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EDITORIAL

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

I thought it was a nice touch that AFC Ajax, when the club was putting a name to the youth football facilities they built alongside the Amsterdam ArenA, decided on De Toekomst (meaning 'the future'). Youth development is, without a shadow of a doubt, key to the future of the game. The main actors in that arena are obviously the players themselves. But successful youth development work can only be built on the foundations of top-quality education delivered by highly qualified coaches – and that, in turn, hinges on the professional, leadership and policy-making qualities of the coach educators. That is why 'building for the future' was chosen as the slogan and core element of the UEFA Coach Education Workshop staged in Bratislava, in conjunction with the Slovak Football Association, towards the end of September.

This was the 11th event of its kind and it had special significance in that it gave us a great opportunity to present coach education and technical directors from all 54 UEFA member associations with the results of an independent assessment of the newly published UEFA Coaching Convention. A summary of the findings was presented by Julian North and David Piggott, the leaders of a far-reaching research project conducted by Leeds Beckett University in the north-east of England. It was good to hear them talk about *"strong evidence of improvements in coach education"* prompted by the UEFA Coaching Convention. But we refused to be distracted by the pats on the back. Instead, we used the event in Bratislava to consult our member associations about how to further improve the convention and, if appropriate, offer tailor-made support and assistance according to scenarios encountered in individual associations.

We have already highlighted certain areas where we feel more work could be done with a view to implementing the new convention in the best possible way. Tutoring the tutors is one of them. Not many member associations have specific education programmes for tutors, and ambitions of continuing to raise standards of coach education can be realistically linked to the quality of coach educators. Positive feedback from pilot courses in Turkey and Romania means that UEFA is ready to travel further along that road – as we are with pilot courses aimed at helping female coaches get UEFA B licences.


Sportsfile

A practical coaching session at the Slovak FA's national centre

There is also room for progress in further education for coaches – or continual professional development as it is called in the business world. We can look for ways of fine-tuning further-education courses and catering for specialist areas. The new convention stresses the value of reality-based learning and this is another area where we can clarify definitions and help national associations find the best pathways towards efficient implementation of the concept.

In Bratislava, we dedicated significant portions of the theoretical and practical sessions to youth development work and to experience gathered during the pilot phase of UEFA's academy project. This highlighted the importance of preparing coaches to perform their roles in this vital area – and raised some fundamental questions. For example, is it right to assume that the holder of a UEFA Pro licence is necessarily the best coach to work with groups of 14 or 15-year-olds? This is where UEFA's Elite Youth A licence has particular relevance and provides a great platform on which we can continue to build for the future. ●

Ioan Lupescu
UEFA Chief Technical Officer

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THE INTERVIEW

Most members of the coaching profession acknowledge, often grudgingly, the importance of results. One of Europe's smaller national associations getting enough good ones to reach the final tournament of the European Championship for the first time represents an achievement that has generated ripples of admiration. But the coach in question has been in the game long enough to remain unfazed by the momentary media hype attached to success. And his professional lifestyle remains unaltered: a lifestyle which, far from the public gaze, conceals an alter ego. Intertwined with 25 years of front-line national team coaching, he has always found time for another passion: the betterment of coach education. It is this facet that has forged his close relationship with UEFA. His coach education wisdom has made him a valued member of the specialist Jira Panel for more than a decade even though he has been, during that period, in full-time employment as head coach of the national teams of Sweden, Nigeria and Iceland, leading them to a sequence of EUROs and FIFA World Cups. He is, of course…

LARS LAGERBÄCK

Lars, as a member of UEFA's Jira Panel, you have helped a large number of member associations with their coach education programmes. But, to start the ball rolling, tell us about your own.

I actually started in 1972 when I was still playing at my club. I got the opportunity to work as an administrator with responsibility for youth football. Then my head coach in the men's team talked me into starting my coach education. So I did what, today, would be the B level in 1974 and two years later I got into the sports university in Sweden, with the football association covering 25% of my tuition. I was also trained as a physical educator. Then I went through the highest coach education that you could get in Sweden at that time. That's the background to my own education.

Did you have any role models in the coaching profession?

I was lucky because at the time I was going through my sports education at university, Bob Houghton came to Malmö. We were only five specialising in football and one of the others was Roland Andersson, who was at Malmö. Thanks to him, I could go there as if I were a child of the club, so to speak. Bob came in with a totally different approach, especially in terms of training methods. And his playing style was totally new for Sweden. Two years later, Roy Hodgson came and I was able to get very close to him. Bob meant a lot to me and so did Roy. A lot of the things they brought to Sweden formed a base for me. I also hope I've developed a little bit on my own since the seventies!


Getty Images

Lars Lagerbäck with the Swedish national team during their match against Trinidad and Tobago at the 2006 World Cup

What in particular impressed you about their methods?

The first things were in training. We had a very long pre-season in Sweden and Bob took away all the physical work off the pitch and insisted we did everything on the pitch. What was done was also very structured and organised. He focused on making sure that everybody clearly knew their roles. The team had an identity and what they did on the pitch was what they did in training. It seemed logical to me and the big lesson was the conviction that if you don't have the best players, you have to be organised. Otherwise you don't have a chance to win games.

How would you describe the style that you have developed over the years?

Thinking back to the beginning, I recognise that I wanted to control everything – even on the pitch. Too much. What I believe today is that you should have very few rules. I feel you should focus on getting the players to understand that they need to take responsibility for themselves if they want to become good players. Because I, as a coach, can't run them all the time on and off the pitch. So I tell the players today that if they want to be 100% professional, they have to take on a lot of responsibility themselves. About how

they live outside football, how they eat, how they sleep … If you get players to understand this and to accept responsibility, I think you create a much better development environment. I wouldn't say it was totally about democracy but, having worked with Sweden, Nigeria and, now, Iceland, I have guidelines that we go through with the players but few firm rules. If they don't follow the guidelines it becomes easy to tell them 'I don't think you're professional' – which is something they don't like to hear. I believe in giving opportunities to discuss the guidelines but once we have agreed on the guidelines and the rules, they are there to be observed. If you are not prepared to respect them, you should not be in the team.

ISI

You mix 'I' and 'we' when you speak – and this has been an unusual feature of your career. You have been assistant coach, head coach and also co-coach, with Tommy Söderberg in Sweden and now with Heimir Hallgrímsson in Iceland. What is your take on relationships within the coaching set-up?

From my personal experience, I feel that the differences are not huge. I started as assistant with Tommy, who was very team-oriented. I know it's easy to say this but I mean it from the heart. I consider coaching to be about teamwork. If everybody feels they are part of the global picture, it's a step forward. If you get together regularly with the staff and ask for their opinions, they identify with the objectives. With Tommy, he did the things that he thought he was the best man to do. And I did the work that I felt I could get on with. The major difference is that if you are assistant coach, the media are not usually interested in you – that's one of the good things! I have known coaches who don't want to be Number One and feel comfortable as the 'second man' – maybe because they don't like the pressure, the media contact … I don't know. Tommy and I, Roland and I with Sweden and Nigeria, and now in Iceland with Heimir, we see ourselves as a team, along with the goalkeeper coach. When you come down to the practical work, the difference doesn't seem that big. I also believe in keeping the staff list small. Players like Henrik Larsson and Freddie Ljungberg always told me it would be a mistake to bring in too many other people because the most important thing was what I, as coach, was saying.

Talking of pressure, you always seem calm and collected. What is your personal recipe for dealing with the pressures of the job?

I've probably been lucky because of the way I was raised by my parents. It may not be the best word, but I regard myself as a pretty secure sort of person. I was also privileged to have my background in physical education, which meant I could always fall back on another job. I've met many coaches over the years who, if they can't keep a job at top level, have very little to fall back on because they haven't been educated in other spheres of life. For me, it removed any fear element attached to being told 'You're not wanted anymore!'. That has never been a problem for me but I acknowledge

that it can often be the biggest pressure that coaches have to face today, along with pressure from fans, media and even sponsors. I've been lucky because, since I started working at national level, we've had pretty good results. In Sweden, there were times when the media wanted me out of the job. But when I finally stopped, it was for my own reasons. I also regard myself as fortunate in that the players have always been behind me and haven't really said anything negative about me, even when they've stopped playing. If you have the players on board, your employers are more likely to want you to stay. I sometimes do presentations on leadership and one of the things I stress is the belief that if you become a populist, it's easy to get into trouble. You have to listen to people, of course, and learn from them. But if you listen too much to what some of the media or fans say, you're in trouble. As I said, I thank my parents for the way they raised me.

It's easy to look at the outcome and salute your achievement of leading Iceland to a EURO for the first time. But, going back to the beginning, how did you lay the foundations for this success?

Well, my first contact was only with the players at clubs in the Nordic countries. When we got together with those playing elsewhere, we sat down for half a day to discuss the guidelines that I was talking about earlier. We talked about how we proposed to work, how we wanted to live off the pitch … We discussed our football philosophy and I set out the rules I wanted them to respect. They had the opportunity to make comments and tell me if they accepted what I was proposing. To be honest, I would have needed very strong motives to make big changes. But in Iceland it was easy because they accepted everything. It creates a good working atmosphere – which is important in a national-team job, where you don't have daily contact. We established our preferred way of working and the things we would set out to do. And the players felt that they were a big part of it. I've seen coaches who don't invite the players to participate in that way – and that makes it easier for them not to do their best or to do something wrong. If we want to be totally professional, this is an important facet and a good way to motivate players.

Sportsfile

In Bratislava, you mentioned the 'underdog perspective'. Would you say that your achievements with Sweden and Iceland have been down to making the most of collective virtues rather than exploiting individual talents?

The nice thing about football is that, even if you don't have the best individual skills, you can always win with a good team performance. In other team sports with a ball, like handball or basketball, it is practically impossible for a third-division team to beat a side from the top division. In football you can – because it's so hard to score goals. I respect other systems and philosophies but I find it difficult to understand why many coaches don't really investigate why you win matches. There are a lot of hard facts in football. To give you an example, everybody knows that most goals are scored inside the penalty box. But in training, if you don't practise crosses, it's difficult to work on finishing inside the box. I prefer to make training directly connected to what we can expect in a match. I also try to educate the players all the time. I try to present facts that will help them to understand why we are doing things in training. With the national team, almost all the work can be described as tactical training – and a lot of it can be really dull. But if it's something that you want the players to do in a game, you need to repeat it. You can't just do it once and let it go because players will soon forget. Especially in the national team, where the players are at clubs with different ways of playing. That's why I'm an advocate of looking at facts, trying to translate them into what we do on the training ground and using that as motivation for the players.

With the Nigerian national team at the 2010 World Cup


AFP Photo/Getty Images

Talking about presenting facts, to what extent do you embrace technology?

It's a useful tool but you need to calculate carefully how much of it you want to use. We analyse opponents but, if you have a team meeting of 30 or 40 minutes, I feel that the priority is the way we perform against this particular opponent. Apart from picking out any obvious weaknesses in the opponent's game, it's much more important that they understand why we are setting certain priorities for this game. I'm definitely into using science and analysis programmes in as many ways as possible. But at the same time, the head coach should filter information. I don't believe in over-burdening the players. And if you try to bring in too much, you run the risk of losing the most important bullet points, so to speak. You have to look in the mirror and ask yourself what is genuinely relevant; what is best for the players and the team. One other thing I've noticed on my travels as a member of the Jira Panel is that some coaches try to put themselves on something like a pedestal and surround themselves with assistants. I don't find that a positive trend because it can mean that they are moving themselves away from the players. I prefer to be close to the players. I may be old and conservative but that's the philosophy that I stick to. Going back to technology, I always try to learn from science, use a laptop, prepare clips, produce a PowerPoint presentation and so on. I sometimes get some stick because the layout is not the best in the world but I can take that. When I started in Iceland, we didn't have a video analyst because Heimir is very good at that. But now I do it myself – and you learn from paying attention to detail when you're doing these things on your own. You ask yourself whether you really need to bring this up with the players, so, when I'm scripting a team meeting, I sometimes go over it many, many times just to filter it down. I think I could describe myself as a hands-on coach!

Keeping things simple can be a complicated art …

Yes, I remember my first visit to a club took me to West Ham United when Ron Greenwood was the manager there. I was going through the sports university and I had to write a report. So I talked to him and he told me that to do things as simply as possible is to be a genius. It's probably not the exact quote but that was the message he wanted to transmit. That has followed me too. Don't complicate things. I remember when Tommy and I went to our first EURO in Belgium and Holland in 2000, we were extremely ambitious and felt that we had a fantastic group of players. We worked ourselves to death for four weeks before we went there and, afterwards, Tommy and I decided to make a guideline 'be ambitious but not over-ambitious' and to remember what Ron Greenwood had said 40 years ago. You find a lot of truth if you listen to guys who learned the business right from the beginning.

Last question: you've been in full-time employment but still always wanted to be involved in UEFA's coach education programmes. Why?

I've been a coaching instructor since the end of the seventies – as a part-time job when I was coaching at a club. And I think the main reason the Swedish FA hired me was to be their coaching director. I have always liked coach education. There's also a selfish undertone because I learned aspects that were valuable to me in my coaching. Also, since I joined the Jira Panel in 2004, I've probably visited at least 25 countries in the context of coach education. That's good. Even if you don't learn many new things, it widens your perspectives, it keeps your mind tuned in and makes you ask yourself whether you're still doing things properly or whether you've forgotten certain aspects. So I've found that combining coaching with coach education is something that's very stimulating. It's like continual further education. The quality of coach education is important for the future of a game which has developed with money and pressure and so on. It is a really tough job, especially if you're in one of the bigger countries, but in the smaller countries too. So the important thing is to give people as much knowledge as possible and give them the feeling of security that they are well-equipped to do the job. Without that feeling, you can find that you're not doing the job as best you can. In that respect, coach education is really important. I've met so many good players in different countries who have tried to get into coaching. Some of them have done really well but others have realised that it's much more of a job than being a player and not as easy as they thought. So giving them a good education is something that is really necessary. ●

Sportsfile

A member of the Jira Panel since 2004, Lars Lagerbäck – pictured here in Vienna in 2008 – has visited more than 25 countries in support of coach education.

FOLLOW-UP AND FEEDBACK

After being highlighted in the previous issue of UEFA·technician, the revised and updated UEFA Coaching Convention was also in the spotlight at the UEFA Coach Education Workshop in Bratislava. On the opening day, the results of a far-reaching research study were presented and the representatives of all 54 UEFA member associations were invited to provide feedback with a view to setting educational priorities for the years to come.

UEFA's football education services unit had commissioned an independent analysis of the Coaching Convention with the aim of assessing its value, quality and impact. As mentioned in the editorial, this project was carried out by Leeds Beckett University and when Julian North and David Piggott stepped up on stage in Bratislava, their main challenge was to pinpoint the key features of a report which, in its entirety, runs to well over 200 pages. To their credit, they had compiled a 14-page executive summary, which was distributed to the participants.

Hearteningly, the feedback gathered by the researchers between December 2014 and July 2015 was overwhelmingly positive. To quote the independent review, *"the national associations' engagement with the Convention has been very impressive and a tangible success for UEFA and European football"*. The researchers also found that *"the Convention has had a significant impact on the quality of coach education systems, especially in the less- and middle-established national associations. These systems also appear to be improving the quality of coach education, coaching and player development."* Everybody likes praise but, from UEFA's perspective, the tastier findings were those that provoked reflections on possible improvements. As UEFA's head of football education services, Frank Ludolph, remarked, *"the research gave us a unique opportunity for self-assessment, which was extremely enriching"*.

One of the comments to emerge from the study was that *"there appeared to be considerable variation in the interpretation of reality-based learning"*. In the convention, the expression

David Piggott and Julian North (right) from Leeds Beckett University presented the results of their independent study on the UEFA Coaching Convention

is defined as *"learning mainly in the club context, using knowledge, skills and attitude to solve realistic situations and problems in football"*. In simplistic terms, the clear trend towards reality-based learning has its origins in a desire to take coach education out of the classroom and on to the pitch – or at least to achieve a nice balance between the two locations. *"Despite a range of different institutional and educational traditions across the 54 national associations, there was almost universal endorsement of the reality-based learning concept. However, we experienced very different understandings of what that meant to the national associations, so this may be an area to work on for the UEFA administration and the Jira Panel,"* the authors of the study remarked.

In Bratislava, similar doubts were expressed about 'theoretical' and 'practical' work. As Denmark's technical director, Peter Rudbæk, ventured by way of example, *"being taught match analysis is theoretical; doing it yourself is practical"*. Nevertheless, the lines between theoretical and practical course elements can easily become blurred.

Feedback from the discussion groups suggested that the principles of reality-based learning could do with being more clearly defined. In addition, the research study pointed out that it can be *"a very resource-intensive approach"* – or, as Rudbæk put it, *"face-to-face time is expensive"*. The development of online alternatives was one of the proposals made. Among the participants there were also advocates of more flexible interpretations of the convention, with UEFA helping individual associations to marry concepts with resources. In other words, there was much to mull over.

Educating the educators

Questions were also raised about educating the educators. The participants in Bratislava confirmed the suggestion by Jira Panel member Dany Ryser that most national associations have no specific education programme for tutors. This impression was endorsed by the independent study: *"There was also concern that national associations had very undeveloped initial and further-education programmes for coach educators, even amongst the more established associations. The education and development of coach educators and the improvement of coach educator education and development systems was seen as a key area for improvement for the Convention, the UEFA administration and the Jira Panel."* Point taken – and feedback in Bratislava signalled various ways forward, including a call for UEFA experts to create profiles, guidelines and minimum standards for the education of tutors.

Further education was another salient topic, with the independent study commenting that programmes are typically delivered through workshops, seminars, top-up courses and conferences, although some associations use mentoring arrangements. *"A number of national associations conceded that their further education programmes were still relatively new and this was an important area for development,"* it added. This was put to the discussion groups and the feedback called for UEFA support in terms of specific re-education programmes, availability of UEFA experts – especially in specialised fields – and the creation of a best-practice database. Once again, plenty to think about.

Dany Ryser

The research study featured data related to the coaching diplomas currently available. If all 54 associations were to offer the three core diplomas (Pro, A and B), the total number of courses would be 162. Currently, 148 (91%) are on offer, with plans to increase this to 158 (98%). Including the Elite Youth A, Goalkeeper A and Futsal B diplomas, the potential total rises to 324, with 160 (49%) now available. However, those three diplomas are in their infancy and plans already in place would dramatically increase the offering to 255 (79%).

At the same time, the study says that *"although all national associations recognised the importance of women's and girls' football and were concerned about the lack of female coaches, only a small proportion provided women-only coach education and then only at the lower diploma levels"*. Hence the relevance of UEFA's ongoing pilot schemes – most of them pegged to development tournaments – aimed at encouraging players to further their involvement in the game by moving into coaching. In Bratislava, UEFA expert Béatrice von Siebenthal was joined on stage by the technical director of the Football Association of Moldova, Ghenadie Scurtul, who passed on the positives and negatives (many more of the former than the latter) of the course recently staged in his country. One of the recommendations from the independent study was *"to support the education of women coaches, especially helping them to work their way up the education levels"* – and UEFA is firmly committed to that cause.

Three days of consultations in Bratislava, along with the findings of the external audit, provided a wide range of ideas to take on board as UEFA and the national associations team up to design and build the future of coach education. ●

YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM

Youth development was obviously a core feature of the recent UEFA Coach Education Workshop in Bratislava, which was all about 'building for the future'. Indeed, all three days featured training sessions with youth players – the Slovak U15 and U18 teams to be precise – at the national association's centre in Senec. They served to underline the need for a specialised approach to coaching at these critical age levels. This, in turn, highlighted the relevance of UEFA's recently introduced Elite Youth A coaching licence.

The sessions with the Slovak U15 and U18 teams underlined the need for a specialised approach to coaching at these age levels

As chief technical officer, Ioan Lupescu alludes in his opening message to the pitfall of assuming that a coach licensed at UEFA's Pro level is automatically the best person to take responsibility for the youth rungs of the coaching ladder.

This sentiment was echoed by Denmark's technical director, Peter Rudbæk, on the opening morning in Bratislava, when he also stressed the importance of good tutoring for the Elite Youth A students. *"You might be a good coach,"* he said, *"but that doesn't necessarily make you a good tutor or instructor."* He offered the audience a rundown on the first Elite Youth A course being staged in Denmark from February 2015 to March 2016, comprising 5 two-day modules, a study trip and a final assessment. The Danish association's Elite Youth A course takes 80 hours (40 theory and 40 practical), and it also offers a combined UEFA A and UEFA Elite Youth A course taking 260 hours (same 50:50 split). Students are divided into groups, with a modus operandi of emailing work to fellow group members before sending it to the course tutor. Plans to include the Elite Youth A licence in club licensing requirements offer further encouragement for coaches to go down the youth route rather than automatically following the beaten track towards the UEFA Pro licence. Jelle Goes, technical director in the Netherlands, later reported a similar move, with a compulsory Elite Youth A requirement drafted into the academy licensing system for U14 to U19 teams.

Pilot projects

The need for specialised coaching skills was emphasised by UEFA's head of football development, Jean-François Domergue, who also had a guiding hand on the tiller while the Slovak youth coaches led their charges through the practical sessions on the training ground. The former France international is leading UEFA's elite youth player development programme, often referred to on UEFA campus as 'the academy project'. *"The objective,"* Domergue told his audience in Bratislava, *"is to give national associations access to high-quality development programmes for young players and create a proper educational environment, where there is the right mix of values, school and sport."* Three pilot projects involving U14 and U15 players kicked off in August 2014 in Armenia, Georgia and FYR

Macedonia and the national associations were in Bratislava to report on their experiences and impressions during the opening season.

All three acknowledged that maintaining good working relationships with clubs was the hinge on which the project turned. Clubs needed to be reassured that their young prospects would be receiving top-quality tuition and return as better players. The three schemes were perfect pilots in that they each took different approaches. FYR Macedonia, for example, had the boys at their academy from Monday to Thursday, releasing them to play for their clubs at weekends. Armenia, on the other hand, took the boys into full-time residence at the academy (though the clubs retained 'ownership') and fielded academy teams in the national league – against opponents who were one year older. The Armenian project was based on the idea of recruiting an external technical director for the scheme but using local coaches. FYR Macedonia created a blueprint which had double-edged benefits, arranging for club coaches to be members of the academy staff, rotating their dual responsibilities every two weeks. The advantage, they reported in Bratislava, was not only to demonstrate to the clubs that their most promising youngsters were receiving optimal tuition but also for the coaches to take some of the UEFA standards back to their clubs.

Regular evaluation

In terms of coaching, the projects have pretty uniform parameters, with a head coach, an assistant and a goalkeeping coach assigned to each age group. Domergue and his colleagues took a hands-on approach, conducting four or five evaluations during the first season and, as FYR Macedonia's national youth team coordinator, Zoran Stratev, told the audience in Bratislava, *"the constant evaluations were vital to keep us on track – and it was good to have UEFA input while we were monitoring the performances of the coaches"*.

Stratev also underlined the importance of working at the academy with the playing system currently being used by all the country's age-limit teams. In Armenia, the project was similarly designed, as technical director Marc Lelièvre put it, *"to promote a national footballing philosophy and a playing style"*. All three associations underlined the importance of physical training in this age bracket, with Lelièvre noting that physical education requirements differ substantially within the U14 and U15 levels, echoing the view aired by Rudbæk that *"fitness coaching needs to be tailored to biological age rather than just chronological age"*.

UEFA's approach insists on giving the boys – at the moment the pilot projects only involve boys – full support in terms of schooling and social values. In Armenia, arrangements have been made for a local school to provide classes all morning (starting at 08.00), backed by a teacher at the academy and thrice-weekly English classes. In Georgia, the emphasis is on schooling within the academy itself. Parents are key stakeholders and are kept up to date via briefings, open days and opportunities for individual meetings with the project coordinators.

The project is also enabling the participating associations to fine-tune their scouting mechanisms. Georgia selected squads of 20 at U14 and U15 levels (actually 21 for the latter, as one injured player was allowed to remain in the group) from over 400 candidates. FYR Macedonia started with a group of 35, among whom only three or four were getting regular football at their clubs. Armenia whittled down its academy squads from 100 candidates in each category.

Armenia started the project with the clear aims of producing better players, creating high-quality technical programmes for youth development and investing in the development of high-quality technical staff. *"In the first year there has been obvious progress,"* Lelièvre reported in Bratislava, *"and we have enjoyed full support from top management. The next step will be to expose the boys to more international football by arranging friendly matches."* FYR Macedonia's Stratev concurred: *"We can see the development work of our academy coaches. We sincerely hope that this project will produce better players for our national youth teams and raise quality levels in our country."* In Georgia, the project will move into a higher gear with the imminent completion of a national training centre in Rustavi, complete with residential provisions for 120 people. All in all, UEFA's elite youth development programme has already produced encouraging results – encouraging enough for Belarus to step on board in 2015/16 as the fourth member of the pilot scheme. ●

Left to right: Irakli Nakaidze, Zoran Stratev and Marc Lelièvre

Sportsfile

THE SLOVAK MORNING

"Hands up all those who believe they come from a small country!" That was the opening gambit in Bratislava from Zsolt Pakusza, coach education manager at the Slovak Football Association (SFZ). After an impressive show of hands, his next challenge was: *"Hands up those who want to win an international tournament!"* When fewer hands were raised, he raised an eyebrow – maybe surprised that fewer associations dared to share the ambitions of his own. This heralded the start of a Slovak morning at the workshop – and sessions which, although tied to an individual association, could easily apply to many of Pakusza's 'small countries'.

To set the parameters for comparison, Slovakia has a population of 5.45 million, including 361,000 registered players and a coaching population comprising 243 holders of the UEFA Pro licence, 516 at A level, 1,461 at B level and around 2,000 on the grassroots C rung. The country's football is divided into four regions, each of which has a coach education manager. UEFA B and national C courses are staged at the regional centres, with A and Pro courses taking place at the national centres in Poprad and Senec.

Quality rather than quantity

Pakusza stated his mission as being to *"achieve an adequate position for the coach in football and society"*, adding: *"I am an educator and, as such, my wish is to leave a footprint of successful coaches and players."* His path towards those ideals is marked by a set of declared principles: to focus on quality rather than quantity; to be unafraid to change thinking; to offer creative support for the work done by coaches; to promote decision-making freedom based on full knowledge of the possibilities available; and to pursue the continual professional development of coaches. He explained that the new SFZ coach education philosophy is based on a switch away from purely theoretical work and towards applied theory, with an emphasis on practical sessions, workshops and discussion groups. Where possible, learning modules are centred on national team events, more of the practical work is being done at clubs and, when resources permit, a trend towards individual tutoring is encouraged.

In parallel with the core UEFA licences, the SFZ organises courses for former players, designed to lead high performers in the women's league into coaching at grassroots C level, top-division players and members of the women's national team into B courses, and long-serving top professionals into combined B and A courses. The SFZ also organises Goalkeeper A and Futsal B courses once every two years.

"We then had to decide how to focus our coaching in order to develop the next generation of players," added SFZ technical director Ján Gregus. *"We wanted to find viable ways of becoming more similar to the big countries. But, at the same time, we felt that it was very important for our national teams to retain Slovak characteristics. So the first step was obviously an in-depth self-evaluation. For example, we pinpointed the elements we considered to be our strengths, such as organised defending, tactical discipline and strong athletic qualities. We then listed the components we regarded as*

In Bratislava, the Slovak FA's coach education team of Štefan Tarkovič, Zsolt Pakusza and Ján Gregus (left to right) explained the association's coach education policy

weaknesses, and set out to devise ways of improving in those areas. We analysed our pool of players and decided that we were short in attacking positions. There is obviously no quick-fix solution to this and, to be honest, it is more difficult to remedy than we initially thought it would be."

A new playing philosophy

One of the main challenges, according to Gregus, was to design a new playing philosophy for the country's youth teams and to set up a talent scouting framework beginning at regional level and aimed at spotting potential in the U12 category. *"If our ambition is to appear regularly in final tournaments,"* he told the audience in Bratislava, *"we need a style which is much closer to 'the art of playing football' than to a philosophy of playing to avoid defeat. So the first thing was to create guidelines for a style of play, addressing issues such as pressing, transitions and the mechanisms of a compact defensive block. For example, we prefer to work on defensive solutions that permit an immediate transition to attack. We have looked at things like how much time on the training ground we should dedicate to set plays. And we are constantly looking for ways of improving our players' abilities in one-on-one situations."*

The coaching challenge is to translate trends and concepts onto the training ground and into match play. This is where Štefan Tarkovič, assistant coach to the national team, took the baton, using transitional play as an example and then transferring the theory into a training session involving the Slovak U18 squad, led by head coach Milan Malatinský. *"What we worked on,"* Tarkovič explained, *"was the basic concept of what to do when possession is lost, focusing on the sort of pressing required from those in the vicinity of the ball and then the defensive balance to be created as quickly as possible by those not in the 'ball space'. When we work on defence-to-attack transitions, the objectives are speed, vertical movement and passing, and support for the move in the final third. For example, you could work towards fast counters ending with four or five players in or around the box in a time frame of around ten seconds. For the youth coach, the main challenge is to make sure that the concepts are easy for the players to understand. And there need to be different objectives for each age category. You need to decide at what stage you start to work on double transitions – attack-defence-attack and so on."*

The Slovak morning picked up some of the threads which had been woven on the previous afternoon. Hallvar Thoresen, for example, explained how the national association of Norway had, like the Slovaks, needed to design coaching and coach education principles once the decision had been taken to adopt the UEFA Elite Youth A diploma in 2013. *"The coach is the most important factor in player development,"* he said, *"and we needed to offer the coaches a vision based on Norwegian thinking."*

Willi Ruttensteiner, sports director at the Austrian Football Association (ÖFB), also underscored the importance of designing a clear philosophy for youth development and coach education. *"We have to ask ourselves what kind of coaches we want to produce,"* he said, *"and exactly what we expect from them."* He also explained how the implementation of a national philosophy is fostered by ÖFB-funded academy coaches, who work hand-in-hand with the clubs. Jelle Goes also outlined the implementation of the Elite Youth A licence in the Netherlands, a country with extremely well-established youth development traditions. *"The A and Youth A are equally reality-based,"* he said, *"but the impact is different, as the A will allow you to work as an assistant coach at the top level, while the Youth A will get you into the highest level of youth competitions and academies. But, these days, programmes generally require more coaches who are specialised in certain age groups. This is the trend."*

THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

The UEFA•technician's traditional tribute to coaches who have stepped up to receive medals reveals just how many UEFA competitions have reached their conclusions in recent months. Curiously – or significantly perhaps – only two of the medal-winning coaches (Cacau and Colin Bell) were coaching teams outside their native countries. Another eyecatching statistic is that seven of the finals involved Spanish teams.

For the coaching profession, it is good to look back in order to look forward. No fewer than eight of the competitions listed below have been followed up by UEFA technical reports, in hard copy in the case of the U21 final tournament and the two major club competitions, the latter as the highlight of the corresponding season reviews. The reports on the men's and women's U19 and U17 tournaments have been published exclusively online, with the added benefit of video links and translations in various languages, and the technical report on the UEFA Women's Champions League is the first of its kind – also in electronic form. All online technical reports are accessible on UEFA.com, via the 'Technical report' tab on the respective competition pages. Apart from providing a record of the events, the aim of the technical reports is to inform of trends and provoke reflections which, it is hoped, will be of use to coaches – particularly those involved in youth development.

In the meantime here, in chronological order, are the 'credits' from the finals played during the peak spring/summer period.

UEFA Youth League
13 April in Nyon, Switzerland

Chelsea FC v FC Shakhtar Donetsk 3-2
Gold: Adi Viveash
Silver: Valeriy Kryventsov

UEFA Futsal Cup
26 April in Lisbon, Portugal

Kairat Almaty v FC Barcelona 3-2
Gold: Ricardo Camara Sobral 'Cacau'
Silver: Marc Carmona

UEFA Women's Champions League
14 May in Berlin, Germany

1. FFC Frankfurt v Paris Saint-Germain 2-1
Gold: Colin Bell
Silver: Farid Benstiti

European Under-17 Championship
22 May in Bourgas, Bulgaria

France v Germany 4-1
Gold: Jean-Claude Giuntini
Silver: Christian Wück

UEFA Europa League
27 May in Warsaw, Poland

FC Dnipro v Sevilla FC 2-3
Gold: Unai Emery
Silver: Myron Markevych

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UEFA Champions League
6 June in Berlin, Germany

Juventus v FC Barcelona 1-3
Gold: Luis Enrique
Silver: Massimiliano Allegri

European Under-21 Championship
30 June in Prague, Czech Republic

Sweden v Portugal 0-0 (4-3 on penalties)
Gold: Håkan Ericson
Silver: Rui Jorge

UEFA Regions' Cup
4 July in Dublin, Republic of Ireland

Eastern Region (Rep. Ireland) v Zagreb 1-0
Gold: Gerry Smith
Silver: Sreten Ćuk

European Women's Under-17 Championship
4 July in Reykjavik, Iceland

Spain v Switzerland 5-2
Gold: Pedro López
Silver: Monica Di Fonzo

European Under-19 Championship
19 July in Katerini, Greece

Spain v Russia 2-0
Gold: Luis de la Fuente
Silver: Dmitri Khomuka

European Women's Under-19 Championship
27 July in Netanya, Israel

Spain v Sweden 1-3
Gold: Calle Barrling
Silver: Jorge Vilda

UEFA Super Cup
11 August in Tbilisi, Georgia

FC Barcelona v Sevilla FC 5-4 (aet)
Gold: Luis Enrique
Silver: Unai Emery