

The curse of modern football

In 2017, 209 under-aged players were transferred, just 1% of a market worth \$6.37 billion, according to FIFA's Global Transfer Market Report. With too much money at the top for too little talent, transfer fees have become inflated. As a consequence, clubs chase talents at brittle ages.

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Vinicius Junior inhabits a mad world. Last year, at the age of 16, the Brazilian striker became football's most expensive teenager in a £38m move to Spanish giants Real Madrid. Vinicius was a talented player, popping up on the left of midfield for Rio-based Flamengo. In general, he came on as an impact sub. Often, the teenager looked a bit clumsy. Here was a developing prodigy, trying to make his way at Brazil's biggest club.

Then, Real Madrid decided to snap him up. But what had Vinicius actually proved? He had impressed at the 2017 South American Under-17 Championship, scoring seven goals. "He's a promise, but we shouldn't go overboard," said Brazilian coach Carlos Amadeu at a press conference after the tournament. "He's a good kid, but he has a lot of mistakes to make, and I just hope people are patient with him. If he stays focused despite all the glamour surrounding him, he can get to a really high level."

The money play

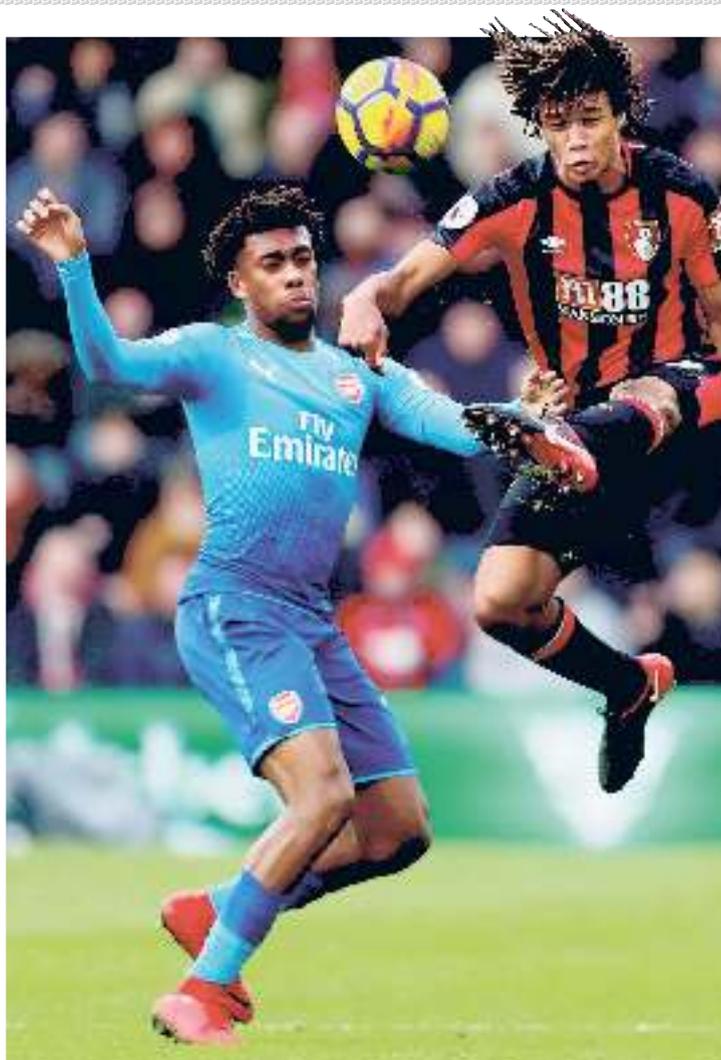
Amadeu's words didn't curb the hype. Vinicius hadn't played a single professional match, but, following his acquisition by



Catching 'em young: Vinicius Junior had impressed in the 2017 South American Under-17 Championship, scoring seven goals. His performance caught the eye of Real Madrid, who paid £38m for the Brazilian teenager. GETTY IMAGES

Real Madrid, the Brazilian, in a long line of exports from his country, was an expression of business might and of regal Spanish confidence, an idea in the minds of Madrid's board members. He was the incarnation and assertion of the club's ambitions.

But why chase a 16-year-old and even unsettle him? Indeed, modern football has derailed; the club game has been transformed as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates infiltrated the European football



landscape in a compulsive quest for Champions League glory. Two Gulf nations wield football as a soft power tool. As a result, the beautiful game has become both a larger-than-life tilted social experiment and a suffocating arms race for the best human resources, poached at ever younger ages.

In the heart of a storm

Vinicius is at the heart of it. In 2017, he was one of 209 under-aged players to be transferred, just 1% of a market worth \$6.37 billion, according to FIFA's Global Transfer Market Report. With too much money at the top for too little talent, transfer fees have become inflated. As a consequence, clubs chase talents at brittle ages. In turn, teenagers leave their homes as just that — kids seeking their way.

"You can see that in two ways," says famed Chelsea scout Piet de Visser. "One

Making an impression:

Bournemouth's Nathan Ake (right) takes on Alex Iwobi of Arsenal during a Premier League match. "Nathan Ake came to Chelsea when he was sixteen. Everyone said he was crazy, but he wanted that. He got that drive," says famed Chelsea scout Piet de Visser.

GETTY IMAGES

player drops off and the other one gets a boost by going abroad. Nathan Ake came to Chelsea when he was sixteen. Everyone said he was crazy, but he wanted that. He got that drive and today he is very prominent in the squad of Chelsea. The player, who cannot handle it, drowns. Jeffrey Bruma also went to Chelsea from Feyenoord at an early age [15] and received an education that provided something extra."

The law

De Visser may be talking from his club's point of view, but the international transfer of under-aged players is prohibited, bar for three exceptions in Article 19 of FIFA's Regulation on the Status and Transfer of Players: when the player's parents move to the country where the club is located for unrelated matters, when the transfer takes place within the European Union or European Economic Area and when the player lives less than 100 kilometres away from the club.

"The rationale of Art. 19 FIFA RSTP is to protect professional and amateur minors," explains Dr Alexander Wild, specialised in sports law and editor of the book 'CAS and Football: Landmark Cases.'

"Article 19 was enacted before the background of human trafficking, particularly of minors coming from poorer countries like South Africa and Africa. The minors are asked to leave their home countries and settle down in countries where the culture and the way of living are completely different to what they are used to. If they do not live up to expectations they are abandoned, not knowing how to survive in a foreign country without education and mostly without any relations to people they know. Article 19 should hence protect minors from becoming victims of unscrupulous exploitation and secure them education. In the past few years, FIFA has shown a strict application of the rules on protection of minors," he says.

The reality

The rule may be a restrictive rationale, trying to offer safeguards to younger players, but in reality clubs and their scouts scour the globe in search of the next prodigy and abusive transfer practices, in a complex web of globalisation, national migrations laws and trade rules that fall outside the coverage of Article 19, still persist. Famously, FC



Barcelona brought Lionel Messi and his parents to Spain when he was just 13. This move pre-dated the existence of Article 19, but in 2013 the Catalan giants registered ten minors in violation of the regulation. Barcelona were slapped with a transfer ban. In 2016, Real Madrid were found guilty of similar violations.

Article 19's leading CAS precedent concerns the transfer of Javier Acuna, a Paraguayan footballer who, in 2005 at age 16, moved to Cadiz in Spain. CAS held that since the decision to move to Spain was a direct result of the transfer, rather than Acuna's mother's new job at a restaurant, the exception did not apply and the transfer was invalid.

Problems aplenty

Danish club FC Midtjylland, renowned for their data approach to the game, were also reproached for signing three under-aged footballers from Nigerian club FC Ebiede. FIFPro, the international players' union, discovered the transfers and alerted FIFA to what the union characterised as "systematically transferring minor Nigerian players in violation of Article 19."

"One has to realise that the number of minor applications increases constantly," highlights Dr. Wild. "Players like [Kylian] Mbappe show: minors are an investment for

Production line:

Renato Sanches (No. 8) in action in the UEFA Youth League quarterfinal between SL Benfica and Shakhtar Donetsk at Caixa Futebol Campus on March 17, 2015. Benfica's youth department has a fine track record, having raked in more than £230 million in the last three years, selling academy graduates. Sanches now plays for Swansea City.

GETTY IMAGES

the future — more than ever before. Each club and each agent is eager to dive in for pearls — there's a close connection between success and early scouting of talented minors. We are now reaching a point where even minors become expensive. In Germany, RB Leipzig wanted to pay a sum of €10 million for a Portuguese player [Umaro Embalo], aged 16."

The Benfica story

Embalo, who has also been linked to a move with English giants Manchester United, is a product of Benfica's academy in Portugal. The club's youth department has a fine track record, having raked in more than £230 million in the last three years, selling academy graduates, among others Manchester City's duo of Bernardo Silva and Ederson, Manchester United's Victor Lindelof and Swansea City's Renato Sanches.

The key to Benfica's youth academy is a holistic approach that balances technical training and education, and offers its youngsters a clear pathway to the first team and the top.

A worrisome development

However, in the current climate not all clubs are prepared to invest in youth development. Last season Brentford FC, founded in 1889, made the unprecedented move to cease their



youth academy's operations. The Bees' reasoning was straightforward: at a cost of around £2m a year, the investment was simply too high for a Championship club with so many Premier League clubs in London on standby to snap up the best talents. Brentford instead focused on a building a reserve team made up of Premier League outcasts and talents from alternative markets.

"Teams are weighing up the financial cost to run these academies and some are finding it just doesn't make sense when compared with how many young players make the first team or get picked by the bigger clubs for small fees," says international scout Neil McGuinness, who worked for Celtic Glasgow in the past. "Huddersfield have made huge changes to their academy structure to try and give themselves a better chance of producing first team-ready players, focussing only on 16 years old and above."

The exceptions

In general, Huddersfield and Brentford re-

Going places:

Spain's Sergio Gomez moved from FC Barcelona to Borussia Dortmund after an impressive performance in the under-17 World Cup in India last year. **K. R. DEEPAK**

main exceptions. Major clubs won't change their modus operandi soon either.

The recent Under-17 World Cup was another playing ground for scouts, with both Manchester United and City, Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain and Sevilla among the clubs who had sent representatives to India.

After the tournament, Spain's Sergio Gomez moved from FC Barcelona to Borussia Dortmund. The USA's Josh Sargent crossed the Atlantic to sign for Werder Bremen.

Vinicius didn't participate for Brazil in the tournament. He has remained with Flamengo for the time being.

Recently he came on as a substitute again in the local state championship of Rio de Janeiro, his every move closely monitored and dissected by the fans, media, pundits and his new club Real Madrid.

Whether all the attention, and distraction, at his delicate age will help Vinicius prosper in the future remains to be seen. **ES**