

# Invest in our young footballers: Long-term planning key to nurturing talent

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Dr. Fadhil said Sabah has consistently produced gifted young footballers from virtually every district, yet the State’s greatest challenge lies not in discovering talent, but in developing it systematically.

**KOTA KINABALU:** Sabah has no shortage of talented young footballers, but without a structured, long-term and science-driven development system, many of those promising players risk falling short of reaching their full potential, according to a senior sports academic from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Education and Sports Studies, Dr. Frederick Josue @ Mohd Fadhil Abdullah, said Sabah has consistently produced gifted young footballers from virtually every district, yet the State’s greatest challenge lies not in discovering talent, but in developing it systematically.

He said youth football development should never be judged solely by match results or league standings, but by the quality of players produced through a comprehensive pathway that nurtures them from grassroots football to the professional level.

“Sabah has never lacked talent. Every year we continue to see outstanding young players emerging from Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau, Keningau, Lahad Datu, Kota Belud, Beaufort, Semporna, Penampang and many rural districts.

“The real question is not whether Sabah has talented players, but whether we have a sustainable system capable of developing that talent through proper planning, continuity and modern sports science,” he said in a statement.

Dr. Frederick noted that football has evolved significantly over the years, making natural talent alone insufficient for players to succeed at higher levels.

He explained that modern football demands structured coaching programmes supported by tactical education, sports science, performance monitoring, sports psychology, nutrition, injury prevention and rehabilitation, as well as the consistent use of performance analytics.

According to him, many young Sabah players excel during school and district competitions but struggle to continue progressing due to limited exposure to high-quality competitions, age-specific coaching and systematic monitoring of their physical, technical, tactical and psychological development.

He said Sabah’s participation in the Malaysia Youth League should be viewed primarily as a player development platform rather than simply another annual competition where success is measured by league positions.

“Every match should become an opportunity to evaluate how players are progressing—whether they understand tactical principles, maintain team structure, execute attacking and defensive transitions effectively, control possession and make sound decisions under pressure.”

He stressed that victories in youth competitions do not necessarily indicate a successful development programme, just as defeats should not automatically be viewed as failures if players continue to improve individually.

Dr. Frederick called for a clearly defined player development pathway beginning as early as 13 years old and continuing through the Under-17 level, with strong emphasis on mastering football fundamentals.

These include first touch, ball control, passing accuracy, dribbling, finishing, one-on-one defending and intelligent off-the-ball movement before introducing more advanced tactical concepts associated with the modern game.

He also highlighted the growing importance of sports science in youth football, recommending that all youth players undergo regular physical assessments covering speed, strength, endurance, power, agility, mobility and injury prevention.

“Player development decisions should be based on objective data rather than observation alone,” he said.

Beyond physical preparation, Dr. Frederick said mental development remains equally crucial, particularly during adolescence.

Young players, he said, should be guided to develop confidence, discipline, emotional control, resilience and the ability to perform consistently under competitive pressure—qualities that often distinguish elite athletes from the rest.

He described youth coaches as the most influential figures within Sabah’s football ecosystem, emphasising that their responsibility extends far beyond chasing weekly victories.

“A youth coach is not merely preparing a team for the next match. He or she is shaping the future of Sabah football.”

To strengthen coaching standards, he proposed continuous education programmes focusing on modern coaching methodology, sports pedagogy, sports science and performance analysis to ensure coaches remain current with international best practices.

Dr. Frederick also urged football authorities to widen talent identification programmes throughout Sabah, particularly in rural and interior districts where many gifted youngsters often go unnoticed due to limited opportunities and lack of organised competitions.

He suggested expanding age-group leagues, grassroots football festivals and structured scouting programmes to ensure promising players from every corner of the State are given equal opportunities to develop.

According to him, Sabah possesses all the ingredients required to become a leading producer of football talent in Malaysia. However, achieving that vision will require long-term commitment, collaboration among all stakeholders and a development philosophy centred on producing better players rather than merely winning youth trophies.

“If we invest consistently in our young players today, Sabah will not only build stronger youth teams but also create a sustainable pipeline of quality footballers capable of representing the State and the nation for many years to come.”