

CULTURE CLUBS

Every generation will complain of it – that clubs and organisations with the largest chequebooks will sweep the honours. But real success, more often than not, is built upon solid foundations, so that even those with deep pockets realise it's wise to nurture your own talent, and immerse them in the ways of your team... as **Mike Dale** discovers.

Saracens' Richard Hill is nurturing the club's future stars



When Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Xavi were named as the three best footballers in the world last year, it did not go unnoticed that all were graduates of Barcelona's famed youth academy. La Masía, the prolific talent factory situated in the shadow of the Nou Camp, has been churning out world-class players for more than 30 years; all of them fleet-footed, quick-thinking masters of the club's trademark tiki-taka style of football.

Barcelona's domination of the FIFA Ballon d'Or nominations and Spain's World Cup win, in which Barcelona-educated stars played a vital role, led to a global clamour to discover the academy's secrets.

Director Carles Folguer revealed that he not only prioritises skill, vision and passing, but also respect for officials, fairness, hard work and humility; values he described as 'non-negotiable'. His boys must respect the coach as much as the cook, and be an example.

There is much that coaches of all sports at all levels can take from this culture of developing the player and the person in tandem. So what are the benefits, and what techniques are effective?

Richard Hill, the lynchpin of England's Rugby World Cup

winning side in 2003, gives an insider's view of how it's done at Saracens, the club with whom he spent his entire playing career.

The legendary flanker now works as a mentor and coach at the club's academy. He identifies work-rate, honesty, discipline and humility as its core values.

'Throughout the week, while in the Saracens culture, we want that to be at the forefront of their minds, every time they train, play and everything they do to do with Saracens. That's what we all believe in,' says Hill.

'Of course, we're always trying to recruit players with talent, but we also appreciate that talent needs to work alongside a huge heart and head. They are two major components that are needed.

'Talent will take you so far, but if you want to be a top player in the Premiership or push to be an international player then you have to have that ability to drive yourself and be organised. It's not just a case of fitness, skill work, rugby; it's about making sure you're prepared off the pitch as well.'

'You want to build an environment that they don't want to leave.'

No sport values mental fortitude, bravery and strength of character more than rugby. The ways in which Saracens try to help instil these values in their young tyros are fascinating.

As part of a lifestyle programme for the elite academy players, they're often deliberately taken out of their comfort zone to see how they react. One recent example saw them ushered into a room in which Derek Derenalagi, a British soldier who had both his legs blown off in Afghanistan, was sat down in front of them.

As Hill says: 'To listen to Derek and how he coped with the adversity of his injury and the positive mindset he has, that's a good insight for them and something to think about when they're moping around a training pitch, complaining that they're tired. It puts things in perspective.'

The players were also taken to Twickenham and, without warning, Martin Johnson came in and spoke to them for an hour about the importance of being a team player. A simpler exercise saw youngsters invited to a plush golf club. Some realised this would require them to adhere to a dress code - those that didn't gained 'a little lesson in maturity'.

One of the most obvious benefits of established academy structures like Saracens' is the loyalty and sense of inclusion it fosters in its pupils. From the moment youngsters are spotted and recruited

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from surrounding counties to the club's Elite Player Development Group, the potential to progress through a clearly drawn pathway into the first team is laid out in front of them. They're provided with the same environment as any full-time professional, even though most are combining rugby with studies at nearby Oaklands College or at university.

The oldest academy players, who may be on the fringe of the first team, are loaned out to clubs in the two divisions below the Aviva Premiership. But even if playing for other sides at the weekends, they come back to train at the academy in midweek and their match performances are reviewed on DVD. As Hill explains: 'If they're off on loan at Bedford, Barking or Blackheath it would be very easy for them to lose their association with the club. You need these younger players to understand (our culture) and appreciate it. They do train full-time with us, but you still want to create that feeling of belonging which a first-team regular gets by performing every week in matches.'

'You want to build an environment that they don't want to leave. If you're providing a player with everything he desires and his development is going well, you have to have a belief that that goes a long way towards making them want to stay, because they may not get exactly the same somewhere else. They may get better money, but is money everything that you desire in life? We're very much about the people. One of the reasons we run our life skills programme is that players leave us as more rounded individuals.'

Back to football, and a different perspective from one of the most respected coaches within the game.

Alfred Galustian is international director of Coerver Coaching – an innovative global programme that has mastery of the ball at its core.

THE COACH'S EDGE

Hill says:

'We want to deliver sessions that are technical, taxing in terms of the physical and the mental side, but ultimately we want players to come off with a smile, even if it's not the first thing that comes to mind!'

Galustian adds:

'In the Coerver Performance Academy, the life skills part is as important as the football part – how you behave, your work ethic, respect for players and the referee.'

A sense of togetherness, a club culture and a clear path of progression through the ranks is essential.

Reinforce your key values and build a rounded character by taking players out of their comfort zone.

Transferring the responsibility on to the player to learn his craft individually, then testing progress, is an excellent way to aid a player's focus and discipline.

Galustian was recently appointed technical skills adviser to England's Premier League, with the aim of addressing the deficiencies in skill levels among English players that were so painfully evident at the World Cup in South Africa.

He believes excellence in discipline and character is best nurtured by transferring responsibility from the coach to the player. 'When you focus on your own passing skills, receiving and running with the ball, getting quicker, your focus becomes greater.'

'With computer games and 75 TV channels, how are kids going to focus on anything? When you're set individual training, it gives you the mental discipline to build your life skills, communication and decision making.'

'The Coerver method has hundreds of individual ball manoeuvres. They're expected to practise themselves and you can see whether they've done it or not. You hand responsibility to them. It's not, "here I am for training, coach, show me what I've got to do". It's, "this is what you've got to do, you go home and do it".'

It all contrasts sharply with the experience of Pete Ferris – just one forgotten name among thousands who are dumped into obscurity every year from youth teams at professional clubs.

Except Ferris wasn't dumped initially. He was one of three out of 18 apprentices given a pro contract at Carlisle United in 2006. It was an achievement even more impressive as he'd just sustained a cruciate ligament injury.

He reflects: 'By the time I was fit, the manager who had put faith in me had gone. I had a new manager, was trying to get back to full fitness and he seemed to have no interest. He didn't know who I was. I was out the door within six months. It's really fragile, so ruthless.'

If Barcelona and Saracens provide us with exemplary examples of how to nurture young talent, Ferris' experience is surely the anti-example. Messi, Iniesta and other alumni from sport's leading academies are fortunate to have had far more rigid frameworks underpinning their talent. They're privileged too to have been moulded into loyal, disciplined and mature human beings.

Further Reading

Haskins, D. (2010) *Coaching the Whole Child: Positive Development Through Sport*. Leeds: Coachwise Business Solutions/The National Coaching Foundation. ISBN: 978-1-905540-78-5.

Lerner, R.M. (2008) *The Good Teen*. New York: Three Rivers Press. ISBN: 978-0-307347-58-9.

NEXT STEPS

sports coach UK runs a useful workshop related to this subject area called 'Coaching the Whole Child: Positive Development Through Sport'. For details of your nearest workshop and dates, visit www.sportscoachuk.org or call the Workshop Booking Centre on 0845-601 3054.



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