

Professional paper

## ROLE OF FOOTBALL SCOUTS IN PLAYER TRANSFORMATION PROCESS: FROM TALENTED TO ELITE ATHLETE

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**Abstract:** Revenues generated by football clubs belonging to one of the so-called "The Big Five" leagues (England, Germany, Spain, Italy and France) give a strong argument by claiming that modern football has become a very organized, but also profitable business. In the football clubs of the mentioned European countries, the most famous players of today are "super heroes" and they are the reason why massive numbers of football fans visit football stadiums. All players, who today identify themselves as elite athletes, were at the beginning of their sports careers merely talented individuals with more or less pronounced psycho-physical predispositions for playing sports. This paper will present the basic characteristics of the profession of professional scouts as one of the key persons in recognizing talents and their transformation into top athletes. Also, the paper emphasizes the necessary skills that these sports experts should possess, but also points out the importance of decision-making in terms of often difficult and complicated decisions in the process of identifying talented individuals in sports..

**Key words:** *scouting, talent, predispositions, football, elite sport.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As one of the most popular and widespread team sports in the world, football has become a very lucrative business in the XXI century. On the other hand, throughout history, football as a game did not undergo essential changes so we can still talk about the „beautiful game“ enjoyed by millions of watchers on football stadiums and tv screens. Today, football is a sport that has integrative function, connecting different nations, cultures and continents, but it was not always treated that way and especially observed as a profitable branch.

The first forms of ball play occurred 3000 years ago in China. However, in its present form, football is mostly related to the mid 19th century England, when the first rules of the game of football were defined at the Cambridge University in 1848, after which football developed as a movement through formation of the first football clubs and associations. The first football club in the world was Sheffield United F.C., founded in England in 1885, while the oldest football association in the world was also founded in England in 1863 (Macdonald, 2010, 10-11).

Industrial revolution, development and the expansion of cities throughout the world enabled the expansion of the popularity of football. At the beginning of the 20th century, football gained a new social dimension, becoming a game predominantly played by the working class (Macdonald, 2010, 12). The first elements of football as a lucrative activity emerged in the 1904/1905 season, when Newcastle United F.C. made a ticket sales turnover of GBP25.000 (Macdonald, 2010, 102). Of course, in today's football world, this amount is insignificant, since in the 21st century football surpassed many economic branches in terms of financial turnover and profitability.

## FOOTBALL AS GROWING BUSINESS IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

Global trends, fast development of sports science (technology of sports training, IT in sports) and sports industry outlined the path for future development of sport (Savić, et al., 2017). Modern football, as well as other sports, underwent certain changes in the past few decades. Changes of the type and approach to play, greater demands from athletes (football players) in terms of psychophysical abilities, complexity and demandingness of the selection process, especially identification of young athletes by anticipating the development of specific football predispositions, implementation of modern and complex diagnostic methods in the assessment of morphological-functional, motor and psychological abilities (Trunić, & Mladenović, 2014), need that educated sports professionals are engaged in work with the youngest

age categories – all these things are just some of the factors that conditioned changes in football as a sports branch. It is also worth mentioning that special importance for many aspects of the game of football lies in the maximum professionalization of football from the youngest age categories, which is accompanied by significant financial funds and investments.

Not only has football become a lucrative business, but the way of analysis and measuring performance in football underwent major changes. Both financial and non-financial parameters are considered to compare clubs' performance, including: average number of visits to stadiums, worldwide fan base, media coverage and sports achievement in terms of score. By combining different parameters, Deloitte Sports Business Group publishes an annual list of top 20 European clubs according to: their ability to generate income on game day (including individual and group ticket sale), sale of television rights (including broadcasting rights when participating in domestic championship and cup competitions and European club competitions) and other commercial financial sources (sponsorships, jersey and souvenir sale in official club stores, stadium tours, and other commercial activities).

In the 2017/2018 report, Deloitte Sports Business Group states that the official European champion for that season, Spanish Real Madrid F.C., became the first club whose total revenue exceeded EUR700 million, as it made extraordinary EUR750.9 million of revenues. The second place was occupied by Barcelona F.C. with EUR690.4 million, and the EUR60.5 million difference between the two leading teams on the list was the second biggest ever between the first two teams observed according to the total revenue criterion.

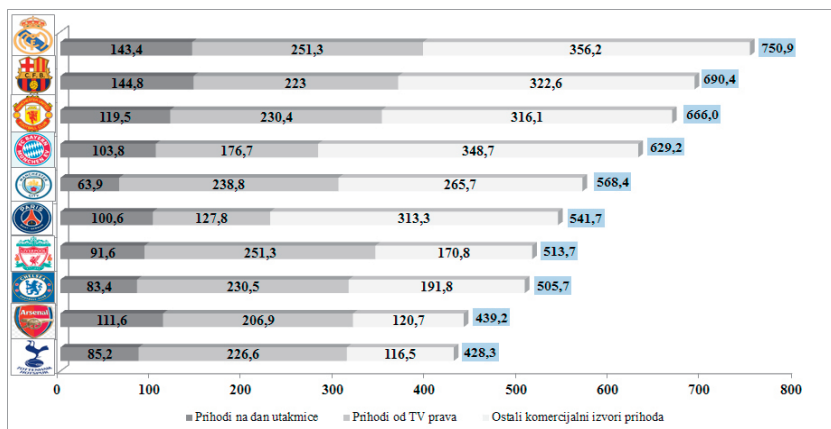
The common characteristic of the top 20 European clubs list is that all those clubs belong to the group of the so-called "The Big Five" leagues, i.e. top five European championships, namely the English Premier League, German Bundesliga, Spanish Primera, Italian Serie A, and French Ligue 1. The top 20 football clubs according to the revenue generated in 2017/2018 season included: nine clubs from England, four clubs from Italy, three clubs from Spain and Germany, respectively, and one club from France. Observed cumulatively, the revenues generated by the top 20 European clubs hit a record amount of EUR8.3 billion, which represents a EUR400 million increase in comparison with the 2016/2017 list. The structure of the generated EUR8.3 billion was as follows: 17% of revenues came from ticket sale on game day, 43% based on the sale of broadcasting rights and 40% came from commercial sources (Deloitte Sports Business Group, 2019). If only ten of the top European clubs in the 2017/2018 season are observed, the clubs' total revenue was EUR5.7 billion, which is 68.7% of the total revenues generated by the top 20 clubs. Table 1 presents an overview of the top 10 European clubs according to total revenue generated in the 2017/2018 season.

**Table 1** Top 10 clubs according to total revenue  
 Source: Authors based on Deloitte Sports Business Group, 2019

No.	Football club	Total revenue (mln EUR)
1	Real Madrid	750,9
2	Barcelona	690,4
3	Manchester United	666,0
4	Bayern Munchen	629,2
5	Manchester City	568,4
6	Paris Saint-Germain	541,7
7	Liverpool	513,7
8	Chelsea	505,7
9	Arsenal	439,2
10	Tottenham	428,3
<b>Total for top 10 clubs:</b>		<b>5.733,5</b>
<i>Total for top 20 clubs:</i>		<i>8.344,6</i>

The structure of the total revenue for the top 10 European clubs is presented on Picture 1.

**Picture 1** Structure of total revenue for top 10 clubs  
 in 2017/2018 season (in mln EUR)  
 Source: Authors based on Deloitte Sports Business Group (2019)



The financial results of football clubs represent just a “tip of the iceberg” and reflect how well football clubs do business in conditions adapted to modern day challenges. Essentially, the people behind the aforementioned impressive financial revenue results are direct “manufacturers”, i.e. players on the field. For a long time now, enormous player transfer values are no news. For example, the transfer of Brazilian Neymar from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for EUR222 million was in the limelight (BBC Sport, 2017); as well as the transfer of Frenchman Paul Pogba from Juventus to Manchester United for EUR 105 million (Transfermarkt, 2019) and many others. Before these football players became globally famous, they too were merely talented players, for whom no one could assess with certainty that they would achieve top careers.

The central point of this paper is the function of scouting service in football clubs, i.e. the impact of “people behind the scenes” who are in charge of identifying and anticipating the talent of players predisposed to become elite athletes. The accent here is on scouts’ knowledge, skills and characteristics, as they are indispensable team members in modern football, whose abilities largely affect the end result (success) of every football club.

## **PROFESSION OF FOOTBALL TALENT SCOUTS**

Identifying and selecting talents in sport is a complex and dynamic process that has become one of the central topics of sports science in the past few decades (Den Hartigh, Niessen, Frencken, & Meijer, 2018; Gonçalves, Rama, & Figueiredo, 2012). It is a fact that a multidimensional approach is necessary to define the term talent in sport. Therefore, most authors define talent in sport as a combination of genetically acquired morphological characteristics, psycho-motor, functional, cognitive and social abilities, and a degree of intrinsic motivation and creativity of an individual (Čoh, 2019, Malina, 2010).

In most countries, in the period of early specialization in sport and observing young talents, the key role in identifying potential elite athletes (football players) during the training process and games is played by sports experts, above all coaches and scouts. The ability to recognize talent in sport provides clubs and national teams with quality and prestige in terms of investing into the “right” players, which represents efficient management of human and material resources, as well as time. However, most problems emerge when there is no comprehensive national sports and educational system, which envisages systemic and strategic identification of young talented athletes, as well as when there are no objective, science-based indicators of sports selection.

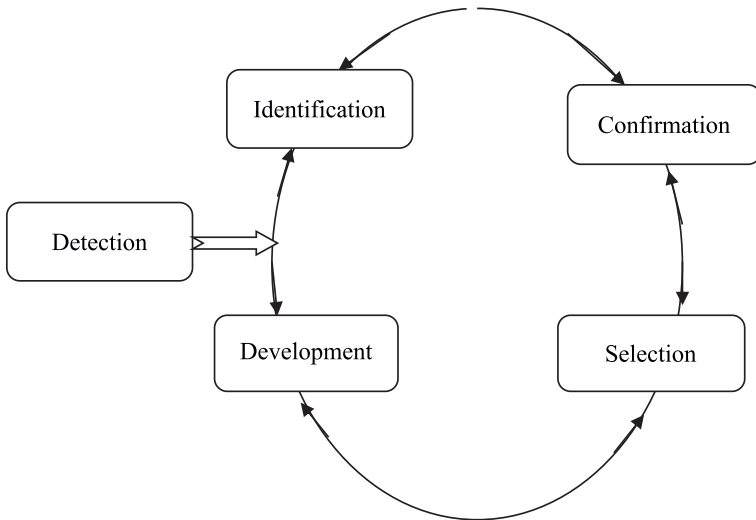
Based on their material abilities, professional knowledge, competences, perception and intuitive evaluation, a scout assesses athletes' (football players') abilities and performance. Talent scouting involves the process of monitoring and evaluation of talented football players, whose final stage can result in a player signing a contract with the scout's club. In that sense, certain scouts are primarily focused on monitoring young players with pronounced talent, in whom they see future football "stars". Smaller football clubs are mostly focused on scouting within their region or country, while larger and richer football clubs have a widespread, global scouting network. A high level of mutual confidence should exist between managers and coaches in football clubs on one side, and scouts on the other side, because very complex and important decisions concerning player transfers can be made based on scouts' detailed reports. A distinction should certainly be underlined between scouting of young players of different age categories and players who already play in clubs at different competitive levels. This paper will mostly look into scouting of football players of young age categories.

As this paper already notes, in football – as well as most sports – talent is determined by anthropometric, physiological-motor, psychological and social predictors (Baker, Cobley, & Schorer, 2012). On the other hand, talent identification and its further development (Mills et al., 2012) represent key points in potential creation of future elite athletes. Most authors underline five stages on the way to top sports results (Vaeyens, et al. 2008; Williams, & Reilly, 2000), and those are:

- 1) talent detection stage – this refers to detecting those talents that are estimated to possess adequate predispositions, without being actively involved in sports competitions;
- 2) talent identification stage – this is a process of identification of potential elite athletes as well as prediction of achievements based on a multidisciplinary approach to assessment of their physical, physiological, psychological, genetic, sociological and technical potentials and characteristics;
- 3) talent development stage – this implies providing each individual with conditions to learn and develop potential in line with their physical, mental, social and emotional characteristics;
- 4) confirmation stage – this stage involves monitoring, verification and confirmation of the speed of an athlete's predispositions necessary to achieve success in sport; and
- 5) selection stage – this stage represents a selection of the best, i.e. identification of those players or groups of players who will be able to execute set tasks in a certain sports context.

Those five key stages in talent identification and development are presented on Picture 2.

**Picture 2:** *Stage of talent identification and development in sport*



Patience and studiousness represent important characteristics of a football scout. Scouts are patient and persistent in monitoring football matches, but also the behaviour of talented football players before they make a decision to hire a player. The first level of evaluation mostly involves conclusion whether a player possesses the necessary technical and other characteristics to succeed in sport, and then, depending on those characteristics, scouts analyze the player's abilities in relation to the demands of certain positions within a team. This way they estimate and anticipate the predispositions that a football player may possess to perform certain roles and tasks, which they can successfully execute and achieve in team play. That is the selection stage in sport and it enables an athlete during the monitoring process to put forward all their psychophysical predispositions and abilities to cover a certain position within a team.

Players within a team have significantly different roles, and in line with this a clear difference should be made between desirable characteristics of players in different positions (Musculus & Lobinger, 2018):

- *Goalkeeper*: it requires good reflex; communication with close defense line; ability to engage players "one-on-one"; good spatial orientation; ability to organize and assign defensive tasks to other players;
- *Central back*: it requires good jumping and ball turnover abilities; height, courage and uncompromising play in duels; focus; play overview: spatial orientation;
- *Full-back*: it requires speed; stamina; reliability in keeping up with opposing players;

- *Central midfielder*: it requires strength; stamina; the ability to pass the ball precisely; positioning; play overview; creativity; change the rhythm of the game;
- *Winger*: it takes speed; technical characteristics (above all dribbling and ball control); creativity; and
- *Striker*: it requires realization abilities; calm and composure in final moments; technical characteristics; speed; speed of reaction; good anticipation of situations; good orientation for movement without the ball; excellent technical kicking skills.

After a scout recommends a player to a football club, the club can choose to monitor the player's progress in the following period. Scouts assess whether a player shows consistency in terms of shape throughout the season (i.e. how prone to oscillations they are), then they assess their team work abilities, i.e. a player's responsibility and behaviour within a group and many other aspects. Also, there is an option to invite a player to a trial period in a club if they initially satisfy the general requirements. At the test, scouts and a team of coaches assess the suitability and ability to subordinate a player's personality to the team, as well as their attitude and behaviour during practice (Giacobbi et al., 2012). During the trial, it is possible to determine the good and bad sides of every player in relation to the existing team and make an assessment of the benefits of their potential involvement in the group. It is very important to note that certain clubs do not let their players who are bound by contracts to go for trials in other clubs due to potential injuries and uncertainty regarding further realization of the transfer. After players trials are finished and all the necessary assessments collected, a club that is satisfied with what they saw begin negotiations about a player's further engagement.

The club's decision to hire a talented player is the result of a comprehensive process which involves a review of all the aspects based on interaction of all interested parties. A football club management particularly estimates the expert opinion of their coach/manager who makes the final assessment about hiring a player based on their extensive experience and work with players of different characteristics (Jones et al., 2010). Experienced coaches can base their judgement on a representative sample of players they worked with in the past, and who comprise very different personalities, abilities and levels of success. Thanks to their work and experience, coaches can estimate and predict with a degree of certainty both current and future potential of a player. When a player's characteristics completely fit into the concept, philosophy and preference system of a coach, that is when the final deal is made with the player and their agents regarding the terms of the contract.



## KEY DUTIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TALENT SCOUTS

A well-organized and efficient scouting service also means great financial savings for every football club. Of course, if a club's financial power is limited, that makes their scouting service's work much more complex. Scouting is a rather challenging, demanding and intensive job. Scouting talents involves the assessment of giftedness of young players at the beginning of their career, providing a final grade after detailed analyses and reports on players' characteristics.

Some of the key characteristics of a successful scout are: readiness to have flexible working hours; readiness to travel frequently; readiness to work overtime and take over responsibility for the decisions they made; excellent communication and organization skills; professionalism and high degree of reliability; good team working skills; good perception and reasoning skills; knowledge of work in modern softwares; ability to easily establish and maintain contacts (Salford City, 2019). However, it is very complicated to find a unique answer to the question: How to detect a talented football player?

A former scout of English football clubs Tottenham, Westham and Portsmouth, *Robert Walker*, underlined that once the life of a scout involved many working hours and travels, changeable times, observing several (even three to four) games a day (BBC UK, 2019). After that, scouts would phone their club and point out potential talented players who they believed deserved a chance. The process would be finalized by organizing a meeting with parents and making an offer for a trial in the club with covered transportation costs. Yet, significant innovations occurred in the last decade of the 20th century, so scouting includes submitting various reports that cover a wide range of aspects related to the game of football, such as: height, weight, speed, agility, playing intelligence, physical and mental strength. It is clear from Robert Walker's decade-long experience that talent is a necessary condition for players' success, but that achieving top sports results requires work ethics, will and mental strength for overcoming obstacles, as well as passion (strive) to return to the path of success after the first disappointment and failure in sports segment. Still, Walker considers that the foundations of scouting remain unchanged, i.e. that scouting will never evolve so much to be treated as an exact science. On the contrary, he believes that scouts will have to rely on their own instinct above all. Top sports results and competitions require persons who will be resistant to physical and mental loads and pressures. For talented players, the key to succes is in hard work and improvement, persistence, learning and sacrifice.

In addition to playing intelligence, a determining factor is also coordination ability, because in difficult situations in the field, a player must

largely rely on their instinct, and a precondition for that are good coordination of movement and automatization. Quite frequently, scouts identify themselves with players whose talent they detected, so it is a special moment of satisfaction for a scout to see their players achieve excellent sports success. A scout's key duties include the following activities (Salford City, 2019):

- Involvement in local, regional and national scouting networks in order to identify new talents;
- Designing a clear scouting strategy;
- Day-to-day cooperation with club managers and coaches on talent identification;
- Understanding the philosophy and way of functioning of the club so as to enable an optimal process of search for talents;
- Designing various reports that include all relevant data considering talented players;
- Building and maintaining relationships with local amateur and professional clubs;
- Defining the policy of monitoring talented players and their scores;
- Keeping up with the latest trends and techniques in the domain of scouting.

A positive example of successful scouting is the scouting service of Borussia Dortmund F.C. A central figure in the system is *Markus Pilawa*, a 40-year-old from Bochum, who became the Chief Scout of Borussia and developed a plan to hire the best teenagers from entire Germany and abroad. At his disposal, Pilawa has 20 scouts whose aim is to get in touch with their preferred player at young categories' games before the competition does. They most frequently scout children aged 12-15. Somewhat older players are also monitored, and for the 16-18 year olds scouting is conducted outside Germany, too (mostly in the Netherlands and Belgium). Age limit has been raised so it is not permitted to bring in foreigners younger than 16, and for non-EU countries, the limit is set at the age of 18. For example, for that reason Switzerland is less attractive for Borussia scouts, because football players aged 18, 19 or 20 are mostly beyond the German club's financial potential (MozzartSport, 2019).

## LIMITATIONS IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN SCOUTING

When making a decision concerning hiring a player, there are multiple aspects that may blur a scout's perception. Namely, there are significant differences in the way player monitoring is conducted – directly in the football field or indirectly on a TV screen. Also, a player's country of origin affects

the perception of numerous coaches or managers. It is generally known that players from South America (Brazil and Argentina) are considered magical dribblers and artists with ball more than Scandinavian players or Southeast European players, as future elite players (Bierman, 2009). On one hand, such an opinion is somewhat justified, because it is highly likely that an average Brazilian football players will be technically and tactically more talented, and their process of learning and mastering training elements will be significantly faster than in case of players from less attractive countries. However, on the other side, such generalizations are completely wrong, because there are players in Brazil and Argentina who do not possess high technical performances. At the same time, certain extraordinarily talented players from less known countries, such as Finland (famous Finnish football players Jari Litmanen, who had an excellent career in Dutch Ajax F.C., and then played in Spanish Barcelona F.C. and English Liverpool F.C.) or Serbia, can have superb technical giftedness. An example of how difficult it is to make a breakthrough in the global football scene if a player comes from an unattractive country is that of Bulgarian football player Dimitar Berbatov, who despite his undeniable talent had to take a detour through German Bayer Leverkusen F.C. and English Tottenham F.C. to reach the peak of his career in famous English Manchester United F.C. (Bierman, 2009).

Certain decisions to hire talented players are occasionally made for culturological reasons. It should be no surprise that a large number of Scandinavian players found their place in the English Premier League, or that Polish players most frequently play in the German Bundesliga. The economic conditions in football clubs largely dictate the possibility of player transfers from countries recognized as a source of talented young players. Logically, wealthier football clubs will focus on players from Brazil and Argentina, when it comes to South America. On the other side, clubs that are not able to match wealthy clubs' offers, are forced to focus on other, less attractive South American countries, such as Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela. At that point, the coverage of a scout's network plays a crucial role, as well as their knowledge of conditions on monitored, "exotic" football destinations (Bierman, 2009).

## **IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION ON SCOUTING**

Even though human factor can still be considered the most important and inevitable factor when it comes to talent scouting, one cannot neglect the growing impact of digitalization, i.e. the implementation of sophisticated sports technology and modern software throughout the scouting process. Modern scouts in sport become increasingly dependent on software programmes and

applications in terms of talent evaluation (overview of physical condition, tactical overview, monitoring the performance of teams/individuals, etc.). Software-based scouting often requires professional knowledge to implement advanced and rather complex software systems. This type of scouting implies the process of data collection from various sources, and the implementation of certain mathematical models that predict a team/player's success or failure.

The appearance of software packages such as the well-known "*Football Manager*" significantly speeded up data collection process, with scouts still holding the key role in analyzing and interpreting collected data. Within *Football Manager*, the crucial skills for a good scouts are described with terms such as "judging ability" and "judging potential", which represents a skill and ability to recognize true potential. A good scout will adequately predict a player's progress and potential, which is particularly useful for clubs which base their play on younger, insufficiently affirmed players who will become elite football players after some time and acquired experience. *Football Manager* can send scouts to different missions and countries using the option "Scouting Assignments", which enables them to additionally enlarge their knowledge and skills at the club level. As well as in real life, *Football Managers* envisages that scouts submit detailed reports, which contain the necessary information related to a certain player: character, good and bad sides, current physical shape, quality, top achievement, transfer information, etc. A software solution for scouting does not deny the essence – that good scouts make things easier for managers, and enable them to focus on other aspects of their job.

In 2017, a Serbian-Austrian technology startup "*Playerhunter*" made it to the HYPE foundation's list of top 50 most innovative sports companies in the world. "*Playerhunter*" is a free sports platform, i.e. a social network for recruitment, which allows athletes, clubs, managers and scouts to make connections and arrange cooperation. "*Playerhunter's*" vision is to digitalize communication in sport and enable all those interested in football to have successful careers, regardless of their origin and starting conditions. One of the Company's special goals is to increase the visibility of lower league players who otherwise have no other chance to present themselves adequately on the market (Ekapija, 2019). "*Playerhunter*" is the first company outside the UK which received support from the Virgin Startup programme and very quickly realize its plans and goals concerning the number of users and the potentials of its platform. The company started a crowdfunding campaign with an aim to improve its application and include up to a million of users in 2019, but also to boost the company's monetization. This type of financing enables every adult individual to invest into a certain project and become their co-owner (Centar za transfer tehnologije, 2019). The targeted sum of GBP500,000 was missed by over GBP70,000, so through the crowdfunding campaign, "*Playhunter*"

funded the entire digital platform that serves to connect managers, football players, clubs, coaches, scouts and the entire football world in a single place. In the public, “Playhunter” is frequently described as “*Sports LinkedIn*”.

## CONCLUSION

New, interesting events constantly occur in modern football, enabling it to maintain undisputed top position in team sports in the 21st century. From the economic aspect, football has long been observed as a very lucrative business, where football clubs must abide by market principles characteristic of large multinational corporations if they seek to be competitive in the sports market.

On the other side, fast development of science about sport and sports industry, and the latest trends in sport impose the direction of sport’s future development. A high level of professionalization of football, as a branch of sport, in all selections – from the youngest age categories to senior teams – is accompanied by substantial financial means and investments. Today, football implies engagement of multidisciplinary professionals, i.e. sports experts from various fields: marketing, market, advertizing, law, finances, etc. In such an environment, scouts are an inevitable and irreplaceable component, as sports experts in charge of monitoring and identifying new talents in sport. There are numerous talented football players all over the world, but talent itself is not enough for top sports results. This paper presents the basic characteristics of the work of a professional scout, recognized as one of the key professions in the development of young players and their transformation into elite athletes. The aim of this paper is to point to the specificity of scouting job, as well as the current tendencies in this profession, which also imply strong impact of information and communication technologies in creating new scouting trends. The paper is intended for all football and scientific professionals interested in the field of identification young talents in sport, and its goal is to use theoretical and empirical determinants to underline the benefits a well-organized and designed scouting service contributes to the development and success of each football club. Ultimately, all football fans benefit this way because thanks to the role of scouts, there is a constant flow of elite athletes in this game enjoyed by millions of viewers.

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