



EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS

Selecting teams is easy, right? You simply choose the most in-form individuals and pitch them together – supporting them with the most up-to-date coaching methods and state-of-the-art preparation. But beneath the glamour of the first-team lies a huge world of preparation, thought and theory, as **Richard Gibson** reveals...

The reality of most sport is that massive focus is now given to the development of sides sometimes years before players emerge at senior level. Nowadays much greater resources are devoted to preparing shadow teams below the elite, so that the transition for individuals is as straightforward as possible and they are better prepared for the ultimate step-up in class.

Planning the formation of future teams both in the short and long term has become one of the great challenges for our sporting bodies – with style of play, tactics and technique all in focus well in advance, in readiness for the step up.

Here three men currently attempting to influence prospective England and Great Britain stars discuss their remits...

David Parsons, the England and Wales Cricket Board's performance director:

'Our job at the national academy in Loughborough is to supply players that Andy Flower and the other England selectors can call upon to perform at world-class level, while the more developmental objective is to take players three or four years away from the England team and improve their skills and attributes. So we are about the balance of having the players ready to go now if the call comes and others who are a few years further back but will benefit from being exposed to the next level.

'For example, this winter we have selected Danny Briggs, the Hampshire spinner, and all-rounder Ben Stokes, from Durham, who have ostensibly had one year of first-class cricket, for the performance squad in Australia.

'But we have also learned from experience not to make too many distinctions between categories when we are developing players.

A couple of years ago we estimated that Amjad Khan, Michael Carberry and James Tredwell were within 12 months of playing for England. We were right but then again, we also had Steven Finn, Ajmal Shahzad and Craig Kieswetter come through the performance programme, and such was the progress they made that their time came sooner, so we are trying not to be too prescriptive in terms of how far away people are.



England's Ajmal Shahzad was a crucial member of the Ashes squad and ready to step into the starting attack

the door and the third generation players, and basically work in Olympic cycles in terms of that development. So as well as preparing the current team, we are formulating thoughts on the 2012 and 2016 versions.

'What we have done in recent times is to create a Futures team - which primarily constitutes players under 23 - because we found that between the under-20s and the senior British team there was too big a gap. Chris Finch, the national coach, was then brought in to work with this squad, so he was aware of the next generation, whereas previously he was relying on others to relay the information.

'We have already seen a huge positive from this with four of the Futures squad moving up this year and Ogo Adegboye going from an unknown to the starting five for Britain.

'In general, however, we are trying to create an environment so that they play cricket in a certain way.'

'Within British basketball we have a huge challenge because we are undoubtedly playing catch-up, and one of our major current focuses is looking after our up-and-coming athletes and providing them with high-quality coaching and good preparation. The budget allocation between the under-20 team and the seniors is disproportionate, of course, but we have tried to give a greater emphasis to emerging players with the establishment of the Futures team and we needed to produce a statement of how important they are to us.

'Pinpointing which guys are ready for the step up can be difficult because of the nature of our sport - there are five men on court but you use a constant rotation system. For example, if you were picking a team in a football code you might want to pick someone with certain attributes similar to a current player who is doing well - someone of the same type - but in basketball the planning has to be different.

'Different guys can bring different things to the table and with the amount of interchange that goes on - you have a primary group of eight - you do not try to replicate a starting five man for man. One potential point guard will have different attributes to the next and it is about getting enough of a variety of attributes across the whole team.'

'When we are composing England Lions teams (formerly England A) we are always trying to put sides together to win matches, because that is the ultimate aim for any team. It is effectively our next best team but we then have the dilemma of what "next best" means. It can mean second best presently or it can mean future best. For example, there might be a player you are confident will be in the future England team but is not currently in the second-best XI on merit, so that can complicate things.

'In general, however, we are trying to create an environment so that they play cricket in a certain way - the way we want them to play when they reach the England side.

'The best example of preparing players for the full side was last year before England Lions went out to Abu Dhabi. It was made clear to me that Andy

Flower and the selectors wanted to be able to pick a wicketkeeper who could hit boundaries at the top of the order, particularly with Twenty20 cricket in mind. We compromised our selection to include both Steven Davies and Craig Kieswetter in reacting to that request.'

Warwick Cann, British Basketball's head of performance:

'Our main approach to developing players below the Great Britain team is through a depth chart - whereby we rank our athletes in the five positions on their competency levels. We have a pecking order from the top down to 17 year olds, which hopefully shows us where certain people will be in a few years' time.

We analyse the current senior group we are working with, the players who are knocking on

John Peacock, head coach of England Under-17s, football's reigning European champions:

'We prepare our players at international level from Under-16 with Kenny Swain as their manager; he runs that team for a year and then becomes my assistant when they move to Under-17 level.

'We work with them on what Kenny has done with them previously - our philosophy of how the game should be played - and push towards getting to the latter stages of the European Championship finals, because it is important when you are dealing with the elite that you test them as much as possible.

'The last group that got to the Under-17 final before this year's win was the 1993 squad that had players like David Beckham, and Gary Neville.'

'Earlier this year (2010) we produced the *Future Game* document, which was some 200 pages long. The first 60-70 pages are just about how we see the game moving forward. With Spain's recent track record, football has become very much a possession-based game, and if you are going to win anything at international level you need to be able to play out from the back, through the middle third and have that ability within the team to be unorthodox on occasion in the final third of the pitch. Those are the key ingredients of the teams we are trying to build now.

'This is how we want the England team to play in the future and winning the European Championships will hopefully have a positive knock-on effect. We had been knocking on the door for 10 years, so from a psychological point of view it was excellent to get over that final hurdle.

'The nature of development means some players come through later than others, but the way the England Under-21 set-up is now, a good number are a lot closer to the senior environment and we have seen shadow-squad players - Andy Carroll, Jordan Henderson and Jack Wilshere are recent examples - coming through.



'The last group that got to the Under-17 final before this year's win was the 1993 squad that had players like David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Gary Neville in it and they obviously went on to become senior international players. That cannot happen in every year group and doesn't.

'But hopefully this team - they were all born in 1993 ironically - will get a few through.

'Players develop at different rates, of course, and there will be some that do not emerge until into their 20s. By the same token when you are dealing with 17-19 year olds, we are no different to any other nation, and that means that

two or three years further on when they reach the Under-21 age group there will be a 50% drop out.'

Further Reading

Charlesworth, R. (2004) *Shakespeare the Coach*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia. ISBN: 978-0-33036478-2.

Charlesworth, R. (2001) *The Coach: Managing for Success*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia. ISBN: 978-0-732911-06-5

Woodward, C. (2005) *Winning!* London: Hodder Paperbacks. ISBN: 978-0-340836-30-9.

THE COACH'S EDGE

When working with reserve or youth teams, communication with the first-team coach is vital: liaising on tactics and style should help players' pathway to a higher level. What is the vision on how your teams should play?

Remember that as a coach, you are playing a part within the greater scheme of things, not just for your direct team. Guard against any 'them and us' scenarios when feeding players to senior sides.

Be proactive in discussing future targets for team development - acknowledge where the gaps might appear higher up or which of your players could force openings by the sheer strength of their performances.

Try to replicate the full team not just in unit play but also in preparation and practice methods - is it viable to set up the same procedures?

Think about ways to make the transition between back-up player to the front line as seamless as possible.

Exposure to a better standard is crucial in development - are there opportunities for your team to be tested at a higher level? If so, note who copes best as rates of development differ from player to player.