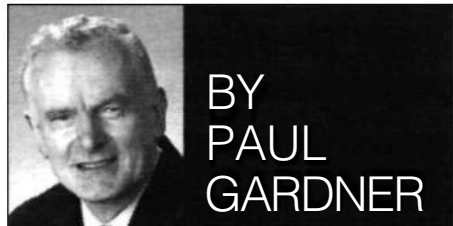


Youth soccer London-style

Money and rules play large role in academy system



BY
PAUL
GARDNER

DALLAS — Here's a pretty good measure of the way in which money now saturates soccer at every level.

I'm sitting with Tony Carr, director (i.e. head coach) of the youth academy at London's West Ham United, and his assistant Peter Brabrook. Both were professional players in England — so they're grinning and shaking their heads at one of the day's stories, the one revealing that the average yearly income of a pro player in England is now over \$630,000.

They're smiling, remembering when they played, not all that long ago, back in the 1960s, but really the stone age in financial terms. They played for a fraction of that \$630,000, but there's no bitterness here, just an amused wonder at the riches they missed by a decade or so.

Anyway, we're not going to talk of money. It's youth soccer we're going to discuss, how the kids develop, how the academy system works in England. And almost immediately we're talking about money again.

All the Premiership clubs, except Bradford, have an academy. But the Premiership lays down minimum requirements — number of fields, indoor and outdoor facilities, and so on. West Ham can't meet all of them at the moment — to do so, means purchasing more land. An expensive business in — or near — London. So: Money looms again, with pressure, because the club has a deadline next year to meet the Premiership stipulations.

For the moment, West Ham has 134 boys enrolled, an average of about 15 per age group, starting with the U-9s. More regulations: boys between ages 9 and 12 must live within one hour's traveling distance of the club; between 13 and 16, it's one and a half hours.

Except — there's always an exception or two, right? — except that the club can offer a six-week trial to kids from outside the traveling area. They can sign those kids, but the kids have to move to the area, and the club has to look after them. West Ham has a home for them in East London, run by a husband-and-wife team, house parents they're called. At the moment, there are 12 boys there, boys from Australia, Ireland, the north of England.

London, crowded with pro soccer clubs (it has five Premier League teams, six if you include Watford), is a fiercely competitive area for youth players, as the catchment areas for each team overlap

considerably.

Not easy to define, "one hour's travel." Mike Kelleher, who oversees that end of things for the Premier League, says, "We have to be realistic and flexible — we know about traffic problems!"

(There are those who will tell you that Liverpool's academy, an elaborate new complex, was placed in Knowsley precisely because the adjacent expressway makes getting there easier and quicker.)

The youngest kids sign for a year. After that, they can switch to another club, which is required to pay compensation to the original club — to pay for the training the boy has already received. The Premiership is working on a menu of fixed fees for this. At the moment — we're back to money again — West Ham is feeling hard done by, having been required by the Football League Appeals Committee to pay \$650,000 to Charlton for a 16-year-old who switched clubs.

Carr insists that the fee is way too high to reflect any money spent by Charlton. "It's more like a fine or a transfer fee," said Carr, "They think we poach players, which we don't. It's a warning to other clubs."

Carr shrugs off the thought, and returns to talking about youth coaching. Something he's been doing, at West Ham for 26 years. A broken leg aborted his career as a center forward, and led to his interest in coaching — he is a holder of the UEFA "A" license, a requirement for an academy director.

"Because London — especially East London, where we are — is such a good source of players," he says, "and because of all the clubs involved, signing young players gets increasingly more difficult. There's a feeling now that if you haven't got a kid by age 9 or 10, you won't get him."

West Ham has three full-time development coaches whose job is to go around all the schools in the area, giving free coaching clinics, watching players, making contacts. Their recommendations send the youngest kids to one of three development centers.

"At that age, we're looking for natural talent," says Carr. "What he does on the field, his control, maybe a turn of speed, his shooting, does he have a natural gift or

an eye for the game.

"They play small-sided games — we let them play, the coach doesn't keep stopping them, I don't want to hear the coach's voice all the time. It's all about enjoyment at that age, we want them to come back."

Those who are signed get to play 30 games a season for the academy, eight-a-side Sunday morning games against academy teams from other pro clubs. Full-team games start at age 12, and by the age of 16,

was a forward in his playing days. He has a feeling for technique, and after a moment's thought mentions the game that his team had played a day earlier, a 1-1 tie with California's Santa Anita Heat: "You know, the technique of some of their players was better than our boys'. The game in England is so fast, there's so much pressure, maybe technique is not allowed to develop.

"I have a question — do we perhaps put too much emphasis on competition and winning too young? But I don't have an answer."

There is also, says Carr a climate factor: "For so much of the winter, it's so cold, training outdoors. I think an indoor sports arena is a must now. That's what academy status requires, 60 yards by 40 yards, and what we don't have yet."

The West Ham team at the Dallas Cup includes a number of players who were part of the squad that won last year's FA Youth (U-19) Cup in England. They are clearly potential

winners here — their main challenge comes from the Brazilian teams, Corinthians and Cruzeiro.

But how important is winning youth competitions? The bottom line surely has to be the number of players developed for the first team.

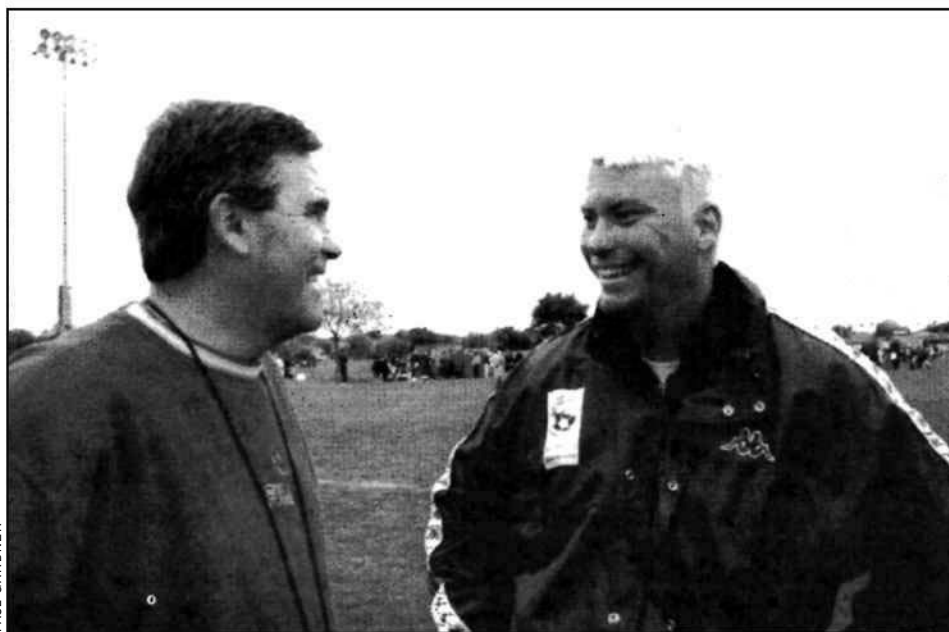
"Last week," says Carr, "the West Ham first team fielded three of our ex-youth players, with four more on the bench."

Seven out of a squad of 15 — but Carr says that is above average for the Premier League. Can the academy system, then, be judged a success if it only produces one or two players for the senior team?

Maybe it can. Here comes money again. Players who don't make it for West Ham can be sold to other clubs. And those three players currently on the first team — Joe Cole, Rio Ferdinand and Frank Lampard — are worth a combined \$45 million or so.

But Carr's final word on the academy system is not a financial judgment: "It's excellent — sure, it's got to get better, but I fully endorse it. It's the best thing that's ever happened to youth soccer in England."

(Soccer America columnist Paul Gardner's latest book is "SoccerTalk, Life Under the Spell of the Round Ball," NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group.)



After a Dallas Cup encounter, West Ham's Tony Carr (left) was impressed with the skill level of the Santa Anita Heat, coached by Clint Greenwood (right).

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— Tony Carr, director of West Ham United's youth academy

the selecting process starts in earnest. The cutting reduces the number of boys by about 50 percent.

"At that age, we've got to start focusing on those we believe have a realistic chance of making it as a pro," says Carr, "We're looking at the effect a player has on the game, as a defender or an attacker. Can they compete in the real world, can they take the pressure? And we also look at a boy's potential size — whether we like it or not, it's a physical game."

True enough, but what about the skill level — in the English game in general, is it good enough? Carr, unlike most coaches,