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## **Andre Merelle – I.N.F. Academy Director**

The French focus is a great deal on technique at the I.N.F. They believe that football is first a question of technique. The players must play with the ball as much as possible from an early age, the younger the better.

Fichi, the first F.F.F. academy in Paris, was a model school for the Club Academy's. The academy structure in France is a kind of 'apprenticeship' to be footballers. The academy's in France start with U/15 players. The French call these academy's 'Formation Centres'. All French clubs have their own Academy's. The FFF set the criteria and oversees this 'apprenticeship structure'

From 1990 the FFF elite development focus shifted to the U/13 age bracket. They could have decided to take players earlier (which would be better) but 12/13 was deemed to be a reasonable age to take the boys away from their families while still allowing enough time to develop the players. The players live at the I.N.F. from Sunday night until Friday evening; they play for their own club on Saturday.

In their third year at the Institute (U/15 – 16) they play for the I.N.F. in the National Championship Group West and not for their clubs. This Championship comprises 6 different groups, the first placed team then meets in a final to decide the national champions.

### **On the structure...**

The structure in France is comprehensive. The best kids are identified quite early so that the very best players from the each region train in their respective pre-formation institute programs. The players in the Paris region go to the I.N.F. in Clairefontaine. After the 'pre-formation' program they go directly to the 'formation centres' at the professional clubs.

There are 650 special school classes throughout France and they want to have 1000 by 2010. The classes are for players, both male and female, aged 11 to 15. The content for these classes (mainly technique) are designed by the FFF Technical Department to encourage kids to play football at school in a highly technical based learning environment.

The issue for the FFF is to make sure that coaches are of the appropriate standard. As part of the criteria the Departmental coach and Regional coach must approve and oversee the content within these schools

The players that are involved in these 650 schools are at all levels and play for their own club. An example of a young players training program would be to train 2 to 3 times at school and train 1 to 2 times with the club and play on the weekend. The focus is on

technique. According to Mr. Merelle, the players need to be training 4–5 times per week in order to get to a descent level.

The development of technique needs to start as soon as possible. Although Mr. Merelle is not an expert on the very young payers – he specializes in the 12 – 19 age groups – he believes that that to be a good footballer you need to be taught very early. You have to play every day, touch the ball every day, that is what Zidane and co. have done... play, play, play...

Andre believes that Spain and Italy are better fundamentally. For example in Spain the level of the Championship is better than the French league... this could be because the French have lost 60 players to overseas leagues. However, he believes the structure in France is better and that is why they can develop good players.

The structure could be better though! What the coaches actually do on the training field in these structures, i.e. in the schools could be better. The FFF have a major focus now on technique development in the school system. The technique of football is very difficult, and Mr. Merelle believes you should never be satisfied with your level of technique. This is why the FFF decided to shift their development program focus to the pre-formation level; ideally they would like to have started earlier (which they are looking to do in partnership with the schools).

### **The I.N.F. focus...**

The FFF philosophy is that the winning at all cost mentality is not good for a player's football development. When this is the focus you usually rely on physical qualities, fight, kick the ball away... just like the English (his words!). This is not good for the young boys; the focus should be on their touch, passing, feints, dribbles etc. The F.F.F. focus is on playing good technical football at a very young age. This is not kicking the ball away because you are afraid of making a mistake... players should be encouraged to play.

The best way for the French teams to win games is to play well. Mr. Merelle believes the focus in France is becoming too much on winning games at a younger age and there is a constant battle to get people to implement the F.F.F. / I.N.F. philosophy. This is what they are trying to do particularly with their special school and coach education programs.

The kids from a young age are used to being asked to win at all cost and the way the kids then play is not relaxed as they are too afraid of losing. The FFF is continually trying to convince everyone that this is not the way. When you watch the French teams at the moment he believes that they are not doing the right thing as their focus is too much on winning.

They have a major competition for fourteen year old boys. This competition is extremely important talent identification event on the French calendar. It involves all the Regional select teams (approx 28).

The I.N.F. plays a 4:3:3 system. There is a strong belief (also on Holland) that the 4:3:3 system is a better system for the young kids to play. Mr. Merelle believes that they younger teams are trying to play the senior team / winning system (4:4:2) too early at the expense of developing players. This is being reflected at the last few U/14 championships.

At Clairefontaine they are quite special; the focus is not on the result of the game. The only figures mentioned in any performance evaluation / discussion is how many players are produce for professional football. Historically, the Institute has produced 6 -7 professional footballers each year, which is the best in France. They have been champions on a number of occasions but that is not important to them.

The I.N.F. encourages their players first and foremost to not lose the ball... never just kick it a way. They work a great deal on technique, ball control... then in the game with this superior technique they can keep the ball and play a type of football that develops the player's game. Technique is first!

When the players start the program the coaches teach the players as if they knew nothing at all. The players therefore learn exactly how to kick the ball, which part of the foot etc. The I.N.F. coaches painstakingly concentrate on juggling, turning with the ball, dribbling, feinting. About three months later they start with kicking, short passes, long passes with the inside of the foot, with the outside etc. Only when they have mastered the specific skills and learn to kick the ball properly do they go onto shooting, crossing, heading etc. They then meticulously concentrate on the aspects of shooting and long passes.

#### Year 1

In the first year they review and practice each and every technical / skill aspect of the game. The focus is on the 'boy and his ball.' (This was mentioned countless times during my visit) During this technical training aspect of the game they also play small side games and other passing exercises.

#### Year 2

In the second year the players have matured both physically and mentally and therefore a large focus shifts to the relationship between two, three and four boys – 2v1, 2v2, 3v2, 3v3, 4v3, 4v4 etc. The FFF believes that usually the players can not see much further at that age. A great deal of emphasis is still placed on the repetition practice of the techniques learnt in the first year.

#### Year 3

In the third year the players, who have trained the previous two years but have never played a competitive game together (only with their respective clubs) then represent the I.N.F. in a competition. The focus then shifts to team play on a full sided field where they learn how the defense works, how to construct attacks etc.

It is only at this age that they focus on the tactical aspect of the 11 v 11 game. What becomes apparent is that even though these boys have never played together as a team in an 11v11 environment they play an excellent brand of cohesive football.

### **On coaching...**

In small sided games the job of the coach is not just to write the 'sophisticated' exercises on paper and allow the boys to just do them! Mr. Merelle passionately believes that the simpler the exercises are the better. A coaches job is to look after the 20 plus players, this is a massive job alone so if you concentrate on organizing sophisticated exercises you can't advise and focus the necessary time on the players.

He believes that people / coaches are trying to be too sophisticated, they believe that the more difficult the exercises the better. This is not the INF way! During the small sided games you can say a lot in terms of tactical and technical instructions...so the I.N.F. play a great deal of these small sided games. The coaches can then instruct on the fundamentals of the game... remain compact, keep in touch with the game, give support both behind and in front etc. This type of training is game related and time is not wasted with fancy coaching drills that use lots of cones that often are not at all related to the actual game situation. The coach must be able to control and observe all players at the training session. He must be able to concentrate on the whole group.

When the players start the third year they already know a lot of the fundamentals of playing due to the coaching during the many previous small sided games. This understanding is developed slowly with the foundation being built in a learning environment where the 'win at all cost mentality' is not the focus. Funny enough the team win's most of the time.

### **The learning environment...**

According to Mr. Merelle, this step by step learning culture is crucial. This is why at the I.N.F. and the other 8 pre-formation National Training Centres around the country the players do not play together in competition games; they only TRAIN as a group. The players go home on the weekend to play with their clubs with a clear direction of practicing the technical skills learnt at the training centre's in a match environment. It is important to play games at that age but the focus on winning alone should not be the reason for these games.

Mr. Merelle explained an example of the step by step process; when you want to keep the ball... the ball is played across the back line, after this is done well and only then...the next step is to try an incorporate the mid field, then the next step is to play passes to the forwards. This needs to be coached in a learning environment where the focus is not only on winning as mistakes will inevitably be made along the way.

Even with long balls the focus should not be... 'I kick and then you run' it should be "I run and then I try and I give you the right ball". There is a difference!

Through this education philosophy the players develop extremely well. The Institute prides itself on the fact that when you watch an I.N.F. team you should recognize the team and the players by the way they play. I watched the team play twice and they were excellent.

The aspects of the game that they try to impose on the players are;

- The goalkeepers never kick the ball away, they are required to either throw or pass the ball to a team mate.
- The throw-ins are never tossed forward just to 'work the line'. They work on three options – forward, sideways and backwards but the ball must not be 'thrown away'. Possession is the key!
- At corners they mostly play two against one and not just always kick the ball into the box and hope that someone gets their head to the ball.

Even if sometimes it is a bit dangerous/risky the focus remains on keeping the ball, little by little the players get more and more confident and become better players. They learn different solutions to problems. If teams press, they learn to use the goalkeeper; they try and kick the ball over midfields to the forwards. It is not always successful but they try. The main thing is the players need to be good with the ball. All the great players are fantastic with the ball. This is why it is important to focus on technique from a very early age in an environment that encourages a step by step process.

Football is a question of technique! (heard countless times)

### **On physical training...**

The F.F.F. believes that physical training should definitely not be the focus for players 15 and below. At the Institute they do five sessions of at least 2 hours plus the game on Sunday. They do very little if any gym training. They believe that during the 12 hours of football training a week the players do enough physically.

They spend a bit of time on stretching exercises, flexibility movements, speed with or without the balls, on the technique of running and some agility work. They do very little coordination sessions without the ball as they believe that the football sessions themselves incorporate all the necessary coordination and that to not use the ball is a waste of valuable technique development time.

When the players leave the I.N.F. and go to professional clubs at 16 years old then they do undertake gym programs but this depends on the clubs themselves. Andre believes that sometimes the clubs forget about the importance of technique. The I.N.F. has a philosophy that almost everything they do is with the ball.

Mr. Merelle believes that when the players go to the clubs they don't do this as much – the clubs 'may' lose a bit of focus and concentrate too much on all the gym and conditioning work! e.g. - After the game they have recovery sessions, then physical training / conditioning the next day, then they have a 'rest day', then they prepare for the next game and then play again. They do not spend enough time on working on technique.

If the INF started to bring in older players they would incorporate a gym program, but not to the detriment of the already established technique based program. In the third year they do a bit of abdominal work, push ups etc. Mr. Merelle believes that the players have to play as much as possible with the ball while they are at the Institute, as they move on to the clubs they may work on the more physical attributes but as long as the technique training does not suffer.

Nicolas Anelka, William Gallas, Lois Saha, Thierry Henry, etc. were at the I.N.F. for three years and they are superb athletes. The I.N.F. did not do anything special regarding a gym program with these players. All the exercises that they do at the Institute for their age are sufficient. 'First you have to make sure that technically the players are good.' (That technique word again!)

### **The Modern Game...**

Mr. Merelle questions whether the game has changed all that much. He is not sure that the players are running quicker, he believes they are doing things quicker. The game is narrower, the spaces are tighter and so the question of technique is even more important. The game is becoming more compact. Players need to be more precise.

It is not really a question of doing exercises for the sake of doing them. At F.F.F. they concentrate on the quality, they work every day to aim for perfection. Players can give a pass aimed at the knee – not a good pass – players can give a 'spinning ball' pass – again, not a good pass. 'a pass is a gift'.

The players must have control of the ball to play in the modern game.

### **How do players get to the INF?**

The players send a registration form to Clairefontaine. They can only take players from the Paris region. There are 8 other Institute centres in the whole of France which in essence are 'mini' Clairefontaines. All the other Institutes have the players for the U/13 and U/14 age groups, Clairefontaine is the only program that keeps the players for the third year and plays as a team. The other institute players only train at the various institutes and then go back and play for their clubs.

Each Institute has the same philosophy of concentrating on technique.

Recently the professional clubs have been allowed to have their own pre-formation centres under the control of FFF guidelines. Their guidelines are very stringent – the same as Clairefontaine.

The boys are not allowed to go to a club pre – formation centre until they are 13 years old. The players must first undergo and pass the F.F.F. ‘exam’ (at Clairefontaine) otherwise they have to wait until they are 14. There are restrictions on recruiting players as the clubs have been trying to sign players too young.

The F.F.F. exam is a football exam. It is mainly observation, watching them in game situations, speed test (40 metres) and technique work. The test is not really objective but the reason that the F.F.F. insists on the test to approve the players is because they don’t want too many boys moving away from their homes to clubs. They only allow the best to go. The last test at Clairefontaine had 50 boys and they only approved 24. The other players were not allowed to join the clubs and will have to wait for another year.

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