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Critical Thinking as a Defense Against Exploitation: Preparing Young Footballers for Life

Beyond the Game

by

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Abstract

This work examines the intersection of critical thinking, football, and neocolonial exploitation, focusing on challenges faced by young footballers from marginalized communities. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) it argues that critical thinking empowers players to resist systemic exploitation. The global football economy commodifies young talents, particularly from Africa, perpetuating neocolonial dynamics. While football academies, agents and scouts offer opportunities, they often prioritize athletic performance over holistic development. This study proposes a multi-disciplinary framework integrating critical thinking, financial literacy, ethics, and cultural awareness. It emphasizes culturally responsive mentorship and partnerships with governments, NGOs, academies, and clubs to promote systemic change. By fostering critical thinking and self-awareness, the framework aims to empower young footballers to resist exploitation, assert their identities, and advocate for a more equitable football ecosystem.

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Critical Thinking as a Defense Against Exploitation: Preparing Young Footballers for Life Beyond the Game

Football is a global game. Arguably, it is the biggest sport in the world. The football industry presents immense opportunities for young players across the globe – particularly those from marginalized communities. Unfortunately, while it presents talented young footballers the opportunity to display their talents, it equally exposes them to systemic exploitation. The recruitment and development of football talent, mostly from third developing countries (a term I use reluctantly), have been critiqued as neocolonial enterprises that prioritize economic gains over the holistic development of the young players (Darby, 2007; Darby, 2013). Given this context, critical thinking emerges as an essential skill for young footballers to navigate exploitation, make informed decisions, and assert agency within the football economy.

For many young footballers, the game represents a pathway to economic and social mobility. This is more so evident when with young footballers from Africa and Latin America (Poli, 2010). However, the football industry, driven by capitalist imperatives, prioritize profit over player well-being. The global football transfer market, controlled primarily by European clubs and agents, perpetuates economic and racial hierarchies that disadvantage young players from the Global South (Poli, 2010). This asymmetrical power dynamic, reinforced through systemic economic dependencies, reflects broader patterns of neocolonial exploitation.

One of the fundamental concerns with young football talents migrating from Africa or Latin America into Europe or the America's is the limited agency they have over their careers. According to Clarke, (2014), several youth players enter contracts with limited, or in some cases, no understanding of the legal and financial implications. A large reason for this is because intermediaries prioritize profit over the holistic development of the players. Without structured

educational initiatives within football academies, tailored towards the holistic growth of the young talents, they are exposed to exploitation and financial mismanagement (Esson, 2015). Some studies examining the role of critical thinking in sports have argued the need for a more critical approach to education within football academies (Larbi, 2017; Zarei Mahmoudabadi et al., 2021). Although there is a dearth of literature on the topic, this literature review attempts to synthesize key scholarly contributions on the exploitation of African footballers, the role of academies, and the empowering potential of critical thinking.

Method

This literature review was conducted using a systematic approach to identify, evaluate and synthesize essential scholarly literature into themes on critical thinking, race, identity and athlete development in football. The review was designed to provide relevant details on the development of Critical Race Theory-informed frameworks for youth football development while focusing on empowering young Black football players and addressing systemic inequalities within the football industry. The review primarily focused on publication between 2007 and 2025 for relevance and recency; however, fundamental text like Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970) helped build a strong theoretical grounding. The review utilized different academic databases and platforms for relevant peer-reviewed literature including but not limited to Scopus, SPORTDiscuss (via EBSCOhost), Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis online, JSTOR, PubMed, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Additionally, essential literature was sourced from reputable organizations such as FIFA, FIFAPro and BBC. These sources helped in capturing real-world athlete experiences and policy documents. The search terms included *“Critical thinking AND youth football, Critical race theory AND sport, Black athletes AND mentorship, financial literacy AND football players, Racial discrimination in football, Football*

academies AND player development, Neocolonialism AND African football, Identity formation AND athletes, Ethical reasoning AND football, Football migration AND exploitation”

Additionally, the search excluded studies not relevant to youth development, race, or critical thinking and also opinion pieces without scholarly backing.

The Global Football Economy: Capitalism and Exploitation Business of Football

Globally, football has become a multi-billion-dollar industry which unfortunately thrives on the commodification of young talents – particularly from the Global South (Darby, 2013). The development of a player is based on his or her profit generating abilities (Bourg & Gougnet, 2010) – and this is ruining the sport. According to the FIFA Global Transfer Report 2024, a record 78,742 international transfers were registered across both professional and amateur level (FIFA, 2024). Financially, the value of global transfers reached an all-time high of \$8.59 billion, which is a 15% increase compared to the previous record set in 2019 (Reuters, 2024). European clubs dominated the transfer market, with English clubs leading the spending spree, investing over \$1.6 billion during the mid-year transfer window (TalkSport, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The Confederation of African Football (CAF) recorded 2,698 outgoing transfers and 1,901 incoming transfers in 2022, representing the highest numbers in recent years (Statista, 2024). Nigeria and Ghana have led the continent in player transfers. In 2022, Nigeria recorded 725 transfers, generating \$104.2 million, while Ghana recorded 515 transfers, earning \$17.4 million (Prime Progress NG, 2024). These figures are reflective of the intense capital investment and profit generation in the football space.

The globalization of football has been the major contributing reason to the sport becoming a site for capitalist exploitation (Darby, 2007, 2013, 2014; Poli, 2010; Esson, 2015; Dubinsky, 2022). Notably, the *transfer market* (a digital platform with the profiles of footballers

and their associated market value) functions as a capitalist marketplace for the commodification of football players. According to Poli, (2010) football players morph from individuals with talents into tradable assets. This is a conversation largely predicated on the desire of young football talents to migrate into Europe for greener pastures. The exodus of African football talent to Europe is synonymous with neocolonial resource extraction (Darby, 2014). Similar to the term brain, Darby (2014), alludes that the feet drain phenomenon highlights the power asymmetries between the Global North and South where African nations lose their best talents to European leagues, often without commensurate benefits. This power imbalance not only places the young African talent depending on the European market at a disadvantage, it reinforces global power asymmetries (Esson, 2015).

Role Of Agents, Scouts, and Academies in Perpetuating Profit-Driven Motives

Considering the huge profit margins in the sport, the activities of agents, scouts, and academies are purely profit driven, hence prioritizing short-term financial gains over the well-being of young players (Darby, 2007). The political economy of professional sport, as examined by Bourg and Gougnet (2010), suggests that football, despite being portrayed as a meritocratic field, is severely entwined in global capitalist structures reproducing economic inequalities. It is no surprise that the recruitment of African players into European leagues exemplifies how profit-driven motives dictate player mobility, often at the expense of their holistic development. Agents, scouts and academies are deeply implicated in this. In fact, one can argue that they are the vehicle enabling the perpetuation of this exploitation. Agents and scouts are the gatekeepers controlling access to opportunities for young athletes, often prioritizing players who can generate immediate financial returns (Poli, 2010). Prioritizing financial gain over long-term development ensures that agents create an environment dictated by profitability and not skill progression

(Anderson & Santiago, 2020). One of the ways agents and scouts do this is by pursuing short contracts, quick transfers and high value deals which maximize their commission at the expense of skill development of young footballers (Elliott & Weedon, 2016). To explore why scouts, engage in such practices, Giffiths and Bloyce (2023) suggest that the modern capitalist division of labour has damaged the community of practice that allowed professional identity development to occur through participation in a structured social environment. They further argue that in most cases, agents and scouts have engaged in *hope labour* – working without compensation in the belief that it will lead to paid positions (Griffiths & Bloyce, 2022). This has made the football industry a site for precarious work. In light of this, scouts will jump at any opportunity to make profit even if it's at the detriment of the young player.

Football academies occupy what I term as a *contradictory space* in the global football ecosystem – on one hand, they are celebrated as providing young talents with opportunities to escape poverty. On the other hand, they are critiqued as sites of exploitation through neocolonial control, where young players are commodified and exploited for the benefit of European leagues and clubs (Darby, 2014). Many academies, although registered as NGO's secretly function as for-profit enterprises by facilitating commodification of players (Elliott & Weedon, 2016). Darby (2007, 2013) and Dubinsky (2022) have extensively studied the role of football academies in Africa, highlighting how they function within the neocolonial dynamics of the global football industry. These academies are often funded and operated by European clubs or investors, who view them as a means to identify and recruit young talent at a low cost. This model of talent development reinforces the dependency of African football on European leagues, as the primary goal of these academies is to produce players for the European market rather than to strengthen local leagues or national teams. Academies, just like agents and scouts, prioritize high revenue

generating players who can quickly be traded to larger clubs while ignoring their development (Elliott & Weedon, 2016).

The Exploitation of Talents

According to Esson (2015), the exploitation of young talents happens not only through contractual injustice but extends to the psychological and cultural dimensions of identity formation. Young talents who move to Europe are welcomed with the rude awakening of sudden cultural shifts - one which they are not prepared for. To further worsen their woes, they experience racial discrimination and alienation that can affect their mental well-being (Esson, 2015). The exploitation perpetrated is multifaceted. The media is an undeniable culprit – shaping narratives and promulgating negative discourses around Black athletes, often reinforcing stereotypes of natural athleticism while downplaying their intellectual contributions to the sport (Carrington, 2010; Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). British tabloids are infamous for subjecting Black footballers to disproportionate scrutiny and negative portrayals (Burns, 2024). British tabloids promoted the narrative that players like Amad Diallo of Manchester United, despite being a victim of child trafficking, was culpable in his own exploitation, reinforcing narratives that criminalize rather than support Black athletes (Burns, 2024). Similarly, players like Raheem Sterling and Mason Greenwood have been unfairly criticized in contrast to their white counterparts, like Phil Foden, who receive more favorable coverage. Such biased reporting perpetuates institutional racism in British football and society at large, shaping public perception in ways that reinforce existing inequalities (Burns, 2024).

Wein, (2007) suggests that the lack of support by clubs for player's post-career planning contributes to the plans of exploitation – although subtle. Many aspiring young professionals are convinced to believe that making it to the professional level is their only viable pathway to

success, leaving them ill-prepared for alternative careers if they do not secure professional contracts (Wein, 2007). This issue is prevalent among Black athletes and is compounded by the additional structural barriers in accessing education and career development opportunities (Dimeo & Finn, 2022). As Dubinsky (2022), in his study alluded to, without structured education programs, financial literacy training, and career transition support, many former players struggle with economic instability and limited career prospects after retirement. Blakelock, Chen and Prescott, (2016) argue that the transition out of professional sport can be psychologically distressing, with many players experiencing identity loss, depression, and financial hardship due to a lack of career readiness. Stambulova (2016) advocates for a more comprehensive dual-career approach, where education and professional development are embedded into youth training systems. Additionally, he called for the restructuring of football's developmental ecosystem to emphasize player education and empowerment (Stambulova, 2016; Onwumechili, 2019). Implementing financial literacy programs, contractual education, and legal representation for young players could help safeguard their rights and ensure informed decision-making. Furthermore, regulatory bodies such as FIFA and national federations must enforce stricter policies on recruitment practices to prevent exploitation and ensure clubs and agents uphold ethical responsibilities towards young athletes (Onwumechili, 2019).

Neocolonial Dynamics in Football

European leagues, backed by vast financial resources and superior infrastructure, continue to dictate the opportunities and mobility of African footballers (Darby, 2014). This asymmetrical relationship mirrors historical colonial patterns, where resources—now in the form of human capital—are extracted from Africa and monetized in Europe, often with minimal reinvestment into the local footballing ecosystems (Onwumechili, 2019; Darby, 2013,

Stambulova, 2016). Darby, (2014) has extensively documented the neocolonial dynamics in football, describing it as a "*new scramble for Africa*," where European clubs and leagues act as modern-day colonial powers, extracting raw talent from African nations. This results in a one-sided flow of talent from Africa to Europe, with little investment in the development of local leagues or infrastructure in African countries.

European football clubs hold disproportionate power over African football, controlling access to lucrative contracts, superior training facilities, and global visibility. The financial disparities are stark: while the English Premier League (EPL) generated a record-breaking €6.4 billion in revenue in the 2022/23 season (FIFA, 2023), entire African leagues struggle with underfunding, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure. The Confederation of African Football (CAF) has a significantly lower commercial reach, making local leagues unable to compete with their European counterparts (Poli, 2020). The result is a system where African players are developed locally but exported to European leagues, reinforcing a dependency model. Data from the CIES Football Observatory shows that as of 2022, more than 1,500 African-born players were active in European leagues, with France, Belgium, and Portugal serving as primary destinations due to historical colonial ties (CIES, 2022).

Moreover, European clubs increasingly invest in African academies, to primarily secure first access to emerging talents. Clubs like RB Salzburg, Barcelona, and Manchester City operate talent pipelines in Africa, scouting and signing young players before they reach their prime, thereby ensuring a steady supply of high-potential, low-cost players to European markets (Esson, 2015). For many young African players, a move to Europe represents the only viable route to financial stability and career success. The average annual salary for a footballer in the Ghana Premier League is \$3,000–\$5,000, compared to the €1.5 million average salary of a Ligue 1

player in France (FIFA, 2022). Esson, (2015) has explored the motivations behind African players' migration to Europe, highlighting how economic inequality and lack of opportunities in their home countries fuel this departure. For many young African players, football is seen as a way out of poverty, with European leagues representing the pinnacle of success. The vast income disparity forces African players to view European migration as a necessity rather than a choice.

Critical theorists like Fanon (1961) and Robinson (1983) provide a framework for understanding these power asymmetries. Fanon's critique of colonialism emphasizes how colonial powers exploit the resources of colonized nations while maintaining control over their economic and political systems Fanon (1961). In the context of football, European leagues and clubs act as neocolonial powers, extracting African talent while maintaining control over the global football economy. Robinson's (1983) concept of racial capitalism further contextualizes this exploitation, showing how Black labour is commodified and exploited for the benefit of global capital.

The Role of Critical Thinking in Empowering Young Footballers: A Critical Theory Perspective

It is essential to distinguish between critical thinking and critical theory—while also understanding how they are interconnected. Critical thinking refers to the cognitive process of questioning, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating information to form reasoned judgments (Facione, 1990). It enables individuals to make informed decisions, recognize bias, and assess arguments logically. In contrast, critical theory is a philosophical approach that seeks to interrogate and dismantle the social, historical, and ideological structures that perpetuate oppression and limit human freedom (Horkheimer, 1972; Giroux, 2001). When used together, critical thinking becomes a foundational skill that allows young athletes to engage with critical

theory—to not only make sense of their individual experiences, but also to understand and challenge the systemic forces that shape those experiences. This dual focus lays the groundwork for a Critical Race Theory (CRT)-informed framework that prepares young Black footballers to both think critically and act collectively against the inequities embedded within global football systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010).

Critical theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Cedric Robinson deepen this analysis by exposing how historical and contemporary forms of racialized exploitation are embedded in global systems, including football. Fanon's (1961) critique of colonialism and Robinson's (1983) theory of racial capitalism equip us with the tools to understand how football replicates colonial power dynamics, with European clubs and institutions extracting value from African talent while maintaining control over the global football economy. These thinkers provide the theoretical foundation for reimagining football development through a CRT lens—one that moves beyond individual reflection to systemic transformation.

Critical thinking is a vital skill for young footballers navigating the high-pressure, exploitative world of professional football. Rooted in the ability to analyze, evaluate, solve problems, and engage in ethical reasoning, critical thinking empowers individuals to make informed decisions, resist exploitation, and advocate for systemic change. The concept is a multifaceted skill involving the ability to analyze information, evaluate arguments, solve problems, and engage in ethical reasoning. Bailin and Siegel (2003) define critical thinking as *"the ability to assess the plausibility of claims, the soundness of reasoning, and the strength of evidence"* (Bailin & Siegel, 2003. p. 185). This skill is particularly relevant in the context of professional football, where young players are often required to make high-stakes decisions under pressure, such as signing contracts, choosing agents, or navigating career transitions.

Moore and Parker (2012) emphasize that critical thinking enables individuals to question assumptions, recognize biases, and make decisions based on evidence rather than emotion or external pressure. In a high-pressure industry like football, where young players are often exploited by agents, clubs, and other stakeholders, critical thinking provides a defense against manipulation and exploitation.

Using the A Critical Theory (CRT) as a Tool for Empowerment through Awareness

One of the most significant ways critical thinking empowers young footballers is by fostering awareness of the structural inequalities and exploitative practices within the football industry – from a social justice perspective, this can be best achieved via the Critical Race Theory. Considering football as a global phenomenon, it reflects and reproduces societal structures including economic inequalities, racial hierarchies and as earlier alluded to, systemic power imbalances. Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that racism is not merely a product of individual prejudices but a systemic and institutionalized force (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). As earlier discussed, neocolonial dynamics manifest in various forms. There is the existence of racialized hierarchies in player positions. While Black players are overrepresented in physically demanding roles, White players dominate strategic positions such as captaincy, striker and coaching (Hylton, 2009). It is important to raise awareness through critical consciousness. CRT argues that racial disparities in football are not incidental but structural (Hylton, 2009).

An important step in addressing the issues above is raising awareness through critical consciousness. Adopting data-driven critiques can raise awareness and help address these challenges. Critiquing the statistical underrepresentation of Black managers in European leagues to expose systemic biases, and through counter-narratives that amplify the voices of players who

have confronted racial barriers can help raise awareness. Educating young footballers on media literacy and narrative disruption are also essential in creating awareness. Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers (2004) demonstrate how football media perpetuates racialized narratives that reinforce White superiority. Black athletes are often described in terms of physical attributes (e.g., “pace,” “power,” “natural talent”), while White players are praised for their intelligence and leadership. CRT-informed interventions can disrupt these narratives by decolonizing sports media by training journalists in anti-racist reporting practices and by promoting diverse voices, such as increasing representation of Black former players in broadcasting and analysis roles to shift dominant discourses.

A CRT perspective also reveals the economic exploitation of African footballers, particularly how the Global North profits from African talent without ensuring sustainable pathways for players post-career (Darby, 2007). Designing awareness initiatives should focus on exposing unethical practices via investigative journalism, and policy reform advocacy. Another critical dimension CRT can be applied to football is empowerment through policy and structural change. A core tenet of CRT is its advocacy for convergence, hence expanding access to leadership roles is important to allow racial growth as it aligns with the interest of the dominant groups (Bell, 1992). Additionally, legal and institutional reforms need to be undertaken to address the racial exploitation in football. By embedding CRT principles into their policies, Football federations across the world institutionalize anti-racist governance. Some concrete measures could include enforcing stricter consequences for racial abuse in stadiums and online spaces, systematically monitoring racial disparities in hiring, wages, and player development pathways, and investing in anti-racism education programs for clubs and federations to address implicit biases and systemic racism.

Critical Thinking and Identity Formation

Critical thinking plays a pivotal role in identity formation. To many young talents, football is an avenue to assert their otherwise unknown identity to achieve social mobility. Unfortunately, the football industry often imposes racialized and cultural biases which can potentially undermine players' confidence. Black footballers are often reduced to their physical abilities, with little regard for their intellectual or emotional capacities (Carrington, 2010; Onwumechili, 2019). This racialized narrative as earlier noted, reinforces colonial hierarchies and limits players' opportunities for personal and professional growth. Critical thinking built on the foundation of CRT will enable young players to question these narratives, challenge stereotypes, and assert their identities on their own terms. The works of wa Thiong'o (1986) and Du Bois (1903) provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the role of critical thinking in identity formation. According to wa Thiong'o (1986) concept of *decolonizing the mind*, there is the need to emphasize the importance of self-awareness and resistance to colonial narratives, while Du Bois' notion of *double consciousness* discusses the struggle of marginalized individuals to reconcile their identities with societal expectations.

Critical Thinking as a Tool for Decolonizing the Mind

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952), explores the psychological impact of colonialism on the identities of the colonized. Fanon's work centered around the concept of decolonizing the mind. This helps the process of unlearning the internalized colonial narratives that shape how marginalized individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world (Fanon, 1952). For Fanon, aside from decolonization being a political or economic process it is also a deeply personal one that requires individuals to critically examine and reject the racial hierarchies and stereotypes imposed by colonial systems.

In the case of young footballers from the Global South, Fanon's concept of decolonizing the mind is extremely relevant. As explained earlier, the global football industry is deeply rooted in neocolonial dynamics. The commodification of the footballers can lead to internalized oppression, where young players begin to see themselves through the lens of their exploiters, valuing themselves only for their athletic prowess and not for their full humanity (Darby, 2014; Esson, 2015; Carrington, 2010). Hence, it is important that the footballers have a strong sense of identity and cultural pride.

Critical thinking, as a tool for decolonizing the mind, would empower young footballers to battle these negative narratives. By developing the ability to analyze and question the structures that shape their lives, young players can begin to see themselves as more than just athletes – this can be enhanced by intertwining CRT. They can identify the exploitation tactics and begin to assert their identities on their own terms. Fanon (1952) emphasizes that this process requires self-awareness and the willingness to challenge uncomfortable truths about the oppressive systems. For young footballers, this means questioning the motives of agents and scouts, challenging expectations placed on them by coaches and fans which are often racialized. It also means seeking out education and mentorship that empowers them to think critically about their careers and their futures.

Blackness and Resistance

The Role of Mentorship

Mentorship, particularly when grounded in cultural responsiveness and critical pedagogy, serves as a powerful catalyst for cultivating critical thinking among young Black footballers. By encouraging reflection on their lived experiences and the systemic forces shaping their realities, mentorship becomes a site of consciousness-raising—a foundational step in engaging with

critical theory. In this way, mentorship does not merely support personal development; it invites young athletes into deeper intellectual engagement with structures of power, fostering the analytical tools needed to question, critique, and ultimately transform the systems that impact their lives on and off the pitch.

Culturally responsive mentorship—mentorship that acknowledges and addresses the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black players—can provide young athletes with the guidance, support, and tools they need to navigate the football world, avoid or resist exploitation, and assert their identities. Collins (1990) and hooks (1994) emphasize the importance of mentorship that is rooted in an understanding of the intersectional experiences of Black individuals, particularly those who face systemic marginalization. For young Black players, this means having mentors who understand the racial and cultural biases they encounter, as well as the structural inequalities that shape their opportunities. For young Black footballers, culturally responsive mentorship can help them unlearn the internalized racial stereotypes that reduce them to their physical abilities and ignore their intellectual and emotional capacities. Mentors who understand Fanon's critique of colonialism can guide young players in developing a critical consciousness that enables them to resist exploitation and assert their identities.

Stereotypes surrounding Black players limits their opportunities for leadership and personal growth, as they are often relegated to specific roles and positions that align with these biases. Culturally responsive mentorship can help young players by providing them with role models who affirm their identities and challenge the narratives that marginalize them. Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the importance of critical pedagogy in empowering marginalized individuals to resist oppression. Freire argues that education should be a dialogical process, where learners and educators engage in mutual learning and critical

reflection. For young Black footballers, mentorship that incorporates Freire's principles of critical pedagogy can empower them to critically analyze the structures that oppress them and take action to challenge those structures.

Stuart Hall (1996), in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, explored the concept of cultural identity as an avenue for resistance. Hall argues that identity is not fixed but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in response to changing social and cultural contexts. For young Black footballers, culturally responsive mentorship can help them navigate the complexities of their identities, particularly in an industry that often imposes racialized stereotypes. Mentors who understand Hall's concept of cultural identity will be best positioned to guide young players in asserting their identities on their own terms and resisting the narratives that marginalize them.

Additionally, Davis (1981), in *Women, Race, and Class*, highlighted the importance of solidarity and collective action in resisting systemic oppression. Davis, just like Fanon, argues that marginalized individuals must come together to challenge the structures that oppress them. In the context of football, this means leveraging the power of mentorship to build solidarity among young Black players and empower them to advocate for systemic change. Mentorship programs that foster a sense of community and collective action can help young players resist exploitation and assert their agency. Achille Mbembe (2017), in *Critique of Black Reason*, critiques the ways in which Blackness is constructed and commodified in global systems of power. Mbembe argues that Black individuals must resist the dehumanizing narratives that reduce them to their physicality and deny their intellectual and emotional capacities.

This kind of culturally responsive mentorship is not only vital for personal and emotional support—it also lays the groundwork for critical thinking and engagement with broader socio-political structures. When mentors help young Black footballers reflect on their experiences and

recognize systemic patterns of inequality, they begin to develop the analytical tools central to critical theory. In this way, mentorship becomes the first step in building a critical consciousness that can be further developed through a structured, CRT-informed framework for youth football development.

Building a Framework for Critical Thinking in Youth Football Development Using a Critical Race Theory Approach

Football often reproduces systemic oppression through exploitative contracts, racial discrimination, and the commodification of Black bodies (Hylton, 2010). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a necessary framework for understanding these dynamics, as it critically examines the ways in which race, power, and capitalism intersect to disadvantage Black and Global South athletes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Applying CRT to youth football development allows for a transformative educational model that empowers young players to critically engage with the structures governing their careers, resist exploitation, and advocate for systemic change.

A CRT-informed framework for football development must extend beyond technical training, incorporating elements of critical thinking, financial literacy, ethics, and cultural awareness. Additionally, collaborative partnerships between governments, NGOs, football academies, and professional clubs are necessary to ensure that young footballers are not just trained as athletes but are also educated as socially and politically conscious individuals capable of making informed decisions about their futures.

A Multi-Disciplinary Curriculum: Centering Critical Thinking in Football Development

Critical thinking is essential for young footballers to navigate the complexities of their careers, resist systemic inequalities, and develop a strong sense of self-awareness and agency.

However, traditional football academies largely ignore this aspect, focusing exclusively on athletic performance while neglecting intellectual and ethical development (Poli, 2010). To counteract this, a CRT-driven curriculum in youth football academies should integrate four key educational pillars:

Critical Thinking and Racial Awareness

Young athletes must be educated to critically examine power structures within football. This involves understanding racialized stereotypes in sports and how these affect career trajectories (Carrington, 2010). It includes examining the lack of Black representation in coaching, management, and executive positions, despite Black athletes dominating on the field (Bradbury, 2013). Furthermore, it requires questioning media narratives that disproportionately scrutinize Black players compared to their white counterparts (Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2019). A CRT-based curriculum encourages young footballers to see their role not just as athletes but as active agents in shaping the discourse around race, power, and representation in football as well as agents of social change and symbols of hope.

Financial Literacy and Economic Empowerment

Football is a multibillion-dollar industry, yet many players—especially those from working-class and Global South backgrounds—lack the financial literacy to protect themselves from exploitation. A CRT-informed financial education program would address the economics and business of football, helping young players understand how clubs, agents, and sponsors profit from player transfers and contracts (Poli, 2020). It would focus on investment and wealth-building strategies, using examples of players who successfully managed their finances, such as Didier Drogba, and those who suffered financial collapse, such as Ronaldinho (Klein, 2021). It would also emphasize financial agency, teaching young athletes to critically analyze contract

clauses, recognize predatory financial schemes, and demand transparency from agents and clubs. By teaching financial education, young footballers can retain economic control over their careers, resisting the exploitative capitalist structures that profit from their talent while leaving them financially vulnerable.

Ethical Reasoning and Social Responsibility

A CRT-based ethics curriculum should emphasize player agency, activism, and leadership. This includes challenging institutional racism within football, such as FIFA's inadequate response to racist abuse (Cleland, 2015). It involves understanding the role of athletes as activists, drawing on examples such as Raheem Sterling's stance against racism in the media, Marcus Rashford's campaign for social justice, and George Weah's transition into politics and becoming a President in Liberia. It also requires encouraging young footballers to develop a moral compass that prioritizes community upliftment over mere financial gain. By fostering ethical awareness, this curriculum ensures that young athletes are not merely passive participants in football's capitalist machine but are critically engaged individuals who can use their platform to challenge injustices.

Cultural Awareness and Identity Formation

Footballers from Black and Global South backgrounds often struggle with assimilation pressures and racial discrimination in European leagues (Poli, 2010). A CRT-based cultural awareness module should focus on understanding African and Caribbean football histories, while simultaneously resisting the erasure of Black contributions to the global game (Darby, 2013). It should address racial microaggressions in professional environments, equipping players with strategies to assert their identity without compromising their careers (Poli, 2010). It must also develop pride in Blackness and community, reinforcing the idea that footballers can be agents of

cultural preservation and social change. Culturally responsive education reframes footballers not just as athletes but as storytellers, community leaders, and cultural ambassadors.

Partnerships with Stakeholders: Creating Structural Support for This Framework

While education is a critical component of player empowerment, meaningful systemic change requires collaboration with governments, NGOs, football academies, and professional clubs. A CRT-based framework should include sustainable and relevant partnerships.

Governments, particularly in football-rich nations like Ghana, Nigeria, Brazil, and Senegal, must enforce regulations that mandate financial literacy and ethics education in football academies.

They must develop post-career transition programs, ensuring that players are not left financially and emotionally stranded post-retirement. Additionally, they must protect young athletes from exploitation, particularly in player transfers and agency dealings. Organizations such as FIFPro (the international players' union) and NGOs focused on athlete rights should create legal and financial advisory services for young players, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds. They must develop educational workshops in grassroots academies, teaching players about contract law, racism in football, and self-advocacy. They must also ensure clubs and agents adhere to ethical recruitment practices that prioritize player well-being over financial profit.

Academies like Right to Dream (Ghana) and Generation Foot (Senegal) already incorporate holistic development programs, but a CRT-driven approach would expand mentorship programs that provide culturally relevant guidance for young Black players. It would ensure education is prioritized alongside football training, reducing the *“football or nothing”* mentality that traps players in financial precarity. It would challenge Eurocentric coaching methods, encouraging a more diverse approach to tactical education and player development.

Professional clubs must be held accountable for providing financial transparency in contracts and sponsorship deals. They must implement anti-racism policies that go beyond PR gestures, actively protecting players from discrimination. They must invest in player welfare programs that extend beyond their playing careers. Meanwhile, player unions must strengthen collective bargaining rights, ensuring that footballers—particularly young and Black players—have a seat at the table in policy negotiations. There is the need for a holistic, CRT-informed approach to player empowerment—one that extends beyond education to reshape the broader football ecosystem. By fostering sustainable partnerships among governments, NGOs, academies, clubs, and unions, the framework prioritizes ethical practices, culturally grounded mentorship, and long-term player welfare. At its core, this approach challenges the profit-first logic of global football, advocating instead for systems that protect, educate, and empower young Black athletes both on and off the pitch.

Conclusion

The global football industry, while offering opportunities for young talents, is deeply entrenched in neocolonial and capitalist structures that exploit and marginalize players, particularly those from the Global South. Critical thinking predicated on the foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an essential tool for empowering young footballers to navigate these challenges, resist exploitation, and assert their agency. Drawing on CRT and the works of prominent CRT scholars, young footballers, administrators and coaches can understand how systemic racism, racialized stereotypes, and economic exploitation shape the experiences of young footballers.

A multi-disciplinary framework for youth football development, integrating critical thinking, financial literacy, ethics, and cultural awareness, is essential for fostering

empowerment and resistance. Football academies, while often complicit in perpetuating neocolonial dynamics, have the potential to become sites of liberation by prioritizing holistic development and education. Culturally responsive mentorship programs demonstrate the transformative potential of mentorship in empowering young players to navigate the football industry and advocate for systemic change.

Partnerships with stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, academies, and professional clubs, are crucial for promoting systemic reform and creating a more equitable football ecosystem. Governments must implement policies that protect young players from exploitation, while NGOs and academies should provide mentorship, education, and advocacy services. Professional clubs have a responsibility to ensure fair treatment and support for young players, fostering an environment that prioritizes their holistic development.

Now, I have gotten to the point where I must truly end this review. To use A.G Hopkins's words in the preface to his *An Economic History of West Africa*, "I have decided to down my tools not because perfection has been reached... But because there comes a time when the pursuit of unattainable goals threatens to undermine the sanity of the pursuer" (p. vii). By sailing through the scarce literature, I hope this work has been able to highlight the importance of critical thinking, CRT, education, and mentorship in empowering young footballers to resist exploitation and assert their identities. By challenging the racialized and capitalist structures that dominate the football industry, we can create a more just and equitable future for young players, ensuring that they are valued not only for their athletic abilities but also for their full humanity. The proposed framework offers a pathway toward systemic change, empowering young footballers to navigate the challenges of the football industry and advocate for a more equitable

and inclusive future. I hope in a small way, I have been able to contribute to youth development in the football ecosystem.

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