The New York Times Magazine

Magazine

How a Soccer Star Is Made

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE JUNE 2, 2010

The youth academy of the famed dutch soccer club Ajax is grandiosely called De Toekomst — The Future. Set down beside a highway in an unprepossessing district of Amsterdam, it consists of eight well-kept playing fields and a two-story building that houses locker rooms, classrooms, workout facilities and offices for coaches and sports scientists. In an airy cafe and bar, players are served meals and visitors can have a glass of beer or a cappuccino while looking out over the training grounds. Everything about the academy, from the amenities to the pedigree of the coaches — several of them former players for the powerful Dutch national team — signifies quality. Ajax once fielded one of the top professional teams in Europe. With the increasing globalization of the sport, which has driven the best players to richer leagues in England, Germany, Italy and Spain, the club has become a different kind of enterprise — a talent factory. It manufactures players and then sells them, often for immense fees, on the world market. "All modern ideas on how to develop youngsters begin with Ajax," Huw Jennings, an architect of the English youth-development system, told me. "They are the founding fathers."

In America, with its wide-open spaces and wide-open possibilities, we celebrate the "self-made athlete," honor effort and luck and let children seek their own course for as long as they can — even when that means living with dreams that are unattainable and always were. The Dutch live in a cramped, soggy nation made possible only because they mastered the art of redirecting water. They are engineers with creative souls, experts at systems, infrastructure and putting scant resources to their best use. The construction of soccer players is another problem to be solved, and it's one they undertake with a characteristic lack of sentiment or illusion.

The first time I visited De Toekomst happened to coincide with the arrival of 21 new players — 7- and 8-year-olds, mainly, all from Amsterdam and its vicinity — who were spotted by scouts and identified as possible future professionals. As I came upon them, they were but it is one that sorts out the real prodigies — those capable of playing at an elite international level — from the merely gifted.

About 200 players train at De Toekomst at any given time, from ages 7 to 19. (All are male; Ajax has no girls' program.) Every year, some in each age group are told they cannot return the following year — they are said to have been "sent away" — and new prospects are enrolled in their place. And it is not just the children whose performances are assessed. Just before my second trip to Amsterdam in March, several longtime coaches were informed that they had not measured up and would be let go. One of them was the coach of a boy I had been following, Dylan Donaten Nieuwenhuys, a slightly built, soft-featured 15-year-old who began at Ajax when he was 7.

Dylan's father, Urvin Rooi, served as a sort of guide for me. Gregarious and opinionated, he introduced me to other parents, made sure I came inside for hot drinks at the cafe and even gave me lifts on his scooter from the training grounds back to the transit station. He was particularly useful in translating a culture that was nothing like I had ever seen in many years of reporting on American sports. When I observed that for all the seriousness of purpose at De Toekomst, I was surprised that the players did not practice more hours or play more games, Rooi said: "Of course, because they do not want to do anything to injure them or wear them out. They're capital. And what is the first thing a businessman does? He protects his capital."

When the boys start at the youth academy, Rooi said, they are attached to the ideal of Ajax, whose senior team packs in 50,000-plus fans for its home games and still occupies a mythic place in world soccer because of the innovative style it established in the 1960s — a quick-passing, position-shifting offensive attack that became known as Total Football. "The little boys drink their tea out of Ajax cups," he said. "They sleep in Ajax pajamas under Ajax blankets." As spring approaches, he continued, they get nervous about whether they will be permitted to stay for another year. "This is when they sometimes start to get bad school grades. They don't sleep. They wet their pants."

Over time, though, the academy hardens them mentally as well as physically. I asked Dylan how he felt about his coach's being fired. He shrugged. "The football world is a hard world," he replied. "He has made the decision to send boys away. Now he knows how it feels."

LATE ONE AFTERNOON in the cafe at De Toekomst, I was talking with a coach, Patrick Landru, who works with the academy's youngest age groups, when he asked if he could take my writing pad for a moment. I handed it over, and he put down five names, then drew a bracket to their right. Outside the bracket, he wrote, "80 million euros." The names represented five active "Ajax educated" players, as he called them, all of whom entered the

the dominant model is "pay to play" — the better an athlete, the more money a parent shells out — is the outlier.)

Ajax makes mistakes, plenty of them. It sends the wrong boys away, and some of them become stars elsewhere with no compensation returning to the club. As a production line, it is grossly inefficient; only a small percentage of its youngsters become elite players. But the club does not throw money after pure fantasy, encouraging visions of pro careers that never have a chance of materializing for children who do not have the foundational talent to reach such goals. The club decides which boys have potential — "Please note," its Web site advises, "Ajax's youth academy cannot accept individual external applications" — and then exposes them to scientific training and constant pressure.

The director of the Ajax youth academy is Jan Olde Riekerink, an intense man with piercing blue eyes who spends much of his day walking from field to field, observing. He usually stands in the background, out of sight, before coming forward to urge better effort or correct some fine point of technique. "He is always watching, like a spy," Urvin Rooi told me.

One Sunday in March, I was on the sideline of a game — Ajax's 15-year-olds matched up against the youth academy of another Dutch professional club — when I noticed Riekerink behind me. He was by himself, bundled into his parka and writing in a small notebook. With the Ajax boys up two goals and dominating the action, I told him I was impressed by their skill. (I was always impressed by the quality of play at De Toekomst.) "Really?" he responded. "To me this is a disaster. They are playing with the wrong tempo, too slow."

During training sessions at Ajax, I rarely heard the boys' loud voices or laughter or much of anything besides the thump of the ball and the instruction of coaches. It could seem grim, more like the grinding atmosphere of training for an individual sport — tennis, golf, gymnastics — than what you would expect in a typically boisterous team setting. But one element of the academy's success is that the boys are not overplayed, so the hours at De Toekomst are all business. Through age 12, they train only three times a week and play one game on the weekend. "For the young ones, we think that's enough," Riekerink said when we talked in his office one day. "They have a private life, a family life. We don't want to take that from them. When they are not with us, they play on the streets. They play with their friends. Sometimes that's more important. They have the ball at their feet without anyone telling them what to do."

*

By age 15, the boys are practicing five times a week. In all age groups, training largely consists of small-sided games and drills in which players line up in various configurations, move quickly and kick the ball very hard to each other at close range. In many practice settings

Drawn from a nation of fewer than 17 million, with a core of stars who trained at Ajax, the Dutch national team plays in the Total Football tradition that relies on players who know what they want to do with the ball before it reaches them and can move it on without stopping it. The British author David Winner, in his book "Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Soccer," calls this approach "physical chess," and the Dutch can be quite haughty about it. They abhor the cloying defensive tactics associated with the Italians and the boot-and-chase way the English played for years, and it has been observed that they sometimes appear more intensely interested in the artfulness of a match than in the result.

The Dutch style (indistinguishable from the Ajax style) even has its own philosopher-king — Johan Cruyff, an Ajax star in the 1970s, considered just one step down from Pelé in the pantheon of playing greats, who can sound like a more erudite Yogi Berra. "Don't run so much," he once said, meaning that players often cover lots of ground but to no effect. "You have to be in the right place at the right moment, not too early, not too late."

In March, I had a seat at the Amsterdam Arena, just across the highway from De Toekomst, to watch the U.S. national team play the Dutch in a "friendly," a pre-World Cup tuneup and test. Thanks to a late goal by the U.S., the final score was only 2-1, in favor of the Dutch, but the match was a version of that old playground game: it's our ball, and you can't play with it. The Dutch zipped it from player to player and from one side of the field to the other while the Americans ran and ran, chasing the ball but rarely gaining control. When the Americans did get the ball, their passes too often flew beyond reach or directly out of bounds.

Other nations and professional clubs around the world play in a manner similar to the Dutch — including, not coincidentally, Barcelona, one of the most consistently successful clubs in Europe, and where Cruyff played after leaving Ajax and then coached for eight seasons. What this type of play demands is the highest order of individual skill: players with a wizardlike ability to control the ball with either foot, any part of the foot, and work it toward the goal through cramped spaces and barely perceptible lanes.

After the U.S.-Netherlands friendly, the Dutch coach praised the Americans for having a "well-organized" defense — which was true but seemed to be a case, unintentional perhaps, of damning with faint praise. But what else could he say? The Americans did a good job of backing up and closing ranks, a survival tactic that, along with several heroic saves by the goalkeeper Tim Howard, kept the Dutch from running up six goals or so.

That was only one game, of course, but it seemed to bring into focus what I had been observing at the Ajax youth academy, as well as learning about American soccer. How the U.S.

peer on his team and rarely one on an opposing squad. He may not realize it at the time, but the game, in essence, is too easy for him.

Of the 23 players chosen for the U.S. team going to the World Cup, 15 of them played at least some college soccer. Among the 8 who went straight into the professional ranks are several of the team's most accomplished performers, including Landon Donovan, DaMarcus Beasley and Tim Howard, and promising players like Jozy Altidore and Michael Bradley (son of the head coach, Bob Bradley). Did they rise to the top of the American talent pool because they bypassed college? Or did they skip it because they were the rare Americans good enough as teenagers to attract legitimate professional opportunities? The answer is probably a little bit of both. But you will find no one in the soccer world who says they would have enhanced their careers by staying in school.

No other nation has as comprehensive a college-sports system as exists here, and none assume that an elite athlete will seek (or benefit from) higher education. "You have a major problem in the ages of 17 to 21," Huw Jennings, now the director of the youth academy at Fulham, in the English Premier League, told me when I visited him in London. "The N.C.A.A. system is the fault line. I understand that it is good for a person's development to go to university, but it's not the way the world develops players."

ONE DAY AT AJAX, I stood beside an otherwise empty playing field and watched for 30 minutes as a coach tutored Florian Josefzoon, a lithe, dreadlocked 18-year-old who is being groomed for stardom. Bryan Roy, a former member of the Dutch national team, demonstrated a series of stutter-steps and pirouettes, then kicked the ball to Josefzoon, on the right wing, who trapped it and tried to match Roy's moves as he turned and headed up the right side. It was as if Roy were teaching him a dance. When Josefzoon mastered one set of steps, Roy showed him something new. "He is one of the talents," Roy told me. "He's a winger; I was a winger. He has been put into a special program in order to bridge the gap between the under-18s and the first team, so it is natural for me to be the one to help him."

On an adjacent field, Ruben Jongkind, a consultant who mainly works with Dutch track athletes, was altering the posture and gait of a 15-year-old recently acquired from another Dutch club. Jongkind told me that while the boy was actually quite fast, he did not have enough range of motion in his vertical plane. "He was running like a duck, shuffling," Jongkind said. "That takes more energy, which is why we have to change his motor patterns, so he can be as fast at the end of a game as the beginning."

Jongkind had been working with this player for several weeks and said he had progressed to "consciously able but not subconsciously able" to run with the desired form, meaning that is Ajax. People from clubs around the world come to visit, and they always want to know, 'What is the secret?' But it is a matter of earth and air. We are in Amsterdam, so we are a little bit adventurous, a little bit artistic, maybe a little bit arrogant. You can observe what we do, but it is something you cannot copy."

Ajax won the European club championship as recently as 1995, the same year that a decision in the European Court of Justice (the Bosman transfer ruling, named after the Belgian player who brought the case) gave players the power of free agency when their contracts end. It priced Ajax out of the top tier of competition and left the continental championships to be fought over by the big clubs in the English Premier League, Spain's Liga, Germany's Bundesliga and Italy's Serie A, which get vastly greater fees for television rights. Endt told me that the need to sell players — just to keep the club going and to bring money in to help pay the salaries of players on the first team — is well understood but regretted. "We're realistic about it," he said, "but the real Ajax man is crying inside."

Ajax is listed on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, but 73 percent of the shares remain in private hands and are not publicly traded. Just as no one sugarcoats the mission at Ajax, the demands placed on children are not minimized. "One of the things we say is we are never satisfied," Endt said. "That is both good and bad. It can be difficult to be in a situation where whatever you do, you are told you should do better."

Versloot said that, on average, one and a half products of De Toekomst per season will rise to the first team and go on to a significant, well-compensated pro career. Some of the others will gravitate to second- or third-tier pro circuits or the high amateur ranks in the Netherlands, where the best players make "black money," under-the-table payments. The pressure to emerge from the academy as one of its top products — and to produce them — is immense. "It is always a very tense atmosphere here, for everyone," Versloot said. "You have to just get used to it."

EARLY IN EACH NEW calendar year, youngsters in the Ajax academy are given preliminary notice of their status. Some are told they are secure, others that they are in danger of being sent away in the spring. A current 16-year-old at Ajax said he still recalled this conversation from when he was 8. (Ajax discourages players who have not yet signed pro contracts from talking to reporters, so he agreed to talk only if his name was not used.) "It was my second year, and they said: 'You are in doubt. We don't yet know if you'll be one of the boys who get to stay,' " he recounted. "They said I was a good technical player, but I was too passive and had to become more aggressive."

The Ajax development system has its critics. Some assume that because the first team is no longer a competitive force in Europe and does not even consistently finish first in the Eredivisie, the top Dutch professional league, it is no longer turning out top talent. But if all those who trained at De Toekomst now playing elsewhere were to come home — Wesley Sneijder from Italy; Rafael van der Vaart from Spain; Ryan Babel, Johnny Heitinga and Nigel de Jong from their teams in England — Ajax could compete with any club in the world. The more substantial criticism is that Ajax has become too mercantile and coldblooded. "I feel like they've lost some of the spirit of the place," John Hackworth, the former U.S. youth coach, told me. "What made them great, these heroes they create, now go on to stardom so quickly somewhere else."

I talked with Huw Jennings at the youth academy of Fulham, in London, as we watched a group of 10-year-olds train. They were louder and more physically animated than the boys I saw in Amsterdam. "What they do at Ajax is a little rote for my taste," Jennings said. "We are more apt to let the game be the teacher." He added that he believed Ajax "had become a caricature of itself." The last time he visited, he sensed that the dealmaking had breached the complex itself. "That dining area was crawling with agents," he said, "right among the players and their parents." (I did not see this during my visits.)

Jennings acknowledged that, based on the methods pioneered by Ajax, top clubs all over Europe were scouting very young kids and enrolling them in their academies. A book published in 2009 by the British journalist Chris Green, "Every Boy's Dream," estimated that 10,000 were being trained by clubs in England. They are cheap investments for clubs wanting to scoop up every boy with even a remote chance of one day becoming a top footballer.

Jennings said that his scouts, in response to the "unsuitability of the indigenous population of Britain" — children who are too sedentary and spend their time with video games — were increasingly focused "on the inner city of London, among Africans, Eastern Europeans and Caribbeans."

Fulham, like Ajax, is often a seller of talent. It recently sold a 20-year-old to Manchester United for seven million pounds, or more than $10 million. "It's a little ugly talking about the financial terms," Jennings said. "I don't like to do it. It feels not too far off from the slave trade."

Everyone draws the line somewhere. Jennings told me that he recently received a call from a rival club asking if it could schedule a game against his "elite 5s" — 5-year-olds. He replied, "We don't have elite 5s, but we'll play your expectant mothers."

Also, dozens of top amateur soccer clubs around the country have been designated by the U.S. Soccer Federation as academies, with the intent that they will offer training on a European-based model — more practices, fewer games, greater emphasis on technical skill. They have, however, already drawn criticism that their coaches can't break an old habit: trying, first and foremost, to win rather than focusing on the stated goal of developing elite individual talent.

The way we approach youth soccer in the U.S. is no more thoughtless than how we groom talent in baseball or basketball. All the same syndromes apply. Overplay. Too little practice. The courting of injuries — for example, the spate of elbow operations for pitchers in their midteens brought on by coaches who leave them on the mound for too many innings. The difference is that because these are, largely, our sports, we have a head start on the rest of the world and therefore a bigger margin for error.

Ajax is a fulcrum of the worldwide soccer market, exporting top players to the world's best clubs, because they take very young players and shape them. The U.S., by comparison, is still a peripheral participant. In the past decade, increasing numbers of Americans have gone overseas to play for European clubs, many of them signing contracts as teenagers. But with just a couple of exceptions, they are complementary players, not the star-quality performers who make up the rosters of the World Cup favorites.

How much does it matter for the U.S. to ascend to the top rung of worldwide soccer and become a serious threat to win a World Cup? The effort itself would bring some welcome changes. Players whose training was paid for by professional clubs, rather than by their parents, would likely be treated as investments and therefore developed with more intelligence and care for their physical well-being.

But club-financed training is the entry level to a rough-and-tumble, often merciless worldwide soccer economy. Elements of it clash with American sensibilities. What Ajax pioneered, and still executes at a high level, can look uncomfortably like the trafficking of child athletes.

Ronald de Jong invited me to go scouting with him one Saturday. He had his eye on a specific target — "a 2004," he said, referring to a birth year. A 5-year-old whom he had seen and was checking in with every month or so. This boy might not even be in school yet, I pointed out. "I don't think he is," de Jong said with a slight smile, as if he recognized the absurdity. "I believe he's in day care."

Even if Délano turned out to be a world-class prodigy, it would be at least a dozen years before he could play for Ajax's first team. He could not even enter De Toekomst for another two years. But I understood de Jong's interest. Délano was well worth this investment of time and attention, because one day he might be sold to Chelsea or Real Madrid or Juventus for millions.

Michael Sokolove, a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author of "Warrior Girls," about the injury epidemic among young female athletes.

A version of this article appears in print on June 6, 2010, on Page MM40 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: From Boys to Pros.

© 2018 The New York Times Company