

In France, c'est la Technique

Program emphasizes technical skills for 13- to 15-year-olds

The following is from a presentation made by Aime Jacquet, former French National Team coach and World Champion at the U.S. Youth Soccer Workshop in January 2001 in Las Vegas, Nev. Jacquet oversees the development program for 13- to 15-year-old players in France. He is in charge of 128 coaches split into six regions. Players are identified at age 11 through districts and then regional teams.

The best French players at age 13 go to the National Training Center in Clairefontaine. At this center, the players are educated with these concepts in mind:

- To forget what is at stake
- That results only come from the game
- To respect the principles of playing soccer and play within the structure the coach gives you
- Victory is the only goal
- The first consideration is to be present (to become an impact player) in the game, to free yourself from your opponent, and to ask for the ball

When the coach is preparing his or her training sessions, the emphasis should be on technical ability, and his or her own convictions and conception of what soccer should look like. The coach must take into account the age of the players and the proper objectives linked to that age. He or she must be precise and professional. Every coach has access to many soccer exercises but has to know the proper way to proceed and to present them. The advice given to each player is very important. The coach must be careful of his or her language in order to help the players understand his or her methods. No yelling is tolerated. Objectives and issues in training are made clear to the players. The players have the best training conditions and train one time daily, five days a week. However, the sessions are very intense. The priorities for the players are:

- To become a professional player with the maximum chance of succeeding (this includes the four factors of soccer);
- Keep up with academic studies so they can have a career in the event a soccer career is not an option.

Priorities for the coaches:

- The proper methods necessary to work with youth players. France is the only country in Europe to require a youth coaching license.
- To develop a highly qualified technical staff, all licensed and well-trained

In the training sessions emphasis is given to repeating the quality of soccer movements. These are corrected and repeated until they become a regular part of the player's package of skills. The coaches must be quality demonstrators. The coaches will then work on:

- Making the player's movements faster and better;
- Linking movements efficiently and wisely. Coaches constantly ask the player why he or she uses a certain move in a certain situation;
- Using the weakest foot. Coaches will develop specific sessions to work on weaknesses in the player's game;
- Technical exercises with many repetitions;
- Games with the possibility of many choices and follow-up discussion of those choices;
- Simple tactical exercises forcing the player to make a quick decision;
- Realistic activities which make the player feel as if he were in a real game.

The coaches remind the players that all high-level players keep the game simple. An example of this would be not dribbling (unless going to goal) instead of making a 30-yard pass. Dribbling slows the game down. Sir Bobby Charlton has said many times that "soccer is a simple game made difficult by the players and by the coaches." Johan Cruyff, while at Barcelona, stated that the coach who gave his player more than two options does not understand the game of soccer. Training therefore is done with the following in mind:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Consistency
- Demands of the game
- Simplicity

Weekly schedule (club)

- U-13 — Participate in two to three training periods and one match
- Ages 13-15 — Participate in four to five training periods and one match with a minimum of 35 matches a year

Weekly schedule (pros)

- Ages 16-17 — Five to seven training session each week with one match, 40 matches per year and four to five weeks without any training at all
- Ages 17-20 — Seven to nine trainings, one match, with many competitions against older players

TRAINING PRIORITIES

Age 13

- The range of the players' abilities (age specific)
- The choices the player makes. Every player plays with the ball for the first fifteen minutes of training. The player decides what to do with the ball. This starts to personalize his or her game.
- The game. This is the most important part, in training or actual competition

Age 14

- The range of the player's ability r
- The situation. Here the coach decides on the activities to bring out the individual's technique
- The choices the player makes.
- The game.

Age 15

- The situation. The coach plans everything.
- The efficiency of movement on and off the ball.
- The competition (lots of opposition)

In addition to the soccer aspects, the FFF looks at three aspects of maintaining the balance in their young players' lives. First is ensuring that players are able to maintain a normal study program in case their intended professional career does not become reality. The family and original club are very important. The player returns to his club each week to play matches. He is expected to become a leader on and off the field. Since 1992 the FFF has been tracking graduates of this program. Eighty players have played in the first division, 40 in the second division, 15 in the third division, and 22 in the amateur leagues.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

The players undergo a QPS, or sports personality tests. There are 120 question tests that give the players situations that they have to solve, dealing with family matters, peer pressure, etc. The players who scored the highest all currently are professional players. All the training centers employ consultants to work with the players. In certain situations, outside experts may be brought in. The clubs pay strict attention to the special needs that may be associated with being a minority.

MEDICAL FACTORS

Players undergo extensive medical testing. These include tests on the treadmill, cybex machines, skin fold thickness (body fat), height and weight, vision, dental and suppleness. The FFF followed 40 players for two years in the areas of sight and dental. None of the players who excelled in this area had injuries in qualification games, lead-up games and the World or European Championships.

Physical tests

All tests are taken on the soccer field. The players run through a battery of speed detector tests over 40 meters with sensors every five yards. The Swedish Beep Test also is used frequently. Springing and bounding is tested via the Italian formulated Bosco Test. Another Swedish test originated by Lager-Boucher is run over 200 meters. This is the players' favorite as they can easily see their progress.

Detection of young players

Morphology – players are tested to determine the age of their bones to help predict adult size.

Medical Purpose – determining medically-related limitations

Physical Aspect – determining their athletic potential. Here speed is the most important.

Technical Skills – the most important aspect! This includes intelligence, adaptability and understanding during the games.

Personality – discussed during QPS and Sports Personality section

Scholarship – Grades in school. The student's behavior in and out of school and work is monitored.

The FFF believes that the player has two real jobs, one to be a soccer **player** and the second is to be a student.

TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

All the players have the same equipment. They are taught and expected to take care of their shoes. Each is provided with a water bottle and a ball that is required to be well-inflated at all times. The training progressions are increased in intensity and difficulty at the proper time. The training time depends on the amount of intensity and may possibly be as long as two hours. The weekly training schedule:

Monday

- Skill work
- Aerobic exercises
- Stretching
- Agility training
- Basketball, volleyball or handball games

Tuesday

- Skill work, repetitive exercises versus opposition
- Games with opponents

Wednesday

- Skill exercise
- Tactical exercises which are specific in nature
- Applications of the above tactical exercise to the game

Thursday

- Same training as Tuesday but with more leeway to the players

Friday

- Physical implications. This is done without intensity, i.e., working for five seconds and resting for 20 seconds (work/rest ratio of 1:4). The work is done with the ball whenever possible.
- Speed movements
- Strength movements
- Jumping movements
- Principles of Play

Saturday and Sunday

- Match or break physical training

PHYSICAL TRAINING

This aspect is broken down into three areas: endurance, speed and flexibility. Endurance is developed through a series of calibrated runs with special attention given to the rhythm of the exercise. Speed is developed through races with and without the ball over short distances of 5m, 10m, 20m, and 30m, exercises with the ball, and games of 2 v. 2 with special attention paid to the rhythm and intensity of the games. The flexible training consists of activities that promote the individual's suppleness, supporting moves, coordination with the ball and agility.

SKILL TRAINING

- Juggling the ball, running with the ball, dribbling, feints
- Kicking and passing. Ball control.
- Shooting
 - To be executed with both the foot and the head
 - To be comfortable in front of the goal
 - The touch (technique)
 - Precision is more important than power
 - To link up the goal scorers and finish with a shot on goal, from in front of the goal
- Crossing and snap shot
- Heading games
- Defensive games with the emphasis on not committing fouls

PASSING THE BALL

Ball control is the basis of the game (always done while moving). The young French players are taught to always feint when receiving or passing which allows them to get in and out of tight marking situations. All sessions include lots of shooting and special sessions on how to cross the ball.

TACTICAL POINTS

These elements are always part of the training games and the system of play:

- To help the ball carrier
 - To get the ball back
 - To offer support
- To demand the ball
- To pass the ball and follow the pass
- Coverage in the defense
- Positioning and the movement into space
- The notion of the attacker defending and the defender attacking

GAME TACTICS

- Numeric advantage
 - Always seeking numbers up in tight space, the lower the numbers the more difficult
- Reduce the playing area and reduce the numbers
- Use the lateral space
- Be aware of the changes from zone to zone
 - Changing the zones from large to small and visa versa
 - Incorporating games with four small goals to provide target areas and played on a handball field (similar to our basketball courts)
 - Partnering up two forwards and two midfielders, etc.
- Attacking and defending in waves (using the midfielders)

The French Football Federation very much operates under the principle “This work today is very important for the game of tomorrow.” The better job they do in the development of quality players at the youth level, the more accomplished professional players will develop. The FFF keeps a close eye on the professional clubs because they might not always be concerned with the best interests of the young players. They believe that, out of all the elements, the development of the technical ability is the most important.

Editor's note: This report based on Aime Jacquet's presentation was prepared by Roby Stahl, Director of Coaching, OSYSA.