

DEVELOPING PLAYERS, NOT TEAMS

By Dan Herbst

National Soccer Coaches Association of America

The view from the cafeteria of Liverpool Football Club's Academy is stunning: Perfectly-manicured soccer fields virtually as far as the eye can see, augmented by an indoor arena and a fenced-in full-size artificial turf pitch with floodlights. It is on these \$18-million grounds covering a 55-acre urban oasis that the next generation of Michael Owen and Robbie Fowler wannabes are being groomed to soon claim their niche for England's most successful club.

It also is here that a group of American soccer coaches are listening to Tim Devine, the Academy's head of education and welfare. The guests will observe training sessions and matches ranging from the first 11 of Premiership teams down to the U-9 sides in those clubs' academies. This particular tour will take the coaches to five of the 40 pro clubs that currently boast their own officially-accredited academies - the aforementioned Liverpool as well as the Premiership's Everton, Leeds and Middlesbrough and the First Division's Bamsley.

The aim is to glean from the British player development scheme useful tidbits that can be employed on our side of the Atlantic Ocean. The eight-day tour will yield ample food for thought.

The process kicks off at age 6 when professional team scouts identify area prospects to be called in for training. Not until the U-9 stage do the academies formally field a team. At that age, play is eight-a-side across a field with a minimum of 24 and a maximum of 30 matches annually. Travel time for games must not exceed 90 minutes. At the U-12 stage games expand to 11-a-side.

Youngsters who are involved with an academy cannot play elsewhere except for their school sides. All of the expenses that Americans typically associate with youth soccer - from equipment to coaching fees - are borne by the pro club. Liverpool's Academy has approximately a \$1.5 million annual budget that covers three full-time coaches and several part-timers.

The practices for younger lads that the group saw at Everton were noted for their fun-filled atmosphere. True, these are some of the most gifted youngsters in one of the world's great soccer hotbeds. Even so, training for teams up to and including V-II is only 60 minutes in duration and limited to only three sessions per week.

"The whole program is designed around the development of the players rather than the development of winning teams," says Mick Dickinson, Everton's head of education and welfare. "Match results are just not important to us. Obviously, when you're winning you're playing well and the things that you've been doing in your sessions are translating into the games. But this isn't about winning. The onus is to do things well and, as a consequence of that, you may win."

The playing style is to consistently build from the back with an emphasis on possession and combination play. What a refreshing change to see 8-year olds passing to feet of their teammates. It is a far more appealing style than the stateside practice of using large bodies to win the 50-50 balls, then pumping long passes over the top to fleet-footed forwards, a strategy that stems from the "winning is everything" mindset.

Training at the younger ages has a heavy technical emphasis, with the coaches taking great care to make things fun. Only the most basic tactical concepts, such as recognition of when to play the ball back and across the field, are addressed by creating an environment in which the demands of that training game emphasize that aspect of decision-making.

Although tactics essentially are ignored during practices, the Academy youth games that the group witnessed far better resembled the Real McCoy than those of their counterparts in the States. The likely reason has to do with the emphasis on visualization.

Each of Everton's youngsters is given a ticket to every match at Goodison Park. This shows the importance the pro clubs place in having top prospects watching games because the tickets handed out significantly reduce the ticket revenues. Most Premiership games are sellouts.

"Children aspire to what they see," says Dickinson. "It's as simple as that. It's a case of monkey see, monkey do: Our coaches then re-confirm it. We have youngsters in our sessions trying to do things just because they have seen a senior pro doing it during a match. In your country, there still aren't enough kids whose dads played and there aren't enough kids who watched their dads play or who attend games. That could

take generations to fix."

Everton's Academy presently has about 140 players. The recruitment staff constantly combs Merseyside for talent. Those identified are invited in for a six week trial. But not all who enter the gates will remain

"We explain as sensitively as we can to the parents that we just don't feel that their son is quite up to our standards at this moment," says Dickinson. "We'll monitor their progress when they go back to their junior side. If they come on again, we'll invite them back in."

Exactly what qualities would a scout value in a youngster?

"When we are recruiting younger players," says Liverpool's Devine, "we're looking at about 80 percent their technique and 20 percent something else."

"I suppose the first thing is appetite," offers Dickinson. "We want to know that the boy really wants to become a good player."

Each features the club's logo and each has a one-word slogan in gigantic letters: Technique, Attitude, Balance, Speed. The deliberate omission is 'size,' "If a player is good enough we think, and in the end, he will be big and strong enough. Michael Owen is not particularly big or strong, We recruit kids at younger ages looking for good player's as much as good athletes. The most important consideration is identifying players who we think will be better later."

"All we do here with the kids can be undermined in 10 minutes when they get into their cars with their parents" notes an Academy Director.

Recognition of that pitfall has led to real efforts to segregate Parents during training sessions and matches. For the most part they are asked to watch from one predetermined area. Their function is to never instruct (coach).

Older boys here in the clubs are all incredibly talented" Liverpool's Devine. "What makes up the difference for them is from the neck up. It then becomes 20% technical and 80% percent mental, and psychological. There's little chance that if a player is released at 16 and older it's not due to his talent, but due to something else in his character.

There are many reminders plastered along the walls with issues. The mental attributes of work, sacrifice, commitment, perseverance, competitive drive and selflessness are the price that each and every one of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.

Also posed are questions such as, "How good of a player are you when you don't have the ball?" or What is it that is so special about you that makes everyone else you train and play with BETTER?"

There is one major intentional psychological parting from the American youth scene. From an early age many of our top prospects grow accustomed to being told how good they are, owing to their status as big fish in small ponds. In an attempt to fill seats, that worrying trend continues unabated when they sign with MLS and that League's publicity machine urges the media to crank out Bobby Convey/Chris Albright feature stories long before such players have achieved anything meaningful at the senior level. The result can be a youngster with a false read on where he stands in the sport with his motivation to improve significantly stunted.

"We'll never tell a young player that he is great," states Devine. "We'll tell him that he's good and that he has the potential to become a great player."

Liverpool prefers to separate its Academy from the first team's training

Other clubs believe that the youngsters are influenced in a positive manner by being at the same venue as their heroes.

Another question involves intentional geographical isolation. Good luck if you try to find the Middlesbrough or the Thorp Arch Sports Education Complex that houses Leeds without the assistance of a helluva good map.

There is now a conscious effort to groom far more than the on-field requisite physical characteristics. Part and parcel of that has been a long-overdue recognition by the clubs that they harbor a responsibility to provide a viable future to the vast majority of their youth who will not make it as top-class players.

The "old" way was for each club to have approximately two dozen 16- and 17-year-old apprentices on its staff who were paid a weekly stipend of roughly \$100. Prospects faced a clear-cut choice: either continue to pursue their education at the expense of becoming a professional athlete or leave school to follow their sporting dream.

For that two-year spell, the apprentices trained full-time and played against other clubs' apprentice sides. They also performed their daily "chores," which ranged from shining the first team members' boots to cleaning out bathrooms and sweeping up the stadium's stands. Some clubs have eliminated the "chores," while others quietly retain the tradition to help instill a sense of responsibility and discipline.

At age 18 those who were deemed to be the most promising were signed to a professional contract which, except for a lucky few, offered modest wages. The majority were set adrift, some to surface with lower-division clubs while many others make their way in the semi-pro world of so-called non-league football. This is year three of the experiment, with today's participants also spending ample time in the classroom. A two-year residency program commences at age 16, with the player receiving 65 pounds per week, just under \$100 at current exchange rates. That is raised to 85 pounds weekly, about \$130, for the following year. At 18 they may sign a professional contract.

"If you throw money at youngsters, what you get are players who will only do things when you throw money at them," offers Vic Florey of the Leeds Academy. "Parents must realize that development comes first and then the financial rewards will follow."

"I suppose the first thing is appetite," offers Dickinson. "We want to know that the boy really wants to become a good player. In the first phase, they have to show something to catch our eye."

Editor's note: Dan Herbst is a long-time soccer fanatic who has coached at the high school and youth levels in and around his Hartsdale, N.Y., home. He also has enjoyed a successful freelance career in soccer journalism.