Youth Development philosophy
and Recap of the 2004 UEFA Conference.
(European Coaches Symposium)

By David Caetano
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Recently here in Portugal In October, 2004 I attended a three day symposium for UEFT (Europe coaches association).

The symposium was for coaching directors of each European country and any other FIFA affiliated country. Two NSCAA directors were in attendance. Some of the symposium speakers included Otto Rehhagel the Greece national team coach and Euro 2004 champion, Dr.Jozef Venglos who is a former professional player and coach with many teams in Europe and President of UEFT, Andy Roxburgh head of technical department for UEFA, Holger Osieck, FIFA head of technical development, and Luiz Felipe Scolari Portugal national team coach and world cup champion with Brazil. I took notes and below is a general recap of information presented by each speaker. In addition I wrote my thoughts on training youth soccer players.

This reading is for your pleasure and hope to provoke your thoughts on coaching.

After I attended Portugal vs. Russia game in June for Euro 2004, I witnessed an exciting contest with much intensity and fair play in the newly built Benfica stadium (stadium of light). This great spectacle, the games following and the fabulous spectators re-energized my passion for the sport. As a former professional player from Portugal and the USA, degree in physical education (four year teacher and sports coordinator at the K-8 Melrose School), and celebrating 23 years of summer day camps in 2005 I have developed a philosophy in developing youth soccer players.

My pro debut in the stadium of light with Benfica vs. Bulgarian national team with 25 thousand spectators in a friendly game was a positive one. The most popular daily paper “A Bola” had a description of my play. One comment was “David the American showed promise and was quick in penetrating the defense with good technique”. I was fortunate to be able to train with some of the top players in the world on a daily basis. At this level not only is technique and tactics essential, but attitude and desire is probably more important as each player needs to have a very high level of technique and tactical knowledge. Through this time I have formed my philosophy on player development.
Why are there so many foreign basketball players in the NBA (National Basketball Association)? The USA has so many players but many do not reach the top level. Other countries usually have soccer as the primary sport but place pros in the NBA. The technical and tactical abilities has to be present within a professional athlete. I believe the importance at this level is the desire and work ethic of each player that forms the foundation to compete.

On the premise of what was just stated I will give my thoughts on developing youth soccer players. The first comment is that players begin to understand the concept of space when they are 11, 12 years old. In schools abstract math is presented during ages 9-12 and is directly associated with teaching space.

The training and soccer related activities should be fun, and then technique development as the second important factor. Age appropriate activities that challenges the athlete must to be included. Players should be provoked to develop creativity through trial and error. Experiencing with a spontaneous free spirited manner. Socrates the Greek philosopher said that the student should be provoked, they should be questioned to come up with solutions. The teacher or “coach” primary responsibility should be to help a player become a passionate player. Players should want to practice. The ideal is for players to spontaneously have pick up games in the backyard such as 1vs1, 2vs2 etc. They need to see sportsmanship like play and colorful games, live or on television. Their enjoyment and passion is the best coach.

We all know the percentage of youth players who actually get college scholarships and become professional players. We need to make the sport a life long activity for physical and mental well being. The teacher/coach most difficult part in coaching, in my opinion, is creating a training environment that allows for learning, be challenging, and keeping in mind the “fun”. At the initial younger ages fun and skill development is paramount. Body coordination and balance such as falling is just as important.

It is well know that too many players begin to loose interest and stop participating in soccer after high school and college. If they were coached to have fun and be challenged to become better players, they will carry the passion. Then as adults, if placed in media positions, these former players will vehemently push for soccer to be more in the fore front of the media as you or I would do.

How to train and develop an excited and creative player:

The advanced players at higher levels must have skill, tactical knowledge, creativity, desire, vision and be a thinking player. Tactics are age appropriate. The focus on training should embody these points. Vision or “peripheral vision” (as my youth club coach Al Diniz use to say) and thinking on the field has great importance but is not given enough attention.

During training, games and skill sessions should include these factors. While training players, they must get lots of ball touches. It is up to each individual coach to create training sessions that incorporate these training techniques in their personal philosophy of coaching. Remember to “Keep it fun and challenging”.

2004 UEFT Symposium  
UEFT, Union of European Football Trainers - now Alliance of European Football Coaches Association  
(Lisbon, Portugal)

The UEFT (Europe coaches association) coach’s symposium was held at the Estoril, Portugal Hotel Palacio October 2004. The speakers chosen had been coaches or continue to be. All of them very successful with the best clubs or national teams.

The overall common comment mentioned by most of the speakers was about fair-play (sportsmanship). Also, the respect for other coaches. In player development, technique and creativity was mentioned by most of the speakers.

David Caetano: Quote “while attending the four day symposium I had the listening pleasure to hear world class coaches as they provoked the attendees with their experiences and thoughts. The speakers on Euro 2004 focused on the tournament (16 European national teams participated on a month log event in Portugal), tactics and youth development were some of the predominant topics.”

Here is a brief recap:

Andy Roxburgh: head of technical department for UEFA:

Was part of the Euro 2004 study group who analyzed all tournament play. Some remarks:

- 4 billion watched on TV
- 95% tickets sold
- no violence at any stadium, “The most organized and well run Euro championship, Portuguese fans top level fair-play and some celebrated with Greece fans after final”
- 1 million attendance
- 1/3 of goals from set plays, 10 from corners

Otto Rehhagel: the Greece national team coach:

Was asked reason for success. Said spoke with players that team could be successful. Need to know how to communicate and work with people. Know the psychological part of each player.

“We worked on our tactics and got better with time”

Took players to Switzerland away from fans and many other distractions in Greece. In Switzerland had player’s full attention on the training and preparation. Otto’s tactics were directly associated with characteristics of his players. 50% of the goals were on free kicks.

Told one of his players that played for Roma, Italy that with the Euro tournament he could be one of the top players in Europe. This player was a big part of organizing the defense. Greece played with a very compact defense. “Seemed to have bridges between players. Players were aware of each others weaknesses and strengths”.

Otto stressed the importance of fair-play. When he was coaching in Japan he was impressed by how the coaches and players respected their opponents, but did not have to like them. Other speakers mentioned that Greece played with a high level of fair-play.

A coach in attendance asked what he did tactically. in more specific terms how his defense played. Otto responded by talking about the block and how the players helped one another and that the team also attacked. Another speaker at a later time mentioned how Greece played man-to-man on defense and some teams did not handle this properly.
Dr. Jozef Venglos: Former professional player and coach with many teams in Europe and President of UEFT; On the Euro 2004 study group

Speech: Focus on talented players from base to top level
These four points are Dr. Venglos foundation on developing youth soccer players.
1. “maximum individual ability for team quality”
2. “unpredictable creative approach”
3. “quick decision under pressure and limited time”
4. “stimulate creative thinking”

Some comments in his speech were from the study group:
• freedom of expression in young players
• coaches need to produce competitive and honest personalities
• all teams with success have great cooperation

Holger Osieck: FIFA head of technical development;

Was Assistant to Franz Beckenbaur as head coach when Germany won the world cup. Some points:
• Under FIFA there are 205 associations in 6 confederations worldwide.
• 40 million woman and girls
• 99.8% amateurs
• 80% youth players

Some comments:
• FIFA sends coaches to new associations to train their coaches
• “Portugal was such a well run event, such fun. If ever an award for spectators, Portugal surely to receive the 2004 award”.

Holger stressed the importance of methodology of coaching. He said coaches need to know how to work with teens, girls, etc. Focus should not be on books, uniforms etc. but on the subject.

I recall when Beckenbaur took over as national team coach in Germany he changed lodging for players from 5 star hotels, to a lower less plush atmosphere and developed the team from this beginning.

Luiz Felipe Scolari Portugal national team coach and world cup champ with Brazil

Spoke on how he prepared Brazil (won the world cup) for the world cup and Portugal (made it to the final and lost to Greece 1-0) for Euro 2004. Scolari said it was very similar and went on the give a description in preparing Portugal.
The Euro 2004 was to begin on June 12th the first game for Portugal.

On the 21st of May many players met to begin training. Some players were involved with FC Porto playing in the European cup final and others such as Figo with their club teams in European competitions.

Until the 30th the players were in a 5 star Hotel next to a golf course and with ocean view. There was complete freedom for players to wonder around the hotel and lobby. They had permission to receive any visitor. The first group of players that arrived had four days with mostly physical fitness training that was individually tailored for each. Then as more players began arriving (FC Porto players were playing in the Champions league final) the training was more focused on technical training with game like sessions.

This time period was for players to be together and feel comfortable with each other and not have complete focus on Euro 2004. There were also group walks around the beach and golf course (not many golfers at the hotel).

The team then moved on to the Sporting Lisbon training facility for 12 days prior to the first game on the 12th. This facility is new and is home to one of Portugal’s all-time great teams and one of the most followed. I have visited the site with a former teammate who was an assistant last year with the 1st team. Also, met with a former pro coach who coached me at Maritimo SC. It is a facility secluded with only one gate as an entrance. It has private rooms for all 1st team players and staff. Also, rooms on a separate side for some youth players. A 1,000 seat stadium and many perfectly manicured fields. Sporting has produced players such as Figo.

At the national teams arrival in the training complex the main focus was the upcoming tournament. Scolari showed the players a schedule of training and games that had the team in the final. He wanted the players to begin to think about being in the final. All the training was done to specific tactical needs for Euro2004. Now the players were to stay in the complex and not receive any visitors. There were only selected times where players could meet with their agents. This was done for the reason that some players were in negotiations and they would end up talking on the phones late hours.

Scolari wanted the player’s only focus on euro but he created some distractions so that players did not spend all their time in their rooms. There were bikes for players to ride around the complex, a room that contained a track for racing cars (Scolari showed a photo on the screen of players racing the cars, he commented this was a time for them to be 12 and 13 year olds), and finally Bingo (prizes were small but interesting gadgets such as a small TV).

This UEFT symposium showcased a fascinating environment of people with an abundance of soccer experience at the highest levels. The information presented was very interesting. The speakers demonstrated a common belief that fair play is the foundation for the sport.

With these thoughts and opinions I hope to provoke your thinking.

About the Author: David Caetano is a former pro and current owner – founder of soccer schools since 1981