

Developing a Management Model for the Guangdong Province Elite Youth Football Players

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Abstract

Background and Aims: This study aimed to develop a management model for elite youth football players in Guangdong Province based on the POLC (Planning, Organizing, Leading, and Controlling) framework. Specifically, the objectives were to identify key issues and factors influencing current management practices, design a systematic model, and evaluate its feasibility for implementation.

Methodology: The research employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. The sample included 112 male football players aged 15–18 from club teams and middle schools in Guangdong, selected purposively, as well as experts with extensive experience in football development. Data collection instruments included a questionnaire (validated by IOC = 0.933) and expert consultations through interviews, Delphi rounds, and connoisseurship appraisal. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used for quantitative analysis.

Results: The results revealed that the overall level of key issues and factors in the POLC dimensions was rated high ($\bar{X} \geq 3.83$), with several specific problems and components reaching very high levels. The developed management model comprised 20 components in planning, 19 in organizing, 19 in leading, and 19 in controlling. These components emphasized long-term planning, resource allocation, leadership development, and performance monitoring.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that the model is not only theoretically sound but also practically significant. Its application can improve coordination among schools, clubs, and provincial agencies, strengthen policy implementation, and enhance the holistic development of elite youth players in Guangdong. Experts agreed that the model is highly feasible and stressed that its success depends on collaboration among stakeholders and the integration of well-trained personnel into youth football governance.

Keywords: Management Model; Elite Youth Football Player; Guangdong Province

Introduction

Football has rapidly grown in popularity across China, and Guangdong Province has emerged as one of the nation's leading regions for football development. Driven by strong



participation in the Guangdong Province Super League and increasing investment in youth academies, football has become a central part of local sports culture. The inclusion of high-level foreign players and professional coaches has improved the level of competition and boosted fan engagement, viewership, and overall interest. These developments highlight Guangdong's ambition to align its football system with international standards and prepare players for elite competitions such as the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao National Games.

Despite this growth, a significant problem remains: the performance gap between Guangdong's youth players and their international counterparts. Research and field reports consistently show that domestic players lag in areas such as tactical awareness, physical conditioning, and psychological resilience (Liu & Zhang, 2021; Huang & Wei, 2023). This gap undermines Guangdong's efforts to produce elite players who can transition effectively from youth leagues to professional football. Local authorities and sports organizations, while committed to development, often lack a systematic management model to integrate training, talent identification, and long-term athlete development in a way that matches global benchmarks.

In recent years, Guangdong has launched several initiatives to close this gap. The Guangdong Province National Games U17 team, for example, has competed in the National Youth League, Guangdong Super League, and China Champions League as preparation for the 2025 National Games. Scouts have assessed hundreds of players from provincial competitions, narrowing a pool of over 500 athletes to 61 trial players. Intensive training camps were organized, yet inconsistency in performance and limited exposure to advanced tactical systems remain evident. The largest challenge is therefore building a management framework that ensures the continuous development of elite youth players.

This issue is particularly urgent because adolescence (ages 15–18) represents a critical “golden period” in sports development. Studies confirm that this stage is crucial for advancing from technical learning to high-performance competition, requiring structured training, systematic scouting, and exposure to high-intensity matches (Wang et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2023). Without a clear developmental model, many talented players fail to transition successfully to professional ranks, resulting in wasted potential and gaps in Guangdong's long-term talent pipeline.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on developing and validating a management model for elite youth football players in Guangdong Province. By integrating scientific approaches such as performance data analysis, expert consultations, and international comparisons, this research seeks to identify key performance indicators and provide a structured framework for sustainable youth football development. The findings will be of direct value to policymakers, football clubs, schools, and sports academies, offering practical strategies for optimizing training programs, enhancing scouting systems, and aligning



provincial football with international standards. Ultimately, this research contributes to bridging the performance gap, improving Guangdong's competitive strength, and ensuring long-term success at both national and international levels.

Objectives

1. To identify the key factors in the management model for Guangdong Province elite youth football players.
2. To construct a management model for the Guangdong Province elite youth football players.
3. To validate the management model for Guangdong Province elite youth football players.

Literature Review

Football development in Guangdong Province reflects both opportunities and persistent challenges. Prior studies highlight that economic growth, urbanization, and government policy have created favorable conditions for football's expansion, yet grassroots participation and professional coaching systems remain uneven (Gong, Chen, & Li, 2020). This indicates that while the region benefits from a strong sports culture and investment, a lack of systematic structures continues to limit long-term development.

One central theme in the literature is grassroots and youth development. The FIFA Technical Report (2019) stressed that sustainable football success depends on structured training environments, grassroots engagement, and long-term development pathways. Similarly, Wang, Zhao, and Huang (2022) confirmed that ages 15–18 are critical for consolidating technical skills while advancing tactical awareness, reinforcing the urgency of providing Guangdong's youth players with systematic and competitive training opportunities.

Another area of focus is the integration of physical and tactical training. Jones, Thompson, and Williams (2021) argued that synchronized development of physical fitness and tactical awareness yields superior results, warning that overemphasis on fitness alone undermines long-term performance. Although Liu & Zhang (2021) and Huang & Wei (2023) analyzed tactical patterns in global contexts (World Cup, UEFA Champions League), their findings provide lessons for Guangdong by showing how balanced offensive strategies, set pieces, and adaptive play can inform local training design.

International perspectives highlight the importance of exchange programs and global integration. Martinez and Lopez (2020) found that international exchanges expose young players to advanced methodologies and tactical diversity, improving adaptability. Such initiatives are particularly relevant for Guangdong, where domestic players still struggle to reach

the standards of foreign counterparts. Collaborative programs with the Greater Bay Area and beyond could thus serve as a key strategy for bridging performance gaps.

Finally, research in sports management theory points to the need for specialized models tailored to football development. While Smith and Stewart (2021) showed that general management principles can be applied in sports, they also emphasized that unique industry challenges demand hybrid models. For Guangdong, this means moving beyond fragmented practices and building a comprehensive framework that integrates planning, organizing, leading, and controlling into youth football governance.

Summary: Taken together, the literature shows that Guangdong's football development is constrained not by lack of enthusiasm or resources, but by the absence of a systematic, integrated management model. By addressing gaps in grassroots structures, tactical-physical integration, international exchange, and management systems, this research seeks to develop a practical framework that strengthens youth football and supports Guangdong's ambition to compete at national and international levels.

Conceptual Framework

The dissertation title, “Developing a Management Model for Guangdong Province Elite Youth Football Players,” was designed as follows.

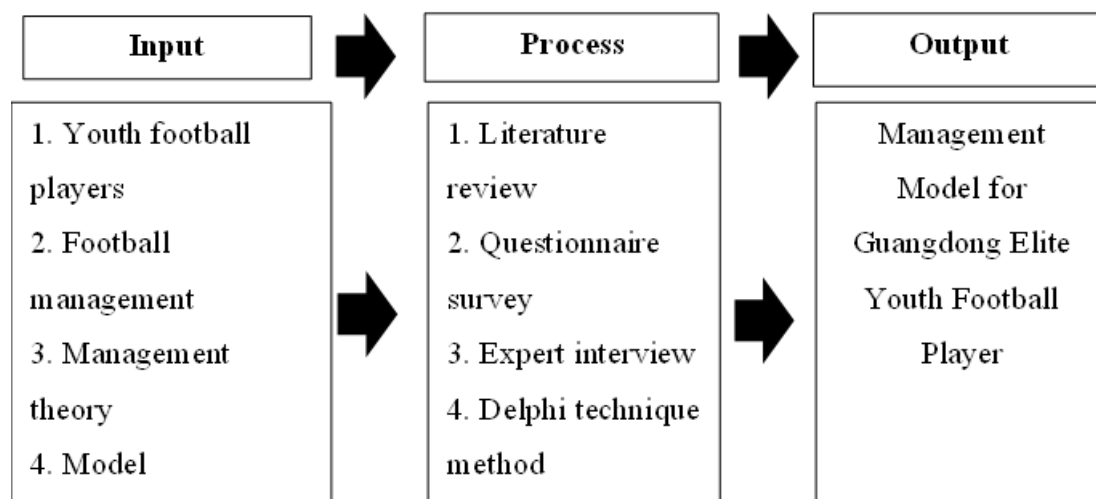


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches in four sequential phases. The purpose was to identify issues and key factors in the management model for elite youth football players in Guangdong Province, to develop a draft model, and to validate it through expert consensus and appraisal.

Population and Sample: The target population consisted of elite-track youth football players in Guangdong Province, aged 15–18 years, who were registered in provincial training centers, club academies, and football-focused middle and high schools. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria: male players, 15–18 years of age, with at least two years of continuous football training, training at least three times per week, and free from injury during the past six weeks. In total, 112 male players were selected to participate in the questionnaire survey, a number exceeding the minimum sample size required for statistical reliability. In addition, three groups of experts were involved at different stages of the study: five experts (administrators, coaches, and technical directors) participated in semi-structured interviews; 21 experts (policy makers, club directors, and sport scientists) were invited to the three-round Delphi process; and nine senior experts were engaged in the connoisseurship appraisal of the final model.

Research Tools: The main research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed based on the POLC (Planning, Organizing, Leading, Controlling) framework. It used a five-point Likert scale ranging from “very low” to “very high” and contained items addressing long-term planning, resource allocation, leadership development, and performance monitoring. For qualitative data, a semi-structured interview guide was used to probe deeper into management challenges, system links, and policy implications. In the Delphi rounds, experts evaluated and refined itemized components of the management model, while the connoisseurship panel employed a structured rubric to assess clarity, appropriateness, feasibility, and scalability.

Instrument Quality: Content validity was confirmed through review by five experts, yielding an IOC value of 0.933, which indicated excellent relevance. A pilot test with 30 comparable youth players was conducted to refine item clarity, and internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach’s alpha, targeting a minimum value of 0.80. Construct validity was further examined using exploratory factor analysis, with KMO values above 0.80 and significant Bartlett’s tests required for adequacy. For qualitative procedures, credibility was strengthened through triangulation, inter-coder agreement ($K \geq 0.75$), and member checking with participants.

Data Collection: The research was conducted over one competitive cycle from March to August 2025 across provincial academies and training bases. In Phase I, players completed the questionnaires in supervised sessions after training, requiring approximately 20–25 minutes each. Phase II involved semi-structured interviews with five experts lasting 45–60 minutes, either face-to-face or online, and audio-recorded with consent. Phase III consisted of three Delphi rounds at two-week intervals, in which experts rated, revised, and refined components of the management model. Consensus was defined as a median score ≥ 4.00 and an interquartile range (IQR) ≤ 1.00 , with Kendall’s W used to measure agreement. Finally, in Phase

IV, nine experts participated in a connoisseurship workshop to confirm the clarity and feasibility of the draft model.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data from the player survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage) and exploratory factor analysis to examine underlying structures. Group differences (e.g., by age or training context) were explored using t-tests or ANOVA, where assumptions were met. Qualitative interview data were coded thematically using NVivo, with themes derived inductively and verified through triangulation. Delphi data were analyzed using the median and IQR for consensus and Kendall's W for inter-rater reliability. Connoisseurship evaluations were summarized with means, standard deviations, and Aiken's V to assess content adequacy. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS v29, while NVivo v14 supported qualitative coding.

Results

1. After the researcher surveyed using a questionnaire to understand the issues and key factors in the management model for Guangdong Province elite youth football players. It was found that the average level of issues and key factors in planning, organizing, leading, and controlling components was high ($\bar{X} \geq 3.83$). And in each component, there will be issues and key factors with a very high average level as well. Divided into planning components, there were 2 very high-value issues and key factors. On the organizing component, there were 2 very high-value issues and key factors. On the leading component, there were 2 very high-value issues and key factors. And on the controlling component, there were not very high-value issues and key factors, but there were a total of 11 high-value issues and key factors ($\bar{X} \geq 3.51$).

Table 1 Opinions of populations regarding issues and key factors in the management model for Guangdong Province elite youth football players of the POLC

NO.	Content	Populations (N=112)		
		$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Evaluation criteria
1	Planning	3.88	0.12	High
2	Organizing	3.83	0.10	High
3	Leading	3.86	0.12	High
4	Controlling	3.84	0.13	High

2. After the final round of Delphi voting from 21 experts, the median and Interquartile Range (IQR) on each item from each component's model framework P-O-L-C had a median value greater than 3.50 and an IQR value less than 1.50 could be summarized as follows: The

planning component consists of 20 items, the organizing component consists of 19 items, the leading component consists of 19 items and the controlling component consists of 19 items.

3. Based on the insights from 9 experts, the POLC-based youth football management model is regarded as comprehensive in both academic and practical terms. The Planning and Controlling components are particularly praised for their emphasis on data-driven strategies, age-specific periodization, and individualized monitoring. At the same time, the Organizing and Leading dimensions are seen as instrumental in promoting structured administration and positive team psychology. Experts agree that the model is highly feasible for implementation at the provincial and regional policy levels. They emphasize that its success will depend on collaboration among government agencies, football clubs, schools, and well-trained support personnel.

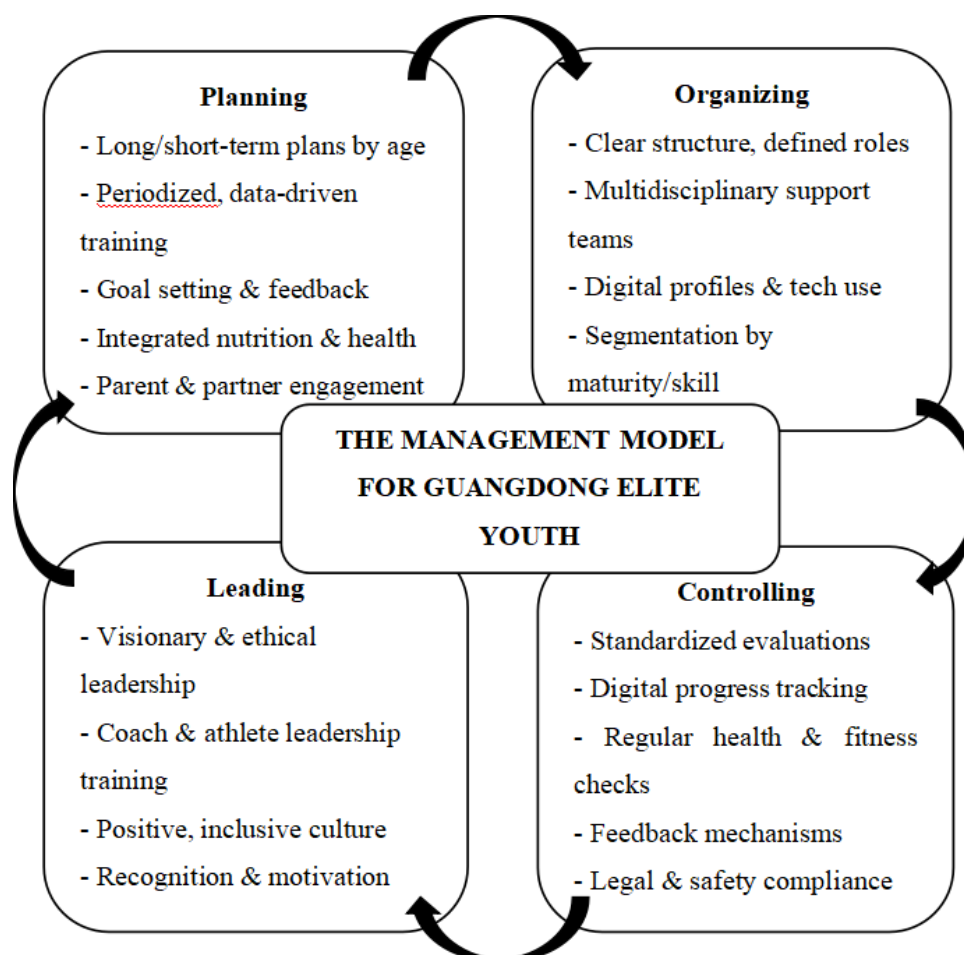


Figure 2 The management model for Guangdong Province elite youth football players

Discussion

The findings highlight that effective planning in youth football requires both long- and short-term strategies tailored to the 15–18 age group, including position-specific training, digital

tracking, competition exposure, and parental engagement, aligning with prior studies that emphasize structured academies as key to success (Vilen, Wei Rieng, & Wei Liang, 2011). In terms of organizing, the integration of technology such as digital athlete profiles, GPS tracking, and AI analytics reflects the growing reliance on data-driven decision-making while also addressing inclusivity through expanding women's football (Zhu & Fan, 2010). For the leading element, training coaches in communication and motivational skills, fostering player leadership, and promoting positive team culture were emphasized as key to building confidence and long-term resilience, supported by evidence from school-academy integration and CFA's international collaborations (Evergrande Football School, 2022). Leadership also extends to transparent, data-driven decisions, recognition of achievements, and collaborative partnerships, which help attract talent and strengthen clubs, as demonstrated in the CSL and Guangdong's successes (Chinese Super League, 2023; Williams, 2005). Regarding controlling, standardized assessment tools, regular fitness testing, health monitoring, and strict adherence to recovery protocols are essential for addressing persistent challenges in Chinese football development (Wang, 2016; Zhu & Fan, 2010). Control mechanisms also ensure transparency in player selection and adaptability to new research, supporting the sustainable growth of youth football (Chinese Football Association, 2015; Evergrande Football School, 2022). Collectively, these four POLC elements underscore the importance of structured planning, technological innovation, strong leadership, and effective monitoring in shaping the future of youth football in Guangdong and across China.

Recommendation

Practice Recommendation

1. Evaluate the age of the youth football players before using the management model for the Guangdong Province elite youth football players and adjust it appropriately.
2. Before using the management model for the Guangdong Province elite youth football players, submit the model for review to the executives.
3. The management model for the Guangdong Province elite youth football players should be studied in detail for smooth operation.

Further Research Recommendation

1. Expand the study population and increase the number of experts, including increasing the factors that should be studied that will affect the management of young athletes, such as academic factors, social factors, and the environment, etc.
2. Implement the model and evaluate the satisfaction of users and athletes. Find the weaknesses and strengths of the management model and improve and develop it to keep up with the times.



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