

2 articles on Manchester United and Small-sided games by Henry Winter.

Youngster's learning curve

By Henry Winter (Filed: 30/09/2005)

When Manchester United's Academy boys glide from their dressing rooms at the club's magnificent skill factory hidden deep in the Trafford countryside, they run past 10-foot high photographs of David Beckham, Sir Bobby Charlton, Duncan Edwards, Ryan Giggs and George Best. "We want them to be inspired," said Rene Meulensteen, United's skills development coach.

They are inspired. In the ensuing sessions of drills and SMALL SIDED GAMES, the technique, ambition and vision of United's youngsters borders on the breath-taking. "If this generation carries on maturing," confided Meulensteen on Monday night, "they will steamroller everyone at Under-18 level. They'll have skills coming out of their ears."

Sited adjacent to United's senior complex at Carrington, the Academy heaved with 10-year-olds dropping shoulders, rolling the foot over the top of the ball a la Zidane, and executing the type of step-over that Cristiano Ronaldo inflicted on Benfica the following evening.

At the end, as sweat and smiles lit up the young faces, Meulensteen gathered the boys together in a circle. "You all have the ability," he told them. "But do you have the confidence to play in front of 10,000 people, 20,000, 30,000? Use all your time training. Don't waste it. Learn. Train hard, work hard. Take responsibility."

The kids ran off, replacing lost fluids with isotonic drinks, laughing among each other about tricks they had tried out. They all changed, some pulling on the shirts of their home-town clubs like Preston and Burnley, and walked into the coaches' room to shake hands with Meulensteen and his chatty staff.

"Any kid who comes here will leave a better human being, and a better player," said the Academy director, Les Kershaw. "We try to teach them right and wrong things. When they come in, they come and shake hands. 'Hello, how are you.' It's proper. When Sir Alex Ferguson came once, one of the little lads said: 'Hiya, boss. How are you?' Two lads misheard him and said: 'Hiya, Bob. How are you?' Bob!"

Laughter is a constant sound at the Academy. Yet there is a serious issue that United want brought into the open, much as it may antagonise other clubs. United want to revolutionise coaching of the Under-9 to Under-11 age-group, focusing more on developing skills in four-v-four games than contesting blood-and-thunder eight-v-eight club skirmishes.

Sitting next to the famous 1970 photograph of Bobby Moore embracing Pele, Meulensteen called for a fusion of English zeal and Brazilian flair. "In Brazil, if a boy goes on the beach with a nice swimming bottom on but he hasn't got any skill, everyone says 'you just sit down'," Meulensteen said. "Here the football culture is more 'get stuck in'. We are trying to marry the two cultures together. Wayne Rooney has that character of wanting to win, and the skill to beat players.

"Why did Eric Cantona, Pele and Romario make the difference? Why does Ronaldinho? Under pressure, they have the ability to create a better situation. You can be as physically strong as you want, as tactically well-organised as you want, but you can never beat players like Maradona, Cruyff, Best or Zidane. They can unlock defences.

"In the last 15 years, the emphasis has been on physical and tactical development, not conceding goals and getting something from a set-play. That's not entertainment. We have been relying on God-gifted players - Cruyff, Best, Maradona - and once every five years somebody else pops up. Somebody [Rooney] popped up at Everton a couple of years ago. We want a development programme that gives us four or five Rooneys." With United's Academy complex costing a third of the £27 million Ferguson spent on Rooney, it makes sense to groom your own.

"We want players who can do the unpredictable like Rooney," Meulensteen continued. "I see too many one-dimensional players at the top level. We inspire kids to take players on. In the attacking third, it's all guns blazing. Sir Alex has been totally supportive. He came and watched what the little kids can do and said: 'Carry on.' The manager has experience of what it means when local lads come good."

Pictures of the class of 92, of Beckham, Giggs, Butt, Scholes and the Nevilles, line the walls of Carrington. Kershaw worked with them and is passionate about giving tyros time to blossom. "How many clubs would have taken Scholesy on at 16?" mused Kershaw a few nights earlier, while watching the Under-9s strut their stuff over on the club's small-sided pitches at Littleton Road in Salford.

"At 16, we could play Scholesy for only 20 minutes a game. He couldn't run. He was a little one. Had asthma. No strength. No power. No athleticism... No endurance. 'You've got a bleeding dwarf,' I remember somebody said to Brian Kidd [the then youth-team coach]. 'You will eat your words,' said Kiddo. If Scholesy had been at a lesser club, they would have got rid of him and he would probably not be in the game now. We stuck with Scholesy, a wonderful technician. How many caps did he get? Sixty-six?!"

In the 21st century, when street football has largely disappeared, Kershaw asked Meulensteen to come to Carrington and hone the techniques of the heirs to the Scholes generation. The Dutchman put on a coaching demonstration for Ferguson and was appointed immediately. "Rene has spells working with Van Nistelrooy, Chris Eagles and Giuseppi Rossi, who all pick at his brains, but his role is development of young boys," Kershaw said. "He is the best coach in the world for kids."

Raised in the land of Total Football, Meulensteen's obsession with encouraging skills dovetailed perfectly with the creed of Ferguson, Kershaw and enlightened Academy stalwarts like Brian McClair and Tony Whelan. "Seven to 10 is the golden age of learning, so we work on their technique at a young age," Whelan said.

"Rene came in," Kershaw continued, "and said it was not helpful to put Under-9 kids into Premier League eight-a-side football games against other clubs with mums and dads on touchlines shouting 'get stuck in'. When we played some teams it was like World War Three. When we played

Man City last year, we had to frogmarch a City parent from the training ground. He was effing and blinding, telling the referee he's an effing cheat. When we play City now, I tell the groundsman to shift the rope away from the pitch so the parents are 20-30 yards back."

United know kids will always be competitive, so they work on their technique first and are prepared to "isolate" themselves from those clubs sticking to Premier League rules. "In eight v eight, the three biggest kids dominate," Kershaw said. "So we decided we would go on a four-a-side programme of development that initially revolved virtually solely around technique."

United commissioned a report from Manchester Metropolitan University which praised the "number of dribbling skills - step-over, drag-back, Cruyff Turn, feint and others - demonstrated" by the Academy's Under-9 players while involved in four-v-four games on pitches measuring 25 metres by 25 metres.

Armed with this backing from respected sports scientists, United went to the Premier League Academy directors' meeting and argued for a change in the rules, replacing eight-v-eights for the youngest kids with four-v-fours... As one coach present described it, other clubs reacted to Kershaw's request as if he had "thrown a hand-grenade at them".

Kershaw himself said: "The supposed experts at other clubs went: 'Bloody ManU, if they don't fancy it, they can pull out of the games programme.' They didn't listen to the argument that what we were doing was good for kids' development."

Whelan sighed: "On Sunday morning, some clubs will travel three hours to Newcastle for one hour's football of eight v eights for their Under-9s. Some of the players stand around a lot of the time. We refuse to go. It is far better to stay and train at home." As Kershaw stressed: "Once a nine-year-old has learned a trick, it's like learning his tables, it stays with him for life."

Evidence that something special was occurring at United could be found at Littleton Road with the merry bands of Under-9s and Under-10s, on Carrington's indoor pitch with Meulensteen and the Under-11s and outside under floodlights with the Under-12s. United have become the Eton College of football.

Practice makes perfect. "Experts reckon it takes 10,000 hours of training to make a top athlete," remarked coach Eamon Mulvey. So United ensure training is fun. "At the start we often put on a five-minute DVD with tricks from Best, Maradona and Ronaldo. We'll say, 'Who wants to be Ronaldo? Hands up.' Then they go off and try the tricks in a game."

All those skills are cultivated and paraded in the four-v-four contests. "We feel like a voice in the wilderness," observed Whelan. "We'd love it if someone else did a four-v-four pilot. We need more allies. We do have some. Derby, Leicester and Liverpool are good collaborators."

Others aren't. "When we play Huddersfield or Stoke, they are so up for it because they are playing against United," Meulensteen said. "They

work twice as hard. It's a battle. That cannot develop players. One manager of another Academy said to me: 'I want to see eight v eight and a nice cup of tea afterwards.'

"Being technical director of the FA is almost an impossible job because there are so many narrow-minded people out there. There's a negative coaching culture in England. It's crash, bang, wallop coaching. We are different. If someone makes a mistake, nobody has a go at them."

Kershaw agreed, adding: "Our poorest Under-16s are light-years in front of anything they have at Bury, Rochdale and all those clubs. We are producing very, very skilful young boys, who do the tricks and compete. By the time they are 12, they are ready to enter 11-a-side."

"The Premier League have a set of rules which now need a major revision. But I am stopping going to Academy managers' meetings. They just spout hot-air. We have little Tin-Gods trying to do big jobs. Some clubs are in disarray with their Academies. The Premier League should be saying: 'You out.' But they won't."

"Barnsley's Academy was magnificent when it was built, but unfortunately they have hit the buffers, they don't meet the rules so they should be chucked out. We are continuing to invest. Other clubs aren't. Chelsea were the worst, but in fairness they will be the tops now."

"The FA set up a system with Academies to develop kids to win England the World Cup. I don't care if England don't get in the top 32 in the world. My job is to get a player in United's first team. But he doesn't need to be English. Rossi [the Italian teenager] has a wonderful chance. He's like Jimmy Greaves: left-kicker, tucks the ball away. But not English."

With Kieran Richardson and Phil Bardsley maturing, the English production line still rolls at United and will accelerate in the future. "Some other clubs don't see English nine-year-olds as cost effective," Kershaw concluded. "Some clubs would rather take a rag-arsed Irish lad at 16, who is a hardened competitor because the Dublin and District Schools League is tough but he doesn't have great technique." And great technique is a quality cherished at the club that produced Charlton, Beckham and company.