

How Barcelona Spawns Stars

by Mike Voitalla, Monday, Oct 1, 2007 12:00 AM ET

Barcelona can buy any player it wants, but maintains an ambitious and successful youth program.

There's a large crowd of people in the plaza area surrounding Barcelona's Camp Nou Stadium, many of them are wearing jerseys with Ronaldinho, Messi and Eto'o on the back. But there's no game today.

It's a Thursday afternoon, the team is in Scotland for a preseason friendly, but that doesn't stop the crowds, who eat Spanish omelette sandwiches in between stadium tours and visiting the FC Barcelona Museum, which draws 1.2 million visitors a year, more than any other Barcelona museum.

Inside the league offices, behind the club store, sits Jose Ramon Alexanco, the director of Barcelona's youth program.

Alexanco's department has an annual budget of \$10 million. But why does a club, which can buy pretty much any player it wants, try to develop its own players?

"It is very important that we have players who grow up in the club," says Alexanco, who starred for Barcelona in 1980-93, "so that they truly understand what this club is all about. We want players to understand its tradition and to truly be a part of the FC Barcelona environment."

The aim is that, from a program that fields 12 boys teams, from age 10 up, one or two players reach the first team each year. The club's entire annual budget this season is more than \$400 million. It spent \$100 million on players in the offseason. A player or two from the \$10 million youth investment represents a solid return.

Sixty of the boys are from outside the area or from as far away as Mexico, Africa and Latin America, and live in La Masia, the club's residence hall. The club prefers not to bring players into residency until they're 14 years old, but there are exceptions.

The 10-year-olds - the Benjamins - practice four days a week for 45 minutes 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 team has two players for each position, and each player plays at least 45 percent of the games.

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

Today's Most Read

1. [Mexico calls in big guns for U.S. clash](#)
2. [MLS's hot expansion race](#)
3. [Laredo teen stars for USA at Copa Chivas](#)
4. [January Transfer Moves](#)
5. [Appeal denied, so Guzan stays in MLS](#)

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. Before that age we mainly play soccer. Everything is with the ball. We work on skills and some tactics."

One of the most famous home-grown Barcelona products is Josep Guardiola, who last summer joined Barcelona's youth development program staff and coaches the "B" team. He noticed some differences from when he joined Barcelona's program in 1984 at age 13.

"The children are surrounded by their parents - and their agents!" said Josep Guardiola,. "When I was a kid, we didn't have agents and our parents weren't involved."

When Guardiola was 19, Coach Johan Cruyff brought him into the first team, which is now known as the "Dream Team," having won the 1992 European Cup and four straight La Liga titles.

Cruyff's philosophy continues to influence Guardiola and the club's approach to developing players.

"Our aim is to help young players understand the game," Guardiola says. "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."

It's an echo of what Cruyff once said: "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."

Guardiola's return to Barcelona's youth program serves as a reminder of one reason why the club strives to bring players up through its own ranks.

Barcelona, whose motto is "More Than a Club," is the flagship of Catalan pride. Cruyff built the Dream Team with Basque players and foreign stars such as Dutchman Ronald Koeman, Dane Michael Laudrup and Bulgarian Hristo Stoitchkov. Guardiola, the central cog of the Dream Team with his precision passes and graceful marshalling of the midfield, was born in the Catalan heartlands.

Spanish regionalism is part of what drives Spanish clubs' ambitious youth programs, their canteras. For Athletic Bilbao, which fields only Basque players, developing young players is paramount to its survival. At Barcelona, which continues to field a few Catalan players, including captain Carles Puyol, young players are also brought in from around the nation and the world.

And of Europe's major club powers, Barcelona may have the most impressive success rate of moving players from its youth ranks into the pro ranks.

Its 2006 Champions League-winning squad included four starters that had come through its program. About half the players who take the field this season for the Blaugrana are "home-grown."

There are veterans Victor Valdes, Puyol, defender Oleguer, midfielders Andres Iniesta and Xavi. Argentine Lionel Messi came to Barcelona at age 12. Mexican Giovani dos Santos, who made his first team debut this season, arrived at age 13.

Also on the brink of breaking into the first team is Catalonia-born Bojan Krkic, the Bronze Ball winner at the 2007 World Cup.

Barcelona also groomed Cesc Fabregas until age 16, when he was snapped up by Arsenal.

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.

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, and 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."

(This article originally appeared in the October 2007 issue of Soccer America magazine.)

Recent Soccer America Magazine Articles

[Hope Returns North of the Border](#) Jun 6, 6:38 PM

...

[Bradley Plunges Into New Job](#) Jun 6, 6:45 PM

...

[Tim Howard Lands on His Feet](#) Jun 6, 6:52 PM

...

[Youth Beat: The Perils of Profit-Driven Coaching](#) Jun 6, 7:00 PM

...

[What the Future Holds for Youth Soccer](#) Jun 6, 7:05 PM

...

[Bob Bradley Interview: 'More of a Comfort Level'](#) Jan 3, 1:57 PM

Bob Bradley looks back on his first year at the helm of the U.S. national team,...

[World Cup 2010: Into Africa](#) Jan 3, 2:02 PM

The World Cup is finally coming to Africa, to be hosted by a nation that had...

[Youth Beat: Total Soccer for Children](#) Jan 3, 2:10 PM

When should coaches start assigning specific positions to young players?...

[MLS: A-Team Takes on San Jose](#) Jan 3, 2:12 PM

First owned by MLS, then owned or operated by various out-of-town ownership groups, and finally shipped...

[Pia Sundhage: A Way of Living](#) Jan 3, 2:15 PM

For the first time, U.S. Soccer has hired a foreigner to coach its women's team. Former...

[>> Soccer America Magazine Archives](#)



©2008 Soccer America. All rights reserved.
1144 65th Street, Suite F, Oakland CA 94608 USA
tel. 510-420-3640, fax 510-420-3655, feedback@socceramerica.com

ads powered by 
atlas.