

Netherlands to keep producing top players

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THE HAGUE, July 27 (Xinhua) -- Dutch specialists believed that the Netherlands will keep producing top soccer players in the foreseeable future, based on the country's efficient youth training system.

Just one year ago the Netherlands advanced to the FIFA World Cup final in South Africa. Wesley Sneijder, Arjen Robben and Robin van Persie are the names of the current stars of the national team. They are the successors of stars from the past football legends like Johan Crujff, Marco van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Dennis Bergkamp.

Wim van Zwam has been working as coach for the Dutch football association KNVB for almost ten years. Currently he is coach of the Under 19 team, responsible for the development of the youth plan Netherlands and instructor of the UEFA Pro Course.

"We don't have any secrets, we just have a clear vision about how to develop football," he told Xinhua on Wednesday. "We have a vision on the game of football, the organization of youth leagues, on coach education, on player development and on team development. Very few countries have a real vision on football. That's why we are ahead of a lot of other countries."

"We are good because of the structure and because of the way we think as a country. We always stick to our plan in developing football. From the Under 15 team to the Under 21's. The aim of the game must always be winning, even for the Under 8 kids," Van Zwam explained.

"However, the coach must not do anything to win the game. He must focus on developing the children. The game itself is about winning, about scoring more goals than your opponent. But for youth football it is always about trying to score more goals and developing the individual player. Besides that, the individual player must learn to play in a team but the focus is on his or her development. That's the difference between youth football and professional football, between developing and results."

"To realize that we determined team functions, like attacking, defending and transition, team tasks, like scoring and building up, and team organization," said Van Zwam. "With young people we always play in a 4-3-3 system and sometimes 3-4-3. We think that's the best way to play football, the best way to learn building up, this formation covers all the field."

Football is the number one sport in the Netherlands with 1.2 million people being a member of the Dutch association KNVB, of which 120,000 female players. The country has now 36 professional clubs, 2,800 amateur clubs and about 600,000 youth players.

The national office is based in Zeist and the country has six football districts, with KNVB coaches and offices in each district.

Until 2005 the Netherlands had 38 youth academies at the professional clubs, but since 2009 the regional top academies arose. Those academies can have their own vision on youth development, but are advised by the KNVB during regular meetings.

One of those top academies is the one of Ajax. In terms of producing world class players Ajax is famous for delivering stars like Johan Crujff, Marco van Basten, Clarence Seedorf and Wesley Sneijder. At the Ajax youth academy the emphasis historically is on technique.

According to Crujff the academy is not what it once was anymore. For example he was explaining about the lack of quality attacking players being produced recently.

With Crujff starting to get influence again they now want to focus more on individual training and developing individual skills. The clubs is currently experiencing a transition period, with head of youth Jan Olde Riekerink left. Edmond Claus, assistant head of youth at Ajax, explained the changes.

"At the moment Crujff is giving his knowledge to Dennis Bergkamp and Wim Jonk, who are redirecting the youth academy a little bit," Claus told Xinhua. "Next year there will be another organizational structure."

"Over the last three years we implemented individual training more and more," Claus said. "In the next period we will do it more and more intense. Every individual player gets the training he needs, so he develops the best on his specific position. That is what Crujff wants and we already did that. In the Crujff report is said, teams do not get promoted to the first team, individuals go to the first team. Crujff, Bergkamp and Jonk believe we can even do it even better by giving more individual development. That could bring us to the next level. Hopefully we can finally win the Champions League again. It's hard, but if you believe in something maybe you make it possible. If you don't believe in it, you better stop."

The more individual approach opposed to the team approach might be a difference between the vision of the association and Ajax. The similarities between the two youth visions prevail.

"The coaches must always be busy with learning and children must always be busy with winning," Claus agreed with Van Zwam. "Kids must be busy with winning, the coaches must always be busy with learning."

Another similarity is the expectation they have on a youth player. "First of all we challenge them to think by themselves, to be pro-active as a player," Claus said. "We encourage them to keep track of their improvement. They can write down things they have learned and develop awareness of their own development progress. Let them think about the game.

"A good youth academy starts with finding good players, talent recognition," Claus added. "You have to start with the end result already in your mind. We want players who are able to play in an offensive way. Our philosophy is based on offensive soccer. How do you recognize a player that fits in here. We look at TIPS, technique, inside of the player, personality and speed or actually the whole physical part."

"We break it down to TIPS, we must look to player as a whole. Technique is very important. He must be able to control the ball. Technique and coordination often go hand in hand. His insight you can see a little bit in the choices he makes in the game or in a training session. Personality is also something you look at. Is he shy or open? We like players with flair and brutality. Those quality's make a typical Ajax player. On the pitch an Ajax player must be proud."

In the end the effectiveness of a youth academy is shown by the number and quality of the players produced. With eighteen homegrown players in last season's squad Ajax seems to be doing a pretty good job said a proud Claus.

"The secret is to give players a chance," he said. "If they develop to a certain good level and they are not given a chance in the first team or squad, it will not be happening. "

"To develop good players you don't need a lot of money," said Claus. "You need a lot of money to get the best facilities and to get the best coaches, but to develop players you need a good vision, a good philosophy. That is also the secret of Ajax and the people who can teach the philosophy to the players."

"This system can be copied anywhere, but in Holland it's different with seventeen million people compared to Brazil, China, America or Russia. Also I have a feeling that we are very special because of our history, also because of our knowledge, of our people who have been educated in this club. The history of this club, the culture, the people who work at this club, who bring the philosophy to the players. You can't copy that. This is in the genes of this club."

Claus' opinion was echoed by Van Zwam. The whole method can be copied, but the results will nowhere in the world be equal.

"In China you can develop football players in the way we do, you can copy it," he said. "But do not forget the Chinese people are other people than we are. To develop this the player must think for himself. Young Dutch guys are asked to give their opinion. They have to do it. In the game the coach can't tell you what to do when 40,000 people are screaming in the stands. They have to make their own decisions."

"In Holland our vision can work thanks to our structure," Van Zwam added. "We are a small country. For us it is easy to let the best Under 17 clubs play against the best Under 17 clubs on national level in the country. Germany is five times bigger. They also have five times the amount of players, so more opportunities to develop a lot of players. We only have two excellent strikers, they have six. You have to put them together to develop them. This here in Zeist (Head office KNVB) is the heart of football in the Netherlands."

"For us it is easy to let them come over here. It is easy to let all the academy directors come and talk with them about developing football. We meet them in a regular meeting eight times a year. That is possible because we are a small country."

The Dutch vision is no secret, but still hard to copy. The point is shared by Maarten van Bottenburg, professor of Sport Development at Utrecht University

"Football is an example of how productive and effective the Dutch sports system is," he told Xinhua on Wednesday. "We have 1.2 million football players, which means one of each fifteen people on the street. Every municipality has its own football club and some even more than ten. They all have their own football field trainers and management and an average of 300, 400 members."

"The Dutch football association is also educating trainer coaches very well. It's a good system, a very fine network of players, clubs, coaches and facilities. That system produces continuously new talent. It is also a very fine structured network. On local level, you have a competition, the best clubs participate in the region and the best regional clubs participate on national level. This proved to be very effective."

"I don't think that a Dutch club will ever win the Champions League anymore," Van Bottenburg said. "The best players are always going abroad. But we can still be world champion with the national team, which hardly consists of players playing in The Netherlands. They play for the best clubs in Spain, England and Italy. Our club level is relatively poor, but the national team is one of the best in the world.

"In our second rated competition people can develop themselves to an age of 20, 21 and after that they often have the advantage towards young people from other countries who have to compete with the best payers of the world and can't make the step to the first team. The disadvantage proves to be an advantage, as Crujff always says. This system is that good, it can't be copied that easy.

"You can't establish the infrastructure and sport clubs by night. The Dutch will still produce world class players for quite some time," Van Bottenburg said.

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