

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

9.1.07

David Beck started this one on December 19th and you can find his article in the Archive. Colin Clark responded and his thoughts were published in last week's Editor's comments. Now we have a response from Andrew Jepson in Italy – and some of his experiences might make us thankful for small mercies!

“Following on from the comments in the Technical Journal from Colin Clark last week, I agree that the development structure should be guided by the right principles - not necessarily by the Old Farts on the committee; however, some observations following my experiences here in Italy might be relevant ...

As previously mentioned in my article some months ago (January 19th, 2006), there is an obligation here in Italy to run certain age groups depending on the league status of your club.

In the Super 10 – the top series in Italy – a club is required to have a vast range of junior sides, all competing at National or Regional level. In Super 10s clubs, there is an Under 19 (in which Under 20 players can play – but FIR decides to call it Under 19!) at elite national level that mirrors the teams in the Super 10. Below that, Under 19s compete at regional level. So, even if an Under 19 team wins the national competition outright after the play offs, if their senior team is not in Super 10 the year after, the Under 19 stays in the regional competition. This has actually happened. This often means that clubs pay ‘lip service’ to the Super 10 elite competition, and even Super 10 sides have sent along their Under 19s with 12 players so as not to receive penalty points and fines. Other clubs, however, take the Under 19 competition seriously and vigorous recruitment campaigns happen pre-season, with even Under 19 players having ‘agents’ who ‘sell’ their Under 19 products on the open market.

This has tended to produce a ‘win at all costs’ element to the Under 19 competition, with locally born and educated players losing their places to young players imported from many kilometres away, simply because they will help the club win for the sponsor. Within a system that usually has only a 1st team, the rejected players no longer play rugby as they will never gain a senior place.

A Super 10 club must also have Under 17s and Under 15s in the regional leagues, and an Under 13 that takes part in a minimum of 8 Festivals in a season, a festival in which there should usually be 4 clubs present. Should the Super 10 club not satisfy this requirement, then they will lose points in the Super 10 competition. This can create a ‘performance syndrome’, as the junior sides must replicate the behaviour of the senior side, so now we see junior sides with separate warm up coaches, warm up shirts different from the playing shirt, etc. There is no more ‘play for fun’ in this game!

Some clubs are happy to create a Junior and Youth Rugby environment based on participation towards performance, others instead beginning at Under 15 level with an insistence on performance – win at all costs – due to sponsorship becoming involved

even at this level. This sponsorship is also often required due to the spread of clubs in Italy, and travelling costs can be astronomical.

All Under 15 and Under 17 teams play in regional, leading to national, competitions. There are no friendlies. This often means that the beginner cannot find space in the team, as the team must win. It also means that recruitment can be based around physique rather than athletic talent and the big, strong and aggressive player who can bash his way to the try line is preferred to the fast, evasive and agile 'rocket'. Few teams will travel for four hours there and four hours back just to play for fun.

So, at the end of the day; yes; pay the players, but beware – the downward spiral can create many problems, as pay often requires results, sponsors demand wins, wins can cost at participation level, and the late developer may well disappear from rugby.

Clubs who do not have to resolve the obligatory element required by the FIR but run, for example, Under 19s as a development activity, sometimes find that their better players are 'poached' by better clubs (this is also happening at Under 17 level!), and whilst this gives individual players the chance to step up and improve, the drop in numbers when these players leave has often lead to the disbanding of the squad, and therefore the 'top up from the bottom' element for the senior team no longer exists. I would prefer to see a system by which youngsters must demonstrate a residential requirement to be registered to a club, which can also be traced through their education. But there must be an emphasis, instead of just winning as the only priority, placed on a vast improvement in the quality of coaching at all junior levels.

Finally, here are a couple of sad but actual recent examples.

1. An ex-national coach known to me visited an Under 11 session recently. He commented afterwards that the players were quite good, but were not aggressive enough. They should come out of the changing room snarling and drooling aggression. Under 11!
2. An Under 17 game attended by the same coach. Comments afterwards also were that the Under 17s (who won their game comfortably against highly rated opposition using a varied array of skills) were also not aggressive enough. When an Under 17 coach asked for advice on how they could develop aggression in these lads, the ex-national level coach said that it was quite easy - one of the lads is taken to the centre of the pitch and five or six of his team mates beat him up until he's on the floor. The coach who 'benefited' from this advice, whose son plays for the team, said that if that happened he would call the police and have the ex-national coach arrested!"

Andrew in Italy, thanks for those insights. It is always dangerous to draw conclusions regarding the whole game from isolated stories, but there are warning signs in the comments that need to be considered when 'win at all costs' becomes the mantra. It will be very difficult to stem the tide of the worst behaviour by players, coaches, teams and clubs; far harder is the fight to maintain high standards and you coaches are in the most forward positions of the front line.