

● CASE STUDY 01

Who gets picked? How relative age quietly shapes youth football selection

A look inside how we help a youth club run fairer trials, so selection reflects potential and not a birthday.

AT A GLANCE

01

Players born early in the year often look stronger and more talented than younger peers.

03

Relationships with parents and prior knowledge of players can decide places early.

02

Trials are often run by one or two coaches, frequently without formal selection training.

04

Bibs numbered by age show selectors each player's relative age at a glance.

● THE REAL PROBLEM

A coach, usually appointed to look after their own team, is also asked to judge every child on the field. Opinions form fast, and familiar faces start with an advantage.

Then there is the relative age effect. A child born in the second half of the year can be smaller and less mature than a classmate born in January, yet both face the same trial. Swiss research found that first time coach selections at grassroots level are where these gaps originate.

● OUR INTENT

We did not set out to give selectors more rules. We set out to give them better information at the moment they decide, in a form they can see on the pitch without a spreadsheet or extra training.

The aim is simple: separate talent from timing, so younger players are not filtered out before they have had the chance to develop.

The practical fix: bibs numbered by age

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE



Number 1 is reserved for the goalkeeper. Every other player wears a bib from oldest to youngest, so selectors can weigh age in their decision. The same numbering carries onto playing jerseys for the season.

THE VALUE IT ADDS

- Selectors see relative age without asking or guessing.
- Younger and later maturing players are judged in context.
- Decisions are easier to explain to parents.
- No new technology, cost or paperwork.

WHAT WE LEARNT

- In controlled research, birthdates alone did not remove the bias. Age shown as a bib number did.
- The cue works because it sits in the selector's line of sight.
- Fair selection is designed, not assumed.

• TAKEAWAY

Do not ask only who looks best on the day. **Ask who is youngest in the group, and what they might become.**

**Every club is different.
Let's start with yours.**

SOURCES

Romann et al. (2020). Origins of Relative Age Effects in Youth Football: A Nationwide Analysis. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 2, 591072.

Mann and van Ginneken (2017). Age ordered shirt numbering reduces the selection bias associated with the relative age effect. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 35(8), 784 to 790.

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