

The clubs that built World Cup finalists

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All Dutch and Spanish fans owe one big thank you (or, dank je wel; or, gracias) to a specific club team in their respected countries.

Ten of the Netherlands 23 World Cup players — five of whom will probably start against Spain — were part of Ajax's famed youth system. Barcelona's academy ([La Masia](#)) has contributed nine players to their country's national team and as many as seven could start in the final.

There are obvious reasons why Ajax's and Barcelona's youth academy's have been so successful: a winning history, great coaches, money. But it's not as though they have a monopoly on history, coaches and cash. Other clubs do the same and haven't produced a world-class, or even first-team, player in years (Chelsea). So how has Ajax and Barcelona done it?

Well...I don't know.

I could ramble for a couple paragraphs about how the Dutch and Catalan cultures help breed footballers, highlight how both clubs focus on improving technical skills and throw in some anecdotes from my time in both cities and I might be able to convince you that I actually know what I'm talking about, but it would mostly be bullshit.

This is what I do know. Ajax and Barcelona wouldn't have the youth systems they do if they weren't as cold-blooded as they are.

Last month, Michael Sokolove in the *New York Times Magazine* [wrote a fantastic cover story on the Ajax youth academy](#). What's clear from Sokolove's piece is when Ajax brings a young player into its system, the Amsterdam-based club isn't interested in producing productive Dutch citizens that could go on to be successful in something other than soccer. It's not the YMCA. Ajax wants soccer players, that's it.

Scouts go around Amsterdam watching kids play soccer that are nearly a decade away from puberty, bring the best to Ajax, coach them for a couple years and if it doesn't work out (like it almost never does) say dank je but no dank je.

Sokolove asked a 15-year-old player in Ajax's youth academy if he thought some of the skills he's learned as a soccer player (focus, perseverance, the ability to perform under pressure) will

help him if doesn't make it with Ajax, "No," the boy said. "We're training for football, not for anything else."

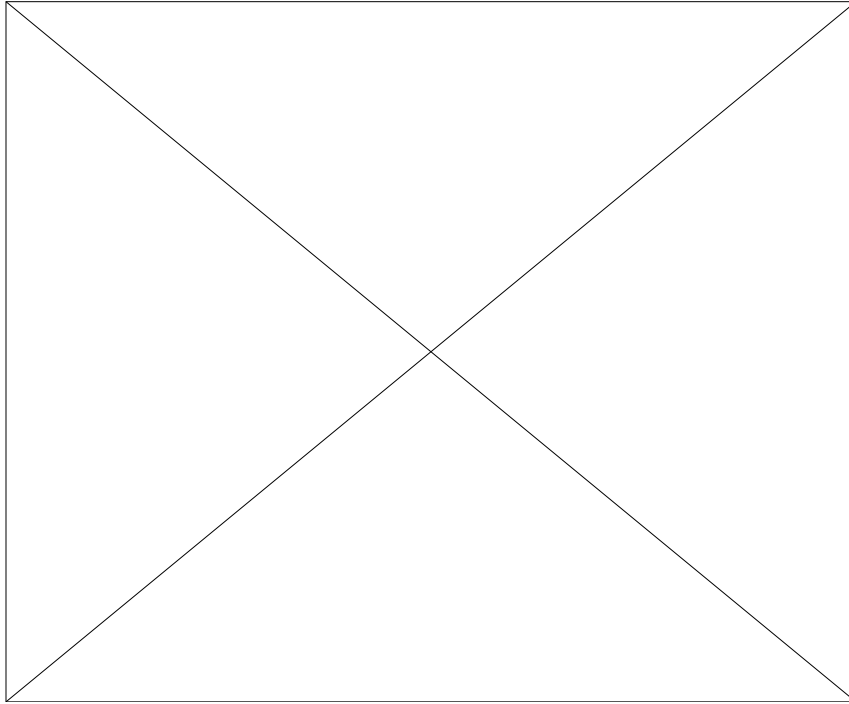
The children in youth soccer academies are treated as assets. Clubs compile cheap, young talent and hope one out of fifty, or hundred, or two-hundred, will one day help the first team win matches. In Ajax's case, its not even that interested in the youth players helping them win the Eredivisie as much as they hope they could sell the young starlets to bigger clubs in Europe.

Is this wrong? Yeah, a little. It's not as though these kids are being kidnapped from their homes and forced to dribble around cones with a gun to their head; they want the chance to play for the clubs they love. But, on some level, it's child exploitation. Eight year old's shouldn't be treated like stocks. That said, being heartless and focused on the ultimate goal (making great soccer players) might be the only way to consistently produce players capable of playing at the highest level.

Copying this formula in the United States would be difficult. It's one thing for parents in Amsterdam's suburbs or Southeastern Spain to allow their children to spends hours every day with Ajax and Barcelona coaches. They know its within the realm of possibility their kids might one day really be a great footballer. There's precedent. But the New York Redbulls or Seattle Sounders don't have the same tradition. It can't point to examples of players in their academy that have gone to become FIFA Player of the Year, or even a starter for the national team. It's one thing to sell parents on a dream that has happened before, it's another to sell them on a dream that hasn't.

But it's hard to see how the U.S. will ever become a top five soccer nation if it doesn't have at least one youth academy that rivals Ajax, Barcelona or River Plate. The current system — plucking the best teenagers from around the country to the national residency program — has had limited success at best. The top coaches need be teaching the best eight year old's in the country, by the time they're 15 it's too often too late.

Many, maybe rightfully, will protest in the U.S. that it's asking too much of players too young. But one would be hard pressed to find anyone in the Netherlands or Spain right now complaining about Ajax's or Barcelona's youth soccer academies.



Ajax youth players on the Dutch national team — Martin Stekeleburg, Gregory van der Wiel, John Heitinga, Andre Ooijer, Nigel de Jong, Wesley Sneijder, Rafael van der Vaart, Elijero Elia, Ryan Babel, Klaas-Jan Huntelaar.

Barcelona youth players on the Spanish national team — Victor Valdes, Pepé Reina, Gerrard Piqué, Carles Puyol, Andrés Iniesta, Xavi, Cesc Fàbregas, Sergio Busquets, Pedro Rodriguez.

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Jorge said,

And this is one of the many reasons we need someone who understands about the game. Sunil Gulati is not the person.

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• **Bill** said,

Excellent topic, the real question is how to get the elements of youth training associated with Ajax/Barcelona into the general approach taken in the United States. We cannot, in our culture, replicate their system. Instead we need to instill the essence of their approach in our development. The keys to the development is a focus on technique and refinement of technique over results in youth. As kids get close to adulthood, results begin to matter, but not ever like it is in the USA (or England).

Second, it is probably useful to examine some of the English post World Cup post-mortem examination. The USA's development is closest to England, which is generally quite a bad sign for the future. England is in bad shape and they have an intense footballing culture. The nature of that culture is at the root of many of their problems, and the USA shares many of the same predispositions. We need to overcome much of our English baggage, and begin to embrace the international game for what it is, assuming we want to compete internationally.

Finally, I'm a bit surprised by the failure to mention the men who tie Ajax to Barcelona, Cruyff and Rinus Michaels. The dutch concept of total soccer is now best embodied by Barcelona, with Spain and Holland taking a pragmatic interpretation with them to the World Cup Final. Along the lines of reforming the US game, Spain underwent a massive investment in modernizing its coaching ranks during the 70' and 80's. This is now reflected with a high degree of professionalism in Spanish coaching (noted in contrast to the English game). The USA is in dire need of greater professional coaching across the board. Moreover, the USA's approach to the game at all levels is rather anti-intellectual. On the other hand, both Ajax and Barcelona along with Holland and Spain approach the game with fantastic intellectual depth.

The game is played with the brain more than the body. In the USA its about the body and not the brain. The results speak volumes about where the emphasis should be!



• **Bill** said,

Let me just say that the final was horrible mostly due to the tactics applied by the Dutch. They have strayed quite far from their roots, and created a horror show instead of the symphony it should have been.

Webb did the game a distinct disservice by not sending De Jong off for his murderous challenge on Alonso. After he was gone the Spanish would have rightly put the Dutch to the sword.

The Spanish did themselves no favors through their tactics. Two holding mid-fielders were unnecessary from the first game to the last, one of them was always a waste of attacking intent especially with the likes of Fabregas and Silva on the bench. Further, Xavi would have sat further back where he is more effective as well. The fact that Del Bosque got away with it is testimony to how damn good the Spanish team is (the lack of a match-fit Torres to boot).

In the end, I would like to see the adoption of a few rule changes to increase attacking, and a few reasonable adjustments to refereeing. Even if the final kind of sucked, attacking football won. We got a look at the new German revolution that will give the Spanish a run for their money in the next three to four tournaments.



ibgc said,

9 out of 10 youth coaches never bother to get any sort of training.

This leads to coaches 'teaching' kids it's 'wrong' to pass the ball backwards, it's 'wrong' to dribble the ball out of their defensive third rather than blasting it as far as possible downfield and mostly that it's 'wrong' to "lose".

My last point is the one that I think hurts the most. If kids are afraid to lose a game they will be afraid to take chances and make mistakes. Sometimes the best way to learn is to make mistakes. When 'coaches' take the creativity and fun out of the game kids get bored and we lose players who find the game boring.

Until the US of A gets better coaches at the youngest levels our level of soccer won't improve. Unfortunately volunteers are damn hard to find. The league I work with has over 300 kids and every spring and fall we have to scramble to find coaches.

The Ajax/Barcelona youth systems sure seems to work, but I disagree that targeting kids at 8 years of age is the best way to identify talent. In my experience I've seen the 'best' 8 year olds are the ones that are more physical than the other players. As Bill mentioned, "The game is played with the brain more than the body". From what I've seen the physically advanced 8 year old never learns to play with the brain as he can use his better

physicality to 'win'. What happens though is that eventually the other kids catch-up to him physically. Unfortunately the 'gifted' 8 year old is now an average 12 year old and quits out of frustration.

Until the US of A gives up believing the most important component of youth soccer is winning then we won't be able to really develop better players.



• **Bill** said,

lbgc, fantastic comments! You are right on the money, the win, win, win mentality is incredibly corrosive to development.

It also results in coaches picking teams to win, which means the big & fast kids get put together to make tournament winning teams. The coach doesn't have to worry about development, just kick and run.

The youth game at a competitive level is very physical and this only amplifies the tendency to go big and fast. This bias is reflected at all levels of the game. The failure to play small-sided at younger levels is yet another manifestation, and on and on.

Winning isn't bad, but sacrificing development to win is.