



# Bullshit in boots: Language, power, and conceptual ambiguity in football

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## ABSTRACT

Language plays a critical yet underexamined role in talent identification and talent development systems in football. While advances in sport science have improved measurement and monitoring practices, the conceptual language that underpins key developmental decisions has remained vague, inconsistently applied, and largely untheorised. Terms such as *talent*, *elite*, *character*, and *training load* are routinely deployed with authority across scouting, coaching, and organisational contexts, yet often lack shared definitions, empirical grounding, or transparent criteria. This conceptual ambiguity is not trivial; it shapes access to opportunity, legitimises identification and (de)selection decisions, and structures developmental pathways in ways that may reproduce bias and exclusion. Drawing on Harry G Frankfurt's philosophical thesis of *Bullshit* as communication indifferent to truth but orientated toward impression management, this short communication advances the argument that football environments may operate as *bullshit ecologies*. In such contexts, ambiguous yet authoritative-sounding terminology is structurally incentivised, serving rhetorical, political, and symbolic functions rather than conveying epistemic clarity. Through illustrative examples drawn from football discourse, the paper demonstrates how key terms function as technologies of power that shape belief, status, and opportunity. Rather than offering definitive definitions, this conceptual paper proposes a shift toward accountable subjectivity through three practical recommendations: the development of shared, football-specific terminology framework; the embedding of conceptual literacy within football education programmes; and the organisational auditing of language practices. Semantic clarity is not an academic luxury but a structural and ethical necessity for more transparent, equitable, and evidence-informed football identification, development, and performance systems.

## Introduction

Language is more than a tool of communication in sport, it is a mechanism of inclusion, exclusion, categorisation, and persuasion [1]. Nowhere is this more evident than in football, where key decisions about talent identification, player development, and progression are shaped as much by what is said as by what is done [2]. Phrases such as “great potential,” or “football intelligence,” are regularly invoked in scouting reports, academy programmes, and coach interviews [3,4]. Yet these terms often lack shared definitions, empirical grounding, or clarity in application [5], and despite their frequent use, may obscure more than they reveal.

In recent years, growing attention has been given to the need for epistemological rigour in athlete development [6,7]. While sport science has advanced rapidly in areas like physical monitoring [8], injury prevention [9,10], psycho-social and life skills development [11,12], environmental and organisational influence [13,14] the conceptual

language that underpins decision-making in football has fallen behind. This poses risks not only to transparency and alignment but also to fairness and opportunity across developmental systems [15]. This paper is neither empirical nor a systematic review of any literature; instead, it is intended as a short conceptual piece to position language use for those researching “talent” in football contexts. The article is not intended to provide answers or solutions – those must be developed with practitioners.

To interrogate this issue, however, Frankfurt's [16] philosophical work *On Bullshit*, is adopted as a theoretical framework. Frankfurt's bullshit thesis distinguished between two types of language/communication, namely *lying* and *bullshit*, the latter being the more insidious form of communication that is indifferent to truth. Frankfurt argued that bullshit arises when language is used primarily to influence or impress, rather than to convey truth or meaning. In football, this concept is particularly salient. Language in the context of football often functions as performance, designed to display competence, justify choices, or

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maintain authority, even when the terms or phrases employed are vague or unverifiable. This paper will argue that football environments may, sometimes unwittingly, operate as bullshit ecologies: environments where ambiguous language is not only tolerated but structurally incentivised. It will explore how such terminology serves political, symbolic, and rhetorical purposes, often at the expense of clarity and rigour. Through illustrative examples, the paper examines the implications of this communicative ambiguity for player identification and development and offers conceptual and practical recommendations; ultimately contending that semantic clarity is not a luxury, it is a structural necessity for more inclusive, equitable, and evidence-informed football environments.

Football is not just played on a pitch, it is constructed through language: The words used by coaches, scouts, analysts, and institutions shape how players are identified, selected, and developed. Yet, as elsewhere in sport, the language used in football environments operates with an alarming degree of imprecision [17–20]. Numerous terms are utilised within talent identification and talent development environments and teams; it is impossible to provide a comprehensive list of these here, nor is it the intention of this article to provide answers. By way of an example, terms such as “character” and “vision” are invoked with authority, but too often lack clear definitions, transparent criteria, or shared understanding amongst those using them. Consequently, vague language has become embedded in everyday practice, which not only clouds judgements, but quietly reinforces exclusion, providing advantage to those who best fit the language rather than those with the greatest potential.

### Blurry terminology in football

The identification, (de)selection, and development of footballers is guided not only by technical, tactical, physical, physiological, psychological, and sociocultural frameworks (cf. [21,22]), but by the language used to describe, evaluate, and justify an individuals’ progression [23]. Within academy systems, scouting networks, and coach education, terminology serves as a form of currency, one that influences access, shapes perceptions, and structures opportunity [19]. Yet, as this section explores, key terms that populate football discourse are often conceptually vague, inconsistently applied, and unmoored from shared definitions. This ambiguity is not trivial; it carries significant implications for player development and system alignment. Below, three examples are offered by way of demonstrating this.

#### *Elite: a floating signifier*

The label *elite* is, perhaps, the most pervasive and problematic descriptor in sport [24], not just football. It is routinely applied to players, academies, pathways, competitions, and even age-group squads, yet its meaning remains fluid and context dependent. In England, for example, the Premier League’s Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP; [25]) attempted to provide formality and conformity to the term through its categorisation of academies [25]. While this framework introduced regulatory consistency, the designation of *elite* has not always aligned with tangible indicators such as competitive success, access to developmental resources, or long-term player outcomes [26]. There are, of course, other ambiguous examples of the terms application, such as the labelling of youth international squads frequently being described as *elite* despite evidence that points to involvement in youth national teams being a poor predictor of future senior national team engagement [27,28], further highlighting the transient moments in a player’s developmental pathway. Likewise, short-term training camps, talent identification days, or regional development programmes are commonly branded as *elite* even when selection criteria are opaque and participation is shaped as much by availability and geography [29] or prior access as by demonstrable performance. At an individual level, players may be labelled *elite* at increasingly young ages, a designation

that can confer status and expectation without clear reference to developmental timescales or comparative benchmarks.

The operational consequences of such terminological ambiguity was particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when youth players in England attached to category one academies were permitted to return to training whilst those in categories two, three, or four were excluded [30]. In this context, *elite* functioned as an administrative threshold, one that carried significant material consequences despite its imprecise foundations. Beyond access, the expanding use of *elite* also fosters an illusion of objectivity while embedding exclusivity and hierarchy [24] within football cultures. Indeed, the term reproduces a binary of those deemed *in* and *out*, often absent of transparent or equitable criteria [31]. In doing so, it contributes to an ecology in which symbolic status is privileged over developmental nuance.

#### *Talent: between intuition and bias*

Despite decades of research in sports science, the concept of talent remains contested and ill-defined [22,32,33]. This ambiguity is compounded by the way talent is embedded across three related but analytically distinct processes in football: identification, (de)selection, and development. Talent identification refers to the process of recognising players who may possess attributes relevant to future performance [33]; (de)selection involves making inclusion or exclusion decisions at specific points in time [34]; and development concerns the structured support, learning opportunities, and environments through which players’ capacities are shaped over time [26]. While these processes are conceptually separable, in practice they are frequently conflated, with the language of talent used interchangeably to justify early identification, immediate selection, and long-term investment.

In football, talent is routinely invoked to justify selection, investment, development, or retention, yet what constitutes talent is rarely made explicit. Definitions shift across contexts and actors, alternately emphasising physical attributes, technical proficiency, tactical awareness, psychological attributes, or overall long-term potential. Whilst studies have sought to better understand specific attributes sought when identifying talented footballers [35–38]; these criteria are seldom anchored in shared frameworks or supported by longitudinal evidence. This results in a concept that is simultaneously central and unstable [39]. This ambiguity is not inherently problematic; in some contexts, the flexibility of the term allows practitioners to recognise emergent qualities that are difficult to quantify, such as adaptability, creativity, or learning capacity. If used cautiously, talent can function as a provisional descriptor that invites ongoing observation rather than premature judgement. However, in practice, this openness often collapses due to impressionistic assessment [40]. The problem, as problematised in this short communication, is not simply that talent lacks a stable definition, but that its ambiguous use obscures the distinctions between distinct processes. When invoked without regard for these differences, talent may function as what Frankfurt [16] would describe as *bullshit*: language that appears explanatory while remaining indifferent to the truth conditions of the processes it is meant to describe. In doing so, it legitimises authority, masks uncertainty, and forecloses scrutiny of how opportunity is actually distributed within and across the football talent ecosystem.

The absence of agreed definitions enables talent to operate as a catch-all label that absorbs subjective preference, institutional expectation, and contextual convenience. Consequently, the same behaviours may be interpreted as indicators of talent in one player and dismissed as inconsistency or immaturity in another. Moreover, the language of talent is not socially neutral, with empirical work demonstrating that players born earlier in the selection year, or those who conform to dominant cultural norms are more likely to be identified and described as talented, reflecting well-documented relative age and social bias effects [41]. Such patterns suggest that talent is often recognised retrospectively in those who already fit the system, rather than prospectively

in those who challenge it. In this sense, talent functions less as a discovered property and more as a legitimising label than rationalises decision making. When used without clarity, talent may operate as what Frankfurt [16] would characterise as bullshit – a statement made without sustained regard for truth conditions, but deployed to signal expertise, justify authority, or close-off debate. Labelling a player as talented can appear to explain success while obscuring the contingent, developmental, and socially structured processes that produced it. Conversely, the absence of the label can naturalise exclusion, framing (de)selection as an objective judgement rather than an interpretive choice. The power of talent as a term lies precisely in its vagueness: it feels explanatory while remaining resistant to scrutiny.

#### *Character: moral merit or cultural code?*

*Character* is often applied as an attribute in player evaluation [37], alongside phrases like “*great mentality*,” or “*natural leader*” populate evaluative documents and coach briefings [20,35,37]. In academy and professional environments, these judgements are increasingly supported by structured interviews, psychological questionnaires, and extended/extensive informal observations during training and competition [20,38]. Yet, despite this attempts at formalisation, terms like *character* remain highly subjective, spared by the experiential frameworks, cultural expectations, and cognitive heuristics of those making identification and (de)selection decisions [42,43].

Applied research suggests that scouts and recruitment staff often attempt to infer character through assessments of motivation, emotional control, coachability, and interpersonal behaviour; drawing on formal psychological tools and multidisciplinary team discussions [12,44,45]. These practices are often suggested to increase objectivity and reduce bias, yet they do not remove subjectivity, so much as relocate it. Psychometric tools embed normative assumptions about desirable dispositions and self-regulatory styles, while interview-based approaches privilege verbal confidence, reflexive self-presentation, and familiarity with dominant cultural narratives of success [44,46,47]. Furthermore, informal observation, often valued for its ecological validity, remains filtered through institutional expectations regarding how attributes are visibly expressed [42].

We can once again see how language, even when attempting to be more objective can succumb to organisational and cultural norms and compliance rather than ethical reasoning, adaptive capacity, or context- and individual-specific demonstrations of attributes. This carries particular risk for player from marginalised social backgrounds, neurodivergent players, or individuals whose behavioural repertoires diverge from the dominant culture of the environment in which they are being assessed. Thus, character can operate less as a stable personal attribute and more as a moralised classification that appears objective while functioning ideologically, legitimising some forms of conduct and devaluing others [12,43,46].

#### *Training load: precision without context?*

Training load is operationalised by sports scientists through a well-established lexicon of quantifiable indicators, including GPS-derived external load and session ratings of perceived exertion from players [48]. In football, these measures are central to load management, performance optimisation efforts, and injury prevention [49]. At a technical level, the concept of training load is neither vague nor unstable. Its parameters are clearly defined within the literature. The difficulty arises, however, in how these measures are interpreted and utilised in practice. When training load is reduced exclusively to physical outputs, critical contextual factors (e.g., school pressure, emotional fatigue, etc.) are marginalised, especially for youth players navigating dual-career pathways [50,51]. Moreover, considerable variation exists across clubs, coaches, and practitioners regarding what constitutes appropriate load, how it should be individualised [8], and how (or whether)

psychosocial dimensions are integrated into decision-making.

In this situation, training load becomes a less neutral descriptor of work performed, and more a justificatory resource. Its numerical precision can be utilised to legitimise decisions, foreclose discussion, or obfuscate, especially when alternative forms of strain are excluded from consideration. Here, Frankfurt’s concern with bullshit becomes relevant: not as an indictment of measurement, *per se*, but of the strategic use of technically rigorous or scientific language [52] to bypass the complexity of seeking truth.

#### **Terminology as technology of power**

Collectively, the examples above illustrate that key terms are not simply neutral descriptors; they are technologies of power [53]. They govern access to opportunity, shape self-concept, and influence developmental trajectories. When language is used without definitional clarity or critical reflection, it contributes to a symbolic economy in which impression often outweighs precision [54,55]. Thus, it can be contested that such terminology does not merely reflect football culture, it actively constructs it. The previous sections highlighted that core terms in football development, though widely used and institutionally embedded, often lack clear definitions or consistent application. This ambiguity is not merely a linguistic inconvenience; it has tangible effects on practice. For example, players may be retained or released on the basis of being labelled “high potential,” despite limited consensus on how such judgements are formed or evidenced. In more constructive cases, shared but loosely defined language can enable interdisciplinary dialogue, allowing coaches, sports scientists, and psychologists to coordinate decisions around player welfare or development. However, when left unexamined, the same terms can obscure accountability, allowing evaluative decisions to appear technically justified while remaining resistant to challenge.

Yet, beyond their conceptual looseness, these terms may also serve deeper rhetorical functions. Their pervasiveness across roles and contexts, despite lacking epistemological precision, suggests that they may operate less as conveyors of truth and more as tools of impression [56–58]. Rather than focusing on what these terms mean, or fail to mean, consideration now turns to how and why they are used, and with what regard for truth, clarity, or accountability.

#### *Bullshit and the language of football*

In positioning the conceptual vagueness that pervades football discourse, Frankfurt [16] argues that bullshit is a distinct mode of communication, different from lying. While the liar knows what the truth is and makes it their mission to keep people from the truth they do, in fact, demonstrate a sense of respect for the value of truth. The bullshitter, however, is fundamentally indifferent to the truth. They do not care whether what they are saying is true or false; they’re not engaged in the enterprise of conveying information or deceiving people; they’re engaged in the enterprise of manipulation: Their primary concern is impression management, not factual accuracy or conceptual integrity.

This distinction has direct relevance in football, where language plays a central role in constructing meaning, status, and belief systems within coaching, talent identification, and talent development. This philosophical framework provides a useful lens for interrogating the proliferation of ambiguous yet authoritative-sounding terminology, what this paper is terming *bullshit in boots*. Football environments are ripe for this communicative phenomenon. Coaches, scouts, media, and governing bodies routinely deploy evaluative terms, such as “potential” or “mentality” without clear operational definitions. These terms often function less as shared descriptors than as signals of expertise or as rhetorical devices used to justify decisions, rather than communicate transparent criteria or foster shared understanding [54]. For example, a player might be excluded from a development programme on the basis of being judged to lack one or more desired attributes [34,35,37,38,59],

even when those attributes remain loosely defined, unmeasured, and inconsistently applied. In this way, terminology that appears meaningful and evaluative serves to legitimise outcomes while obscuring the basis on which they are reached.

From a Frankfurtian perspective, this pattern of discourse reflects not a lack of intelligence or good intention, but a form of semantic detachment: language used without regard for its truth conditions. In football, the consequences of this detachment extend beyond coaches, clubs, and federations, to players and their families, who often encounter the talent system primarily through its terminology. Labels such as “elite”, “academy”, “pathway,” can shape how players and parents interpret progress, risk, and opportunity; frequently encouraging inflated expectations or misplaced anxiety, or a sense of personal failure if progress stalls or deselection occurs. In this context, bullshit thrives not because individuals deliberately mislead, but because the system tolerates, or even rewards, language that performs reassurance, authority, or aspiration rather than informing realistically. The result is a communicative environment in which belief and impression are prioritised over clarity, with implications for trust, equity, and alignment across the talent pathway [60]. By foregrounding this philosophical critique, the paper shifts focus from merely identifying terminological inconsistencies to interrogating the purpose and effect of language in football. It suggests that conceptual ambiguity in football is not just an academic inconvenience, it is a structural problem that influences how athletes are identified, developed, assessed, (de)selected, and excluded.

While Frankfurt’s concept of bullshit helps us understand the philosophical underpinnings of language misuse in football, critique alone is insufficient. If football environments are, indeed, prone to communicative habits that prioritise impression over clarity, then structural interventions are required to realign language with purpose. The challenge is not only to identify where ambiguity exists but to develop practical mechanisms for conceptual precision and shared understanding. In the next section, I offer a set of actionable recommendations aimed at improving terminological rigour across the football ecosystem. These proposals are not designed to eliminate interpretive flexibility altogether, but to establish a more coherent and equitable linguistic foundation for decision-making in talent pathways.

### Toward conceptual clarity

If the preceding sections have established that key developmental terms in football are often vague, subjective, or strategically deployed without epistemic care, then the next logical step is to address how greater conceptual clarity might be achieved. This is not merely an academic exercise in semantics. In environments where access to opportunity, inclusion in pathways, and allocation of resources are mediated through language, terminological precision is a matter of equity, transparency, and integrity. The following recommendations propose a constructive path forward, drawing on principles from sport science, applied linguistics, and coach education.

#### *A terminology framework for talent identification and talent development in football*

A first step in achieving conceptual clarity is recognising that talent identification and talent development are, by their nature, interpretive and judgement-based processes. Decisions about potential, readiness, or progression cannot be fully objective, and some degree of subjectivity is, therefore, inevitable. The problem is not the presence of subjective judgement *per se*, but the absence of shared reference points through which such judgement can be articulated, scrutinised, and held accountable. Based on this position, the creation of a structured and openly accessible terminology framework for football development environments becomes particularly important. This living lexicon (cf. [61]) should clearly define core terms in a way that is both operationalisable yet flexible enough to accommodate contextual variation.

Rather than attempting to eliminate interpretation, definitions should be rooted in practice and observable indicators, making explicit what I being attended to when judgements are being made [62]. Such a framework could serve as a common reference point across clubs, federations, and development programmes for players, scouts, and coaches. Importantly, it should also be co-created through multi-stakeholder input to ensure relevance and buy-in [63]. Comparable approaches have proven valuable in other areas of sport science, including frameworks for psychological safety [64] and athlete mental health [65]. A football-specific terminology guide would, therefore, not remove subjectivity from identification, (de)selection, or assessment processes, but would make the values, assumptions, and criteria underpinning those decisions more visible, contestable, and equitable.

#### *Embedding conceptual literacy into education programmes*

Despite the increasing sophistication of football education systems, including ongoing work within this space by FIFA [66], relatively little attention is paid to the epistemological foundations of the language of football [67]. Courses, especially for coaches, tend to emphasise technical models, strategies and tactics, and understanding modern trends in the game, but rarely interrogate the linguistic habits through which stakeholders describe, assess, or categorise players. This omission is significant, as a wide range of stakeholders (i.e., scouts, coaches, administrators, scientists, etc) act as linguistic gatekeepers at different points across the talent pathway, translating subjective perceptions into evaluative terms that can meaningfully shape an individuals’ future. The consequences of this process are not uniform and will vary amongst individuals within clubs, never mind across different clubs. When language is used carefully, it can support development and understanding. For example, describing a player as “currently struggling to cope with decision-making speed under pressure” offers a specific, time-bound, and improvable conservation. In contrast, labelling the same player as “lacking game intelligence” collapses the complexity into a static judgement that is harder to contest or reinterpret. Importantly, in the latter example, the impact of such language is shaped not only by *what* is said, but by *who* said it. Identical terms may be interpreted very differently when voiced by a senior coach, head of recruitment, or a peer; with authority-lending weight, legitimacy, and permanence to otherwise ambiguous descriptions. As a result, loosely defined terminology can crystallise into perceived truths when attached to institutional power.

Embedding conceptual literacy into education programmes would, therefore, involve encouraging critical reflection on the content of blurry language within football environments [46]. This would include developing awareness of how terms function rhetorically, how authority shapes interpretation, and how language can either invite dialogue or close it down. Educators could draw on interdisciplinary work highlighting the role of language in identity formation, expectation setting, and systemic bias, helping practitioners distinguish between descriptive accuracy and impression management. This approach does not seek to burden individuals with abstract theory, but rather to equip them with the capacity to use language more precisely, reflexively, and ethically when making decisions about players they are responsible for identifying, (de)selecting, and developing.

#### *Audit language use across football development systems*

In addition to individual-level reflection, there is a strong case for organisational auditing of language practices. Football clubs and federations generate large volumes of internal documents, including scouting reports, player evaluations, and progress reviews. These documents are not just administrative records; they actively shape developmental trajectories and, therefore, warrant scrutiny. Importantly, auditing language need not involve exhaustive or burdensome review; at a practical level, it could begin with periodic sampling of existing documents to examine how a small number of key terms are used, by whom,

and with what apparent assumptions. Such an audit would involve systematically reviewing how key terms are used across documentation to identify patterns of vagueness, implicit bias, or inconsistency. For example, repeated use of abstract evaluative labels without accompanying explanation may signal reliance on unexamined norms rather than shared criteria. Comparative analysis across staff roles (e.g., scouts vs. coaches vs. analysts) may reveal how the same player is framed differently depending on professional perspective. In practice, this type of reflection could be embedded within existing review meetings, staff development workshops, or interdisciplinary case discussions, rather than being treated as a standalone compliance exercise.

The expected outcomes of such auditing are modest but meaningful. Rather than producing definitive judgements, the process would surface tendencies in organisational language use, highlight areas of misalignment, and prompt dialogue about values and expectations. Over time, this can support more consistent communication, clearer feedback to players and parents, and greater awareness of how linguistic practices may disproportionately affect underrepresented groups [68]. In this situation, auditing should function less as a policing mechanism and more as a reflective tool, enabling organisations to make visible the implicit assumptions embedded within their language use [60]. Viewed in this way, conceptual clarity in football requires both a cultural and structural engagement. It demands not only improved definitions, but routine opportunities to examine how language is actually used in context. Precision in language is not about limiting expression; it is about ensuring that what is said aligns with what is meant, and that what is meant is just, transparent, accountable, and defensible.

## Conclusion

Applying Frankfurt's [16] concept of *bullshit* (i.e., communication unconcerned with truth but focused on impression), has hopefully highlighted how football discourse is prone to semantic performance rather than conceptual rigour. This does not imply deliberate deception. Rather, it signals a structural tendency for language to be used for persuasion or positioning, often without epistemic care. In such environments, linguistic ambiguity becomes not just tolerated, but embedded into decision-making systems, contributing to inconsistency, implicit bias, and misalignment across roles.

This paper calls for a shift from persuasive jargon to accountable terminology. If football is to progress as a site of evidence-informed practice and equitable opportunity, it must take its language seriously. The development of shared, sport-specific definitions through interdisciplinary consensus processes and the integration of conceptual literacy into education programmes and policy development. Semantic clarity is not an academic concern, it is a practical and ethical imperative: it determines who gets identified, developed, assessed, (de)selected, excluded, and ultimately, *who gets to play*.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Matthew J. Reeves:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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