

## ACADEMY SYSTEM

By  
TONY RUSS.

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The origin of the academy structure lies in the RFU strategic plan created by Francis Baron to win the World Cup during 2007. That this feat was achieved somewhat earlier was fortuitous and the success or failure of the academy project will surely be seen in some two years time.

The basic structure of the academy was to be a network of regional academies and the key word here is *regional*. In fact, because of a political accord between the RFU and the clubs, it was decided that each Premiership club would hold an academy licence provided that they met the necessary criteria. Unsurprisingly this was the case and, instead of a regional academy network, we got four in London, three in the West Country and, at that time, none at all in the West Midlands, the far South West and East Anglia. The situation in the first two areas has now been covered but, nevertheless, it is worth asking the question whether there is a strong case for four academies competing for players in one geographically small area of the country, London.

The role of the academies is simple – to identify those athletes with the potential to play international rugby and to deliver a holistic development programme which provides the most talented young rugby players with the opportunity to fulfil their potentials.

This programme is partly funded by the RFU with lottery money from Sport England, but the level of this funding is not great and the majority is spent on the salaries of the staff who are employed to deliver the programme. The Academy Managers and assistants are nearly all employees of the host club so there is an immediate conflict of interest for the Academy Manager, who is simultaneously responsible to his Director of Rugby *and* to the Director of Academies. One is in the next office with very immediate priorities and the other is at Twickenham, many miles away with rather more long-term ambitions.

There are four main channels of talent identification. The first of these is through the Elite Player Development Centres (EPDCs), which form part of each academy. The EPDCs are partnerships between the academy and the allocated Constituent Bodies CBs to channel the elite players produced by CB development programmes into the academy network. The second route is via the traditional and largely informal scouting networks and by many hours spent watching matches at all levels all over the place. The third route is by running an age-group side which usually manages to unearth the odd gem, but this is increasingly infrequent as anyone with even a hint of talent is scooped up into an EPDC with alarming speed. A fourth route is via the partner schools' system, whereby schools and academies agree to work together. Of course, a player is free to go wherever he chooses but these partnerships can work well and build up the relationship between the player and the club over several years.

At the opposite end to the EPDC is the National Academy which operates at Junior, Intermediate and Senior levels. The National Academy is another filter which selects the best from the regional academies and further refines the programme, preparing these players for international rugby. National Academy players remain in their regional academies but go away on agreed dates for National Academy camps. Players are nominated from regional academies and are then either selected for the National Academy (or rejected) by Brian Ashton and his staff. In my experience, the National Academy staff work closely with the regional academies and the players benefit greatly from their involvement with the National Academy. I believe this area of the programme works really well.

Many Directors of Rugby take a very ambivalent line towards their academy and almost always prefer to purchase a player from a South Sea island rather than promote a young academy player. There are some notable exceptions, but a brief scan of the teams playing for Premiership clubs each week does not give a very optimistic picture of the attitude of Premiership coaches to the risks involved in bringing on a younger player. The present rules, which do not protect clubs' interests in young players, also do not help. A club, via its academy, can spend years developing a young player only to find that at the age of eighteen, when he is first allowed to sign a professional contract, he is poached by a higher offer from a more successful club. In these circumstances one could argue that clubs might as well save their youth development budget and just give the academy manager £150,000 a year to go out and buy the four best young players in the country - or indeed the world.

Another negative effect of the new structure has been the abandonment of age-group rugby by many Premiership clubs. Fewer than half of the Premiership clubs run a regular age-group side when, prior to the academy structure, all clubs ran such a side. The argument goes that the academies exist for only the most talented and that these players are catered for in senior rugby. There are several obvious weaknesses to this argument. Firstly, it has always been the case that star players can be identified at school and brought into the club at the appropriate time. But, equally so, age-group sides have consistently thrown up previously unknown gems and this avenue into professional rugby

is being steadily closed; in the process we are doing the game a disservice. I could quote several examples of players who rattled no cages at school but who have later been identified and developed into international quality players. It is so easy to pop down to the leading public school and pick a player off the peg. It is so much more difficult, but so much more rewarding, to pick a caterpillar and develop him into a butterfly! Secondly, without an age-group side, how can players be provided with sufficient rugby? I am quite clear on this point. Players need to play rugby. We can produce outstanding gymnasium athletes who train to train and to sit on benches and to play twenty minutes for whichever team now and again. It is clearly noticeable these days that many players cannot play for eighty minutes because they are regularly playing for much less. This may be acceptable for senior, so called impact, players but it does nothing for the development of younger players who are so full of enthusiasm.

Players become better players by playing rugby. They do not need matches every day – but a once-a-week game followed by an analysis of the performance in a constructive way and learning from that experience would be an enormous benefit to so many young players. This does not happen often enough for those players outside the club's first team and, it has to be said, probably not even then because the coach has already moved on to the next game. There are those who tout the Zurich 'A' League as the answer. Well, as I write this article it is more than a month since our last game and there is a gap of a month between each of our next two such games. That is no programme and, until Premiership clubs are compelled to deal with this issue, I see no answer to this dilemma. I also believe that clubs are disingenuous when they give their reasons for not running an age-group side and that the truth lies elsewhere. It is purely financial considerations that lead to this policy of lack of investment in young players. Directors of Rugby should recognise that, for the cost of their least important first team squad member, they could run a season's programme for an age-group side and, in my view and considerable experience, the benefits would far outweigh the cost.

How does the Quins' Academy work? We have a number of players who are still at school to whom we deliver the programme locally. Each player will have a strength and conditioning programme and he is visited on a weekly basis to go over videos of matches and to review the programme. These players also spend holiday time at the academy if not required elsewhere by the Junior National Academy.

On leaving school, players come into the academy on a full-time basis and basically follow a course involving several components. In addition to the rugby and strength/conditioning components, we employ a nutritionist and a sports psychologist on a part-time basis and each delivers weekly classes in addition to holding one-on-ones with individual players. Our physiotherapist delivers a weekly 'body protection' session which looks at the theory of injury prevention and rehabilitation and we also have weekly sessions on Understanding the Game and a Personal Development Programme. Each player is required to produce, follow and develop a personal development plan. All matches are videoed and each player receives a CD of his individual performance and is required to review this with a coach each week. In addition we have regular formal

reviews with each player. As time goes on and players develop, there is increasing involvement with the first team squad.

We put a lot into the programme so that each player may have the best chance of progressing. Progression is not guaranteed but we hope that the majority of our players will progress into senior rugby at Harlequins and my ambition is to achieve a situation whereby Mark Evans never has to go outside the club for another player. This will never happen, but our job in the academy is to produce a stream of quality players with the aptitude and ability to play Premiership rugby. This is the desired outcome, but in conclusion I would implore Directors of Rugby to believe in and to trust the academy process and to have the confidence to select these young academy players for first team rugby as and when the opportunities arise. Having been a Director of Rugby myself at three different clubs I understand the pressures involved and, in the professional era, they are, admittedly, greatly increased. Relegation is indeed a disaster and it is tempting to go shopping to avoid this. However, I just believe that, in the long term, success will surely go to those who have the courage to gradually integrate young players into their squads alongside the gems from overseas, such as Andre Vos, who really enhance their new clubs. There have been some truly horrific panic signings across the Premiership and each one of these has hindered the progress of a young academy player. The structure is now in place to ensure that this need not happen again and it is only if this does happen that England has any chance of winning the next World Cup in 2007.