

THE TECHNICIAN

WOMEN'S

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**NEWSLETTER
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COVER

Sandra Smisek (No. 8, Germany) in front of Brazil's Dos Santos in the Women's World Cup final in China. As well as being Europe's leading nation in women's football, Germany have just confirmed their dominance at world level by winning their second Women's World Cup in a row. (PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES)

Denmark v Iceland in the
2007 European Women's Under-19
Championship finals in Iceland.

AN EXCITING TIME

EDITORIAL

BY MIRCEA SANDU
UEFA WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
COMMITTEE

My first words must be to stress that, even though new structures and new committees are being put in place, there is a healthy degree of continuity in the Women's Football Committee, which I now have the honour to chair. I am very happy to be able to work with Karen Espelund, who previously chaired the committee, and the other experienced members who have contributed so much to the very rapid development of women's football during a short space of time.

It represents an opportunity to propose to UEFA's Executive Committee a sustained development programme. I obviously look at the situation in my own country, Romania, and can see the benefits of working with the clubs and establishing budgets for the development of women's football. I say 'women' – but there is a big

place in our programme for junior and youth teams as well. It is only by building a solid base to the pyramid that we can underpin the senior game. I am a firm believer in establishing structures which mirror the men's and boys' games, with competitions at all age levels that can offer them invaluable international experience.

There is, of course, a lot of work to be done and we still need to conduct research into some specific facets. For example, is it best practice to encourage mixed teams in all countries up to the age of 13 or 14? We will need to find optimal solutions for this sort of question.

One of the other subjects that is crucial to development is a correct approach to coaching. I intend to propose as many encounters as possible between coaches from different countries so that know-how and experience can be pooled. I have first-hand experience of a very good symposium that was staged under FIFA auspices in Bucharest. That event had very positive results. So I am convinced that one of the ways forward for UEFA will be to establish a network of mentors who can help

the 'developing' nations to progress and to encourage as many contacts as possible between the people who are responsible for coaching women's teams in all our member associations.

Maybe I should also mention that UEFA's Women's Football Committee is now responsible for all of our women's and girls' competitions – which means that a single voice will make proposals to the Executive Committee who, I am sure, will listen with sympathetic ears. This is an exciting time to take the chair of the Women's Football Committee, with new competitions taking root while the more established competitions are being reviewed and restructured – not least the expanded Women's EURO 2009 finals which, now that the qualifying groups are under way, is already visible on the horizon. At the same time, we will need to express Europe's concerns about an international calendar, which is also becoming busier. There is a lot of work to do – and I am looking forward to getting on with it.

Mircea Sandu heads the new UEFA Women's Football Committee, whose line-up for the 2007-09 period reads as follows:

Chairman:	Mircea Sandu (Romania)
Deputy Chairman:	Friedrich Stickler (Austria)
1st Vice-Chairman:	Karen Espelund (Norway)
2nd Vice-Chairman:	Susanne Erlandsson (Sweden)
3rd Vice-Chairman:	Hannelore Ratzeburg (Germany)
Members:	Sheila Begbie (Scotland)
	Bernadette Constantin (France)
	Aleksandra Nikolovska (FYR Macedonia)
	Vera Pauw (Netherlands)
	Philip Pritchard (Wales)
	Sergei Safaryan (Belarus)
	Gudrun Inga Sivertsen (Iceland)
	Bontcho Todorov (Bulgaria)



Mircea Sandu is the new chairman of the UEFA Women's Football Committee.

INTERVIEW

BY GRAHAM TURNER



**JULIE FLEETING
CELEBRATES ARSENAL LFC'S
VICTORY IN THE
ENGLISH WOMEN'S CUP
FINAL AGAINST LEEDS
UNITED IN MAY 2006.**

European champions Arsenal LFC enjoy their FLEETING VISITS

AMONG THE WOMEN WHO HAVE PERFORMED OUTSTANDINGLY FOR CLUB AND COUNTRY, JULIE FLEETING PROBABLY STANDS ALONE. HER CAREER IS, IN MANY WAYS, UNIQUE. PARADOXICALLY, SHE SPENDS MUCH OF HER LIFE TRAVELLING, YET HAS REMAINED VERY CLOSE AND VERY LOYAL TO HER ROOTS IN THE HISTORIC TOWN OF KILWINNING. ON THE FOOTBALLING MAP, THE NEAREST MAJOR LANDMARK IS KILMARNOCK. MORE IMPORTANTLY FOR JULIE, YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK FAR AWAY ON THE SCOTTISH MAP TO FIND GLASGOW AIRPORT. THE STRIKER IN THE NO. 10 SHIRT LIVES IN HER HOME TOWN, CAPTAINS THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL TEAM, MARRIED A FELLOW FOOTBALLER CALLED COLIN STEWART, AND COMMUTES TO LONDON TO PLAY HER CLUB FOOTBALL WITH THE 2007 UEFA WOMEN'S CUP CHAMPIONS, ARSENAL LADIES FC.

Football is deeply rooted in her life – thanks in great part to the enthusiasm of her father, Jim, the Scottish FA's Director of Football Development for the last year or so. Julie still recalls with affection the goal she scored in a 2-1 win against Cunningham Boys Club for her local Under-10 team when she was the only girl in the league. She emigrated to the USA for a spell with San Diego Spirit in 2002 and, on her return, left Scottish club Ross County to join Arsenal in 2004. In the meantime, she had made her debut for the senior Scottish national team at 15 and, at the time of writing, was poised to make history with a career total of 97 caps and 98 goals – at the tender age of 26. But let's allow Julie to tell her own story, starting with the obvious question:

How do you cope with such an unusual lifestyle?

"It sounds complicated, I know, but I've developed a routine which seems to work out OK. From Monday to Friday, I teach physical education at the local school where I studied. Then I get an easyJet flight down to London on Sunday morning, play a game for Arsenal, and fly back on Sunday evening. In terms of fitness,

my job helps. But I always do a session in the gym before work in the mornings and, two evenings a week, I train with the men's Under-21 side – only five minutes from home. I can understand that people raise eyebrows about playing but not training with Arsenal. But when I arrive, they always give me a good briefing and, if there's something special that they've been working on during the week, it's explained to me before the game. It hasn't been a problem so far!"

How much did it mean to you and the club to beat Umeå IK in the UEFA Women's Cup final?

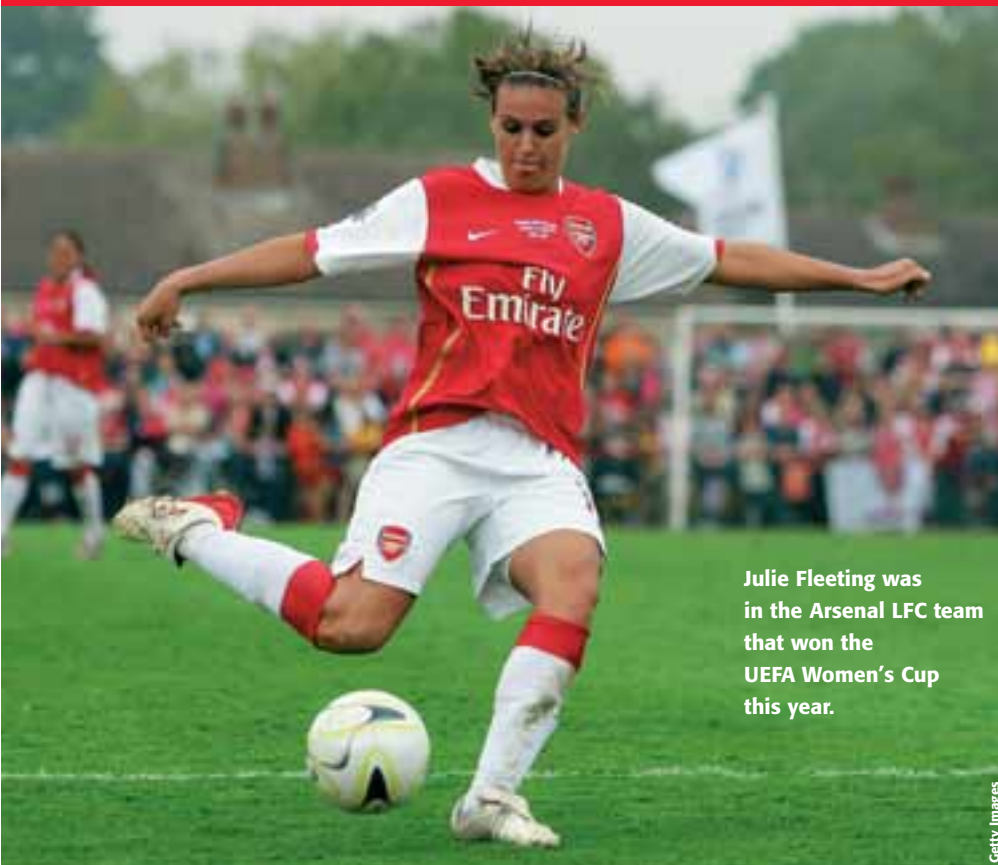
"It definitely represents the greatest achievement of my career. Competing against the best in Europe is always a great experience and winning the title was a huge thing for everybody. We had been working hard to raise our standards over several seasons of domestic football and to achieve something that no British club had achieved in Europe made all the hard work worthwhile. Let's be honest, we rode our luck in the final against Umeå, especially in the second leg at home.

That match gave me the worst and best feelings I've ever experienced. During the game, we were under so much pressure that I felt guilty about being on my own up front and contributing so little to the team. Holding out and winning was just fantastic. Then our captain and vice-captain went straight off to the main stadium in London to parade the trophy at the men's team's league fixture. I think it was a huge boost for women's football in the UK – not just in England, because we have girls from all the countries within the UK in our team – because we'd always had the feeling that we were trailing behind other nations in terms of the players we produce and the football we play."

You've mentioned the Arsenal men's team – and one of the talking points in the women's game is whether more professional men's clubs should be persuaded to run women's teams. What's your first-hand experience?

"My personal opinion is that it definitely works well. I think that being part of such a massive club is very positive,

**JULIE FLEETING SCORES
FOR ARSENAL LFC IN A LEAGUE MATCH
AGAINST CHARLTON ATHLETIC.**



Julie Fleeting was in the Arsenal LFC team that won the UEFA Women's Cup this year.



even if we do play at a smaller stadium near the club's training centre. What's more, Vic Akers is part of the men's set-up and bridges all the gaps."

Yes, we wrote about Vic two issues ago because he was also an unusual case of combining the job of kit man for the men's team with coaching the women's team. How does that work from your perspective?

"It works very well – and I would even say it's something for other clubs to look at. Vic is involved in the day-to-day work of the professional squad and brings things back to the girls' team. He's also a direct link and helps to generate a lot of interest in our team. As a result, we get great backing from the men's team and the supporters. It works fantastically well."

You've had quite a variety of coaches in the Scottish national team. What sort of guidance do you look for or appreciate the most?

"That's right. When I made my debut at 15, the coach was Millar Hay. Then I was with my dad for a while – which worked out much better than you might suspect! And, in more recent times, I've had Vera Pauw and Anna Signeul as coaches. I think you want your coach to pass on as wide a range of experiences as possible and to prepare you physically and mentally to compete with the top athletes in football. When Vera arrived in Scotland, she took on a group with very

limited experience. She was very positive and demanding – and I think that Anna is building very well on the foundations that Vera put down. When I see the Under-19s play and the quality of the players we're producing now, I have to compare with my day. A lot of good work has been done – and is being done. In more general terms, what I appreciate most from a coach is that he or she imposes thoroughly professional attitudes and behaviour. That is why it is so good that Vic comes straight from the men's elite level pro environment to the women's team. Vera and Anna have also done a great deal to establish really professional standards about everything we do – including our conduct."

In your opinion, what are the main differences between national team and club football?

"I live in a strange situation. Because I train apart from my team-mates, we have a very special relationship. And, in fact, my closest relationships within the game tend to be when I'm with the national team and spend a week or so with the girls that I've known since I was 15 and try to catch up with everything that's going in Scottish club football. It's probably exactly the opposite to a normal player."

How demanding is the English league? There is talk about the top players in other leagues not getting enough truly competitive matches in a season...

"I would say that the Arsenal side that won the European trophy is the best we've had in many years – if not ever. Some of the other clubs can't match us for strength in depth, but that doesn't make them weak opposition. Everyone wants to beat us and, especially if we don't score early on, we have to be prepared to play under a lot of pressure. The league is really competitive."

As champions of Europe, do you feel that you've become role models?

"Yes. We would obviously like our success to have been publicised a bit more. But role models are very important, not only in terms of playing but also in behaviour. Kids do copy what they see the seniors doing. This is brought home to me because it's a factor in my job as well as my playing career. Fortunately, I've always lived my life as an athlete so, as a player and as a teacher, I don't have any worries on that score. It's a pity I didn't have any role models in my time. There were no female players to model myself on. And I didn't grow up with a special passion for any particular club. If I had to name one player, it would be Henrik Larsen. During the years he spent in Scotland, he came across as the sort of player and person that I would like to be."

As a role model, what would you say if you were asked to give one piece of advice?

"Play football to enjoy it and work hard – and you're prepared to work hard if you're enjoying it."



Julie Fleeting played for San Diego Spirit in the United States.



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**KAREN ESPELUND,
VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE UEFA WOMEN'S
FOOTBALL COMMITTEE.**

SUPPORTING THE ROOF

"IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT 'STARTING WITH THE ROOF' CAN BE A VALID BUILDING PROGRAMME. PROGRESS MADE AT SENIOR NATIONAL TEAM LEVEL IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES HAS BEEN THE CATALYST THAT HAS SPARKED OFF RAPID CHANGES AND HAS ENCOURAGED MORE AND MORE GIRLS TO ENJOY THE GAME OF FOOTBALL." THOSE TWO SENTENCES FROM THE EDITORIAL IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE OF THE WOMEN'S TECHNICIAN SERVE AS STARTING POINTS FOR A THEME WHICH RUNS THROUGH THIS ONE: THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CLUB AND NATIONAL TEAM FOOTBALL.

Some associations which have successfully developed national team football are now pegging further development to upgraded club competitions, with the aim of building better launching pads towards elite

levels. It is one thing to build a solid roof, but the roof can only be as high as the structures which sustain it.

The French Football Federation, for example, has made a significant

change. Up till now, the elite players at the FFF's national training centre at Clairefontaine had formed a team which competed in the top division of the national championship. Not any more. The team has been disbanded. This season, the 20 or so members of the elite squad are training and studying at Clairefontaine during the week but going back to clubs to play their league football at the weekend.

France's Under-19 coach, Stéphane Pilard, comments, "the move is in response to a problem which has become more evident and relevant in recent times. We could see that, in the national championship, there were only three or four sides who played what we might call top-level football. That creates a development problem. I think it was illustrated by our semi-final against Germany in Iceland. It was a match that we could have won with a bit more experience at the highest level. It brought home to me the fact that, in the domestic championship, the girls might have only two, three or four truly competi-



France competed well in their match against Germany in the semi-finals of the European Women's Under-19 Championship this year.

Sportsfile

**STÉPHANE PILARD,
COACH OF FRANCE'S WOMEN'S
UNDER-19 TEAM.**



Sportsfile



Empics Sport/PA Photos

A great save by Arsenal LFC's goalkeeper, Emma Byrne, in the UEFA Women's Cup final. Having the professional set-up of the Arsenal men's team at their disposal has been of tremendous benefit to the development of Arsenal LFC.

tive matches in a season. The rest are not so demanding. We are relatively well positioned within European women's national team football but I feel that future development hinges on giving players a steeper learning curve in terms of top-level matches. It can be argued that Germany's success has been built on the strength of their league. OK, they have 12 times more than France in terms of registered players. So for every 30 players I can look at for the national team, they have over 300!"

"In many countries," Norway's Karen Espelund adds, "the time has come to consolidate and boost club teams – and the Grassroots Charter with its star system will be a help, as one of the 'stars' is awarded in accordance with what you achieve in girls' football. But it's fair to say that, in general, club structures need to be strengthened.

There's a lack of organisational expertise, volunteers and sponsors. There are strong clubs, as the Women's Cup has demonstrated, but not many. In some countries, women's teams have been written into club licensing requirements in the men's game – which will certainly help. There's also an interesting development in Norway where, for the first time, a women's premier league club, Klepp, has built its own stadium – and it seems likely that other clubs will follow suit.

Arsenal's win showed that it can be beneficial for women's teams to be pegged to professional clubs in the men's game. The Dutch experiment is a test of an alternative way of thinking and we should see some interesting results. It's good that the men's professional teams have reacted positively in the sense that they're willing to take on some of the 'professional' aspects of

the women's clubs. It's a totally different way of thinking."

Karen is referring to the Eredivisie Vrouwen, the new Dutch premier league, which kicked off at the end of August. "The ultimate objective," explains national team coach Vera Pauw, "is to develop an elite-sport structure and culture and, in the longer term, to perform at international level with our women's 'A' squad. Women's football was added to amateur clubs, which implied a lack of expertise in top-level and international football." In other words, the Dutch project is an imaginative response to the concerns expressed by Stéphane Pilard and his colleagues at the FFF.

The parameters of the Eredivisie Vrouwen are set out in a compelling 25-page business report which,



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**VERA PAUW, MEMBER OF THE
UEFA WOMEN'S FOOTBALL COMMITTEE
AND A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND
WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN THE NETHERLANDS.**

obviously, cannot be squeezed into this publication. But there is room to sample the cake and take a few bites out of the slices that are most appetising for the coaching family.

The new Dutch league is being played by six senior clubs, who will meet each other four times during the season. Players do not, for the time being, have full professional status but travel costs can be covered and loss-of-earning payments can be made. To ensure maximum geographical spread, the teams are associated with the pro men's clubs based in Alkmaar (AZ), Den Haag (ADO), Enschede (FC Twente), Heerenveen, Tilburg (Willem II) and Utrecht. Squads of 20 players have been selected – following trials – by the pro clubs, each of which is linked to a top amateur club from the former national league. The amateur squad is being used as a 'nursery' for the premier league team and one of the interesting features is that the players (up to six) who don't get a good run-out in the Thursday evening premier league fixture are guaranteed a game with the 'second team' at the weekend. Players can be promoted to the senior team at any time during the season provided that the squad doesn't exceed 23. The plan opens with a two-season 'consolidation period' within which there is no promotion or relegation – though the door is open for extra teams to be drafted into the concept.

However, attaining the objective of upgrading playing standards doesn't hinge exclusively on a more competitive match play environment. As Vera Pauw explains, "Talented players must become top athletes equipped to play international football. All aspects of their performance will only improve if they train more, with better players in an environment which encourages

the development of sport at the top level. Games will be played at a higher standard because we have the best players concentrated into six teams where they will have the potential to train a lot more."

"This means," Vera adds, "that there will be fewer national team activities. Up till now, we have had to get the players together for weekly activities to fill the gaps between amateur and international football. Now they will be able to do their training closer to home at their clubs. This is part of a long-term project co-organised by the national association and the clubs in the top two divisions of the men's leagues, along with the University of Amsterdam and the Olympic Committee. To summarise it, the scheme is for 24 players a year to live, study and train within biking distance of each other in Amsterdam. The top talents will train twice a day and be groomed to play in the premier league in the future. These players will provide the core of our national team for the 2013 European Championship."

The introduction of such a far-sighted scheme inevitably entails an overhaul of coaching structures. The blueprint for the Eredivisie Vrouwen recommended the use of a head coach from the KNVB (the Dutch national association) during the opening two league campaigns, assisted by a coach (preferably female) from the pro clubs linked to the amateur set-ups, who are also supporting the launch of the new project by contributing to the team behind the team in terms of physios, qualified medical staff and a team manager who knows his or her way around the sport and is equipped to implant professional standards readily identifiable with levels in the men's game.

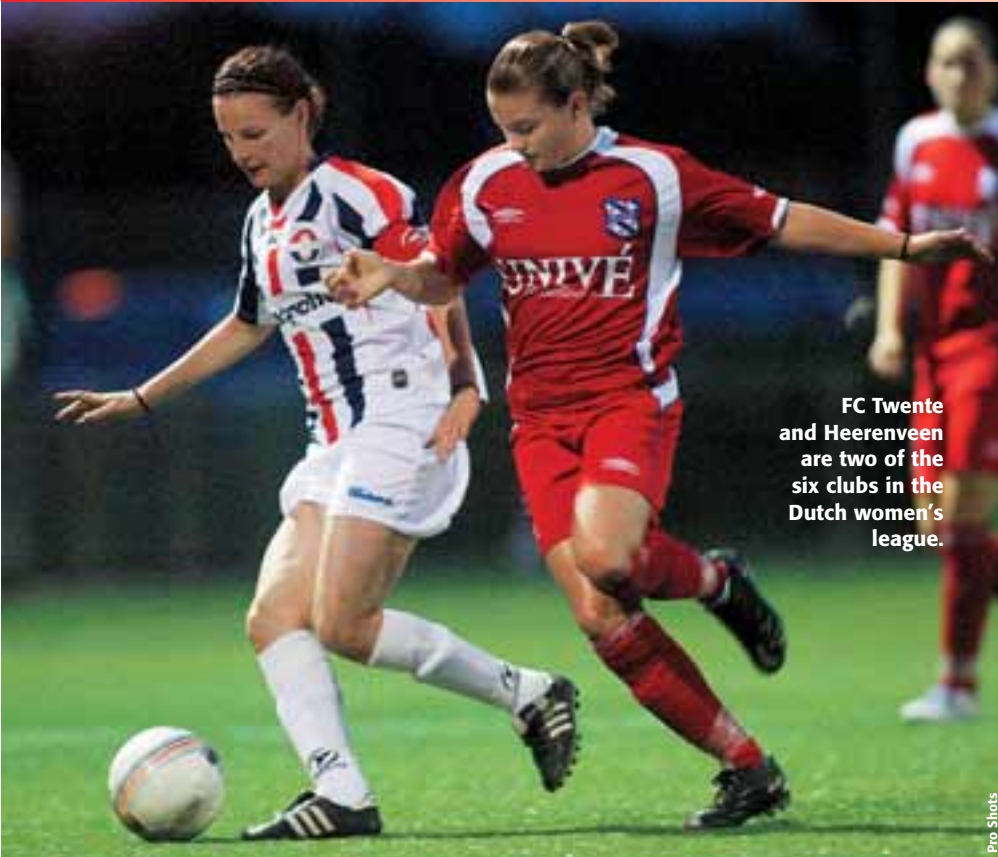
Another area which needed to be carefully defined was the relationship – in terms of coaching – between the senior premier league team and the amateur side below it. This sparked off a highly productive review of responsibilities – not to mention contracts – and the day-to-day workings of the two inter-related squads.



Pro Shots

Utrecht v AZ in the new Dutch women's league.

**THE DUTCH
WOMEN'S LEAGUE
HAS GOT OFF
TO A GOOD START.**



FC Twente and Heerenveen are two of the six clubs in the Dutch women's league.

tool within the marketing and promotion of the new league.

'So far, so good' is the message to emerge from the opening months of the ambitious project. "The response has been overwhelming," Vera Pauw reports. "Initially, we were very heartened by the totally positive reaction in terms of exposure on TV, in the written press and on websites. What's more, the professional men's clubs have really taken in the women's team as an integral part of their family. The women's teams have been included in all their open days and all have their own places on the club websites. We're also confirming the theory that adding a women's team to a professional club generates a more positive, family-friendly atmosphere which is very attractive to the sponsors. The increase in public awareness has been tremendous and is very encouraging for the future. Developing the elite-sport culture will encourage more girls to start playing football, will improve the quality of our game, and will complete the pyramid of our sporting infrastructure."

One of the interesting downsides to emerge from the opening sequences has been a run of injuries derived from an over-enthusiastic switch from amateur to top-level parameters in terms of training – despite guidelines distributed by a KNVB specialist. But that's another story...

The Dutch are by no means alone in feeling that, once national team football has been established, the next steps on the upward ladder to international success may hinge on creating truly competitive domestic championships where girls can acquire the top-level experience that will stand them in good stead on the international stage. There will undoubtedly be many eyes following the Dutch project with great interest.

With up to six members of the senior team potentially available to the amateur side, the coach needs to be totally integrated into the project in order to not only effectively blend the players into his team but also to promote their longer-term development. As fixtures are played on different days (Thursdays v weekends), it's perfectly feasible for the coach of the amateur side to be an active member of the senior team's coaching staff on matchdays.

It's evidently one thing to talk about upgraded training schedules and another to ensure the availability of players who retain essentially amateur status and who, in most cases, combine football with education or employment. Travel expenses are therefore being reimbursed and there has been extensive mediation with educators and employers to make sure that the players are able to train at least four or five times a week and, of course, play league matches.

All of this – despite the warning that space doesn't permit a detailed presentation – inevitably raises questions about how the new project is being funded. The current answer is that the KNVB is offering substantial initial support which will be phased out over the next few years – a period which, it is hoped, will be enough for the women's league to become largely self-sufficient.

In the future, the KNVB will continue to pay the costs of organising the competition but, in the first year, is also contributing up to EUR 90,000 per club – a figure which includes contributions to the salaries of the head coach and the assistant coach. For the 2008/09 season, these contributions will be halved, and, in the 2009/10 campaign, halved again. At the same time, the league's foundation has found a sponsor prepared to cover the production costs for televising Eredivisie Vrouwen matches every week – which is an important



**HESTERINE DE REUS AND
JARMO MATIKAINEN WERE UEFA'S
TECHNICAL OBSERVERS
AT THE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S UNDER-19
CHAMPIONSHIP FINALS IN ICELAND.**

AFTER EXTRA TIME

THE SUMMER OF AGE-LIMIT FOOTBALL PRODUCED CONFLICTING EVIDENCE.

AT THE BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER, A NEW ERA WAS KICKED OFF BY FOUR MATCHES IN GROUP 9 OF THE BRAND-NEW EUROPEAN UNDER-17 CHAMPIONSHIP. IN THREE OF THEM, THE VICTORS RAN UP DOUBLE FIGURES WITHOUT REPLY, TO SUGGEST THAT THE CONTINENT IS STILL RULED BY A SORT OF FOOTBALLING 'CLASS STRUCTURE' WITHIN WHICH THE WOULD-BE SOCIAL CLIMBERS ARE OBLIGED TO BOW TO THE ESTABLISHED ARISTOCRACY. ON THE FACE OF IT, THE UNDER-19 FINALS IN ICELAND OFFERED CORROBORATORY EVIDENCE, WITH GERMANY TAKING THE EUROPEAN CROWN FOR THE SECOND TIME IN TWO YEARS TO TAKE THEIR HAUL OF SILVERWARE TO FIVE TROPHIES IN THE TEN EDITIONS OF THE COMPETITION.

But, in this case, appearances were deceptive. So were some of the results. A 4-2 scoreline in the semi-final against France and a 2-0 victory over England in the final suggest a degree of comfort. Far from it. As Germany's head coach Maren Meinert remarked after collecting her second gold medal in as many years, "this was a tough but valuable learning experience for the girls. Nobody had ever come back from two goals down against us like the French did. And nobody had ever taken us to extra time, as the French and the English did." The trophy went to its usual winner but it had not

been won in its usual manner. The finals were more competitive than the outcome suggests.

"In Iceland, we could see that Poland and Iceland, the debutants, were a fraction below the others," observed France's Under-19 coach Stéphane Pilard. "But the other six were very, very evenly matched. England, Spain and ourselves in Group A; Germany, Denmark and Norway in the other group. I think this has not always been the case in previous years, and I interpret it as a healthy sign. Our semi-final was a good example of two teams

who played at the same high level. We could have won; but Germany did. The first half was quite cautious, very tactical. After that, during the second half and extra time, inhibitions were thrown aside and we saw a great spectacle."

Jarmo Matikainen and Hesterine de Reus, UEFA's technical observers at the final round in Iceland, highlighted in their technical report (which is now available, by the way) noticeable improvements in pace, athletic qualities, technique and defensive organisation. They also stressed that even the teams eliminated in the group phase had, by no means, been outclassed. Olafur Gudbjornsson's Icelandic team practised a good transition game based on fast, direct players and a lot of heart to back their skills. But the lack of big-tournament experience took its toll in crucial moments of attacking and defensive play.

Henrik Lehm, head coach of a very strong, competitive Danish team, commented that the physical side of the game had become more demanding and admitted that his side produced better first halves than second halves. The Danes made good use of the wide areas and produced attractive combi-



Germany open the score in extra time in the U19 final against England.

**THE COACHES OF
THE EIGHT FINALISTS IN THE
EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
UNDER-19 CHAMPIONSHIP
IN ICELAND.**



**Poland v Spain
in the U19 final round
in Iceland.**

Photos: UEFA-pjwoods.ch

nation play, only for their campaign to be ended by a last-minute Norwegian goal in their final group fixture.

'Nacho' Querreda's Spanish team, the youngest of the tournament, displayed excellent technique, kept possession well, obviously enjoyed the football they were playing – but were let down by shortages of pace and physical presence which translated into a failure to score goals against England and France.

Much the same could be said about Poland. Robert Góralczyk adjusted his tactical approach very effectively to his team's strong points. A well-drilled deep defensive block made the Polish side very difficult to break down, even though the other side of the coin was an attack which produced some good moves but which, in the final reckoning, failed to produce a goal.

"I've been working at Under-19 level for seven years now and I have no doubt whatsoever that the standard is improving," commented Jarl Torske, head coach of the Norwegian side which set out to blend technical skills into their traditional long-passing game but was ultimately beaten 3-0 by England in the semi-finals. "When you

watch the best teams and the best players at this level, you are really watching 'senior' football."

Jarmo and Hesterine observed that levels of technique sometimes struggle to cope with pace of modern-day Under-19 football. "The most noticeable trend," Jarl Torske agreed, "is the sheer speed of the game. I've also noticed that, when you analyse your opponents looking for weak points, there aren't as many as there used to be! You look at team structures, set plays, defensive systems, and you see that most nations are very well prepared and have good players who can operate in various roles. One of the other salient features is that the top teams are now equipped to launch very effective counter-attacks. We see a fair number of players ahead of the ball, making good runs and attacking the back four. Compared with some years ago, the structure of the defence is much better organised and set up in a much more compact way. Gone are the days when you saw a really deep-lying sweeper behind the defence. These days, defensive blocks are more compact, with one or two screening players in midfield and some good wide players. In attack, we used to see big target players –

now we see more and more mobile attackers with quick, smart movements – and I would say that the quality of finishing has also improved."

As Jarl insinuated, all eight finalists in Iceland fielded a flat back four and, although out-and-out strikers contributed only nine goals (including one penalty), the number of goals increased to 45 (3 per game) as opposed to 39 in Switzerland a year earlier. "I had been surprised by the number of defensive philosophies in 2006," Stéphane Pilard admitted. "In 2007, I was happy to see a different scenario. Of course it is important to defend and to defend well. But it is also important to attack and to look for goals. I think the Germans have a good balance in this respect – and the English. The Nordic teams suffered a bit in attack, I feel. They defended quite deep and maybe lacked some cutting edge up front. But it was good to see attacking philosophies rather than emphasis on defensive play."

England provided one of the surprises of the tournament by reaching the final for the first time. Their coach, 'Mo' Marley, had commented that, at Under-19 level, the competition has evolved from development to "learning to win". After an opening draw with Poland, it was interesting to note that she fielded the same starters in subsequent games and made only 9 of the 15 available substitutions. The result was a compact side which, under torrential Reykjavik rain, held the Germans at bay until the 17th minute of extra time. The finals in Iceland provided compelling evidence that, even though the German girls took the gold medals home again, European Under-19 football is becoming increasingly competitive – with the realistic prospect that the chance to groom and develop young talent in the Under-17 competition will upgrade standards even further in the not-too-distant future.

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