

ITALIAN RUGBY

By

ANDREW JEPSON.

The author works as Director of Development and Academies for Arix Rugby Viadana in Italy and was previously with Rugby Club San Benedetto. He was an RFU Youth Development Officer for North Yorkshire and South Cleveland 1993-2000 and was seconded to RWC Ltd as Liaison officer with the Italian team during the 1999 Rugby World Cup.

I am now three years down the line here in Italy following seven years in England as an RFU YDO and where are we now?

I think I'm in a reasonable position to evaluate the situation here in Italy, but think it best not to make comparisons with the state of English Rugby development as there's a chalk and cheese element!

I work as Director of Development and Academies for Arix Rugby Viadana and we are amongst the top four rugby union clubs in Italy. A brief background to how the structure works here might help and it works along these lines: the top ten teams make up the Super 10 and this is mainly a professional structure. Below that professional game there are two parallel 'A' divisions, followed by four 'B' divisions and any number of 'C'.

In Super 10, the majority of the players are full-time professionals. We at Viadana, for example, have thirty five full-time senior players and the full-time staff supporting the playing side consists of two senior coaches, two strength and conditioning experts, two physiotherapists and an Under 20 coach who is also our video analyst. In addition there is a large number of support staff on a part-time and voluntary basis. On the full time administrative side there are myself, a General Manager, Promotions Manager and a club secretary. There is also a large group of volunteer support staff who help our full-time club steward run the clubhouse and restaurant. This situation is more or less duplicated in the majority of Super 10 clubs.

The top four clubs are heavily sponsored; we, for example, with sixty five sponsors of varying degrees. A great benefit in Italy is that any sponsor's contributions are fully tax deductible. A curious situation is also that, generally, the club takes its name from the main sponsor, hence the club names of Arix Viadana, Benetton Treviso and Ghial Calvisano.

From the point of view of grass roots development however, a different story emerges. Clubs are obliged by Federazione Italiana Rugby rules to enter mini, junior and youth competitions, depending on their status in the league structure. We, for example, are obliged to have an Under 20 team in the national league, an Under 17 and Under 15 squad in regional competitions and we have to attend at least eight festivals (more than 3 clubs at U11/U13) with the Under 11s and the Under 13s. Should we fail in any of these requirements, the senior team can have points deducted in the forthcoming season! In a town of 17,000 inhabitants this can be a problem!

All players of all ages have to be registered and this can only happen after a medical with a sports specific doctor. The registration is then lodged with FIR in Rome after the submission of the medical result, identity document and club request. This, if successful, means that the club receives

the player's registration card – it is of similar size to a credit card – which then has to be shown to the referee at the pre match identity parade at each and every match. He checks this, together with a photo identity card, (usually displayed in an appropriate folder) before anyone can take part in an official match. As the reader may imagine, this can be quite labour intensive with a group of Under 7s and the referee will not start the match without the presence of a doctor!

The main obstacle to development here is the lack of background nationally for sports development, both generic and sports specific. Schools look upon sport as an opt-out part of the curriculum and in many junior, middle and upper schools the 'sports lesson' is an excuse to relax, read the paper or catch up on some homework. Young people are allowed, without any comeback, to opt out of P.E. when it is offered and it is sufficient to simply tell the teacher that, "I don't feel like doing P.E. today..." and you're excused. As you might imagine, obesity is a major problem and the proliferation of mopeds and scooters, plus parents who insist on taking children to the school gates, doesn't help.

So, where does the Physical Education element come from? As you may have guessed, the local sports club is the main provider. Now, here lies the conflict. Even junior teams are sponsored and the sponsor demands immediate results or next year's budget could be endangered. Thus, clubs are almost obliged to produce teams that win competitions rather than trying to develop players. This means that most clubs look to create effective squads who are able to win, but may consist of advanced physical specimens who simply are stronger than their opponents. This state of affairs is not helped by the FIR, who insists that the primary consideration for a youth international is that he should be big and strong, even though his rugby background may be almost non-existent.

How does the FIR, therefore, support the clubs? In each region, the equivalent of a county in England, there will certainly be at least one regional technical officer who is paid by the FIR. Their job description has *never* been circulated to the clubs, the jobs have *never* been advertised and the clubs are simply not sure how to interact with these people. Generally, they will have the responsibility for one of the national junior or youth squads, which means that they spend weeks away from their territory at training camps. It is quite possible that they have hardly ever played rugby and almost certainly they will not have a sports development background, as sports development is not considered worthy of a university course in Italy; such a background is not even recognised as a minimum requirement. In my region we are very lucky, as we do have a young man who is reasonably open-minded and is willing to collaborate - when we see him. We have never been offered an example of a development plan and the representative structure is quite novel.

The club is asked to send boys to trials at Under 14. These trials may well be held at a ground that is over three hours away. Youngsters are asked to finish school at 1 p.m. then travel to these trials, yet nobody comes to the club to look at players in their own environment. After this initial presentation, the players are registered for the region and will be called up until someone decides that they are not good enough, at which point they fall out of the system, probably to be lost in the mists of inadequacy. Late developers don't have much of a look in, so there exists one available level at representative rugby then that's it for young players. This system generally operates until Under 17 and then it falls apart. And the coaching staff? They are selected by the regional coaching committee, made up of representatives who are generally required to make sure that the more important clubs are represented. (There is, incidentally, no room for an ex RFU YDO or two). And the support for these coaches? I have little or no idea. So, you may well ask, why stay here if things appear so grim?

I am fortunate to work for a progressively minded club. We have a development plan, both short and long term, a fully functional schools' project including our version of the Community Sports Leader's Award, a volunteer support structure and we are considered by the school fraternity to provide a valid and educational activity. The club organises regular courses for teachers and students and tries to instigate an on-going teacher development system so that we are able to move around the local schools verifying work rather than always conducting sessions ourselves. We support our coaches at all levels with regular updates, both home and abroad, and are able to guarantee all young people a safe and healthy environment to practise their chosen sport. We are the only Italian rugby club to have published a Child Protection Policy, are active in the diffusion of rugby within local schools and universities and are able to offer company management development via rugby principles; we use elements such as team building etc as a main plank in our activities. Therefore, the challenge exists. That's why I'm here. Maybe also worth mentioning that the lifestyle, food, wine and travel have a bit to do with it as well!

