

The Ajax Youth Development Scheme

Continuity is particularly important in youth development. Everyone involved needs to be well informed and pulling in the same direction. At Ajax, there is great value placed on the opinion of the chief scout. In principle, an Ajax youth player is only a member for one year. An average of 30 of the 160 youth players drop out after one season. In this context, Ajax has to implement a tough selection procedure. This procedure takes account of numerous opinions, set out in reports.

Communication with parents is also important. An Ajax youth player is already a mini-star in his own environment, even though, in Ajax terms, he still has lot to learn. This means that parents must be kept well informed of what is happening, **because otherwise the youngster may find himself listening to two different versions of the same story.** It goes without saying that he will always lean toward the more favorable version, and this is usually bad for his development as a soccer player.

A **comprehensive report** of each young hopeful Ajax player is presented twice a year, in April and December. The report is discussed with both the player and his parents. The soccer elements have been subdivided into a number of categories.

- **Ball control** -- dribbling, passing, beating an opponent, shooting, speed of action, attacking headers, scoring ability, crosses, speed on the ball
- **1 v 1** -- defending, defensive headers, sliding tackles, tackling, attacking the ball
- **Combination skills** -- overview, positional play, adherence to assigned tasks
- **Athletic personality** -- speed off the mark, speed from 0 to 10, from 10 to 30, and above 30 yards, mobility, strength in the tackle, stamina, running skills and jumping power
- **Charisma** -- leadership ability, match mentality, attitude towards others, teammates, coach, referee, etc, receptivity to coaching, ability to withstand pressure
- **Other information** -- modest, cheeky, creative, plays in the service of others, character player, technical player, right footed, left footed , two footed

Analysis

The next step was to prepare a strengths and weaknesses analysis. At Ajax, a lot is done on intuition. This has led to a typical Ajax culture, with a high yield in terms of the number of young players who succeed in making the grade.

Ajax uses the acronym **TIPS** to describe the strong points of a young Ajax player.

T is for **Technique**. Ajax youth players must be in control of the ball

I is for **Insight and Intelligence**. The ability to observe and think ahead.

P is for **Personality**. Must be able to communicate with others, provide leadership, be creative, show flair and daring, be receptive to his fellow players, and be able to work in a disciplined manner.

S is for **Speed**, which is essential for every Ajax player. Speed off the mark, mobility and speed over long distances.

The Ajax scouts are always on the lookout for **I, P and S**, because these are very difficult to influence. Technique can always be improved. Ajax youth are technically gifted, soccer wise, interesting personalities, with good basic speed.

Development Plan

Every Ajax youth eleven has 16 players. There are 2 goalkeepers. Four right footed players are selected for positions 2, 6, and 7 (right back, right midfield, right wing fwd), Four left footed players for positions 5, 8 and 11 (left back, left midfield, left forward), Three players for 3 and 4 (central defenders) and finally three players for 9 and 10 (striker and shadow striker). This applies from the Under 10 team up to the first eleven. During the players' development, therefore, they play in the two or three positions within the team for which they have been selected.

When a 7 year old has passed the strict selection procedure and is allowed to wear his Ajax shirt at last, his first period will be devoted to learning the basic skills. He first needs to master various techniques if he is later to make the right choices in the various positions within the Ajax system. For this reason the drills developed by Wiel Coerver are used extensively for the 8 to 10 and 10 to 12 age groups. According to the coaching staff, these drills help children not only to use their feet more skillfully, but also to improve their balance, speed up their rhythm, pull away to the right and left, and use every part of their feet. The 8 to 10 year olds learn the rudiments of the Ajax system in a fun way

Recognizing genuine talent at such an early age is a difficult task even for expert Ajax scouts. Even in the 8 to 10 age group, Ajax takes note of how well a talented youngster runs. During the two week test period, each young candidate is assessed on six different activities by the coordination coach.

Another problem involved in selecting 8 to 10 year olds is the difference in mental development encountered in this age group. If you join Ajax, you have to be coachable and be able to understand instructions. The child's environment is also considered. What sort of support is provided by the parents? How does he behave? If adequate attention is paid to the initial selection, there will be no need to make any further subsequent adjustments further up the age range.

It is typical for the 8 to 10 age group that each child plays for himself rather than combining with the others. In addition, children move towards the ball and not away from it, and are inclined to play the ball forward and not to the side or backwards.

Ajax starts at the beginning by formulating the requirements for the 8 to 12 age group. Then the 12 to 14, the 14 to 16, and the 16 to 20 age groups.

Ajax looks at eight different areas:

1 -- Technique, 2 -- tactics, 3 -- know-how, 4 -- running and strength training, 5 -- personality formation, 6 -- coaching situations, 7 -- training, 8 -- matches.

Technique is most important for the 8 to 12 age group. They have to learn to control the ball with every part of both feet and in all directions.

These are the objectives that the players must have achieved by the time they move up to the 12 to 14 age group:

Technical demands in the first phase include:

combining ball control and speed in complicated situations where there is an element of resistance;

- Ability to use both feet to side-foot and semi—side-foot the ball and kick it with the instep, both along the ground and through the air, over short distances
- Taking and cushioning the ball with all parts of the body
- Juggling the ball with every part of the body except the arms
- Passing accurately from a standing position and while on the move
- Accurately shooting on goal
- Working on various crosses
- Learning the basic heading technique, without resistance
- Developing and stimulating body swerves and feints
- Learning techniques for taking a ball past an opponent
- Learning to shield the ball
- The throw in
- Learning to take a penalty

As far as tactics the following principles apply to the youngest group:

- Running into space to receive the ball
- Positions in the length and breadth of the field
- Linking up, linking back
- Taking up positions to receive the ball
- Playing from your own position
- Taking over the position of another player
- Learning to play in another position
- Looking beyond the ball
- Deciding the moment of choice between passing and making an individual run
- Learning to shield the ball when dribbling and passing
- Covering on the inside
- Covering the most dangerous opponent

In the field of **soccer know-how**, the first targets are:

- Learning the rules of the game
- Learning to keep their boots in good condition
- Learning to recognize the Ajax system of play
- Learning to look after their bodies
- Acquiring knowledge of diet in the context of matches and training
- Learning knowledge of the rules of soccer and Ajax's own specific culture

Running and strength training involves:

- Learning the principles of good running technique
- Coordinated running
- Learning to jump by taking off from one leg and from two legs
- Maintaining and improving suppleness
- Learning to use the body during duels
- Strength training by making use of the player's own body weight
- Learning to avoid an opponent, sliding tackle or tackle
- Sprinting in all directions
- Learning to use a shoulder charge

Personality formation -- Ajax makes high demands on even the youngest players:

- Learning a sporting attitude, in which respect for the opponent is central
- Learning to communicate with teammates, coaches and team support staff
- Learning to be open to the opinions of others
- Accepting leadership
- Learning to accept the referee's decisions
- Learning to be critical of their own achievements
- Learning to analyze their own game
- Learning to conform to the Ajax rules
- Learning to listen to the coach
- Learning that soccer is a team sport
- Experiencing the rudiments of team building
- Learning to concentrate
- Learning to be responsible for equipment
- Learning to avoid injury
- Learning to listen to their bodies

Twice each year, all the players are assessed on forty elements. These assessments result in one of three recommendations:

A – stay

B – doubtful (B/A doubtful/stay)

C – go (B/C doubtful/go)

Once the Ajax youth players have reached the age of 12, they enter the second stage of training in the 12 to 14 age group. This is the age at which many of the young players are faced with accelerated physical growth. This is also a significant age group, because actual matches play a larger role. Boys of 13 and 14 already have more strength and speed, and are able to move the ball over long distances. From the Under 14s upward, Ajax training sessions are geared towards competitive games.

Youngsters in the 12 to 14 age group have already undergone four years of Ajax training. In an enjoyable way, they have already learned a great deal about making choices during a game. The most stringent criteria are applied to the players in the second year of the Under 14 level.

Observation by the coaches, and the intuitive feeling that this player will fit the Ajax pattern, and that one will not, remain the most important criteria, but you must be able to support intuition with facts.

To compensate for the loss of street soccer in the busy city of Amsterdam, we have developed a soccer playground for the youngest Ajax players. Twice a week the 8 to 12 year olds can enjoy themselves there, playing soccer tennis, header volleyball, keeping the ball in the air, or small sided games. Ajax believes that young players cannot spend too much time with the ball.

As far as the Ajax board is concerned, the coach for the 8 to 10 year olds is just as important as the coach for the 16 to 18 year olds. In the Ajax philosophy, it is unthinkable that an Under 10 team coach should have the ambition to coach the Under 18 Team in a few years time, or that an older coach should feel he could “take it easy” by coaching the 8 to 10 year olds.

Every youth coach has a limited amount of freedom of action within the Ajax system. First of all, he must always think of the whole picture. The point of departure is the match, and the basis is the Ajax system of play, which runs like a thread through the entire club. At Ajax the youth coaches and players know from the start exactly how the finished structure should look: the desired system of play is totally familiar.

The Ajax philosophy is as follows: you can learn a brilliant book of coaching drills by heart, but the ability to act at the right moment, to make an accurate analysis and to show how things should be done, is much more important. That is the heart of the matter !

The constant will to improve. This is the principle of Ajax and the Ajax youth development scheme.