



In February of 2013, two US Youth Soccer State Directors of Coaching, Gordon Henderson of Ohio South and Bryan Thorp of Michigan, took a 5 day visit to the storied club, Ajax of Amsterdam. With many thanks to NSCAA partner Premier International Tours both Directors were given access to the club culture, player development programming and technical staff.

Below is a question and answer session the NSCAA Director of Coaching Education conducted with Coach Henderson and Coach Thorp about their experience.

Can you provide a one sentence summary of the Ajax Model?

Bryan - Ajax is the epitome of a passionate long term player development model.

Gordon – Commitment to a process and methodology.

What strikes you, as a Director of Coaching, to be the most important aspect of their model?

Bryan - Ajax has a systematic approach to their programming. It begins with their staffing which involves a team of coaches; team coaches as well as individual player coaches. Further, Ajax has a linear approach from u9 to u19.

Gordon – For me, it is the complete integration of their model from the top (Ajax first team/Reserve squad) to the Academy (U19 – U19). For example, the Head coach of the U12 team is just as aware of all players in the U11 and U10 group as he is of his own players; names, positions, strengths, etc. This way, when younger players ‘play up’ – the coach is very familiar with them before they even set foot on the field.

A linear approach to programming, can you explain this?

Bryan - A linear approach is whereby one member of the succeeding age group helps with the younger age group. Hence, the staff is familiar with the players. Further, the system and style of play is indoctrinated from u9 upwards; attacking fluid style that defends up field.

Gordon – Everybody is coaching towards a common goal of player development and system of play. Most teams in Holland play a 4-3-3. Ajax epitomizes a commitment to that system of play.

Is the Ajax Academy Residential?

Bryan - Their setup is really a neighborhood base until 16 years of age. It helps with their philosophy of long term development. They are dedicated to providing a development avenue for their local players.

Gordon – I was personally intrigued that it was not. Again, they recruit players within a 40 mile radius and intentionally want them living at home through the formative years. They feel that keeping their friends, going to the same school and having a ‘normal’ life outside of soccer is an important developmental tool. In saying that, they do train 3 – 4 times a week for 44 -46 weeks of the year.

What is their approach regarding player development versus team development?

Bryan - Ajax believes in developing the individual is a priority. Hence, their youth training begins with individual skill activities grouped by skill. Therefore, a U15 and U16 team maybe training at the same



time; however, the top U15 may warm-up with individual skills training with the U16s and vice versa. Further, the staff per age group includes coaches strictly to help develop individual skills in addition to their team training.

Gordon – This is a piece of programming that Johan Cruyff has changed within Ajax. The traditional model placed the emphasis on ‘team’.....all players having a defined role within the 4-3-3 system. Cruyff has changed that model slightly allowing certain players the ability to be unpredictable within the 4-3-3 system. Cruyff was certainly that player when he played. He

felt the team was becoming too robotic and predictable.

Is it true that Ajax uses other sports as a development tool? Can you explain?

Bryan - To me this is one of the exciting parts of their player model. They utilize certain games/ activities from other sports to help with individual player development. Besides the token speed and agility activities, basketball and judo are introduced. As an example, rebounding in basketball can be very useful for soccer players. Learning balance in “tight” soccer scenarios, shifting weight, is very similar to judo techniques.

Gordon – This is where Ajax is probably one of the clubs at the vanguard in its emphasis on cross training to improve the overall athlete. It was very interesting seeing the speed ladders and agility gates that have been employed in track and field and American Football for many years. I think it shows a willingness to stay at the forefront of soccer development.

Can you identify, with a few words, the culture Ajax has established?

Bryan - Ajax is very family oriented. Over half of their staff is prior Ajax players at some level. They create a family atmosphere by bringing back former players as mentors. Each player is like a team: from a team coach to individual coach, to mentors and tutors, Ajax sees the individual as part of the village.

Gordon – As Bryan states above – it is truly the concept of family. Ajax still recruits the vast majority of its players from within a 40 mile radius of the stadium. Furthermore, their turnover rate of players leaving the program is very low; on average only 1 – 2 per year per team. Some clubs can change entire youth teams. Truly incredible and shows their commitment to the long term process. Loyalty from players to the club and from the club to the players is evident at all levels.

Can we bring this model to the USA? Is it possible?

Bryan - Great question! This is really the 500lb elephant. Let’s remember that Ajax develops players as part of a business model. They spend nearly 6 million Euros, 7.5 million dollars, a year on development. That accounts to about \$33K per player. This investment needs to come back through the selling players to larger clubs.

To answer your question, the business model may be difficult to achieve in the USA. However, the player development model of a systematic linear approach is very conceivable. A handful of clubs have some structure. It needs to go further. Too many teams are not connected across a curriculum; succeeding age groups are unfamiliar with each other and train as islands. However, I believe the key is still indoctrinating the staff, players, and parents into the belief that development is long term.



Gordon – If you remove the business component – yes. There are things that any club can do that will replicate many of the components of the Ajax Model; Teams of similar ages training at the same time at the same place, all youth players given equal playing time over the course of a season, younger players playing up on a consistent basis and coaches of all age groups being as invested in the age groups above and below their own.

The Ajax model seems very systematic and standardized. Is this a positive?

Bryan - The real question is how flexible is the Ajax Model. The Ajax Model is very strict. A few tweaks occur annually, but the institution and mission do not. Most of the changes are based around science and the individual. Again, their mission is to develop skillful players of which at least three can be introduced into the Ajax First Team every two seasons.

Gordon – I think so. Cruyff is adding more flexibility for the individual player – however, the key components of the 4-3-3 remain. Within Ajax, beginning with the U9 group, the roles and responsibilities for each player on the field are clearly defined. If you are the right defender.....you play this way.....if you are the holding midfielder player, you play this way. This way, when someone plays up, they do not miss a beat.

What can USA Clubs learn from this model?

Bryan - My suggestions to all clubs, particularly the ones I have presented to in Michigan, are:

1. Decide on mission for player development.
2. Identify a structure that involves a team of coaches. For example, can your u13 coach also help with the U12 and/ or U14 team?
3. A linear style curriculum that connects all age groups from playing system to training regiments should be clear, concise and manageable.
4. Coaching information and styles of delivery need to always refer back to the mission.
5. Be Passionate about your mission and be PATIENT.

Gordon – Nationwide, I think many clubs fall into the trap of having individual teams under one banner.....it is not a club in its truest sense. For example, the U15 coach has no idea of who is on the U14 team, does not talk with that coach and rarely has U14 players play up. With that in place, players bounce from one coaching style to another and one system of play to another before they have fully grasped the role of the last one. For many players, potential is stifled due to confusion. For some players, they develop in spite of us – not because of us.

Last Thoughts?

Gordon – As a nation, I am not advocating trying to model someone else. There are too many variables; size of the country, culture, college impact, etc., however – there is no question that the Ajax model has some elements in place that would greatly impact player development. The biggest component for me is a commitment to a system of play and an integrated model towards that goal. That is something ANY club can do.



Bryan- I would concur with Gordon. We need to identify the parameters of player development and work within that model. A synergy between style, systems, and coaching philosophies should be the vehicle by which we develop players. No more islands of teams as Gordon mentioned earlier. Have a plan for all players, teams and coaches to follow with one mission.