

WE CAN LEARN FROM THE BEST

BUT MUST MAKE IT OUR OWN!



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I'm sitting in a room full of coaches representing a number of professional clubs and we are challenged to raise our hands in response to 'how many of your club academy's have a philosophy?'. Most coaches quickly glance around the room before reaching up, whilst I pause for a few seconds before giving in, ensuring that a full quota of hands are raised. With no further response or queries from the group, we are then asked to think again and provoked with 'But how many of your academy's pretend to have a philosophy?'.

The above meeting took place over five years ago and inspired me to look deeper into academy philosophies, with the ambition of enhancing the environment we create for young talented footballers. The process of developing a philosophy is not scientific, but quite the opposite. You will find that implementing and developing a philosophy requires the right people, hard work and a lot of patience.

Having worked full time at professional football clubs since the summer of 2002 I have learned a lot about the successes and constraints of an elite academy system. Taking into account the level clubs plays at, I have formed the opinion that by simply having an academy in place, there is still a good chance that those players talented and determined enough will follow the pathway into first team football at some stage. However, as coaches we should be asking ourselves, have the players at our clubs fulfilled their potential whilst in our academy system?

Let me explain my reason for questioning the development of player potential. Say a young player is identified and joins an academy aged 9 and the under 10s coach applies his style of play and beliefs on that youngster for the season. The following year, the young player progresses to the under 11s squad and the same process is repeated, by a different coach with a different style of play. This results in the young player receiving an inconsistent coaching style without considering what has been taught the previous year. The result of this approach will have a negative impact on a player's development, as the coaching input to help form habits year on year is undone, rather than being continually developed. I like to refer to this approach to coaching as applying the 'development brake', where valuable quality and consistent contact time with the players can be wasted if players are always having to adapt to a new coaching philosophy. If this process continues throughout the system, with mixed messages continually being communicated to players, you should consider how productive your club's contact time has been over the years. Even if the player does make it to full time football, I would doubt that the player's potential has been maximised if this path that has been followed throughout their development.

Based on the points raised above, I am sure many people can think of coaches you currently or have previously worked with, that have a completely different opinion to yourself or more importantly your club, on how players should be coached. For example, if your club has taught players to build up from

the back and play through midfield, and then all of a sudden a coach at an older age group decides he wants the keeper or defenders to go long, then the technical skills that have been developed by the player adopting the previous style get less opportunity to be enhanced. The consequences for young players going through an academy with the described scenario could be detrimental, considering they risk being judged, and in some situations potentially released because their style doesn't match the opinion of a specific coach. Coaches are crucial to the success of creating a positive learning environment, as they will most often have the biggest influence on the young players. Their knowledge, experience, and of course personality is vital, but what is equally as important is that they share the club's values and beliefs.

I'm aware that I've talked about creating the right environment for young players to develop, but what about the coaches? The environment that club's create for them should also be a positive one where they can develop and have opportunity to contribute to various aspects of the philosophy. This is arguably one of the best ways to get their initial 'buy in' and providing them the opportunity to contribute helps strengthen the feeling of teamwork amongst coaches.

My experiences on study visits to club's across Europe, including FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, have been a personal driving force in developing a philosophy, having witnessed first hand where their academy strengths lie. Push aside the facilities and finance at these two world class clubs, what they both pride themselves on is a phi-

losophy that is individual to them and one that aims to bring players right through the youth system by adopting and developing their talent inline with this philosophy.

At Barcelona I was amazed at the traits, such as the pre match routine of all their academy teams, which was a replication of those seen in the first team. The young players are modelled on the club's stars, and it was interesting to sit in the training complex and observe a number of the teams where the playing style was mirrored throughout the age groups, whether it was their Under 8s, Under 16s or the first team. The Barcelona playing style was consistent and a joy to watch.

Real Madrid differ in their approach, as they accept that the first team can change their style based on the current manager and players. Therefore, they aim to have a philosophy that runs right through the academy, from Under 9s up to the Castilla side (Real Madrid B), whilst ensuring to keep the club's core values that have been based on the club's history. When watching the Real Madrid teams, they will not play with less than two strikers and there is a real emphasis on the technical qualities of being able to pass and receive, whilst wanting to create an identity that, regardless of age, everyone should recognise a Real Madrid player. Similar to Barcelona, they too implement a highly structured and detailed coaching methodology, which aims to develop their own style of play and their core values in their own players.

Both clubs are very selective in their recruitment of staff, and stress that they prefer to recruit





staff who have previous experience of being involved in the club in some capacity. Why they do this is simple. They need to have people at the club who understand and are proud of their philosophy and history, rather than employing 'outsiders' who risk doing things their own way. Of course they may have a small number of coaches who haven't had any prior experience within the club, but what was explained is that these individuals must have an open mind and a willingness to be engrossed into the club's beliefs. It was interesting to recognise that both clubs had high profile jobs for staff who were responsible, for not only ensuring everyone was adhering to the philosophy, but also helping it to evolve where necessary. They recognise the importance of monitoring all aspects of their development and place a huge emphasis on protecting what their academy has worked for all these years.

It would be easy to dismiss the observations discussed above by saying 'well that's Barca and Real, it's different here!' This type of comment is common and probably supports why coaches can be stubborn and reluctant to change. How many of you have seen or heard 'It's my team' or 'I'm responsible for that player', when actually it's the players who are the most important. Let's not take away the fact that coaches do deserve to be proud of their contributions, but as long as the focus is on progression over possession of the players. Personally, I am a firm believer in challenging players and if that means they are better off playing in an age group a year above, then I'm all for it. I am fortunate that the club I work for share this vision and it's a common trend throughout our academy. But how many





veloped? Does your club have a

clear playing style that the curric-

ulum is designed to bring out? Do

your scouts know exactly what they

are looking for in a player, based on

the club's selection criteria?

The challenge of developing your own club philosophy can be overcome by having the right people, spreading the right message in the right context, whilst believing in it and together to help create the football stars of the future.