

Sport Special Report

Radical thinking needed to arrest downward spiral of English football



Times Sport begins a five-part investigation into the future of English football, pre-empting the commission set up by Greg Dyke, the FA chairman, and free of its politics. **Oliver Kay**, Chief Football Correspondent, paints the overall picture



It is almost six months since Greg Dyke stood in the restaurant on the 29th floor of the Millbank Tower and declared a state of emergency. English football, he said, was a "tanker which needs turning".

It was a little too near the knuckle for some, but just about everything Dyke said that afternoon was correct. As the FA's new chairman, he saw himself as the brave helmsman, ready to turn the ship around and set off on a radical new course towards his bold target of glory in the 2022 World Cup. If he erred, it was in imagining that this particular tanker would respond well even to the suggestion of being handled forcefully and decisively. Nobody in English football likes the boat to be rocked.

Dyke's so-called "England commission", a five-month exercise in asking questions and chewing over a wide range of conflicting responses on youth development and the future of the national team, had hoped to be able to sign off its key findings and recommendations at a meeting last week and release them to the FA board yesterday. It did not happen. Like so much else the FA does, with many good intentions, the commission is at risk of being reduced to an exercise in diplomacy.

If the commission is to be a worthwhile exercise, it cannot be about walking on egg shells. English football has a problem. In September, Dyke

spelt it out with statistics, outlining how English players had gone from representing 69 per cent of starting line-ups in the Premier League in 1992-93, to 38 per cent in 2002-03 to 32 per cent in 2012-13.

Last weekend was a typical one: only 32.7 per cent of those players who featured in starting line-ups in the top division were eligible for Roy Hodgson's team — and of the 72 eligible Englishmen who started, 18 were aged 30 or over, while only 14 were under the age of 24. Alarmingly, this included just eight of the 29 players who have appeared for England Under-21 this season.

That figure, of only one third of Premier League starters being English, is trotted out so often that people have become dismissive of it. The cream rises to the top, we are told. It just means that the best of the rest filter down to the Football League. So how about this statistic: only 50 per cent of players who started in the Sky Bet Championship last weekend were English. Of 484 players starting matches in the Barclays Premier League and Championship and last weekend, only 204 (42 per cent) were English.

The CIES Football Observatory, based in Switzerland, prefers to use a different statistic, focusing on the percentage of minutes played by national players in each league per season. In the first seven seasons after the CIES began its records in 2005-06, the figure for English players in the Premier League was between 40.8 per cent and 46.1 per cent. *The Times*, however, can reveal that the figure has fallen from 45.5 per cent in 2011-12 to 39.3 per cent last season to 37 per cent so far this season. It is getting worse, not better.

As a rough indication, that figure of 37 per cent implies that, at each Premier League match, only seven of the 22 players in the starting line-ups would be English, as would one or two of the substitutes. Hodgson has indicated that if 70 English players start matches in the Premier League on any given weekend, the pool of players of interest to him is smaller than 40.

The figures are even more worrying when it comes to the percentage of English players under the age of 22. In 2005-06 they accounted for 6.4 per cent of the minutes played in the Premier League. By this season, that figure has fallen to 2.7 per cent, which means that, on average, English youngsters appear for a total of 53 minutes in every Premier League match.

Last weekend, only eight English players under 22 started matches in the Premier League: Wilfried Zaha (Car-

Dyke may become mired in politics

diff City), Jon Flanagan and Raheem Sterling (both Liverpool), Nathan Redmond (Norwich City), Luke Shaw and Calum Chambers (Southampton), Jonjo Shelvey (Swansea City) and Saido Berahino (West Bromwich Albion). Curiously, of those seven, three (Zaha, Sterling and Berahino) were born overseas.

The concern is not only that English football is failing to produce enough footballers of the requisite quality — a legacy that reflects inadequacies in coaching, facilities and perhaps more deeply rooted shortcomings of technique, outlook or culture — but that the ever greater financial stakes have created an environment in which the majority of Premier League and Championship managers seem far too preoccupied with their next result to think long term.

This merely reflects the trends that the Professional Footballers' Association highlighted in 2007 in a robust report called *Meltdown*. The report was published shortly after England's failure to qualify for Euro 2008 — though it was commissioned before — and included the line: "We are a second-rate

'Like so much else the FA does, the commission is at risk of being reduced to an exercise in diplomacy'

footballing nation and, if nothing is done, we are a decade away from being a third world footballing nation."

"What is at stake," the *Meltdown* report added, "is not just the future of the England team, but the fundamental right of English players to rise as far as their talent will take them. That right is now denied."

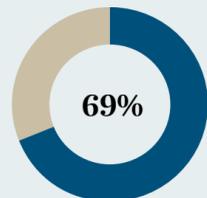
Richard Scudamore, the Premier League chief executive, admits having "flipped" and concluded that something had to change after England's abject failure to qualify for Euro 2008. But it took 2½ years for the Premier League to introduce its "home-grown player rule", whereby clubs had to include a minimum of eight home-grown (which does not necessarily mean English) players in their 25-man squad each season.

It took another four years for the FA to gain approval for an extremely belated overhaul of its approach to playing and coaching at grassroots and junior level, laying out terms for a more technical, fun-based, possession-based approach. It took four years for the Premier League clubs to force through its Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which, whatever its shortcomings, cre-

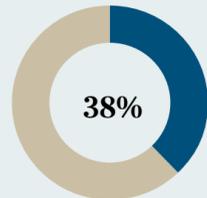


Young, gifted and held back

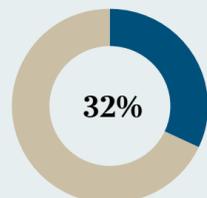
English players in Premier League starting line-ups in 1992-93



English players in Premier League starting line-ups in 2002-03



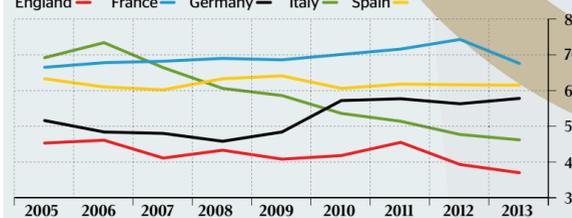
English players in Premier League starting line-ups in 2012-13



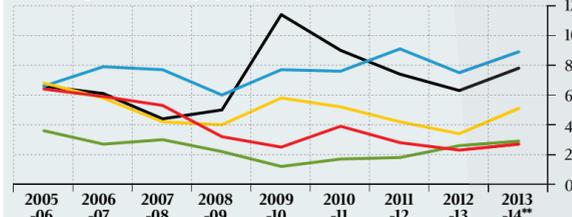
English players in Premier League starting line-ups last weekend

67.3%
148 foreign players

Percentage of minutes played by nationals*



Percentage of minutes played by Under-21† nationals



*National: player born or grew up in the country †Player under the age of 22 during all the season

ates an opportunity for players to have more access to better coaching at the leading academies.

All these advances in coaching and facilities, allied to the new National Football Centre at St George's Park, in Burton upon Trent, should bring benefits, but if Dyke feels that these are merely long-overdue steps in the right direction, rather than the far-reaching reforms that would make up lost ground on Spain, Germany and other leading nations, he is not alone.

Even if the quality improves, will the players get the opportunity? Even if they get the opportunity, will English football give them the best chance of exhibiting their talents on the international stage? Here we enter what has to be another integral part of the commission's work, which is to get a fairer balance between the interests of clubs and country, whether that means securing

mandatory release for international football, particularly youth tournaments, or recommending a winter break to ensure that England do not turn up for World Cups and European Championships exhausted.

After Germany's humiliation at Euro 2000, the DFB (German FA) undertook a wide-ranging review of its approach to youth development. Whereas the FA seems terrified of even saying anything between now and this summer's World Cup in Brazil, for fear of distracting the England team, the DFB had its programme approved and ready to go by the time Germany unexpectedly returned from the 2002 World Cup as runners-up.

The DFB's "Extended Talent Promotion Programme" involved great investment in coaching at 46 club academies, 29 further education colleges designed "elite football schools" and



Teen wonders

Players under 20 who started Premier League matches last weekend

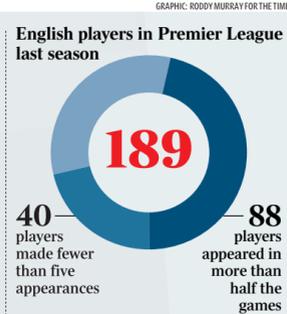
- Raheem Sterling, above (Liverpool)
Nathan Redmond (Norwich City)
Calum Chambers, right, and Luke Shaw (Southampton)
Saido Berahino (West Bromwich Albion)

366 training centres across Germany. Moreover, there was a firm commitment taken by all Bundesliga clubs to increase their commitment to developing, nurturing and promoting German talent. Has it worked? Don't just look at the national team. Look at Bayern Munich. Look at Borussia Dortmund.

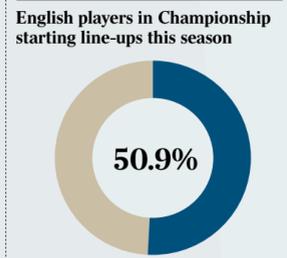
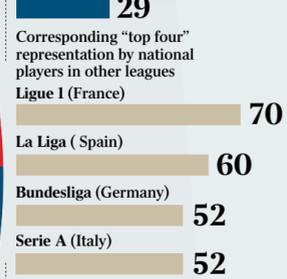
Does English football have the vision, the courage, the will or the leadership even to try to emulate what has been achieved in Germany?

Dyke has already established that English football has a serious problem. He and his commission have to pinpoint not only precise issues, but also how they propose to address them. The feeling persists that they will opt for a steadier, more conservative course, that they will stop some way short of trying to turn the tanker around. That would be a great shame. It is about time someone rocked the boat.

TOMORROW
'Grassroots facilities are under pressure. We only have a modest stock of pitches and it's likely to get worse before it gets better'



English players who appeared for the top four teams, i.e. Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea and Arsenal



English players in Championship starting line-ups this season



Source: CIES Football Observatory <http://www.eurofootballers.org/>

MILESTONES

How earlier attempts to nurture new talent fared

Over the past 40 years, the FA has tried various youth initiatives to try to nurture home-grown talent, half-heartedly changing from one approach to another (Oliver Kay writes). Here are some of the most significant milestones in youth development.

1984 The FA opens a national School of Excellence at Lilleshall, Shropshire, with an annual intake of players educated and trained at the centre, away from their clubs, between the ages of 14 and 16. Pupils include Michael Owen, Jermain Defoe, Phil Neville, Sol Campbell, Andrew Cole, Joe Cole, Jamie Carragher and Scott Parker.

Pros The list of players above shows several success stories and suggests that Lilleshall developed grounded, disciplined professionals as well as good footballers.

Cons The school was closed after Howard Wilkinson, the FA technical director, said it was an "inequity" to select a national elite group at such a young age. Of the final year of graduates in 1999, only Defoe had a successful Premier League career. Wilkinson preferred to replicate the centre of excellence model at a regional level, with the clubs in charge.

1997 Wilkinson introduces his *Charter for Quality*, and youth development becomes the responsibility of the clubs, who are obliged to commit to funding a drastic improvement in facilities. Purpose-built academies replace the old centres of excellence.

Pros Better facilities, more contact time with players, fewer matches.
Cons The plan was not radical enough. Clubs complained about the 90-minute rule, which restricted them to signing youngsters who lived within that travelling time from their ground.

2010 Premier League introduces the "home-grown player ruling". Clubs must name a minimum of eight home-grown players in a 25-man squad.

Pros Clubs encouraged to integrate home-grown talent into their first-team squad rather than sign stopgaps from abroad.
Cons The looseness of the "home-grown" definition ("players trained for

three years under the age of 21 by a club within the English and Welsh professional system") leads some clubs to intensify efforts to import foreign talent at academy level. Eight does not seem enough when Manchester City's total included Richard Wright, their 36-year-old third-choice goalkeeper, and Dedryck Boyata and Gaël Clichy, Belgian and French respectively.

2011 Elite Player Performance Plan lays out requirements to improve facilities and increase exposure to high-quality coaching from 2,500 hours of coaching contact time to up to 10,000 hours by the age of 18. Reserve-team format is scrapped, replaced by under-21 and under-18 leagues.

Pros Greater emphasis on coach education, improvements of standards and facilities (in education as well as training) and increased access to the highest quality of coaching.

Cons Premier League was accused of bullying the Football League into steering the best talent to the biggest clubs, some of whom had little record of nurturing English talent. Under-21 and under-18 league format proved unpopular.

2012 Approval, finally, of an overhaul in coaching at junior and grassroots level. Competitive element is introduced only gradually, five-a-side football for under-8s, nine-a-side up to under-12s. No more primary schoolchildren playing on full-size pitches.
Pros More emphasis on skill, enjoyment and on individual improvement rather than results.
Cons Long wait to implement changes that may take more than a decade to bring real benefits.

2012 St George's Park, the new National Football Centre, opens near Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire.

Pros A training base for all England's national teams and with a more serious, academic approach to sports science as well as educating coaches.
Cons Idea was first raised in 1970s. Nothing like the scope of Clairefontaine, the French school of excellence, which was its inspiration. No direct involvement in the development of young players.



Defoe was one of the talented boys at Lilleshall

Online and on tablet
Join the debate today
Can the Three Lions roar again? Ask Matt Dickinson live from 1pm

On Monday
Gabriele Marcotti puts our ideas to the test in a special edition of the podcast, from 5pm.
Watch the live debate hosted on YouTube
thetimes.co.uk/football

TALKING POINTS FOR CHANGE

Over the next five days, *Times* writers will investigate and make recommendations on such topics as:

- ENABLING YOUNG PLAYERS TO GAIN FIRST-TEAM EXPERIENCE
No matter how many players England's academies produce — and how good they are — it will not matter if the path to the first team is blocked. A solution has to be found. The under-21 league has to be improved, the loan system reformed and feeder clubs considered.
PROVIDING BETTER GRASSROOTS FACILITIES, COACHING AND FUNDING
The roots of football's grassroots crisis can be traced to the origins of the sport and the Victorians' obsession with masculinity and wholeness

adoption of a volunteering culture. As a result many English boys still start the most competitive sporting race of all at a distinct disadvantage in terms of coaching, facilities and funding, with the FA doing its best to play catch-up after decades of neglect. IS MONEY THE ROOT OF ALL ENGLAND'S FOOTBALL EVIL? The English game is the richest in the world but is that wealth a help or a hindrance to talent development? Michel Platini, the Uefa president, is among those who thinks it makes us lazy, turning to foreign imports instead of producing our own, but this is too simple. Our national team was mediocre when our leagues were stuffed full of Englishmen, not cheap French and Danes.