CASE STUDY No. 3: DEVELOPING ELITE YOUNG PLAYERS AT THE AFC AJAX ACADEMY

Many members of the Coaches Circle may be familiar with the Ajax Academy and others less so. This Case Study will attempt to outline an overall picture of the unique institution and highlight some of the more recent innovations which include the following aspects:

- Maximising Practice Time by arranging to take the players out of school twice a week at 1.30 but requiring the players to complete educational work at the Academy later that night
- Initiating younger intake of players at 7 years of age
- Providing quarterly feedback reports for the young (under 12’s and below) players for the players and parents (previously two per year)
- Extending the catchment area to recruit players up to 60 km from the Academy
- Continuing to provide high quality instruction and ‘Schooling’ players to play a certain system from 10 years of age

BACKGROUND

AFC Ajax is synonymous with youth development. Any discussion about the development of young players for elite professional football would be incomplete without reference to Ajax. The production line appears seamless from Cruyff,Krol,Van Basten,Rijkard,Blind,Bergkamp through the De Boer twins,Davids,Seedorf,Kluivert,Reiziger, toVan der Vaart, De Jong and Sneijder. Ajax represent a level of quality against which other clubs judge their own youth programmes.

UEFA recently conducted a survey of the most successful youth academies in Europe by examining which youth academies had developed the most players as registered for clubs in the highest division in major leagues in England,Spain,Italy,Germany and Holland during the 2004-5 season.
Not surprisingly Ajax topped this list with a total 46 graduates -8 still at Ajax, 26 elsewhere in the Dutch first division, 6 with FA Premier League clubs, 3 in Serie A in Italy, 2 in the Bundesliga in Germany and one in La Liga in Spain.

The UEFA Coaches Circle was able to catch up with the current Director of Youth Development, John van den Brom to establish best practice at Europe’s top Academy.

OBJECTIVES of AJAX YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

- Every two years to provide 3 players for the Ajax First Team Squad

PHILOSOPHY

Through analysis and intuition the acronym TIPS has been developed as a short hand for the Ajax philosophy.

TIPS represent a basis for talent identification and development with

T.....Technique
I.....Insight and Game Intelligence: ‘soccer wise’
P.....Personality-to provide leadership, communicate and work in a disciplined manner
S.....Speed-incorporating mobility and to reproduce this on the basis of good conditioning

Discipline still remain a high priority for all players to adhere to with emphasis upon the player accepting high levels of personal responsibility in all aspects of their development.

The club still maintains the philosophy of providing opportunities in the first team for graduates of the Academy and so the home grown talent in the first team underlines the club’s commitment to youth development.
TALENT IDENTIFICATION

- Ajax scout games in the overall Amsterdam area within 60 km of the Academy and also have a relationship with 30 amateur clubs within this area who both recommend players to Ajax and also take players released by Ajax.
- Ajax have extended their catchment area in recent years to 60km and have developed arrangements with two professional clubs outside this catchment area: FC Haarlem and FC Ominworld.
- At the end of the 2004-5 season Ajax released 35 of the 200 players they had registered between 7 and 18 years of age. About a third of those released went to clubs associated with Ajax.
- Ajax still operate Talent Day trials and it is worth noting that from last year’s squad De Jong, Sneijder and Van der Vaart all were first seen by the club at a open trial day which Ajax still operate once a year. The move is more these days to invite the players to the club to join in training for two weeks –a month to make a more detailed assessment based upon performance in games and practices as well as scores in a six activity skills test.
- At the end of the period 8-10 years of age, Ajax select a group of 16 players that roughly corresponds to a squad of ‘team’ players. Thus 2 goalkeepers will be selected and a balance of right and left footed players to fit into the specified positions of a 4-3-3 system as devised and revised by Ajax.
STRUCTURE, ORGANISATION and COACHES

John Van der Brom as well as being Head of Youth also coaches the Ajax 2nd team.

John exemplifies the continuity of the Ajax system in that he played for Ajax and took over his current role from former Ajax captain Danny Blind who is now First Team coach.

It is worth noting that both Louis Van Gaal and Leo Beenhakker had also held the post of ‘Head of Youth ‘at AFC Ajax.

John as Head of Youth reports to the Ajax Board via the Technical Director, Martin Van Geel. There are regular meetings between all full time the Academy Coaches and between John and Danny Blind the current Head Coach.

The current group of 10 full time and 5 part time coaches reflect a balance between those who have had a professional football playing career and those who have not played professionally. Ajax especially wants to recruit young coaches to coach the young players who can also demonstrate the techniques required. Their youngest coach is currently 26 years of age.
TECHNICAL PROGRAMME

- Ajax use 25 Minibuses every weekday during the school year to ferry players in and out of the Academy to augment the travel arrangements provided by parents.
- The number of training sessions and games per year group is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of groups of players (approx 16 per group or team)</th>
<th>Number of Practice Sessions per week</th>
<th>Number of games per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 8 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5 (+)</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 9 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5 (+)</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 10 yrs</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 11 yrs</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 12 yrs</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 13 yrs</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 14 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 15 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 16 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 17 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 19 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(+): In effect this means 3 practice sessions over a two week period.

(*): In effect this means 3 games over a two week period.

After 18 years of age there is the Ajax 2nd team and the Ajax first team.

All the teams below the first team are the responsibility of the Director of Youth Development.

- For the age groups Under 13 to Under 17 years of age Ajax have developed relationships with over 60 schools in this area to allow their players to get out of school at 1.30 pm on two days a week. On these days the players arrive at the Ajax Academy and begin with a training session followed by shower, dinner, homework and then a second session before being taken...
home by one of the Ajax Minibuses. These arrangements allow these age groups to achieve 6 practice sessions per week • Ajax concentrate upon technique development from 8 to 12 years of age frequently using the ‘Coerver’ type drills and practices • From 10 years of age Ajax play 11v11 and ‘school’ the players into the Ajax system of 1-4-3-3. For each group of 16 players there are - 2 goalkeepers - Four right-footed players for positions 2, 6 and 7 (right back, right mid-field and right wing) - Four left-footed players for positions 5, 8 and 11 (left back, left mid-field and left wing) - Three players for positions 3 and 4 (two centre backs) - Three players for positions 9 (centre forward) and 10 (behind the centre forward) • There are specific requirements established for each position and players are coached into the specific requirements of each position. They may very well be coached in more than one position but Ajax believe this system provides the best opportunity for the player to understand 11v11 and as a medium to develop their own individual technique. • The Games Programme up to 14 years of age is a mixture of game against local opposition (usually one year older) in the Dutch District Programme with additional friendly games and tournaments. There is a Regional League for the Under 15’s and National Leagues for the Under 17’s and 19’s. • Ajax see much value in overseas tournaments for players as young as 10 years of age as it provides the player with stimulating technical, tactical and social experiences and allows Ajax to scout players in foreign countries

ASSESSMENT, MONITORING AND FEEDBACK

• Every player and their parents are provided with a progress report four times a year up to and including the Under 12 range and then twice a year for age ranges above that. • Two times a year the players are assessed and at the end of each year they are graded A, B or C, with players graded C likely to be released. • Each Player and their parents are given an two interviews per year when new objectives are agreed for the following season
• To support the coach in making such assessments Ajax require every coach to complete a report on every player after every match and this data is recorded on computer by the Academy administrative staff. Added to these records are height, weight, medical and school records
• Each Player is provided with their own log-book and ‘Ajax’ passport to record key information and requirements are recorded

EDUCATION AND WELFARE

• Ajax organise 3 parents evening a year for each age range to ensure parents are involved in the overall player development process
• Ajax have a high emphasis upon the individual and have not therefore developed a hostel or boarding school facility: instead they as system of guest families, selected for their similarity to the actual family of the player’s own family

FACILITIES- ‘THE FUTURE’

• Currently 7 full size fields, of which 2 are artificial surfaces (for approx 250 players)
• One Small Stadium arena
• Swimming pool
• Gymnasium but no large dedicated Indoor Area