



European Academy Tour

Full Report: June 2007

Football Focus Builds European Academy Alliance!

Football Focus travelled to Europe this Autumn to get a first hand look at some of England and Holland's finest Junior Football Academies, to understand the keys to their success so that our own players can benefit, now and in the future. We are grateful to Rob Baan, our very own Technical Director, for his assistance with our Dutch tour and publicly thank him for helping make this happen.

Holland, home of the bicycle (pictured right), tulips, Van Gogh, edam cheese, clogs, canals and a fantastic public transport system, most notably the tram service which proved as reliable as it's reputation.



Holland - bikes parked at the station



Top & centre: PSV's Philips Stadium; below: the first team dressing room

Our European tour began in Eindhoven, where we were greeted by a Dutch legend, Stanley Valckx Technical Manager at PSV Eindhoven, who through his career with the club has played along side some of the World's best players, Romario and Ronaldo to name a few. In temperatures more conducive with Adelaide's spring than a Dutch spring, we toured the famous Philips Stadium with its unique "vented seating" and the hall of fame before moving onto De Herdgang, home of both senior training ground and junior academy, where each have independent impressive facilities set in picturesque woodlands 5kms

outside Eindhoven. Interestingly and most unlike many other European teams, public attendance at training is not only encouraged but publicised, often with autograph/photograph opportunities.



Jason at de Herdgang

First named Feijenoord in the 1900's after the working class neighbourhood of many Club members, Dutch club Feyenoord's home is Rotterdam. Here, the junior camp neighbours the stadium De Kuip (or "The Tub"), though despite the locality boasts substantial stand-alone



Left: De Kuip, home to Feyenoord; right the Academy's own match pitch

grandstand, multiple artificial pitches supplement the many junior training pitches, huge dressing rooms and club room plus bar/restaurant and facilities for the parents all of which not only benefit the privileged players but helps to foster the family social environment so evident in Holland. We learnt how the Dutch juniors are groomed and developed until they are ready to try out for the first team, where numbers are kept to a minimum to allow more opportunities for home grown stars. Senior staff work closely with academy staff to facilitate this transition.



Feyenoord's U8 - U9's

Observing 7 - 14 year olds players training, it was plain to see how tactically aware even the youngest players are, passing into space, holding position with impressive movement off the ball. At the same time they had an understanding that technically they need to improve and a lot of training time is spent on basic passing and receiving.



Just a portion of PSV's Academy facilities. Top: Academy match pitch, below some of the artificial pitches.

The surprisingly low ratio of coach to player in the youth years ensures individual attention is maximised, assisted predominantly by the number of employed coaching staff verses volunteers. The level of discipline and respect for coaching staff and referee is very high and a competitive match is balanced with post match joint team photographs.

The tactical awareness of players as young as eight was impressive though in terms of ball control the standard in Australia is comparable.

Working closely with schools, club coaches visit and train their own players during school hours, around modified academic programs specifically for talented footballers. This supplements training and matches at the academy (for which they are "taxied" school-academy-home) with children training 3-4 times per week for the club.



De Herdgang...training ground and academy sit side by side in picturesque surroundings

"It's not soccer mate..."

SCORERS OF EXCELLENCE

European academy tour continued...

Following the success of visits to Dutch academies we turned our attention to their English counterparts. Unseasonable gloriously warm English spring weather accompanied our visits to Premier League academies at Aston Villa FC and Bolton Wanderers FC.



Bodymoor Heath: Outgrown original facilities, above, will be superseded by state of the art new ones



Purposely situated outside of Birmingham, away from the major bus routes, Aston Villa's training ground and Academy facilities, at Bodymoor Heath, still attract hordes of autograph seeking fans. Old meets the new dawn at Bodymoor - existing buildings will shortly be levelled and replaced by multimillion dollar facilities. Our players observed Martin O'Neill training the first team, while Brian Jones, Academy Manager, treated us to a behind the scenes, pre public opening tour of the amazing new facilities due to open June 2007.

Modelled on the best facilities English academies afford, each age group moves progressively through the corridor of changing rooms, earning the right to move to the next level with the end target in sight - first rate luxury with first team privilege (pictured below). Fully equipped with the finest equipment, finished with modern furnishings, nothing has been overlooked: pool, spa, plunge pool, sauna, gym, indoor hall, education and press room, separate canteen for families and players, plus space for physiotherapists, doctors and more.



Aston Villa's fabulous new training and Academy facilities due for completion June/July 2007

Travelling north to a blustery, chilly Bolton, Chris Sulley, Academy Manager, greeted us at the Reebok stadium. Familiar with young Australian talent including Adelaide United players, Nathan Burns and Bruce Djite, he talked to our players about their favourite young Australian Socceros and Olyroos. A huge bonus for our players came when they found themselves in the stands with Manchester United legend Denis Irwin, watching the Under 14s play that evening at the stadium.



Bolton's Reebok Stadium

Players here are identified as young as 6 years old, scouted predominately from local schools. Premier League Clubs, Aston Villa and Bolton Wanderers told us



Under 14's play a training match at Bolton's Reebok Stadium

how the volume of English academies available to young talented players affects their selection and contributes to potential burnout at very young ages. In some areas there are over half a dozen academies on offer, families travelling to as many as they can in search for stardom and recognition. Contracts are introduced as young as nine years to prevent parents taking players to too many clubs, so children can concentrate and consolidate their skills with one club.



Meeting BWFC Stars

Although a different culture of football, the basics in England were similar to those in Holland. Be technically gifted, promote tactical awareness and ensure above all that players enjoy what they do, have fun, living for the game because they want to.



Football Focus players in the "dug out".

All clubs carefully allocate teams based on skill and ability rather than age, integrating players to older year groups gradually. Several weeks of assessment at the higher level is encouraged before a permanent move is confirmed.

Football focus believes having a high caliber coach is the starting platform. The game has become so diverse that specialists are required to help get the most from our players. A running coach, sports psychologist and nutritionist to name a few, are the avenues Football Focus intends to explore for the future.

All the clubs we visited welcomed the opportunity to show us their facilities, sharing their training structure and methods. Thank you all for your time and hospitality.

Football focus has been fortunate enough to build good relationships with these clubs and has agreed to keep in contact. Squad players will benefit from our knowledge of the European junior structure, training and tactics, scouting and junior player contracts. Plus our European Academy relationships will assist those showing promise from the Elite Squad. Players may try out for and join professional and/or development squads prior to being invited to join the Elite Squad.



A bit of "R & R"



Please see the Football Focus website for full details of our Squads, including a girls only squad and other programs we offer. Our giant inflatable football pitch is unique to South Australia, perfect for school programs, OSHC and vacation programs and is an integral part of our holiday clinic program.



It's not soccer mate ... it's football!

"It's not soccer mate..."

SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE