

Fringe Players as Strategic Assets a Resource Based Analysis of Squad Depth and Sustained Competitive Advantage in Professional Football

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Abstract

In the fiercely competitive and multi-billion-pound global football industry, the key strategic challenge is maintaining a sustained competitive advantage. This paper employs the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm to shift the focus on managing «fringe players»—those who are not regular starters—viewing it as a central strategic priority rather than a peripheral concern. By synthesising findings from a foundational mixed-methods study on fringe player motivation (Brunskill, 2022) with the theoretical frameworks of the RBV and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this paper argues that fringe players constitute a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) human capital resource. The original research combined a quantitative analysis of the Big Five personality traits of 32 professional footballers with in-depth qualitative interviews with six fringe players. Reinterpreted through a strategic perspective, the findings highlight three essential organisational capabilities to unlock this resource's potential: effective strategic communication, a differentiated training and development infrastructure, and a cohesive, inclusive organisational culture. These capabilities, by fulfilling players' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, can foster the motivation and growth necessary to turn fringe players into sources of on-field success and long-term financial value. The paper concludes with practical strategic recommendations for football club management, providing a novel, evidence-based framework for harnessing squad depth to sustain competitive advantage.

Keywords: Resource Based View, Competitive Advantage, Human Capital, Talent Development, Squad Management, Professional Football, Strategic HRM, VRIN Resources

1. Introduction

1.1. The Business of Professional Football

Professional football has transformed from a straightforward sporting contest into a multi-billion-pound global industry marked by fierce competition on and off the pitch. Football clubs are intricate organisations that must balance the dual goals of achieving sporting success and maintaining financial sustainability. In this high-pressure environment, managing a club's resources effectively is crucial for its long-term survival and competitive position. The main strategic challenge for club executives, managers, and owners is to attain sustained competitive advantage – the ability to consistently outshine rivals. This necessitates a sophisticated approach to organisational management that goes beyond transfer-market speculation and focuses on the strategic development of internal resources and capabilities.

1.2. The Strategic Importance of Squad Depth

Within this context, managing the playing squad is the most important area of resource allocation for any

professional football club. While much attention is given to the starting eleven, the idea of "squad depth" – the quality and availability of players beyond the regular starters – has grown increasingly important as a competitive advantage. The widespread adoption of the five-substitute rule across major leagues, combined with the rising fixture congestion in domestic and international competitions, has increased the strategic importance of having a deep, versatile squad. Fringe players, often assigned squad numbers 12-20, form a significant yet often underused pool of human capital. The ability to effectively manage, motivate, and develop these players is not just an operational task but a strategic skill that offers a club resilience, flexibility, and tactical options needed to succeed through a demanding season.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: The Resource-Based View

To understand how effective management of fringe players can lead to sustained competitive advantage, this paper adopts the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm as its theoretical lens. First articulated by Barney, the RBV posits

that a firm's competitive advantage is derived not from its external market positioning, but from its unique bundle of internal resources and capabilities [1]. According to this view, for a resource to be a source of sustained competitive advantage, it must be Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (the VRIN framework). This paper argues that the human capital embodied in a football club's playing squad, including its fringe players, can be conceptualised as such a resource. Furthermore, the organisational processes and routines that a club uses to identify, develop, and motivate these players can be understood as strategic capabilities that are difficult for rivals to replicate.

1.4. Research Gap and Contribution

Although the RBV has been widely used in the strategic management literature, its application to squad management in professional football remains limited. The existing research on player motivation mainly comes from sport psychology perspectives, with little integration of strategic management theory. This paper aims to bridge this gap by combining the findings of a foundational mixed-methods study on fringe player motivation with the RBV [2]. It redefines the challenge of motivating fringe players from a solely psychological issue to a strategic human resource management priority. The contribution of this paper is twofold: it broadens the RBV's application to a new empirical context and offers a fresh, business-oriented framework for understanding and managing the strategic value of squad depth.

1.5. Research Questions

To guide this investigation, the following research questions are posed:

- How can fringe players be conceptualised as strategic resources within the Resource-Based View framework?
- What organisational capabilities are required to develop fringe players into sources of sustained competitive advantage?
- What are the critical success factors for maximising the strategic value of squad depth in professional football?

1.6. Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a detailed overview of the Resource-Based View and its application to strategic human resource management in professional football. Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods research design, re-interpreting the original study's methodology through a business research lens. Section 4 presents the key findings, reframing the results as evidence of human capital attributes and organisational capabilities. Section 5 discusses the strategic implications of these findings, answering the research questions and providing a VRIN analysis of fringe player human capital. Finally, Section 6 offers a set of strategic recommendations for football club management and provides suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Resource-Based View of the Firm

The Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm is a key theoretical framework in strategic management that aims to explain the sources of sustained competitive advantage.

Introduced by Wernerfelt and popularised by Barney, the RBV signifies a shift from the traditional industrial organisation (IO) perspective, which emphasised external market structures as the main factors influencing firm performance [1,3]. In contrast, the RBV focuses internally, suggesting that a firm's unique set of internal resources and capabilities is the primary source of its ability to outperform competitors. Barney stated that for a resource to provide sustained competitive advantage, it must have four essential characteristics: Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (the VRIN framework) [3]. A valuable resource allows a firm to capitalise on opportunities or mitigate threats within its environment. Many firms do not possess a rare resource. An inimitable resource is one that is difficult for other firms to acquire or replicate. Lastly, a non-substitutable resource is one that has no strategically equivalent substitutes.

The RBV has evolved significantly since Barney's original formulation. Subsequent research has explored the concept of dynamic capabilities, which are the organisational processes that enable a firm to reconfigure its resource base in response to changing environmental conditions. This extension of the RBV recognises that in fast-moving industries, static resources may not be enough to maintain a competitive advantage, and that the ability to adapt and innovate continuously is itself a critical capability. In the context of professional football, where the competitive landscape is constantly shifting due to regulatory changes, player transfers, and tactical innovations, the concept of dynamic capabilities is particularly relevant.

2.2. Strategic Human Resource Management and Human Capital

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is a field of study that has increasingly drawn upon the principles of the RBV to assert the strategic importance of a firm's workforce. Proponents of SHRM argue that human capital – the knowledge, skills, and abilities of a firm's employees – can be a critical source of sustained competitive advantage. Unlike physical or financial capital, human capital is often difficult to imitate, as it is embedded in the organisation's complex social fabric and developed through path-dependent processes of learning and experience. Effective SHRM practices, such as sophisticated recruitment and selection systems, extensive training and development programmes, and performance-contingent reward systems, are considered organisational capabilities that enable a firm to attract, develop, and retain a superior stock of human capital.

Wright, McMahan and McWilliams were among the first to explicitly link the RBV to SHRM, arguing that a firm's human resources can meet the VRIN criteria and thus be a source of competitive advantage [6]. They emphasised that it is not the individual employees themselves that are the source of advantage, but rather the pool of human capital and the HR systems that manage it. This distinction is important, as it shifts the focus from individual talent to the organisational systems and processes that enable that talent to be effectively deployed. In the context of professional football,

this suggests that a club's competitive advantage is not just about having talented players, but about having the systems in place to identify, develop, and motivate those players.

2.3. Competitive Advantage in Professional Football

The professional football industry provides a compelling context for applying the RBV and SHRM. Football clubs are talent-intensive organisations whose performance is almost entirely dependent on the quality of their human capital – the players. While financial resources are undoubtedly important, the ability to translate financial muscle into on-pitch success is far from guaranteed. The RBV would suggest that a club's competitive advantage is derived not simply from its ability to purchase expensive players in the transfer market, but from its underlying capabilities in talent identification, player development, and squad management. As Gasparetto and Kim argue, the depth and consistency of a club's talent development pathways can be a more reliable source of long-term success than a reliance on the volatile and often inefficient transfer market [7].

The sources of competitive advantage in professional football are diverse. While financial resources are significant, they are not the only factor determining success. Clubs with smaller

budgets can still compete effectively against wealthier rivals by utilising superior organisational capabilities. These might include more efficient scouting networks, innovative coaching methods, or a stronger organisational culture. The RBV offers a useful framework for understanding these various sources of advantage and for identifying which resources and capabilities are most likely to result in sustained success. Building on the RBV and SHRM perspectives mentioned above, fringe players can be seen as a strategically important part of a club's human capital rather than just peripheral squad members. According to the VRIN framework, their potential contribution to lasting competitive advantage depends not only on their individual qualities but also on how well the club's systems identify, develop, and integrate them into the broader squad. In professional football's ever-changing, resource-limited environment, the ability to develop high-quality fringe players internally can compensate for financial limitations and lessen dependence on the external transfer market. To illustrate this concept, Table 1 applies the VRIN attributes to fringe player human capital, showing how well-managed fringe players can be a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource that supports long-term competitive advantage.

VRIN Attribute	Application to Fringe Player Human Capital in Football
Valuable	Fringe players provide essential squad depth, enabling rotation, injury cover, and tactical flexibility. They also create a competitive training environment, pushing the starting players to maintain high performance levels.
Rare	A squad containing multiple high-potential, motivated, and well-developed fringe players is a rare asset. Many clubs have a significant quality drop-off beyond their starting eleven.
Inimitable	The development of a fringe player is a path-dependent process, shaped by the club's unique coaching methodologies, training facilities, and organisational culture. These capabilities are socially complex and causally ambiguous, making them difficult for rivals to imitate.
Non-substitutable	While a club can always buy new players, a well-developed internal player who is already integrated into the team's tactical system and social structure has no direct strategic equivalent in the external market.

Table 1: The VRIN Framework Applied to Fringe Player Human Capital

2.4. Talent Development as an Organisational Capability

From an RBV perspective, a football club's talent development system can be viewed as a core organisational capability. This capability encompasses a range of interconnected processes, including scouting and recruitment, coaching methodologies, sports science and medical support, and player pathway management [8]. A club that excels in these areas can create a consistent pipeline of talent, reducing its dependence on the transfer market and generating significant financial returns through player sales. The development of fringe players is a critical component of this capability. By providing a structured development pathway for non-starters, a club can transform what might be seen as a sunk cost (the player's wages) into a valuable appreciating asset.

Prahalad and Hamel, in their seminal work on core competencies, argued that a firm's competitive advantage is derived from its ability to integrate diverse skills and technologies into competencies that empower individual

businesses to adapt quickly to changing opportunities [9]. In the context of professional football, a club's talent development capability can be considered a core competency. It is not a single skill or technology, but rather an integrated system that combines scouting expertise, coaching knowledge, sports science, and organisational culture. This integration makes the capability difficult to imitate, as it is not simply a matter of copying individual practices but of replicating the entire system.

2.5. The Economics of Squad Management

The management of a professional football squad is a complex economic challenge. Clubs must balance the need for a squad large enough to cope with the demands of a long season with the financial constraints imposed by wage budgets and Financial Fair Play regulations. Fringe players represent a significant financial investment, and failing to manage and develop them effectively can result in substantial opportunity costs. A motivated and developing fringe player can increase their market value, providing the club with a potential future

revenue stream. Conversely, a demotivated and stagnant player will see their value depreciate, resulting in a poor return on the club's investment. Effective squad management, therefore, is not just about tactical considerations but also about sound financial and asset management. Significant inefficiencies and information asymmetries characterise the transfer market in professional football. Player valuations are often highly subjective, and the success of a transfer is uncertain. Clubs that can develop their own talent internally have a significant advantage, as they have better information about the player's abilities and character, and they avoid the high transaction costs associated with the transfer market. Furthermore, developing internal talent can create a virtuous cycle in which successful player development enhances the club's reputation, making it more attractive to future talent.

2.6. Motivation and Human Capital Development

For human capital to develop, individuals must be motivated to learn, grow, and contribute to the organisation. This is where the insights of motivation theory become critical for the RBV. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), with its focus on the innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, provides a robust framework for understanding how to create a motivational environment that fosters human capital development [10]. In an organisational context, autonomy refers to the need for employees to have a sense of control and volition over their work. Competence refers to the need to feel effective and capable. Relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to and cared for by others in the workplace. By creating a work environment that satisfies these three needs, organisations can foster greater employee engagement, productivity, and retention – all of which are essential to developing a superior stock of human capital. The integration of SDT with the RBV provides a robust framework for understanding how to build and sustain competitive advantage through human capital. The RBV tells us which resources are valuable, while SDT tells us how to develop them. By satisfying employees' basic psychological needs, organisations can create a motivational climate that fosters learning, innovation, and commitment. This, in turn, enhances the value, rarity, and inimitability

of the organisation's human capital, leading to sustained competitive advantage.

2.7. Conceptual Framework

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the Resource-Based View with Self-Determination Theory to explain how the effective management of fringe players can lead to sustained competitive advantage (see Figure 1). In this model, fringe players are conceptualised as a stock of human capital resources. The club's organisational capabilities – specifically its communication systems, training and development infrastructure, and organisational culture – are the mechanisms through which these resources are developed. The effectiveness of these capabilities is moderated by the extent to which they satisfy the players' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, fringe players are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and to develop their skills and abilities. This, in turn, enhances the value, rarity, and inimitability of the club's human capital, leading to improved on-pitch performance, financial returns, and, ultimately, a sustained competitive advantage.

Extending the RBV and SHRM insights outlined above, this study advances a conceptual model that specifies how fringe player human capital can be transformed into sustained competitive advantage through psychologically informed management practices. As depicted in Figure 1, fringe players represent a key human capital resource whose developmental trajectory is shaped by the club's organisational capabilities in communication, training and development, and culture. The framework incorporates Self-Determination Theory by proposing that the impact of these capabilities depends on the extent to which they satisfy fringe players' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby fostering higher motivation, engagement, and skill development. In turn, these psychologically enabled developmental processes enhance the value, rarity, and inimitability of the club's human capital, ultimately feeding through to superior on-pitch performance, financial outcomes, and a sustained competitive advantage.

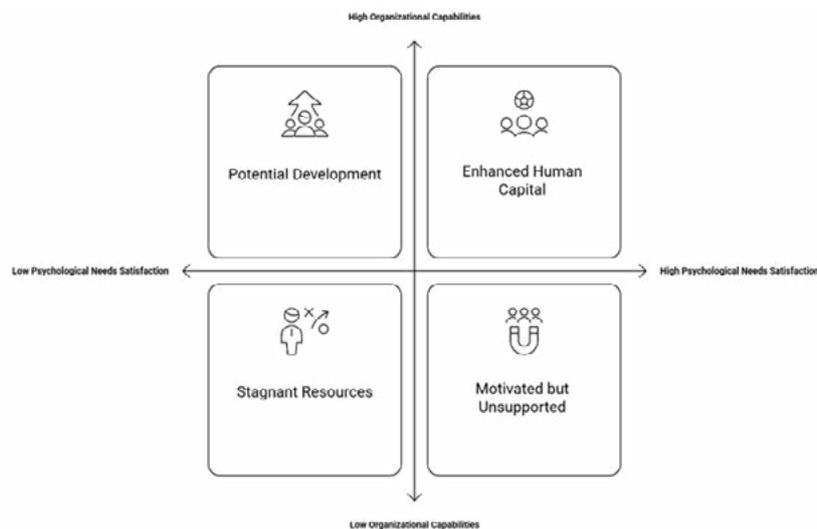


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - Fringe Player Development and Competitive Advantage

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study adopts a pragmatic, mixed-methods research design to investigate the strategic value of fringe players in professional football. Pragmatism as a research philosophy is particularly well-suited to business and management research, as it focuses on practical consequences and real-world applications rather than abstract theoretical debates [11]. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study aims to provide a holistic and managerially relevant understanding of how fringe players can be developed into sources of sustained competitive advantage. The research was conducted in a two-phase sequential design, with an initial quantitative phase providing a broad assessment of human capital attributes, followed by a more in-depth qualitative phase to explore the organisational capabilities that underpin their development.

3.2. Phase 1: Quantitative Assessment of Human Capital Attributes

The first phase of the research sought to quantify a key dimension of the human capital embodied in professional footballers: their personality traits. From a Resource-Based View perspective, a firm's employees' unique personality profiles can be considered a valuable, potentially rare resource. The purpose of this phase was to establish a baseline personality profile for a sample of professional footballers, providing a quantitative basis for assessing the strategic value of this human capital attribute.

3.2.1. Sample and Instrument

The participants were 32 male professional footballers from the top four English leagues. The instrument used was a 60-item online questionnaire based on the Big Five model of personality, which assesses the traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. This well-validated psychometric tool provides a reliable and efficient means of quantifying key aspects of an individual's personality. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics to generate a mean percentage score for each trait, providing a high-level overview of the sample's personality characteristics.

3.3. Phase 2: Qualitative Investigation of Organisational Capabilities

The second phase of the research employed a qualitative approach to explore the organisational capabilities that clubs use to manage and develop their fringe players. While the quantitative phase provided a snapshot of the players' attributes, the qualitative phase was designed to understand the *processes* and *practices* that shape the development of these attributes. This is crucial from an RBV perspective, as it is these organisational capabilities that are often the most inimitable source of competitive advantage.

3.3.1. Sample and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six male professional footballers (P1-P6), who were all experienced fringe players in the top four English leagues. The use of a smaller, purposive sample is appropriate for qualitative

research, which prioritises depth and richness of data over statistical generalisability [12]. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed accounts of players' experiences with club practices in communication, training, and squad management. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data fidelity.

3.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using an abductive thematic analysis approach, facilitated by NVIVO software. This approach enabled the development of a business-oriented coding framework grounded in the data and informed by the theoretical constructs of the RBV and SHRM. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in the data that reflected organisational practices and capabilities for managing fringe players. This process enabled a shift in focus from the players' purely psychological experiences to the underlying organisational systems that shaped them.

3.5. Data Integration and Research Rigour

A convergent mixed-methods approach was used to integrate the findings from the two phases. The quantitative personality data provided a profile of human capital resources, while the qualitative data provided an understanding of the organisational capabilities used to manage them. The findings were triangulated to provide a more robust and credible set of conclusions. Throughout the research process, a commitment to research rigour was maintained. The use of established research methods, the verbatim transcription of interviews, and a systematic approach to data analysis all contribute to the trustworthiness of the findings. The researcher's insider status was managed through reflexive practice, with a conscious effort to maintain a critical and objective stance.

4. Results: Human Capital Attributes and Organisational Practices

This section presents the findings from the mixed-methods study, re-interpreted through the lens of the Resource-Based View. The results are framed in terms of the players' human capital attributes, and the organisational capabilities and practices clubs employ to manage these assets.

4.1. Phase 1: Personality Profile as a Human Capital Attribute

The quantitative phase provided a profile of the personality traits of the 32 professional footballers in the sample. From a strategic human resource management perspective, these personality traits are a critical attribute of the club's human capital. The findings, as illustrated in Figure 2, reveal a workforce characterised by high levels of **Agreeableness** (76.82%) and **Conscientiousness** (71.53%), and a low level of **Neuroticism** (36.87%).

These results have significant implications for the strategic value of this human capital. The high level of Agreeableness suggests a workforce predisposed to teamwork, cooperation, and pro-social behaviour, all of which are essential for creating a cohesive, effective team. The high level of Conscientiousness indicates a workforce that is diligent,

goal-oriented, and reliable – attributes that are highly valuable in a high-performance environment. Finally, the low level of Neuroticism suggests a workforce that is emotionally stable and resilient, able to cope with the high-pressure demands of professional football. This unique combination of personality traits can be considered a valuable, potentially rare human capital resource, providing a foundation for a club to build a competitive advantage.

4.2. Phase 2: Organisational Capabilities and Practices

The qualitative phase of the study identified a range of organisational practices that influence the motivation and development of fringe players. From an RBV perspective, these practices can be understood as the building blocks of a club's organisational capabilities in talent management. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key capabilities, the most prominent of which are discussed below.

Capability 1: Strategic Communication Systems

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the critical importance of communication from the coaching staff. This goes beyond simple instruction and feedback, and can be conceptualised as a strategic communication capability. Players expressed a strong need for clear, consistent, and honest information regarding their performance, their role in the team, and their development pathway. As P5 stated, effective communication provides a sense of clarity and control, even in the face of non-selection:

"So, it's about communication. That's the biggest part. If you've got communication, then it's fine. If he calls you and says that such and such is playing because of X,Y,Z then ok, and he tells you need to improve on something then you can work on it."

This finding suggests that clubs with sophisticated and systematic communication practices are better able to manage the motivation and engagement of their entire squad, thereby maximising the value of their human capital.

Capability 2: Differentiated Training and Development Infrastructure

The study revealed that the design and delivery of training for non-starters is a critical organisational practice. Generic, purely physical training sessions were described as "demoralising" and counter-productive. In contrast, training that was varied, engaging, and focused on skill development was seen as highly motivating. This highlights the importance of a differentiated training and development

infrastructure, a capability that enables a club to provide tailored development pathways for all its players, not just the starters. P4's comment underscores the importance of this capability:

"Making training as fun as possible really. If you don't start games you know it's going to be difficult and know you're going to have a tough session physically so for me it needs to flow and the session should be as fun as possible. Just to make them enjoy it, at least they're happy and they're coming in."

Clubs that invest in this capability are better able to develop the skills and abilities of their fringe players, thereby increasing the value of these assets.

Capability 3: Organisational Culture and Social Capital

Finally, the study highlighted the importance of a cohesive, inclusive organisational culture. Players emphasised the need to feel connected to the group and to have a sense of shared purpose, even when not playing. The practices that foster this sense of unity, such as integrated training schedules and inclusive social activities, can be seen as the components of a capability in building social capital. As P4 noted, maintaining a sense of togetherness is crucial for squad morale and performance:

"I would say keeping them involved as much as possible as in keeping them similar to the starting 11 as much as possible and on the same schedule. Then the dressing room is more likely to be together, small things matter."

An organisation with a strong, positive culture can create a work environment that fosters collaboration, mutual support, and collective responsibility. From an RBV perspective, such a culture is a valuable, rare, and highly inimitable resource that can be a powerful source of sustained competitive advantage. Interpreted through an RBV lens, the personality traits identified in Phase 1 represent a core attribute of the club's human capital, shaping how effectively organisational practices can be leveraged to create competitive advantage. To visualise this strategic resource, Figure 2 summarises the players' Big Five personality profile, highlighting the predominance of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness alongside comparatively low Neuroticism. This configuration underscores the presence of a cooperative, diligent, and emotionally stable workforce, which provides a fertile foundation for the communication systems, training and development infrastructure, and organisational culture identified in Phase 2 to enhance motivation, performance, and ultimately the value of the club's human capital.

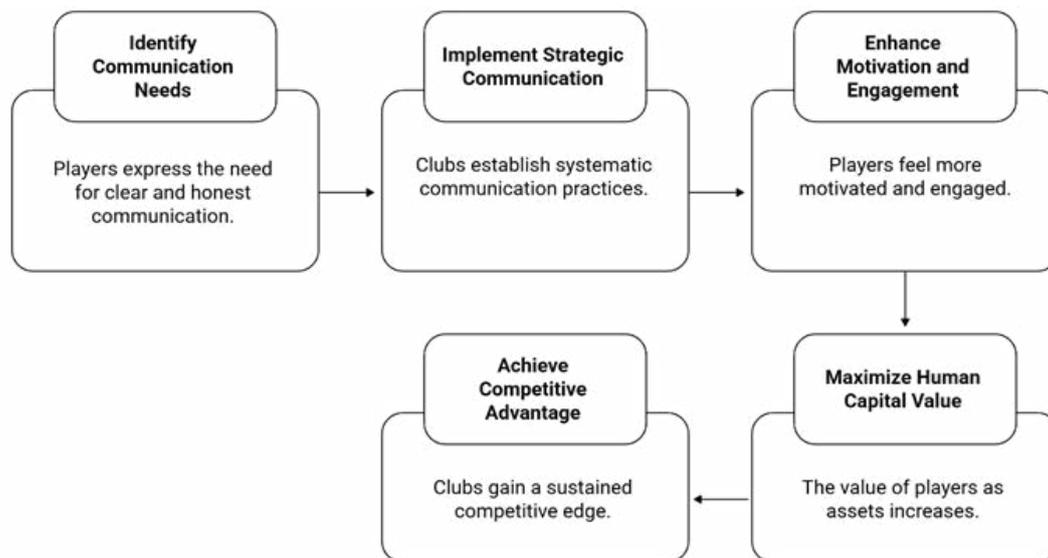


Figure 2: Strategic Communication Systems in Sports Clubs

5. Discussion: Strategic Implications for Competitive Advantage

This study has reframed the challenge of motivating fringe players from a purely psychological issue to a strategic human resource management imperative. By integrating Brunskill's findings with the Resource-Based View, this section discusses the strategic implications of the research, answering the three guiding research questions and providing a roadmap for how football clubs can leverage their fringe players to sustain competitive advantage [2].

5.1. Answering RQ1: Fringe Players as Strategic Resources

The first research question asked how fringe players can be conceptualised as strategic resources within the RBV framework. The findings of this study provide a compelling case for viewing fringe players not as sunk costs or peripheral concerns, but as a valuable and potentially rare stock of human capital. The VRIN framework provides a useful tool for analysing the strategic value of this resource.

- **Valuable:** Fringe players are undoubtedly valuable. They provide essential squad depth, enabling a club to cope with injuries, suspensions, and fixture congestion. They also provide tactical flexibility, allowing a manager to change formation or strategy during a game. Furthermore, a strong group of fringe players creates a competitive training environment, pushing the starting players to maintain high standards. The value of squad depth has been empirically demonstrated in the literature, with studies showing a positive correlation between squad depth and team performance over the course of a season [13].

- **Rare:** While all clubs have fringe players, a squad with a high-quality, motivated, and well-developed group of non-starters is a rare asset. Many clubs experience a significant drop-off in quality beyond their starting eleven, which can be a major competitive disadvantage over the course of a long season. The rarity of this resource is evidenced by the significant variation in squad depth quality across clubs, even within the same league.

- **Inimitable:** The value of a fringe player is not just in their individual talent, but in their integration into the club's tactical system and social structure. This is a path-dependent process that is shaped by the club's unique coaching methodologies, training facilities, and organisational culture. These socially complex and causally ambiguous capabilities are complicated for rivals to imitate. As Barney notes, resources that are embedded in a firm's unique history and culture are among the most difficult to replicate [1].

- **Non-substitutable:** While a club can always attempt to buy a replacement player in the transfer market, a well-developed internal player who is already acculturated to the club's systems and values has no direct strategic equivalent. The cost, time, and risk associated with integrating a new player from the external market make a well-developed internal player a non-substitutable resource in the short- to medium-term. The transaction costs of the transfer market, combined with the uncertainty of player adaptation, make internal development a strategically superior option in many cases.

5.2. Answering RQ2: Organisational Capabilities for Development

The second research question addressed the organisational capabilities required to develop fringe players into sources of competitive advantage. The qualitative findings identified three core capabilities: strategic communication systems, a differentiated training and development infrastructure, and a cohesive and inclusive organisational culture. These capabilities are the organisational routines and processes that enable a club to maximise the value of its human capital. They are not easily acquired but are developed over time through a process of learning, investment, and strategic intent. Clubs that possess these capabilities can create a motivational climate that fosters the development of their fringe players, transforming them from peripheral figures into valuable strategic assets. These findings align with the broader SHRM literature, which emphasises the importance of a bundle of mutually reinforcing HR practices in driving firm performance [4]. The capabilities identified

in this study can be seen as the specific instantiation of these practices within the unique context of professional football. A club that can communicate effectively with its players, provide tailored development opportunities, and foster a strong sense of belonging is, in effect, implementing a high-performance work system likely to lead to superior outcomes.

5.2.1. Strategic Communication as a Capability

The importance of communication in organisational effectiveness has long been recognised in the management literature. In professional football, effective communication between coaches and players is not just about conveying tactical instructions; it is a strategic capability that can influence motivation, engagement, and performance. The findings of this study suggest that clubs with systematic and sophisticated communication practices are better able to manage the expectations and development of their fringe players. This involves not just one-way communication from coach to player, but a two-way dialogue that allows players to voice their concerns and aspirations. Such communication systems are complex to imitate, as they require a high degree of trust, transparency, and interpersonal skill on the part of the coaching staff.

5.2.2. Training Infrastructure as a Capability

The design and delivery of training are core functions of any football club. However, this study's findings suggest that the quality and differentiation of training for non-starters are critical yet often overlooked capabilities. Clubs that invest in creating varied, engaging, and skill-focused training for their fringe players can foster a sense of competence and development, even in the absence of regular match time. This requires not just physical resources, such as training facilities and equipment, but also human resources, such as specialised coaching staff and sports scientists. The integration of these resources into a coherent and effective training system is a complex organisational challenge, and one that can provide a significant source of competitive advantage.

5.2.3. Organisational Culture as a Capability

Organisational culture is one of the most inimitable resources a firm can possess. It is the shared values, beliefs, and norms that shape behaviour within an organisation, and they are developed over time through the collective experiences of the organisation's members. In professional football, a strong, positive organisational culture can be a powerful source of competitive advantage, fostering collaboration, resilience, and a shared commitment to success. The findings of this study suggest that clubs that actively cultivate a culture of inclusivity and collective responsibility are better able to maintain the motivation and engagement of their fringe players. This is not simply a matter of team-building exercises, but a deep-seated cultural orientation that permeates all aspects of the organisation.

5.3. Answering RQ3: Critical Success Factors for Strategic Value

The third research question sought to identify the critical

success factors for maximising the strategic value of squad depth. The findings suggest that the key lies in creating a motivational climate that satisfies the players' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as outlined in Self-Determination Theory. The three organisational capabilities identified in this study map directly onto these three needs.

• Strategic Communication as a Driver of Autonomy:

By providing clear, consistent, and honest communication, a club can enhance a player's sense of autonomy. When a player understands the reasons for their non-selection and has a clear pathway back into the team, they are more likely to feel a sense of control over their career and to take ownership of their development. This sense of autonomy is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation, which is the most sustainable and robust form of motivation [10].

• Development Infrastructure as a Driver of Competence:

By providing varied, engaging, and skill-focused training, a club can enhance a player's sense of competence. When a player feels they are developing their skills and abilities, they are more likely to feel effective and motivated to continue improving. This sense of competence is essential for maintaining self-confidence and for fostering a growth mindset [14].

• Organisational Culture as a Driver of Relatedness:

By fostering a cohesive and inclusive culture, a club can enhance a player's sense of relatedness. When a player feels a strong sense of connection to their teammates and a sense of belonging to the group, they are more likely to be motivated to work hard for the collective good. This sense of relatedness is crucial for creating a positive, supportive work environment and fostering a sense of shared purpose.

5.4. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, the study provides a novel integration of the RBV and SDT, demonstrating how the principles of motivation theory can explain the development of valuable, rare, and inimitable human capital. This provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the microfoundations of the RBV, showing how macro-level competitive advantage is built on the micro-level psychological experiences of individuals within the firm. This integration addresses a key criticism of the RBV: it often treats resources as static and fails to adequately explain the processes by which they are developed. Managerially, the study provides a clear and actionable set of recommendations for football club executives and managers. It suggests that clubs should shift their perspective on fringe players, viewing them not as a necessary cost, but as a strategic asset to be developed. This requires a long-term strategic perspective and a willingness to invest in the organisational capabilities that foster player development. Specifically, clubs should invest in their communication systems, their training and development infrastructure, and their organisational culture. By doing so, they can create a motivational climate that is more likely to unlock the full potential of their entire squad, leading to improved on-pitch performance, enhanced financial returns, and a more sustainable competitive advantage.

5.5. Benchmarking and Best Practice

While the findings of this study are based on players' experiences in the English professional leagues, they can be usefully compared with best-practice examples from other contexts. Clubs such as Borussia Dortmund in Germany and Ajax in the Netherlands have long been recognised for their exceptional talent development capabilities. These clubs have built their competitive advantage not on spending enormous sums in the transfer market, but on their ability to identify, develop, and integrate young talent into their first teams. Their success provides empirical support for the theoretical arguments made in this paper, demonstrating that a focus on internal development can be a viable and sustainable path to competitive advantage. These clubs share several common characteristics: a clear and consistent playing philosophy, a strong organisational culture, a commitment to youth development, and a willingness to give young players opportunities in the first team. These characteristics align closely with the organisational capabilities identified in this study, suggesting that the findings have broader applicability beyond the specific context of fringe players in English football.

5.6. Financial Implications and Return on Investment

From a financial perspective, effectively managing fringe players represents a significant opportunity for value creation. Professional football clubs operate in an environment where player wages account for the largest share of operating costs, often 60-70% of total revenue in top-tier clubs. Fringe players, while not commanding the salaries of star players, still represent a substantial financial investment. The failure to effectively develop and utilise these players results in a poor return on this investment, with the club paying wages for depreciating assets. Conversely, a well-managed fringe player who develops their skills and increases their market value can generate significant financial returns, either through improved on-pitch performance or through profitable player sales. The transfer market provides a mechanism for clubs to realise the financial value of their human capital investments. Clubs that excel at developing fringe players can create a sustainable business model, where the sale of developed talent generates revenue that can be reinvested in the squad. This model has been successfully employed by clubs such as Borussia Dortmund and Ajax, which have built their financial sustainability on their ability to develop and sell players profitably. The effective management of fringe players, therefore, is not just a sporting imperative, but a critical component of a club's overall financial strategy. The organisational capabilities identified in this study – communication, training infrastructure, and culture – can be seen as strategic investments that generate both sporting and financial returns.

5.7. The Role of Leadership

While this study has focused on organisational capabilities and practices, it is important to acknowledge the critical role of leadership in shaping these capabilities. The head coach plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for communication, training, and culture. A coach who is committed to developing all players, not just starters, and who is willing

to invest time and effort in building relationships and providing feedback is more likely to create a motivational climate that fosters player development. This highlights the importance of selecting and developing coaches who possess not just tactical expertise, but also strong interpersonal and leadership skills [15-33].

6. Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings

This paper has provided a business-oriented re-interpretation of the factors influencing motivation in fringe players, positioning the challenge within the strategic management framework of the Resource-Based View. The study found that fringe players can be conceptualised as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) human capital resource. The key to unlocking the strategic value of this resource lies in developing specific organisational capabilities: strategic communication systems, a differentiated training and development infrastructure, and a cohesive and inclusive organisational culture. These capabilities, in turn, were found to be most effective when they satisfied the players' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This integration of strategic management and motivation theory provides a powerful new lens through which to view the challenge of squad management in professional football.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by bridging the gap between the macro-level perspective of the RBV and the micro-level perspective of motivation theory. It provides a clear illustration of how the psychological experiences of individuals within a firm serve as the microfoundations upon which macro-level competitive advantage is built. The paper extends the RBV to the talent-intensive, highly competitive context of professional football and provides a novel framework for understanding how strategic human resource management can be used to create and sustain a competitive edge.

Strategic Recommendations for Football Clubs

The findings of this study lead to several clear and actionable strategic recommendations for football club executives, managers, and owners:

- **View Fringe Players as Strategic Assets:** Shift the organisational mindset from viewing fringe players as a sunk cost to viewing them as a valuable and appreciating asset. This requires a long-term strategic perspective and a commitment to player development.
- **Invest in Organisational Capabilities:** Recognise that competitive advantage is derived not just from the acquisition of talent, but from the organisational capabilities used to develop it. Invest in systems, processes, and infrastructure that support player development, particularly in communication, training, and culture.
- **Adopt a Motivation-Centric Approach to Management:** Understand that the key to unlocking the potential of human capital lies in creating a motivational climate that satisfies the basic psychological needs of individuals. Design

management practices and organisational systems with the principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in mind.

• **Integrate Sporting and Financial Objectives:** Recognise that the effective management of fringe players has both sporting and financial benefits. A well-managed squad is more likely to perform well on the pitch, and a well-developed group of players will appreciate it, providing a significant return on investment.

Bringing these recommendations together, Figure 3 summarises a strategic model for the management of fringe players that aligns sporting and financial objectives.

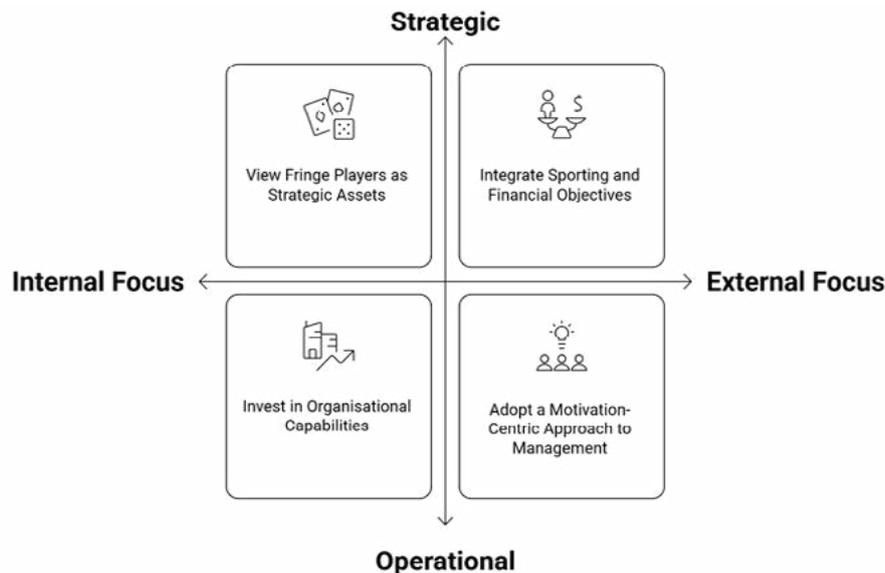


Figure 3: Strategic Management of Fringe Players

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations, including its small sample size and focus on the specific context of male professional football in England. Future research should test the proposed framework with larger, more diverse samples and across different cultural and sporting contexts. Longitudinal studies that track the relationship between squad management practices, player development, and club performance over time would be a particularly valuable addition to the literature. Furthermore, the financial implications of the proposed approach warrant more detailed investigation, with research needed to quantify the return on investment from developing fringe players.

Concluding Remarks

In the hyper-competitive world of professional football, the search for a sustainable source of competitive advantage is a constant and pressing challenge. This paper has argued that a significant, yet often overlooked, source of such an advantage lies in the effective management and development of a club's fringe players. By viewing these players as strategic assets and by investing in the organisational capabilities that foster their development, football clubs can unlock a powerful source of on-pitch success and financial sustainability. The challenge for club leaders is to move beyond the short-term imperatives of the next match and to adopt a more

It depicts how reconceptualising fringe players as strategic assets, underpinned by deliberate investment in organisational capabilities and a motivation-centric management approach, forms an integrated system rather than a set of isolated initiatives. By embedding the principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within communication, training, and cultural practices, clubs can systematically enhance the value of their human capital and generate both performance and financial returns. In this way, Figure 3 illustrates the pathway through which the strategic management of fringe players can be operationalised at club level and translated into sustained competitive advantage.

strategic, long-term, and human-centric approach to squad management.

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