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Barcelona's approach to youth development

By Mike Woitalla

Two years ago, while visiting Spain, I looked into to its approach to youth development. Since then, Spain has won the 2008 European Championship and Barcelona won the 2009 UEFA Champions League.

Both teams won their titles playing attractive, attack-minded soccer in an era dominated by cautious, defensive play. As coaches have become ever more obsessed with strength and size, Barcelona and Spain's star players are notable for their skill and small stature.

Among those I spoke to were **Jose Ramon Alexanco** , the director of Barcelona's youth program, and **Pep Guardiola** , who at the time had just been named coach of Barcelona's reserve team. Guardiola, one of Barca's all-time great players, had come through the Barcelona youth system, which he joined in 1984 at age 13.

Guardiola was promoted to first-team head coach last summer, and proceeded to guide Barca to La Liga title and the Champions League crown, which it captured in Rome on Wednesday by marvelously outplaying Manchester United in a 2-0 win that featured several products of Barcelona's youth program, the *cantera*, including **Lionel Messi** , **Victor Valdes** , **Carles Puyol** , **Xavi** and **Andres Iniesta**.

"Our aim to is to help young players understand the game," Guardiola said when I spoke with him at Barcelona's training grounds. "Of course, there is the emphasis on the technical, where it all starts. But we want the players to learn how to think fast. We want them to learn how to run little, but run smart."

He echoed **Johan Cruyff** , the Dutchman who coached the great Barcelona teams that won the 1992 European Cup and four straight La Liga titles with Guardiola in midfield.

Said Cruyff: "All coaches talk too much about running a lot. I say it's not necessary to run so much. Soccer is a game that's played with the brain. You need to be in the right place at the right time, not too early, not too late."

Alexanco provided me with details on how Barcelona ran its youth teams.

"We don't demand that the youth teams win," said Alexanco. "We demand that they play good soccer. We don't use the word, 'winning.'"

Not until after the players reach age 16 is there fitness training.

"That's when we start to concentrate on the technical, tactical *and* physical requirements they need for the first team," Alexanco said. "Before that age we mainly play soccer. Everything is with the ball. We work on skills and some tactics."

The Barca program fields teams from age 10 up. The 10-year-olds - the *Benjamins* - practice four days a week, in 45-minute sessions, and play 7-v-7 games on the weekend. All of the older age groups play 11-v-11.

"They play the same system, in the 4-3-3 formation, used by first team," says Alexanco. "The developmental teams have to reflect the personality of the first team. That also means playing attacking, attractive soccer. That's what our fans demand and what we want to give them."

Through age 17, Barcelona fields two teams at each age group. Each player plays at least 45 percent of the games.

Choosing the right players for its youth program is the key to its success. Barcelona does not hold tryouts. They don't work, says Alexanco. Charged with finding the talent are the *ojeadores*, the scouts. The players they pick come in for trials before they are invited to join the *cantera*.

Barcelona employs 25 scouts throughout Spain, with at least one in each province. They convene twice a year at Barcelona, where the bosses reiterate the criteria and quality they're seeking in players.

Barcelona also works with about 30 youth clubs throughout Catalonia, with the aim of finding players from the province it prides itself on representing, and it uses contacts throughout the world to find players.

"You have to have eyes everywhere," Alexanco says. "You need to see the kids who are playing soccer on the playground."

"We're looking for players who have technique and speed, and who look like players. And we're looking for players who offer something different."