

# **THE YOUTH ACADEMIES IN ENGLAND'S PREMIERSHIP**

One of the goals of the Georgia Soccer Coaching Department is to expose our members to the international game and to broaden our coaches', parents' and players' horizons beyond the boundaries of our state. This is based on the philosophy that in order to progress and improve our players, we need to look outwardly and learn from what other states and other countries are doing. We are producing better players with every new generation, but it's not enough to compare ourselves with the club next door. Soccer is a global game, and in that context our system still has a long way to go to reach elite international standards.

Georgia Soccer is committed to the soccer development of all our young athletes, whether recreational or select. We try to generate continuous debates surrounding the topic of player development at all levels. Typically, such discussions focus on comparing player development in different parts of the world, and when one attempts to compare, inevitably, the analysis is done at the elite level. This is because the elite level is the end product of all the levels below and the only place one can truly compare apples to apples. But the most important thing for readers to remember is that the lessons and recommendations derived from comparing the elite level apply to all the levels, from U-6 to U-19, boys or girls, recreational or select.

A few months ago, we posted on our web site a video titled "Player Development Philosophy", which compared our player development system to the one in Brazil, a country renowned for producing and exporting a multitude of creative world class players.

Many coaches and parents who viewed the video were intrigued but wanted to know how players develop in other parts of the world, especially in Europe. This article examines the player development system in England. The article will touch on both the male and female situation in England.

The soccer community in Georgia was fortunate over the past year to host Academy coaches and teams from Liverpool and West Ham and observe these top British coaches at work. The Liverpool and West Ham academies have nurtured many professional players over the years and the most famous recent ones from Liverpool are Steven Gerard, Michael Owen, Robbie Fowler, Steve McManaman and Jamie Garragher, while the West Ham academy's famous recent products are Frank Lampard, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Carrick, Jermain Defoe and Joe Cole.

Our coaches had the opportunity to hear the Premiership Academy coaches explain the structure of player development at the elite level in England, through clinics and lectures. The information presented in this article contains material from the Liverpool and West Ham clinics and lectures, as well as from other sources.

## **PLAYER DEVELOPMENT IN PRE-ACADEMY TIMES**

The English Premier League was launched in 1992 and was basically a restructuring of the professional game in England to allow the top clubs to benefit financially from the increasingly lucrative television rights income.

At the same time, the English game was suffering from three serious problems: hooliganism, ground safety issues and dwindling success at the international level. The 1980's are remembered in England as the decade of stadium disasters, hooliganism, and disappointing national team performances in major competitions. A government report concluded that the stadiums at the top tier must be converted to all-seating, installed with close caption TV's to monitor hooligan elements, and modernized in many other ways to improve fan safety. Government funding from lotteries plus the new television money, which was going to be massive, were earmarked to help pay for all these new requirements

Meanwhile, The FA, the governing body for soccer in England, realized that the professional clubs must do a better job of developing players to stop the slide of the national team into mediocrity. In the 1990's, The FA went ahead and created a new blueprint for player development which mandated that every Premiership club must have a Youth Academy with specific requirements for staff qualifications and licensing, facilities, training, games, player ages, and supporting educational opportunities for the players. Hence, the birth of the modern Academies occurred in the late 1990's.

The situation for women's soccer wasn't very healthy in those days. Up until the 1990's, women's soccer did not get much funding or priority in England, as in most of the world. Only in the USA was women's and girls' soccer taken seriously, due to Title IX implementation. Girl's soccer in England finally got a boost in the 1990's. The FA felt obliged for moral and political reasons to support women's soccer and started to promote girls' leagues and player development schemes. Many of the professional men's clubs started to support a women's team and some funded the teams within a semi-professional scope. Fulham FC even fielded a fully professional women's team for a few years. But the lack of revenue from TV or attendance in the female game kept the top level of the women's game in a semi-pro or amateur status. Nevertheless, women soccer in England is slowly progressing and most Premier League clubs run girls' academies in addition to the boys. More on that later.

If the youth academies were only started in the late 1990's, what was the player development structure before that?

Prior to the academies, the professional clubs were only allowed to sign players starting at the age of 15. Players younger than 15 could train at Centers of Excellence run by the professional clubs, but the clubs could not really 'own' them. The players were free to train at as many centers as they wished, since they didn't belong to any one club.

Since the Centers of Excellence were just for training, the actual youth leagues were organized, managed, and coached by volunteers, just like in the USA. There were city leagues, district leagues, and various knock-out cup competitions and tournaments, just like in America. School soccer was also huge in scope and profile, and was well organized. Volunteer teachers coached the school teams in regional and national competition and, in fact, the U-15 National Team was selected from school teams.

In pre-academy days, a typical youth player played for his local youth team, coached by a volunteer parent coach, and would also play for his school team. The best players would also be invited to train at the Centers of Excellence. Once players reached 15, the very best would be signed by the professional clubs, which is where the serious training started, under professional youth coaches.

This meant that the important formative years of development between the ages of 6-14 were in the hands of volunteers and school teachers. This environment resembled very much the youth soccer environment here in America, and spawned the same problems we encounter here today, namely: too many games; emphasis on competition, teamwork and winning trophies at a young age; size, fitness and work rate valued over skill development; kick and run soccer; coaches fighting over the best players; schools and various youth leagues competing for the players' time; and a general lack of a systematic, progressive, centrally directed player development plan. Sounds familiar?

The professional clubs lamented the lack of skill of the players entering their youth teams but were not willing to invest time and money on younger players if they weren't allowed to own them until 15. It must be said that the system did produce many players for the professional teams and the English league was always competitive and exciting to watch and English clubs did well in European competition. But the player development system with its volunteer driven culture was over-structured, over-coached, and did not encourage individualism or creativity. The system did not have any room for the truly gifted individualist to emerge. English soccer simply was not set up to produce magicians the like of Ronaldinho, Zidane, Totti, Henry, Kaka or Berkamp and the national team suffered as a result. Of course, success is a relative term. For England, elimination at the quarter final stage of a World Cup is considered a failure, since England expects to win every tournament they enter. For the USA, getting to the quarter finals stage is considered a huge success.

The English governing body has finally acknowledged this problem and that's why the academy concept was born in the 1990's. Starting in the late 1990's, the professional clubs were allowed to sign players as young as 8 into their academies. But to qualify as an Academy, clubs had to follow a set of criteria. The FA set out the Academy criteria and mandated that every Premier League club must abide by these criteria.

It's too early to gauge the success of the Premiership Academies, since they have been in existence less than a decade. Most of the current generation of players in the English leagues grew up in the old system of volunteer coaches and School soccer. Beckham played his youth soccer for a team coached by his own dad. The bulk of the English

National Team that played in the 2006 World Cup grew up in the old system. It will take another 5-10 years before we can evaluate their academy system. But judging from the performance of the Liverpool U-18 team that came to Atlanta in the past two years and from the emergence of young players like Wayne Rooney, it looks like the academies are producing more creative players who are technically more versatile.

The game in England has also been greatly influenced by foreign coaches and players over the past 10-15 years and the impact has trickled all the way down to the youth academies.

## **THE ENGLISH ACADEMY SYSTEM**

### **The Boys Academies**

#### **Structure**

Every Premier League club must have an Academy operating according to strict guidelines. The objective of the guidelines is to ensure that players do not just possess high technical level, but are also schooled in proper self care, nutrition, character, and social skills. The goal is to produce intelligent, skillful players who behave as professionals, can take care of themselves outside the soccer field and who can seamlessly adjust to normal productive life after retiring from playing.

The academies are fully funded by the pro clubs. The players do not pay a cent. West Ham, for example, spends \$3 Million per year on the academy operations, maintenance, players and staff. The pay back is theoretically in the form of players developed for the first team or players sold to other clubs. Since the cost of an average Premiership player is currently around \$3M to \$5M, all it takes to keep the academy financially viable is produce one quality player per year or one exceptional player every couple of years.

The academies start at U-9 and teams are formed in one year increments all the way through U-16 and then into a two year group of U-17/U-18 players. The soccer year is from September to August, to coincide with the school year. Clubs can sign up to 30 players in each age group, but most sign 12-16 players per group. Players are signed for one year at a time until U-12, making it a one year commitment from both sides. At the end of each year, the club decides which players to retain and who to release. Players are free to leave the club at the end of the year, even if the club wants to keep them, but if they go to another club, the new club must pay the old club a transfer fee to compensate for the time and effort invested into the player. If the two clubs cannot agree on a fee, the transfer fee is determined by a tribunal.

At the U-13 age group, clubs can sign players for either a two year period or a four year period. This longer term commitment is good for the players, but in turn, protects the club from losing the player for the next four years. At U-15, again the clubs sign players for a two year period unless they are already on a four-year deal. At U-17, the players

who are good enough leave school to sign on a two year apprenticeship, where they start earning a living as full-time professionals. After the two year apprenticeship, at U-19, players are either signed on a normal professional contract or released.

The U-9 through U-12 age groups train 3 times per week and play one game per week, on the weekend. The training frequency increases gradually after that and by U-17, the players train twice a day Monday to Friday and play once on the weekend. Of the ten sessions for the apprentice professional players (U-17/U-18), three of them are required to be educational sessions to prepare them for a career outside of soccer should they not make the grade as professional players.

### **Scouting**

All clubs have a wide and sophisticated scouting network. The scouting is arguably the most crucial component of the youth academy since it tracks down and identifies the best players outside the club who are the candidates for replacing the released players each year. Until U-12, the academy rules restrict clubs to signing players who live within a one hour commute from the training site. After that, the geographical limit is expanded to 90 minute commute and from U-16 onwards, clubs have no geographical limits for getting players. These commuting limits are obviously designed to force clubs to concentrate on developing their own local players and to prevent young players from spending excessive time traveling to sessions and games.

The most important stage for scouting is at the pre-academy ages, U-6, U-7, and U-8. For these young ages, most clubs create satellite centers and invite players to train, so they can evaluate them and sell the club to the most promising players and their parents. Since clubs are not allowed to sign them before U-9, the best 6-8 year olds can train every night at a different club and test the waters until decision time arrives at U-9. The pro clubs fight over the best players just like here, but once a player signs for a club he can only transfer for a fee. This way, the clubs' investment is protected while players retain their right to move at the end of the year.

### **The English Academy Philosophy**

The success of an academy program is measured by the number of players they produce for the first team. This is definitely a long term perspective, in stark contrast to how success is measured here by our youth clubs. In England, academy teams don't have to win games, just produce players. The focus is on developing top players by the time they turn twenty, whereas here, the focus is much shorter term since youth coaches are on a race to develop winning teams to win State Cup at U-13.

In England, game results at the academy games are not important. In fact, academy games in England are all friendly games, just like our U-10/U-12 'Academy' games, except that in England the games are friendly all the way to U-16. The Premiership academy teams play only against other Premier Team's academies, so there are no promotion-relegations to worry about. There are no standings and no championships

until the U-17/U-18 bracket. Since promotion-relegation is based on the results of the professional team, the youth team's destiny is out of their control and they can just focus on development and let the professional players worry about results.

Academy teams play 8v8 from U-9 to U-11 and play 11v11 from U-12 onwards. The games are split into either four quarters or three thirds, to allow the coaches to bring the players in for instruction or adjustments. The philosophy of many of the academy coaches is to let the players make their own decisions in the game, and use the intervals for any instruction. They especially refrain from coaching the player on the ball and limit coaching from the sidelines for off-the-ball positioning or team shape and even that is done sparingly.

The training is repetition based to develop technique, but using activities that replicate game conditions. The goal is to breed good habits by taking care of the little details via repetitions and corrections. The corrections must be positive with coaches careful not to embarrass the players in front of their teammates.

By the time players reach 14, they should be technically proficient, so that tactical training can be accomplished. But work on technique is never neglected, even at the first team level.

Academy players are not allowed to play more than 30 games per year. This cap on games was implemented to prevent player burn-out, which was a real problem in England prior to the academy system, and is a huge problem in our youth game. Once a player signs for an academy, his playing time is monitored and recorded to make sure he gets sufficient playing time without exceeding the maximum number of games. Academy players are not allowed to play for another youth team and most academies do not allow their players to play even for the school team. The player's annual schedule is closely supervised to maintain the optimum balance between development and recovery.

Furthermore, when a player signs up with an Academy, he is guaranteed to play at least 24 games per year. This mandatory playing time is applicable to all the academy teams at all the academy ages. It's quite a paradox when profit driven, multi-million dollar clubs operating in the cut-throat business of the professional game treat their youth players with such sensitivity while some of our own youth coaches fail to do the same, even though most of our youth clubs are supposed to be community based, non-profit, volunteer run organizations.

According to Steve Heighway, the Liverpool Academy Director, anytime a player is released, his club helps him find another team at a lower level of the pro game. Parents get a progress report twice a year from the coaching staff, and the player's school gets a copy of the report as well. The coaching staff works with the schools to monitor the players' academic progress. The academies are very much in tune with the needs and welfare of young players and do their best to look after them. All academies must employ not just fully qualified coaches, but also medical staff and educational and welfare officers who look after the off-the-field needs and education of the players.

Parents are kept informed via progress reports and periodic communications, but they are not allowed to get involved in the same way parents are involved in the USA. In England's academies, parents are prohibited from coaching from the sidelines and are generally kept at bay. During training, parents are not allowed near the fields and are usually confined to the club lounge or behind field barriers, where they can watch the session from afar, or relax and socialize. Some academies, such as the West Ham academy, ask parents to sign a Code of Conduct that outlines the dos and don'ts.

Steve Heighway emphasized in his presentations that the academy coaching staff goes to great pains educating the parents on the relatively low rate of academy graduates who actually become professional players. Steve stresses how competitive it is, and that parents have to prepare their son emotionally and practically for the possibility of getting released by the club. According to Steve Heighway, one of the toughest parts of the job is managing parent's expectations and releasing players and shattering their dreams. The players in Liverpool's academy are all technically strong, so the ones who do make it are those with the right mental strength and character that can deal with the stresses and the ups and downs.

In his presentation, Tony Carr, the West Ham Academy Director, outlined his academies' philosophy on player development as follows:

- Open attacking style predominantly 1 & 2 touch movement.
- Player led philosophy.
- Let the players express themselves and let them make the decisions.
- Enjoyable learning environment. Serious but fun.
- Repetition based program.
- Technique based training, breeding good habits.
- Development of the player, not the team. The end product is what matters, not results.

Tony Carr emphasized that the goal is to develop players rather than teams. Game results are not important. West Ham do not emphasize conditioning/strength until U-15 but hire an expert to work on balance, left-right stability and coordination with the younger players.

## **The Girls Academies**

Most of the Premier League clubs run academies for girls that serve as the feeder system into their women's team, but the girls academies are not as developed or well funded as the boys. In most cases, the girls have to pay for their own kit, facilities and travel. Arsenal is one of the few clubs that funds a residential academy for girls.

It all starts at the school levels. The girls' academy coaching staff conducts free clinics at local schools in order to promote women's soccer and identify the most promising

players. These clinics are for girls between the ages 6 to 16. The best talent is then invited to train in Development Centers. These centers do not play organized league games and only train. From there, the very best players are invited to join the club's Center of Excellence at the U-10, U-12, U-14 and U-16 age groups. These teams play friendly games against other club's where no standings are kept.

Players are signed for one year intervals until U-16. At that point, the best players are signed into the U-18 Academy team and can progress from there into the reserve team and finally to the senior women's first team.

Since women's soccer in England is not professional, many of the top English players aspire to come to the USA and play college soccer. Many American college coaches travel frequently to European countries such as England to scout for talent and focus mainly on the European national team level players. Overall, the level of the women's game in the USA is superior to that found in England, but the gap is slowly closing.

## **WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM ENGLAND**

The English player development system has undergone drastic changes in the last decade. The irony is that, while The FA has been for many decades a recognized world leader in coaching education and has exported its soccer educational curriculum all over the globe, its player development was steadily falling behind the leading soccer nations such as Holland, France, Italy, Brazil and Argentina. Cultural and historical traditions and a somewhat insular approach had to be overcome in England in order to embrace the methods of some of these leading soccer nations. But now, the 'Europeanization' process in England is in full swing.

So, the first lesson we can learn from England is that we must also adopt an open mind and learn from everyone and not fall into an insular mind set of 'this is America and we do things differently here'. We might be in America, but in soccer, we are competing with the rest of the world and can ignore it at our own peril. Our current youth soccer environment has very similar problems to those that existed in England prior to the academy system and we need to address them just as they had to address them.

Those of us who had the privilege to watch the Liverpool U-18 teams train and play against our ODP team would agree that technically, we are still behind the top youth players from abroad. Our players are still prone to giving the ball away needlessly due to poor control or misplaced passing and the lesson is clearly that our coaches need to spend more time on developing technique in the formative ages of 6-14. When the game is faster, our players' technique breaks down too easily.

The other lessons we can learn from England is in the area of child welfare and risk management. The Premiership academies' commitment to a sensitive treatment of the players is impressive. Even though it's a business, they are clearly committed to a child-centered approach that puts the best interest of the individual player first. They are

stridently monitoring player abuse, both mental and physical, ensure enough playing time for each player to build confidence and skill, and invest considerable resources and money to develop rounded human beings rather than just soccer players.

It's an eye opener to see how the English academies are protecting the players as one would protect a fragile and valuable treasure. For example, restricting the number of games to 30 per year. In the USA, elite players play between 50-100 games per year, which is not only excessive and counterproductive, but a form of player abuse. The Liverpool U-18 team that visited Atlanta in May spent 10 days in America, but only played a total of 3 games. When our teams travel, they play multiple games per day, which is ridiculous. Our players' experience should be about quality, not quantity.

The academies are also very careful to educate and protect the players from any risky behavior, such as unhealthy life style, poor nutrition, lack of supervision, or any potential dangerous situations when traveling. Our clubs could learn a lot from their approach and high regard for players' well being. Players' code of conduct, as well as parents' and coaches' code, as well as policies addressing safety for team travel, practice and game days would be a good start.

The English academies see their youth program as an investment for the future. In contrast, American youth soccer is regarded as a revenue producer, a profit center. The day will have to come when the MLS clubs will take over the development of our elite players and do it along a similar philosophy to the English academies. Until that happens, our youth clubs should monitor the behavior of our coaches and educate the parents to ensure that our players are protected from trophy hunting mentality, burnout, and a misplaced emphasis on winning at younger ages. We must follow the English example and do a better job of protecting the players' safety, while promoting the technical and creative aspects of the game over team building.