

The French Football Federation Youth Development Program

Working with 13-15 year old Players

Written By Roby Stahl

Former Director of Coaching, OSYSA

Presented by Aime Jacquet, former French national team coach and World Champion at the US Youth Soccer Workshop, Jan. 16, 2001 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

My previous article dealt with all aspects of the FFF coaching and player development style. Aime stressed only the development program for the players 13-15 years old in France. He is in charge of 128 coaches split into six regions. Players are identified at age 11 through districts and then regional teams. The best 20-30 players at age 13 go to the national training center in Clairefontaine. Please refer to the previous article to understand the youth setup at Clairefontaine. At this center and the other six centers, the players are educated with these concepts in mind:

- To forget what is at stake
- That results only come from the game
- To respect the principles of playing soccer and play within the structure the coach gives you
- Victory is the only goal
- The first consideration is to be present (to become an impact player) in the game, to free yourself from your opponent, and to ask for the ball

Training Issues:

When the coach is preparing his training sessions, the emphasis should be on technical ability, and his own convictions and conception of what soccer should look like. He must take into account the age of the players and the proper objectives linked to that age. He must be precise and professional. Every coach has access to many soccer exercises but has to know the proper way to proceed and to present them. The advice given to each player is very important. The coach must be careful of his language in order to help the players understand his methods. No yelling is tolerated. Objectives and issues in training are clear to the players. The players have the best training conditions and train one time daily, five days a week.

The priorities for the players are:

- To become a professional player with the maximum chance of succeeding (this includes the four factors of soccer)
- Keep up with their studies so they can have a career in case soccer does not work out

The priorities for the coaches are:

- The methods in which they work. France is the only country in Europe to have a youth coaching license required
- To develop a highly qualified technical staff, all licensed and well trained

In the training sessions emphasis is given to repeating the quality of soccer movements. These are corrected and repeated until they become a regular part of the player's package of skills. The coaches must be quality demonstrators. The coaches will then work on:

- Making the player's movements faster and better
- Linking movements efficiently and wisely. Coaches constantly ask the player why they use a certain move in a certain situation
- Using the weakest foot. Coaches will develop specific sessions to work on weaknesses in the player's game
- Technical exercises with high reoccurrences
- Games with the possibility of many choices and reflections
- Simple tactical exercises forcing the player to make a quick decision
- Realistic activities which make the player feel as if he were in a real game

“All the big time players keep the game simple”. An example of this would be not dribbling (unless going to goal) instead of making a 30-yard pass (as this slows the game down).

Author's note: I remember Sir Bobby Charlton telling me at my former Post-to-Post International Training Center, **“ Soccer is a simple game made difficult by the players”**. I might add also made difficult by the coaches. Johan Cruyff, while at Barcelona, stated that the coach who gave his player more than two options does not understand the game of soccer.

Training therefore is done with this context in mind:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Consistency
- Demands of the game
- Simplicity

The Weekly Schedule (club):

- U13 – Participate in two to three training periods and one match
- 13-15 years – Participate in four to five training periods and one match with a minimum of 35 matches a year

The Weekly Schedule (pros):

- 16– 17 years – Five to seven trainings with one match, 40 matches per year and four to five weeks without any training at all
- 17-20 years – Seven to nine trainings, one match, with many competitions against older players

Training Priorities:

Age 13:

- The range of the players abilities (age specific)

- The choices the player makes. Every player plays with the ball for the first fifteen minutes of training. The player decides what to do with the ball. This starts to personalize his game.
- The game. This is the most important part, in training or actual competition

Age 14:

- The range
- The situation. Here the coach decides on the activities to bring out the individual's technique
- The choice
- The game

Age 15:

- The situation. The coach plans everything.
- The efficiency
- The competition (lots of opposition)

The FFF looks at three aspects of maintaining the balance in their young player's lives. First is insuring that players are able to maintain a **normal study** program in case their intended professional career does not work. The **family and original club** are very important. The player returns to his club each week to play matches. He is expected to become a leader on and off the field. The **soccer** aspect has been discussed above.

Since 1992 the FFF has been tracking graduates of this program. 80 players have played in the first division, 40 in the second division, and 15 in the third division, and 22 in the amateur leagues.

Psychological Factors:

The players undergo a QPS or **sports personality** tests. These are 120 question tests that give the players situations that they have to solve, dealing with family matters, peer pressure, etc. The players who scored the highest are all currently professional players. All the training centers employ consultants to work with the players. In certain situations outside experts may be brought in. The clubs pay strict attention to the special needs that may be associated with being a minority.

Medical Factors:

Players undergo extensive medical testing. These include test on the treadmill, cybex machines, skin fold thickness (body fat), height and weight, vision, dental, and suppleness. The FFF followed 40 players for two years in the areas of sight and dental. None of the players who excelled in this area had injuries in qualification games, lead up games and the World or European Championships.

Physical Tests:

All tests are taken on the soccer field. The players run through a battery of speed detector tests over 40 meters with sensors every 5 yards. The Swedish Beep Test is used frequently. Springing and bounding is tested via the Italian formulated Bosco

Test. Another Swedish test originated by Lager-Boucher is run over 200 meters. This is the player's favorite as they can easily see their progress.

The Detection of Young Players:

- Morphology – players are tested as to the age of their bones to help determine adult size. This is done through the wrist.
- Medical Purpose – determining medically related limitations
- Physical Aspect – determining their athletic potential. Here speed is the most important.
- **Technical Skills** – the most important aspect! This includes intelligence, adaptability, and expertness during the game.
- Personality – discussed during QPS and Sports Personality section
- Scholarship – Grades in school. The student's behavior in and out of school and work is monitored.

The FFF feels that the player has two real jobs; one to be a soccer player and the second to go to school.

The Training Environment:

All the players have the same equipment. They are taught and expected to take care of their shoes. Each is provided with a water bottle and a ball that is required to be well inflated at all times.

The training progressions are increased at the proper time in intensity and difficulty. The training time depends on the amount of intensity and may possibly be up to two hours, depending on the frequency of recovery time.

Schedule:

Monday:

- Skill work
- Aerobic exercises
- Stretching
- Agility training
- Basketball, volleyball or handball games

Tuesday:

- Skill work, repetitive exercises versus opposition
- Games with opponents

Wednesday:

- Skill exercise
- Tactical exercises which are specific in nature
- Applications of the above tactical exercise to the game

Thursday:

- Same training as Tuesday but with more leeway to the players

Friday:

- Physical implications. This is done without intensity, i.e., working for 5 seconds and resting for 20 seconds (work/rest ratio of one to four). The work is done with the ball whenever possible.
 - Speed movements
 - Strength movements
 - Jumping movements
- Principles of Play

Saturday and Sunday:

- Match or break

Physical Training:

This aspect is broken down into three areas: Endurance, Speed, and Physical (?). Endurance is developed through a series of calibrated run with special attention given to the rhythm of the exercise. Speed is developed through; 1) races with and without the ball over short distances of 5m, 10m, 20m, and 30m, 2) exercises with the ball, and 3) games of 2 v2 with special attention paid to the rhythm and intensity of the games. The physical (?) consists of activities that promote the individual's suppleness, supporting moves, coordination with the ball, and agility.

Skill Training: Mastery of the Ball

- Juggling the ball, running with the ball, dribbling, feints
- Kicking and passing
- Ball control
- Shooting
 - To be executed with both the foot and the head
 - To be comfortable in front of the goal
 - The touch (technique)
 - **Precision is more important than power**
 - To link up the goal scorers and finish with a shot on goal, from in front of the goal
- Crossing and snap shots
- Heading games
- Defensive games with the emphasis on not committing fouls

“Passing the ball is the language of the soccer player”

Ball control is the basis of the game (always done while moving). The young French players are taught to always feint when receiving or passing which allows them to get in or out of tight marking situations. All sessions include lots of shooting and special sessions on how to cross the ball.

Tactical:

These elements are always part of the training games and the system of play:

- To help the ball carrier
 - To get the ball back
 - To offer support
- To demand the ball
- To pass the ball and follow the pass
- Coverage in the defense
- Positioning and the movement into space
- The notion of the attacker defending and the defender attacking

The Game:

- Numeric overbalance
 - Always seeking numbers up in tight space, the lower the numbers, the more responsibility each player has to undertake
- Reduce the playing area and reduce the numbers
- With lateral space
- In several zones
 - Changing the zones from large to small and visa versa
 - Incorporating games with four small goals to provide target areas and played on a handball field (similar to our basketball courts)
 - Partnering up two forwards and two midfielders, etc.
- Attacking and defending in waves (using the midfielders)

Summary:

The French Football Federation very much operates under the principle that “**This work is very important for the game of tomorrow**”. The better job they do in the development of quality players at the youth level, the more accomplished professional players will burst onto the scene. The FFF keeps a close eye on the professional clubs because they might not always be concerned with the best interests of the young players. They feel that out of all the elements, the development of the technical ability is the most important.