

Introduction

Could Gareth Southgate and Dan Ashworth's success this summer be indicative of how the game is developing in England? Their attention to detail, meticulous planning and the use of a well thought through and holistic performance strategy, could be seen as a signpost as to how some clubs in English football are using such approaches to establish competitive advantage.

Traditionally, football clubs haven't enjoyed the greatest reputation when it comes to deploying mid to long term planning and organisational strategies. It would also be fair to say that there have been some owners who neither want (nor care for) longer term thinking. Fair enough. Owning a football club for some is the sexy, adrenaline fuelled part of their investment portfolio. The investment where they actually don't want to get bogged down in mundane discussions around things like process and organisational efficiency. Things that they spend enough of their time discussing in their other businesses.

A New(ish) Style of Ownership

Although I wouldn't go as far as to say that this form of ownership is now a dying breed, a new type of owner has emerged in recent years. Success and sustainability drive an ever increasing number of investment orientated clubs. Quite simply, these clubs have plotted a map of where they want to get to and exactly what they need to do to get there. It is a more strategic style of ownership that can be compared to owners/investors across professional sports in North America.

We have been fortunate this year to have partnered with a range of clubs in the Premier League and the MLS that fit this bill. From the moment we begin to engage in discussions with ownership or Executive Leadership teams, it is evident when a club is aligned from ownership through to executives and on to the training ground, both in terms of business operations and performance. It is no coincidence that these clubs have a true sense of their own identity and a clear vision of how they want to develop both on and off the pitch.

The Sporting Director (R)evolution

The continued emergence and significance of the 'Sporting Director' model is the stand out trend we have witnessed that binds this group of progressive clubs together. No club in this country would be foolish enough to put on record that they have mastered exactly how the role and model is best served in English football. We have, however, seen a number of clubs really study what the role is and identify the clear competitive advantage it can bring, if thoughtfully executed.

From ex ‘Managers’ first assuming the title ‘Director of Football’ to ‘Heads of Recruitment’ demanding a flattering (whilst often not accurate) job title of ‘Sporting/Technical Director’, the 2017/2018 season saw a version of the role being adopted in England that is much closer to how it is used in Europe.

Owners/Investors and CEO’s now demand much more than a coaching track record or mobile phone book with a long contact directory. The Sporting Directors that we recruited across the 2017/18 season were able in interviews to talk eloquently and in detail, about the structure and processes that underpin what they do. In short, they have substance. By this I mean that they understand:

- Wider organisational strategy
- That successful organisations achieve success through collaboration
- That talent is the most valuable asset
- The importance of succession planning
- The necessity for thorough and objective processes when it comes to talent acquisition and indeed, development
- Leadership is just as much about empowerment as it is about making decisions
- The need for accountability and clarity of roles during decision making processes

These individuals are as fluent, comfortable and credible in the Boardroom as they are at the training ground.

In, addition, one of the key messages from owners/investors, boards and CEO’s when hiring for these roles, has increasingly been about the need for somebody who displays humility and a low ego.

As it stands today, in our experience, the model seems to work best in English football when it sits next to the Head Coach in a support service role. Candidates are quickly discounted when they exhibit behaviours that indicate a preference for structural hierarchy where the Sporting Director sits above the Head Coach. Where we have seen this model work best, is when there are three points of a triangle, i.e. the owner or CEO, the Head Coach and the Sporting Director, all providing input from different angles in an attempt to reach the most cohesive 360 degree solution.

The Rise of Major League Soccer

As English football continues on this journey, the MLS continues to develop its “football acumen”.

In keeping with other professional sports in North America, MLS franchises are (for the most part) sensibly run, usually well-structured organisations and manage the business operations side very well. The next step in the league’s evolution will be to further build and develop its “football muscles”. Like the Premier

League and Championship here in England, the MLS is what we as headhunters deem to be an international market place.

Whereas Bundesliga consists of predominantly German technical staff and business executives, La Liga with Spaniards, both the UK and North America are far more likely to be populated by international CEO's and technical staff.

Whereas in the past, some Europeans moving to the MLS have complained about lower quality resources, poor quality players and lower budgets, a new crop of more enlightened Europeans are moving to North America enthused by the longer term growth potential of the MLS.

In years gone by, some MLS franchises and on occasion the League (understandably) took the view that they didn't need to look overseas too often for either business or performance leadership talent. What followed was a period of League administrators, ex-players and executives from other US sports assuming key roles in League franchises. A 'develop from within' strategy.

The rules and regulations in the MLS and shared ownership model make it a League like no other in world football. It was/is therefore understandable and logical to appoint North Americans into leadership roles.

2017/2018, however, saw a marked increase in MLS franchises exploring the global talent pool when looking to appoint a CEO, Sporting Director, Head Coach or Head of Scouting/Recruitment. For example, three of our most recent MLS searches have resulted in candidates residing in Europe transferring to North America – Tom Fox and Jesse Fioranelli at the San Jose Earthquakes and Ian Ayre at Nashville. In our experience, it is now more widely agreed that hiring business or performance talent from outside of North America, is one route that the MLS can utilise to help to build on its very stable foundations.

Football (soccer) continues to boom Stateside and we are now seeing franchises looking to establish themselves on the world stage. In conjunction with MLS growth, we are now being approached by elite European talent enquiring about moving to the MLS. Top tier CEO's and technical staff are now genuinely excited by the prospect of joining a rapidly growing start up(esque) environment where they can leave a lasting legacy on North American soccer.

Our role in this is to continue to use our research expertise to identify talent from the global market place, supported by our assessment and evaluation skills and our extensive knowledge of the global soccer market, including the MLS, to ascertain which talent would best work most effectively in North America.

American Invasion?

Whilst not imminent, our belief is that we will start to see MLS executives and GM's (Sporting Directors) making their way into European football (Ivan Gazidis being the obvious example of somebody that has made such a move). We are firmly of the belief that there is talent in North America that would add significant value to European football. Whilst we all acknowledge that American sports often lead the way when it comes to commercialising a team/franchise, it is often less well known that the quality of General Managers (Sporting Directors) is also on the rise. Often ex-players that have embarked on MBA's or a career in accounting, business or banking etc. possess a fascinating blend of technical knowledge and business/commercial acumen. Whilst a lack of top level player trading is an obvious gap on their CV, we believe that these individuals could move the needle from an operational perspective, either as a number two or in a general management role with strong player recruitment support.

Forthcoming Season

Now the window is drawing to a close we anticipate further movement in Europe across the CEO and Sporting Director landscape. It is always difficult to anticipate exactly where this will be, but we are certain that our clients will continue to want to see global shortlists. Twinned with an ever-increasing appetite to think globally, we anticipate more clubs will look to other sports as well as outside of sport to drive innovation. The unique nature of every club provides us with fascinating access to a range of cultures and environments. As with every season, the only guarantee is that it won't be boring on or off the pitch!



STEWART KING | Global Head of Performance

Stewart has managed executive search assignments for over 10 years. As the Global Head of Performance for Nolan Partners, Stewart advises on and executes leadership appointments into the technical departments of world leading professional clubs and national associations. Typical search assignments Stewart will manage include Sporting Director/General Managers, High Performance Directors, Heads of Player Recruitment, Head Coaches, Academy Directors as well as senior professionals across sports science, medical, strength and conditioning and nutrition.

Stewart has delivered on assignments across Europe, North America, Middle East and Asia-Pacific. The time Stewart spends out in the field means he is able to provide accurate and real time benchmarking information/market analysis to clubs/franchises/governing bodies around the world.

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