

Victorian National Premier Leagues 2018 - A homegrown players' assessment

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Abstract

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Keywords: Youth development program; Football Academy; Elite football players; Homegrown players; Football Federation Australia (FFA); Football Victoria; NPL; National Premier League;

1. Introduction

Despite the Australian Bureau of Statistics confirming that football has currently grown to almost two million participants outnumbering other football codes combined [1], Australia as a football nation has historically failed to play a major role on the world scene. Until 2005 Australia had only qualified once to a world cup final and it is only since approximately the mid-1990s that a lack of skilled young players was named to be the main factor contributing to this failure [2]. Consequently, since the beginning of this century the newly born Football Federation Australia (FFA) developed a serious interest for youth development recognizing the need for the national talent scouting and development system to be significantly improved.

It must be noted that the concern for an apparent lack of emerging young talent is currently a world-wide phenomenon. Even in Europe where you have the highest number of registered players and where the football industry is at its most professional level, there is an increasing concern by football's governing bodies in the reluctance by big clubs to invest in youth development programs [3]. In 2008-09 the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) imposed all teams competing at a continental level a maximum 25 players for their rosters with a minimum eight players trained by clubs from the same national league, four of which from the club's own youth system [4]. Bullough & Mills [5] and Rapp [6] explain that the English Football Association adopted an almost identical UEFA homegrown players rule. In 2002 the German Football Association (DFB) implemented 366 local federal bases to support 14,000 talented eleven to sixteen-year-old players from around Germany [7]. Closer to Australian soil, China's president Xi Jinping is personally involved in producing 20,000 new football schools in an effort to establish an indigenous grass-roots system to grow the sport from the bottom up [8]. Furthermore, at a professional senior level, clubs are forced to field a Chinese under-23 player in every game of their league [9].

While examples of a push towards youth development in countries around the world is abundant, the present Australian model remains quite peculiar. As admitted by FFA CEO David Gallop [10], over the past 10 years our player development path has been very narrow. Back in 2010, the FFA in conjunction with State Member Federation CEOs, launched the National Competitions Review (NCR) [11] in which competition structures from u12 to senior State Leagues were reviewed. After extensive consultation, in 2012 the NCR implemented an Elite Club Licensing program creating the National Premier League (NPL) whose prime objective focused on the National Football Development Plan and National Curriculum paradigms. In recognizing that State-based clubs historically played an important role in developing talented young players, the NCR stated that this reform would address key gaps in the Elite Player Pathway, ensuring the sustainability of league competitions nationally and improving the quality of youth development by football clubs of all levels. With the implementation of the Elite Club Licensing program the FFA however expected semi-professional and often amateur run NPL clubs alone to raise the standard of youth development across the country leaving A-League clubs the sole prerogative to focus on crowd figures and TV ratings. After years of hypocritical debate, in fact, it has only been since this present 2018 season that these existing 10 professional A-League clubs have now forcibly joined the rest of the state based NPL clubs.

While perhaps being one of the many contributing issues to the bitter political war presently embroiling Australian football's governing body [12-14], the most important and fundamental regulation introduced with the NPL in 2012 was the new Player Points System (PPS) to efficiently tackle the inadequate focus on youth development. Besides being an alternative to a salary cap system, with the PPS all senior NPL teams are required to remain within 200 points with each player, as a starting point, attributed a value of 10 points, after which his total value is adjusted depending on certain characteristics. In the PPS own words, the objectives were clearly set and announced to 'provide greater opportunities to Australian players, promote a greater focus on the importance of youth development, promote players through the club youth development structures and increase the stability of Club Player Rosters [15].

While providing greater opportunities to Australian players and better focus on the importance of youth development, the PPS also aimed at increasing the stability of club player rosters via mathematically incentivizing the promotion of players through the club youth development structures, that is, implementing some sort of a homegrown player rule similar to the above mentioned examples from other parts of the world.

While the constant criticism over the years by many state-based clubs may not come as a surprise considering the history, ethnic complexities, unfair status and youth obligations when compared to A-League clubs, it seems reasonable to try and measure the success of such a radical change that created so much angst among state-based club, board members, coaches and players. While finding a valid and scientifically accepted means to measure an entire program is a presumptuous task, within-sport career transition provides the framework in which to analyse, quantify and reflect upon the success of the NCR youth development objectives. Understanding the relationship between engagement history and expert attainment lays the fundamental disciplines within this field of research [16]. This has indeed provided a great amount of studies [17-27] and opinions in regard to the pathways in which players engage during childhood and adolescence in an effort to develop the expertise necessary to reach professional and/or semi-professional levels. However, only a handful have sought to specifically evaluate the numbers of homegrown players and thus the real opportunities that exist for young players when coming from a youth academy and transitioning to senior football. The University of Liverpool [28] assessed the UEFA Homegrown rule confirming that this resulted in only marginal improvements for European homegrown players. This study provided twenty conclusions discovering that since its introduction there had been a significant increase in the number of home-grown players in European first team rosters and starting XIs in both UEFA and domestic competitions. However, no data proved with certainty that this resulted from the introduction of the new regulation while this trend was already marked in the years leading up to the introduction of the UEFA homegrown rule.

While Dalziel et al. [28] thus argued against possible quotas being a solution to the European concern for youth development, a large-scale retrospective analysis on the English Premier League (EPL) was conducted by Bullough & Mills [5] condemning the state of the English youth development apparatus. By analyzing players' appearance, rather than percentage, they provided a rather accurate representation of English players appearing in the EPL and their unique method was truly an important guide to this present project. They found a declining trend in the number and proportion of appearances made by homegrown English players demonstrating that the opportunities for indigenous players have diminished since the EPL was first launched in 1992-93.

A similar study was later conducted in Germany and investigated the impact of German u17 youth players in their pathway to reaching senior status in the Bundesliga 1, 2 and 3 leagues. Schroepf & Lames [7] examined and tracked an entire generation and found that less than 10% were offered a senior roster contract within a professional German team confirming not only a low ratio of opportunity in terms of senior level attainment but also a high burnout ratio where 45% quit playing the game at any level. In 2013 the European Club Association (ECA) [29] published a report on 96 youth academies over 41 European countries. This study involved surveys and statistical analysis providing an insight on the best practices of some of the most prestigious European football clubs acknowledging the importance of youth development in an effort to reduce financial risks. It was found that the development of players via a youth system is unique and individual to the club's DNA. The ECA [29] quantitative survey discovered that 60% of the clubs considered their youth academy as a source of income rather than a cost and that their agreed prime objective is that of developing homegrown players for professional football and in particular for their own senior roster. Besides providing data confirming that in Europe 28.2% of players of a senior roster spend at least 3 years within their own club's academy, it was stated that the key challenge and ultimate success for an academy fully depends on providing a positive motivational climate in order to ensure the optimal transition of youth players to the first team. Nencini [30] confirmed that certain European clubs greatly depend on their youth system for up to 64%. Athletic Bilbao (Basque region, North of Spain), for instance, is famous for its isolationist culture so much that they have an unofficial policy where only players native to the Basque Country are eligible to play for them. Sceptics have often argued that Athletic are held back by their racial identity, heritage and tradition but supporting data demonstrate that their specific selection process means they can focus their time and money on local scouting and bringing players through the ranks as opposed to organizing and running a global network [31].

With only a handful of relevant quantitative studies mainly concerning such European settings, transition studies have historically concentrated on a more qualitative method, showing a more conceptual approach in an attempt to investigate what might be affecting youth development. According to Haugaasen & Jordet [32], despite the contributions made by several authors to football expertise development and its environmental factors, we still don't really know much about the pragmatic, contextual and psychological consequences of this transitional development. Røynesdal [33], also confirms that we are still far from any proven and widely accepted guidelines to assist players in their junior-to-senior career transition from the academy to first team context.

With sports psychology and transition researchers thus shifting towards a more theoretical holistic lifespan developmental perspective, the general consensus is that transition from junior to senior achievement is indeed a complex and dynamic developmental phase which may endure for one to four years and be extremely challenging [34-35]. These strains can be athletic, social, psychological, organizational but, most centrally to this project, also social and environmental. Numerous studies [3,16,36,37] have highlighted the importance of the environment in determining how well athletes cope during the transition from junior to a professional level. From an environmental point of view young Australian football players are indeed more challenged than their overseas counterparts. Australia provides a unique sporting eco-system and further to the above mentioned holistic and time effective way to develop youth players envisaged by the FFA National Curriculum, it needs to come to terms with its contextual factors such as the ever-present competition for facilities amongst its different football codes, ill-equipped coaches, fragmented and fractious

administrators [38]. First of all, due to the Australian sporting status quo where Football still needs to adhere to the confinement of a winter sport, Australian clubs presently struggle to match the developmental environment offered overseas. Besides the European examples, even in Japan elite youth players nowadays train several times a week throughout the year with highly qualified coaching [38]. Secondly, the historical and cyclical crisis engulfing Australian football have created the basis for a difficult and at times demotivating social context [39]. The often-rhetorical attitude of the Australian media towards the growth of the game have certainly not contributed positively to the talent development environment (TDE) advocated by Ivarsson et al. [37].

Using a quantitative methodological approach, the aim of this study is to assess the number of homegrown players in NPL rosters, their age and game time participation during the 2018 season as a reflection of the success of the NCR youth development objectives. It is therefore predicted that irrespective of the NCR [11] youth development objectives set in Victoria four years ago, the presence and participation of homegrown players in senior NPL rosters during the 2018 season is likely to be numerically irrelevant and well behind other football developed nations.

2. Methods

Gaining access to the rosters of the 34 Victorian NPL teams participating to the 2018 NPL1 and NPL2 proved to be an unimaginable daunting task. Pre-season senior rosters were in fact officially unavailable from any website with the factotum <http://websites.sportstg.com> webpages dedicated to NPL being the only source of real-time truth.

The 2016 and 2017 PPS official listings were downloaded from http://websites.sportstg.com/assoc_page.cgi?c=1-10178-0-0-0&sID=323022 (accessed April 2018) but that information was not released or genuinely available in the first place until this present study requested some official help. These 2016 and 2017 PPS contained the year of birth (YOB) of all senior players in NPL1 and NPL2 and were examined to compile and populate the 2018 rosters. The YOB of new NPL senior players were instead mainly obtained by searching the internet or, as discussed, by contacting first sources directly or FFV/clubs personnel. Once all 2018 NPL rosters were completed with names and YOB, this was entered into an excel file of 724 players who could then be queried in order to narrow it down to the PPS youth player category, that is, all born from 1996 onwards.

The next task concentrated on examining all individual career paths of all eligible youth players since 2014, when the NPL was first introduced in Victoria. While the SportsTG webpage at <http://websites.sportstg.com> provided a career pathway of all these players, ironically the most helpful source of data proved to be the Football Manager 2018 webpage at <https://sortitoutsi.net>. This webpage is linked to the football management simulation game developed by Sports Interactive and published by Sega which provides an unrivalled database of players with all the latest real-life transfers and movements.

A subsequent screening included an examination of which youth players could be considered homegrown as such for the purpose of this study. Contrary to the NPL PPS system which automatically deducts points based on whether a player is homegrown but also loyalty [15], the present study instead considered homegrown a player who has registered in the same club's youth system for at least 3 seasons (u12 to u20). It must be clarified that the homegrown and loyalty categories recognized by the NPL PPS were created to reward clubs in a mathematical sense respecting the 200 points quota. However, the NCR original objective was to incentivize the stability of club player rosters while also promoting players through clubs' youth development structures.

In this study the decision to numerically specify the definition of homegrown player follows the UEFA methodology where this is synonym with club-trained player. This is defined as a player who, irrespective of his nationality and age, has been registered with his current club for a period, continuous or non-continuous, of three entire seasons or of 36 months whilst between the ages of 15 and 21 [28].

The collection of data finally required to examine in detail the 2018 senior appearances of all these selected homegrown players within the first 10 rounds of play. This was also carried by looking at the SportsTG webpage (<http://websites.sportstg.com>) where homegrown players' appearances and

actual playing time was recorded by taking note of whether they were actually in the starting XI or simply sitting on the bench to possibly come on as substitutes.

3. Results

3.1. 2018 NPL age variances and youth presence

In 2018 the mean year of birth (YOB) across all NPL is 1994 making the average age of a Victorian senior NPL player 22.9 years old (SD 1.646). Table 1 shows a breakdown of average age for each club ranked youngest to oldest providing an introductory information on club's overall youth orientation showing how the PPS allows a large generational variance. Considering that the two Melbourne A-League clubs are outsiders to the rest of NPL clubs and unique in their strict NPL youth policy, basically fielding two under 20 teams at a senior level, there still exist a five years average age discrepancy between the oldest and youngest rosters amongst all other Victorian NPL clubs. Average age differences at a competition level are instead marginal and historically differences are minimal. Table 2 below in fact demonstrates how the 2016, 2017 and 2018 NPL rosters have remained consistent throughout these three seasons with mean age across all NPL competitions always equivalent to 23.

Table 2 also presents a general overview on the presence of youth players across the whole of the Victorian NPL. With 724 senior players spread across the 34 clubs rosters participating to NPL1 and NPL2 competitions, a total of 314 players are eligible for their youth status as per PPS system. This accounts for 43.37% meaning that almost half of all rosters are comprised of youth players being born in or after 1996. While the two NPL2 competitions register almost the same percentage of youth players across the East and West, the 14 rosters in NPL1 demonstrate a much inferior presence of youth players that when compared to NPL2 East alone is 9% lower.

Table 1. 2018 Victorian NPL clubs' age variances.

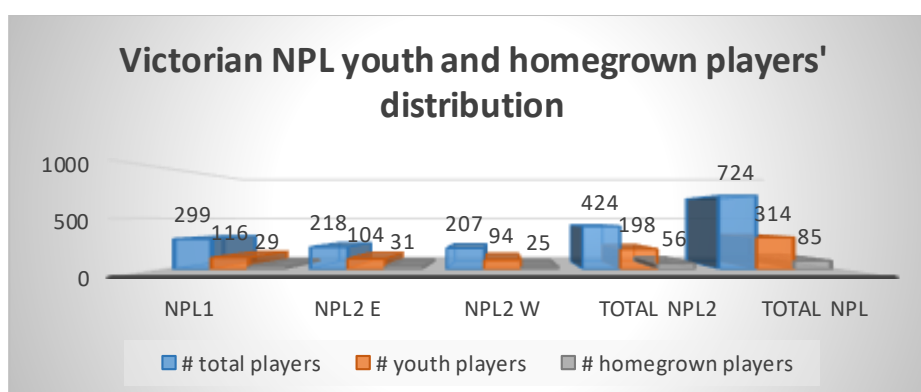
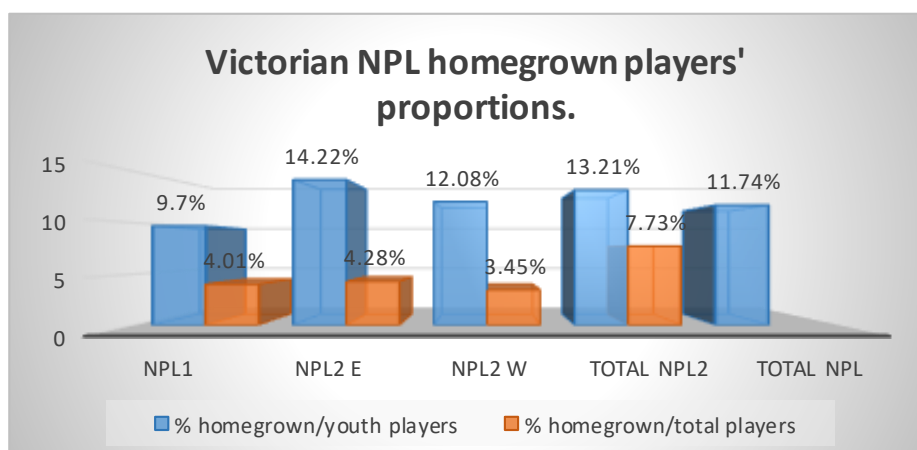
2018 Senior rosters	Competition	Average age in 2018
Melbourne City FC	NPL2 e	18
Melbourne Victory FC	NPL2 w	19
White Eagles Springvale	NPL2 e	21
Bentleigh Greens	NPL1	22
Bulleen FC	NPL1	22
Green Gully FC	NPL1	22
Eastern Lions SC	NPL2 e	22
Murray United FC	NPL2 e	22
Moreland City FC	NPL2 e	22
Brunswick City FC	NPL2 w	22
Werribee City FC	NPL2 w	22
Whittlesea Ranges FC	NPL2 w	22
Ballarat City FC	NPL2 w	22
Hume City FC	NPL1	22.5
North Geelong Rangers	NPL2 w	22.8
Langwarrin SC	NPL2 w	23
Kingston FC	NPL1	23
North Cote City	NPL1	23
Port Melbourne Sharks	NPL1	23
Box Hill United SC	NPL2 e	23
Moreland Zebras FC	NPL2 w	23
Nunawading City FC	NPL2 e	23.5
Goulburn Valley Suns	NPL2 e	23.6
South Melbourne FC	NPL1	23.8
Avondale FC	NPL1	24
Dandenong Thunder	NPL2 e	24
Pascoe Vale FC	NPL1	24
Altona Magic SC	NPL2 w	24
Sunshine George Cross	NPL2 w	24
Melbourne Knights FC	NPL1	24.6
St. Albans Saints	NPL2 w	24.9
Dandenong City SC	NPL2 e	25
Heidelberg Utd	NPL1	26
Oakleigh Cannons FC	NPL1	26

Table 2. Age comparison with previous NPL years.

Year	Competition	# Players	Average YOB	Average age	# Youth presence	% youth players
2016	NPL1	291	1992	23	113	38.83
2016	NPL2 e	204	1992	23	96	47.06
2016	NPL2 w	206	1993	22	114	55.34
2016	total NPL2	410	1993	22	210	51.22
2016	total NPL	701	1992	23	323	46.08
2017	NPL1	244	1992	24	86	35.25
2017	NPL2 e	212	1994	22	118	55.66
2017	NPL2 w	204	1994	22	105	51.47
2017	total NPL2	416	1994	22	223	53.61
2017	total NPL	660	1993	23	309	46.82
2018	NPL1	299	1994	23	116	38.80
2018	NPL2 e	218	1995	22	104	47.71
2018	NPL2 w	207	1995	22	94	45.41
2018	total NPL2	424	1995	22	198	46.70
2018	total NPL	724	1994	23	314	43.37

3.2. Homegrown players' presence

Figure 1 and 2 show an overview on homegrown players' presence across both NPL1 and NPL2. In 2018 a total of 85 players are part of a NPL senior roster having played for the same club for at least three seasons between the age of 12 and 21 years. As in Figure 2, the NPL2 East competition has by far produced the highest number of homegrown players and has the highest in general over all Victorian senior NPL players. The overall percentage of homegrown players in senior NPL Victorian rosters is therefore approximately 12%.

**Figure 1.** 2018 Victorian NPL youth and homegrown players' distribution.**Figure 2.** 2018 Victorian NPL homegrown players' proportions.

If we compare the presence of these 85 identified homegrown players across all 34 NPL clubs, Table 3 below becomes perhaps the most revealing so far. In fact, the homegrown production of the three so called country clubs, Murray United (Wodonga), Goulburn Valley Suns (Shepparton) and Ballarat City surpasses that of all other clubs by a large margin. These three clubs' senior rosters alone hold 26% of all homegrown players across the entire NPL, that is, over a quarter of all are produced in rural Victoria. All three clubs play in NPL2, two in the East and one in the West and on average over 1/3 of their three rosters consist of homegrown players with Murray United reaching an astonishing 41%.

In Table 3, contrariwise, there are instead four metropolitan clubs, two of which in NPL1, whose rosters do not account for any homegrown players demonstrating that it is possible to compete at a senior level without relying on an internal youth system. It is important to mention that there are also three State NPL metropolitan clubs that have successfully produced homegrown players accounting for over 20% of their rosters, that is, Nunawading City, Whittlesea Ranges and Melbourne Knights.

Table 3. 2018 Victorian NPL presence of homegrown players by club.

Senior roster 2018	Competition	Roster size	Youth presence born btw 1996-2002	Homegrown presence	Proportion of homegrown players over total NPL	Proportion of homegrown players in each roster
Melbourne Knights FC	NPL1	23	11	5	5.88%	21.74%
Green Gully FC	NPL1	22	8	4	4.71%	18.18%
Bentleigh Greens	NPL1	22	9	3	3.53%	13.64%
Bulleen FC	NPL1	20	10	3	3.53%	15%
Hume City FC	NPL1	20	10	3	3.53%	15%
Avondale FC	NPL1	22	8	2	2.35%	9.09%
Dandenong Thunder	NPL1	20	6	2	2.35%	10%
South Melbourne FC	NPL1	22	9	2	2.35%	9.09%
Kingston FC	NPL1	22	10	2	2.35%	9.09%
Oakleigh Cannons FC	NPL1	20	4	1	1.18%	5%
Pascoe Vale FC	NPL1	21	8	1	1.18%	4.76%
Port Melbourne Sharks	NPL1	22	11	1	1.18%	4.55%
Heidelberg Utd	NPL1	20	1	0	0%	0%
North Cote City	NPL1	23	11	0	0%	0%
Murray United FC	NPL2e	22	10	9	10.59%	40.91%
Goulburn Valley Suns	NPL2e	23	13	6	7.06%	26.09%
Nunawading City FC	NPL2e	22	7	5	5.88%	22.73%
Moreland City FC	NPL2e	23	8	3	3.53%	13.04%
White Eagles Springvale	NPL2e	22	12	3	3.53%	13.64%
Eastern Lions SC	NPL2e	21	10	2	2.35%	9.52%
Melbourne City FC	NPL2e	22	22	2	2.35%	9.09%
Dandenong City SC	NPL2e	20	5	1	1.18%	5%
Box Hill United SC	NPL2e	20	7	0	0%	0%
Langwarrin SC *	NPL2e	23	10	0	0	0
Ballarat City FC	NPL2w	20	9	7	8.24%	35%
Whittlesea Ranges FC	NPL2w	22	12	5	5.88%	22.73%
Melbourne Victory FC	NPL2w	21	21	3	3.53%	14.29%
Moreland Zebras FC	NPL2w	20	7	3	3.53%	15%
North Geelong Rangers	NPL2w	21	9	2	2.35%	9.52%
St. Albans Saints	NPL2w	20	7	2	2.35%	10%
Werribee City FC	NPL2w	20	10	2	2.35%	10%
Sunshine George Cross	NPL2w	22	6	1	1.18%	4.55%
Brunswick City FC	NPL2w	21	9	0	0%	0%
Altona Magic SC *	NPL2w	20	4	0	0	0
TOTAL		724	314	85	100%	

3.3. Homegrown participation in 2018 after 10 rounds

The identified 85 homegrown players have been part of a senior NPL game 410 times in the first 10 rounds of all three competitions for a total of 170 league games. Table 4 shows that there are no major differences in the way these homegrown players have appeared in senior game team-sheets with an almost identical number of appearances (137 ± 1) across all NPL games. On average there are 2.4 homegrown players appearing every league game but in reality, only 1.3 is in a starting XI. Table 4 also show that the NPL2 West competition is where homegrown players are more likely to start a game (1.7) contrary to NPL1 where the opposite trend is instead visible.

The difference between starting and coming on to a game off the bench indicates that only in NPL2 West there are more homegrown players likely to start a game than coming on as substitutes from the bench. Table 4 further accounts for the number of homegrown appearances at an under 20 level as a comparable means to determine their actual usage. It is clear that homegrown players in senior rosters are equally and heavily used for under 20 games. In NPL2 East they are more likely to appear and play u20 than be in a senior roster for which they have been originally signed.

Table 4. 2018 Victorian NPL presence of homegrown players by club.

2018 competition	# League games after 10 rounds	Proportion of homegrown per league game	Proportion of homegrown starting a league game	Homegrown in starting XI	Homegrown coming on off the bench	Senior matches appearance (Round 1-10)	Minutes on the park as senior player (Round 1-10)	u20s matches appearance (Round 1-10)
NPL1	70	1.9	1.0	72	64	136	6405	118
NPL2 E	50	2.8	1.3	63	75	138	5942	200
NPL2 W	50	2.7	1.7	85	51	136	6889	100
NPL2 total	100	2.7	1.5	148	126	274	12831	300
NPL total	170	2.4	1.3	220	190	410	19236	418

Table 5. 2018 Victorian NPL presence of homegrown players by club.

Roster	Homegrown presence in senior roster	Minutes on the park (Round 1-10)	Proportion of homegrown players on the park	Homegrown in starting XI	Homegrown coming on off the bench	Total senior matches appearance (Round 1-10)	u20s matches round 1-10
Murray United FC	9	3085	31.20%	33	25	58	53
Melbourne Knights FC	5	2512	25.40%	28	5	33	13
Ballarat City FC	7	2366	23.90%	36	14	50	38
Melbourne Victory FC	3	1701	17.20%	20	0	20	0
Kingston FC	2	1502	15.20%	17	2	19	1
Whittlesea Ranges FC	5	1258	12.70%	13	8	21	17
Melbourne City FC	2	1080	10.90%	12	2	14	0
Bentleigh Greens	3	838	8.50%	10	0	10	10
Nunawading City FC	5	828	8.40%	10	12	22	25
Bulleen FC	3	756	7.60%	8	13	21	5
Hume City FC	3	681	6.90%	7	10	17	4
Eastern Lions SC	2	628	6.30%	6	11	17	8
Werribee City FC	2	516	5.20%	6	5	11	0
St. Albans Saints	2	439	4.40%	5	8	13	5
Goulburn Valley Suns	6	260	2.60%	2	13	15	46
Moreland Zebras FC	3	243	2.50%	1	12	13	20
Sunshine George Cross	1	230	2.30%	2	3	5	3
North Geelong Rangers	2	136	1.40%	2	1	3	7
Dandenong Thunder	2	81	0.80%	2	8	10	10
South Melbourne FC	2	34	0.30%	0	8	8	12
Dandenong City SC	1	33	0.30%	0	5	5	8
White Eagles Springvale	3	28	0.30%	0	4	4	30
Avondale FC	2	1	0.00%	0	4	4	14
Green Gully FC	4	0	0.00%	0	10	10	33
Moreland City FC	3	0	0.00%	0	3	3	30
Oakleigh Cannons FC	1	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Pascoe Vale FC	1	0	0.00%	0	3	3	7
Port Melbourne Sharks	1	0	0.00%	0	1	1	9
Box Hill United SC	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Brunswick City FC	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Heidelberg Utd	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
North Cote City	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Altona Magic SC *	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Langwarrin SC *	0	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	85	19236	100.00%	220	190	410	408

Table 5 provides an overview on actual homegrown participation across all NPL clubs. For what concerns the top tier NPL1 competition, the Melbourne Knights match the results shown in Table 3. With one of the highest proportions of homegrown players, they are also the top NPL1 roster in terms of their time spent on the park and number of appearances in their starting XI. In coherence with earlier findings, it is in rural Victoria where more space on the park has been given to homegrown players in the first 10 rounds. If Murray United and Ballarat City confirm a tangible reliance on local talent resulting in game time opportunity, Goulburn Valley Suns do not reinforce this result and align themselves with other senior rosters where the presence of homegrown is far lower.

By taking in consideration the total amount of minutes played by all teams in NPL in the first 10 rounds of the three leagues, Figure 3 shows that in total homegrown Victorian NPL players have been on the park 5.7 % of the time. In line with previous findings above, there are variances between the three leagues with NPL1 using their homegrown players below 5% of the total time and NPL2 West raising the statistic to a 7.7%. If one considers that Murray United and Goulburn Valley Suns as country teams are in NPL2 East, this value is very significant in demonstrating that the numbers shown earlier in Figure 1 and 2 can be misleading. In fact, a higher number of youth players or homegrown players do not seem to automatically result in more game time on the park.

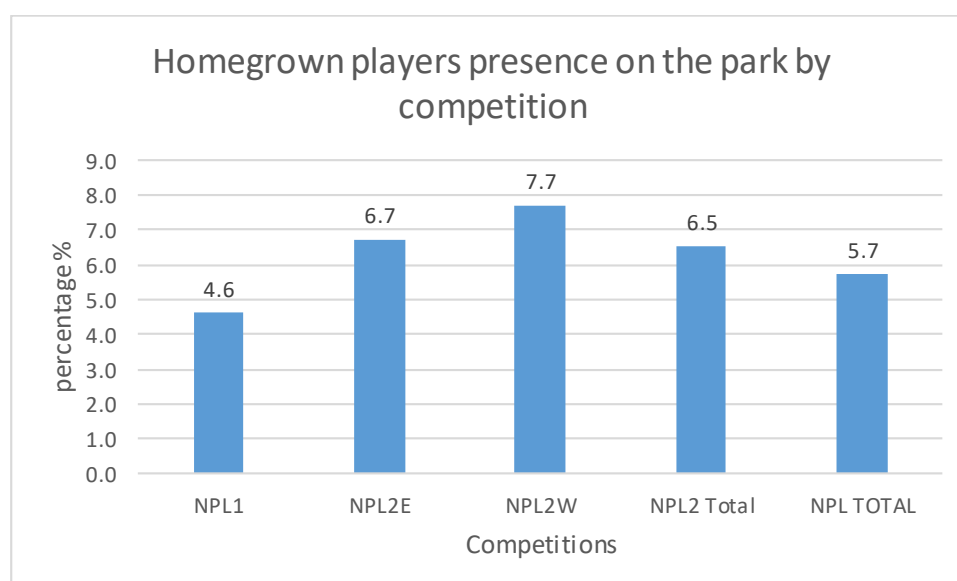


Figure 3. 2018 Victorian NPL homegrown players' proportions.

Table 5 provides a final consideration demonstrating that beside the country teams pattern discussed earlier, only the Melbourne Knights, as a NPL metropolitan State club, truly stands out as the roster having generated and currently comprehensively using homegrown products for more than a quarter of all game time spent on the park by all their senior players. Other clubs like Kingston reaches 15% with all other NPL1 metropolitan counterparts well below 10%. Whittlesea Ranges are the top NPL2 club in this classification. By looking at the bottom of Table 5, it can also be noticed that there 10 rosters (29.4%) that have no homegrown players or that have given them no time on the park.

4. Discussion

This project aimed at examining the incidence of homegrown players within the Victorian NPL senior rosters. Investigating how many players have actually risen through each club's individual elite-pathway to be part of their 2018 senior team roster presents several points of discussion. In more general terms, it confirms the concerns expressed by several authors [40-47] on this subject which

have reported that the Australian pathway to youth football development is still a long way from reaching the outcomes established by the FFA and NCR in 2012.

The incidence of homegrown players cannot ignore the importance of age as a preliminary factor. Results show that with the introduction of the PPS, the NCR succeeded in restricting the signing of older players. Since almost half of all NPL players is composed of 16 to 22-year-old, the three NPL leagues are regularly providing an opportunity for young players to participate in senior football (Table 3). One of the initial criticism when the NPL was first enforced in Victoria indicated this was a type of salary cap rather than a real effort to promote youth development.⁴⁷ However, it seems that this can be debated since the NPL successfully ensured a youth focus right from its beginning or at least when making comparison with the oldest available data from 2016.

Secondly, the analysis of club's average age differences shows how the two A-League clubs based in Melbourne are taking advantage of local environmental factors. Both their NPL squads are fielding extremely young players in their rosters (18-19 years old) but with data showing no major homegrown presence and with their top senior teams competing at a fully professional level where there is no relegation, it is pertinent to point out that they are in a privileged position in comparison to all other state NPL state clubs. In fact, they have no result-driven pressure to perform and can easily concentrate on youth development. Furthermore, NPL state club board members were always skeptical of the NCR outcomes questioning the current pointlessness of youth development considering that Melbourne Victory and Melbourne City use their A-League pedigree to take their best young players providing no financial return. The general opinion [46] is that there is a big gap between the A-league and the NPL clubs that cannot be bridged as a result of no transfer fees being implemented. The two A-League teams joined the Victorian NPL only in 2015 but their current rosters indeed show a lack of homegrown players (Table 3). This confirms the view that State NPL clubs lose their best players to the two A-League clubs based on the perception that these can offer a more professional setting despite ultimately competing in the same league at the same level.

The ECA [29] study on homegrown players discussed how most European clubs, in an effort to reduce financial risks, consider their youth academy as a source of income rather than a cost. Victorian NPL clubs, on the contrary because of this unfair situation do not share the same enthusiasm. In 2012 one of the NCR by-products was for NPL players to be knocking on the A-League door due to the supposedly increased professionalism and quality provided by their reform. However, in accordance with what reported by Kulas [48] and Stamocostas [49], six years later this is yet to materialize and while these two A-League Melbourne based clubs do not nurture their own players exploiting other NPL State clubs, the players' movements in the current 2018 A-League transfer window is stagnating showing a general true lack of player promotion from the NPL competitions into the national league. This confirms the concern that the current environment might not be providing a great opportunity for NPL players to join Australia's top tier competition contributing to the negative perception surrounding youth development.

In quantitative terms, the overall predictions of homegrown presence are confirmed. While the implemented NPL PPS rule consistently ensured young rosters (approximately half of all NPL players are 22 years old or younger), those that have actually risen through each individual clubs' elite-pathway and can be considered homegrown is only 12% (Fig.2). The A-League as a professional competition currently lacks any enforced or regulated focus for youth development and thus it provides no opportunity for comparisons. For this reason, these figures can only be related to overseas systems. When compared to the European figures provided by the ECA [29], the differences are sharp and evident. European teams on average fill almost 30% of their senior rosters with homegrown players that have spent at least 3 years in the same club. In view of the NPL not yet being a professional league and considering the obsessive result driven nature of the European scene that generates 25.5bn Euros a year [50], the low presence of homegrown players in the Victorian NPL rosters further provides reasons to doubt on the success of the NCR youth development objectives. In fact, when compared to the professional world, the lower NPL financial pressures should offer a less frantic environment enabling clubs the opportunity to focus on developing their own future players.

While generally comparing homegrown proportions can demonstrate such worrying differences amongst football settings that are, however, economically and contextually completely different, the findings of this project again offer an insight in terms of specific environmental factors influencing athlete development. The results recorded by the Victorian country teams (Ballarat City, Goulburn Valley Suns and Murray United) were not predicted nor expected with over 1/3 of their senior rosters represented by homegrown players (Table 3). These results are similar or even higher to those clubs reviewed by the ECA [29] showing a rather autarchic tendency by NPL clubs from rural Victoria in relying on local talent. This can perhaps be explained within the bio-ecological systems theory where it was reported that athletes' birthplace is an influencing factor in developing sport expertise where small communities can offer youth players more open and appropriate space for sporting activities [51]. In contrast, large urban areas like Melbourne, where all other NPL clubs in this study are located, present a more intense competitive structure with young players easily roaming from one club to another that are just within a few km away. As predicted, the results found only a handful of NPL metropolitan clubs with rosters presenting a number of homegrown players near or close to that of certain professional European clubs. Within these few exceptions, the Melbourne Knights stand out showing how in 2018 you can compete in the NPL top tier competition with more than 20% of players having transitioned from your own youth academy to the senior team. While globalization and metropolitan life can affect youth players and their movement, the Melbourne Knights data can perhaps be explained when looking at the similarities with the isolationist culture of Athletic Bilbao discussed earlier. The Knights' proud Croatian heritage is often criticized and has historically been in open dispute with the FFA's national club identity policy of 2014 which banned football clubs from using names that contain ethnic, national, political, racial or religious connotations.⁴⁰ The history of Australian soccer is tied up with ethnicity and thus ethnic communities and their football clubs should be recognized for their contribution to the development of the game rather than being portrayed by the media and governing bodies as an obstacle.

Ironically, this study found that one of the NCR outcomes has therefore been met by the Melbourne Knights, the only club in Australia that retaliated against the FFA policy of de-ethnicizing football by filing a complaint against them to the Human Rights Commission under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 [40]. Furthermore, the results show how the Melbourne Knights are also the metropolitan club that has not only generated a large number of homegrown players, but that currently gives them the opportunity to represent the club on the park, rather than on the bench or at an u20 level. As predicted, despite 70% of clubs presented homegrown players in their rosters, their appearance on the park after ten rounds can be considered irrelevant since it only accounts for 5.7% of all game time played by all teams in NPL (Fig. 3). The data seems also to suggest that homegrown players are in reality u20 players recycled in a senior roster to make up the numbers (Table 5). Besides once again reinforcing the bio-ecological systems theory of country teams like Murray United and Ballarat City that give their local established talents the highest proportion of time on the park, the Melbourne Knights thus represent the only true successful example of NCR youth development meeting its objectives.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that Australia presents a unique sporting environment where its youth football player development is affected by several social and environmental factors that can make the transition from youth to senior teams more challenging than in other nations. When the FFA National Curriculum [52] was introduced in 2009, with a second edition released in 2013, certain environmental particularities were acknowledged for and only a few years since the launch of the NPL, it might be too soon to fully judge its achievements. It seems however that the data collected in this project presently confirms all the clichés and concerns surrounding Football in Australia.¹³⁻¹⁴ The NCR succeeded in rejuvenating the Victorian State NPL competitions locking the age parameters by means of the PPS but whether it contributed to providing greater playing opportunities can still be questioned.

It encouraged a greater focus on the importance of youth development on paper and only a few players are nurtured through each individual Victorian NPL State club youth development structures.

Nevertheless, such environmental and contextual challenges also contain some deep cultural advantages that should be used to Australia's football development advantages. First of all, rural areas offer the opportunity for a more intimate, stable and nurturing environment which appears to provide the right motivational climate for a longer-term involvement through youth into adulthood. Talent development environments in regional Victoria should continue to be supported by the FFV irrespective of the difficulties for their youth teams in attaining immediate results against metropolitan oppositions. In fact, in terms of NCR outcomes, clubs located in the country all set an example of successful transition from youth to senior football. Secondly, ethnic communities and their affiliated football clubs are still providing the passion, enthusiasm, finance, support, determination and vision to set the benchmarks for others to follow. They seem to create the micro-system necessary to home grow players and rather than air-brush Australian past soccer history it must be recognized that they are a product of Multicultural Australia. Thirdly, a new homegrown rule needs to be implemented. While the PPS is a good starting point, its point cap system is currently not ensuring that enough young players follow a normative transition from youth to senior football. The UEFA homegrown rule can be used as a model and a similar one, appropriate to the Australian football environment, should effectively be implemented from the top to the bottom, that is, it must include all A-League clubs too. Once all competing parties adhere to the same rules, this will homogenize youth structures across Australia and avoid provoking the ongoing disputation that are currently affecting its own development.

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