprivileged populations in cutting through the red tape. In our case, the fact that department managers and the Football Association do not have the time to study materials and develop long-term plans prevents them from promoting their clubs further. Even when someone does succeed in writing a well-organised plan, the executive departments leave it untouched, and let the managers and coaches handle their overload on their own.

In 2014, a new organisational-educational-social initiative has been initiated, which strives to transform Israeli football: The Shield of Honour competition, which was initiated by the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, together with Value Sports Association. When it was first initiated, the Shield

of Honour project was designed for Premier League clubs, but later it was expanded to include fans and children and youth departments across all Israeli leagues. The goal of the competition, as it was presented in official statements, was: 'To strengthen and encourage clubs to expand their ideological, social-communal activity, establish partnership between different sectors in Israeli society and eliminate violence and racism'. The program focuses on social and moral values, and it is the only program operated in Israel today that requires managers of children and youth departments to draft annual plans at the beginning of each year.

The competition focuses on 18 pre-defined criteria, which are used to measure the success of clubs in implementing the desired values. These criteria were drafted based on UEFA guidelines. During the first year, the criteria were copied from UEFA as is. In later years, they were moderately changed to adapt them to the Israeli reality. The competition includes around 200–300 clubs from all over Israel, where dozens of thousands of children get to participate in educational, value-based programs. The criteria set for departments that wish to enter the competition are: Writing an educational, value-based work program, writing an ethical code, managing the club as an educational program, contacting the players' schools, opening a learning centre, holding educational training and workshops, positioning the coach as a positive role model, strengthening relationships with parents, holding community activities, and more. The inspiration for these criteria came, no doubt, from European football academies, which are based on similar management strategies.[23]

At the beginning of each year, the participating clubs draft annual plans. Over the year, they strive to reduce violence, open learning centres and volunteer in the community. At the end of each year, they submit a summary of their activity. I was a member of the panel of judges for the first three years of the program. We got dozens of booklets with impressive activities of clubs at all levels. Furthermore, we could see the improvement over the years, when the clubs started adapting their activities to the program's guidelines. A community manager in one of the largest clubs in Israel told me: 'During the first year, we didn't know what was expected of us. In the second year, we studied the measures and wrote detailed plans. We would meet every month to make sure we follow the program's guidelines'. We can see how the higher accessibility of management guidelines, written workplans and measurements enabled youth department managers to develop and promote the club according to European standards. While the Shield of Honour reward is granted to a single club every year, the transformation is felt across many different football clubs.

Conclusions

The closer contacts of Israeli players, coaches and managers with European and particularly English football since the 1990s, when Israel

started competing in Europe, increased their motivation to play, coach and manage football clubs like it is done in Europe. Yet, despite this motivation, Israeli football coaches and managers suffer from a constant state of scarcity, since the institutions responsible for sports management in Israel – the Sports Administration and the Football Association – fail to create long-term work plans for the clubs. The Football Association, which is directly responsible for these departments, is inconsistent in implementing work plans. There is no multi-year plan, no training for coaches and managers, and football clubs still run their operation based on instincts.

To imitate the UK model, we must create an equivalent to the administrative institutions that run UK football and define management and planning guidelines for football academies. Israeli institutions should study these methods and try to implement them. Just like in the case of poverty, poor people, or in our case, coaches and managers who suffer from a lack of financial and time resources, need long-term assistance from the government and less bureaucracy to overcome their challenges. The Shield of Honour competition offers a unique model that makes management guidelines more accessible to Israeli managers and coaches, while motivating them to adopt these plans, thus moving Israeli football into the future more quickly and effectively.

Notes

1. Guy, *Good lads*.
2. Guy and Muchtar, *Between Supervision and Social Inclusion*.
3. Mullainathan and Shafir, *Scarcity*.
4. Reeves and Roberts, *Talent Identification*.
5. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*; Elias, *The Civilisation Process*.
6. Tischler, *Footballers and Businessmen*, 23.
7. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.
8. Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*.
9. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*.
10. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
11. Ben-Porat, "Overseas Sweetheart: Israelis Fans of English Football"; Tischler, *Footballers and Businessmen: The Origins of Professional Soccer in England*.
12. See note 8 above.
13. See note 1 above.
14. Premiere League, *Handbook*. Published by the Premiere League.
15. Arsenal Football Club, *Official Annual 2008*. Publish by Arsenal FC.
16. See note 9 above.
17. Zelicha Committee, *Report*, 15–16.
18. Ibid., 28–39.
19. State Comptroller, *2015 Report*, 548.
20. See note 3 above.
21. Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir, "Some Consequences".

22. See note 3 above.
23. See note 1 above.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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