

Wither Pakistan's Football?

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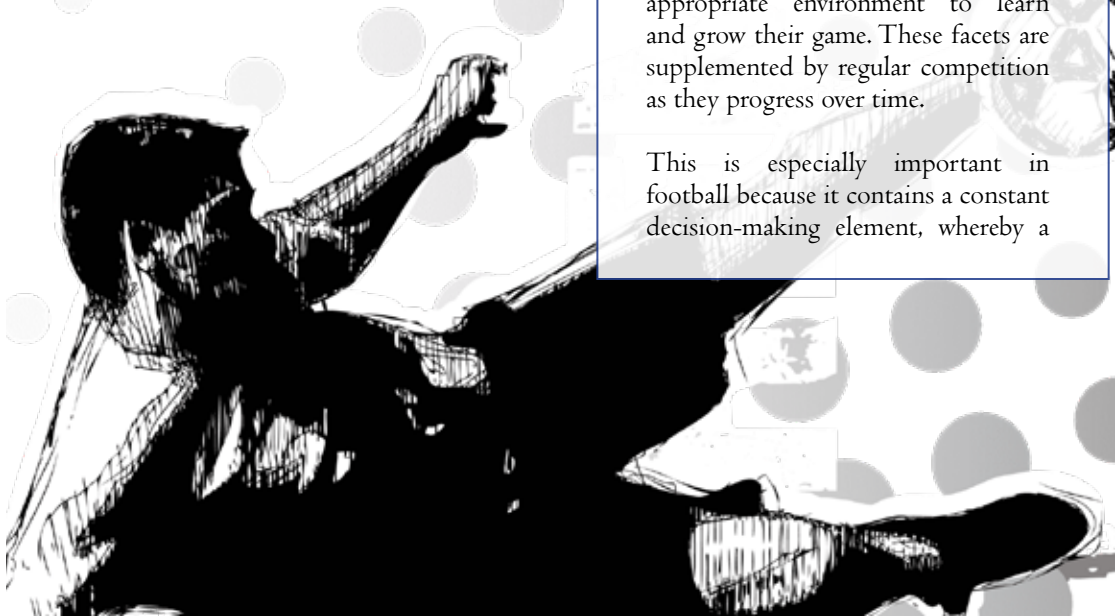
The FIFA World Cup 2022 will kick off in less than a month, with hosts Qatar playing Ecuador on 20th November 2022. Pakistan's only contribution to the event will be in the form of its footballs. Its football team is nowhere near participating in the event any time soon.

We must first understand the magnitude of the problem: Pakistan is the only one out of 47 countries in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) that has never won a single World Cup qualifier match. How has a country of over 220 million people never won a single qualifier while Qatar, with less than four million people, has achieved a top 50 FIFA ranking?

As with all complicated problems, the underlying issues are multivariate in nature. However, I believe most people offer the wrong diagnosis of why Pakistani football continues to stagnate or even regress. For me, if Pakistani football is to progress in any meaningful way, the primary aspect that needs focus is grassroots development.

Grassroots development consists of developing and coaching young players (as young as five years of age) and providing them with the appropriate environment to learn and grow their game. These facets are supplemented by regular competition as they progress over time.

This is especially important in football because it contains a constant decision-making element, whereby a





player has to make decisions in relation to the ball, their teammates and their opponents. A player needs to decide where to be/go (positioning), where to dribble/pass/shoot, and when to do all these things to gain maximum advantage. The legendary Johan Cryuff said it best, “Football is a brain game, where to run,

when to run, when to cover, when to press [...], it’s decisions like these that come from the brain that determines whether you’re a good player or not.”

Elite football is primarily about decision-making. It is about how you find solutions with limited space and time. The higher you progress in football levels, the less space and time you get, so your decisions become less deliberate and more a result of habit/instinct. Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult for players without extensive coaching to find solutions.

You can develop this decision-making element in only one way: providing the right environment and coaching for the children to learn. For example, before children reach 11 or 12 years, you need to teach them the correct techniques and ensure they get maximum touches of the ball (roughly 1000 touches per session and a ratio of one ball for two players). To develop their decision-making, you put them in small-sided games (3v3 or 4v4) in a compact area and let them play. And you routinize this process. This method is effective because players get maximum touches on the ball, and the compact area forces them to find solutions in tight spaces. Children grasp new concepts much more quickly than adults, so they find solutions quickly and impressively.

After age 12, you start coaching their decision-

making through targeted interventions and inputs. This period is when elements like body orientation, the timing of movement, and other advanced principles come into play. This time is also when players need regular competition to hone their competitive spirit, develop a professional and winning mentality, and learn how to apply training principles in pressure situations.

You might ask, “How does he know that a well-coached team of Pakistani kids can become world-beaters?” Here is how I know: Karachi United, a professional football club in Karachi, sent their U-12 team to the Aspire Academy in Qatar in 2018. Not only did they beat European youth teams like Fenerbahce to win the tournament, but they also played a “modern” possession-based brand of football. How did they do it? The players were all Pakistani. They did it because those players were coached and developed in an environment that fostered their decision-making.

Grassroots development is the only absolutely necessary condition needed for Pakistani football to progress (sidenote: I recently talked to one of Pakistan’s best coaches about this topic here). If we do not do this, we can forget about qualifying for any World Cup. Even if we start today, it will take at least 15-20 years for us to reach a competitive level in the continent, let alone the world. Rome was not built in a day.

Pakistan has raw talent, but raw talent alone gets you nowhere in football. Since our talented children are never properly developed, by the time they reach, say, 20 years of age, it is already too late for them to play at the level required globally. Too many years of their youth have been wasted. At the global level, for comparison, players are developed from an extremely early age. By the time they reach 20 years, they already have over 10 years’ worth of football development. How can our players compete against them with (in most cases) zero years of productive coaching? This problem is also consistent with the fact that the major element separating every Pakistani player from a professional player abroad is decision-making. You will find many Pakistani players who are not bad technically. In fact, some of them are quite good. But they are (mostly)

atrocious in terms of decision-making. That is not really a surprise; it is possible, albeit difficult, to become a technically proficient player by practising skills like passing, dribbling, and shooting, but it is virtually impossible to become a good decision-maker without the right environment and coaching.

Why don't we do all of this? There is a severe lack of good quality coaches and an intellectual football culture. We lack coaches not in quantity but in quality. We have coaches with top licensing certifications, but licenses are merely a signalling mechanism/operational checkpoint. I have observed all levels and all top-level personnel (players/coaches/executives) of Pakistani football. I can safely say there are less than a handful of coaches who are operating at the

required level. Pakistani coaches are, generally, either uninterested or totally at odds with how football is trained and played today.

To progress, we must invest in coaching education and somehow instil an intellectual football culture from the bottom-up. We must invest in our children of today who will become the stars of tomorrow. Only then will we have something to look forward to in the future. Instead, all we have done is squabble on political issues, devise outlandish schemes, or think we are blessed with God's special grace so things will automatically fall into place without needing to change anything.

There are no shortcuts in life. We must walk the hard yards before we reach the gates of success.

