

Michael Forde

Clear leadership from the management team is vital

Interview by Dr. Jay Martin, Soccer Journal Editor

Michael Forde is the Performance Director at the Chelsea Football Club. After this interview we agreed that the closest U.S. analogy would be the team's General Manager. Forde is moving Chelsea into the "Technology Era." He is responsible for all aspects of the Chelsea operation, including player development, player scouting, player evaluation, etc. He works very closely with the coaching staff. Forde gave two presentations at the 2009 NSCAA Convention in St. Louis. Here, he sits down with Soccer Journal editor Jay Martin.

From your vantage point, what is the most important ingredient for a successful team?

It's never just one thing; it's a collection of things. Obviously, the playing staff, the selection, recruitment, development and that stuff, so the playing staff is important. For the most successful teams, the common denominator is the leadership style, and the clear leadership not only from a person but from a managing team. So finding the right head coach, who shares the philosophy and organization and vision of the club, is the fundamental thing for me because great players with poor leadership will deliver for a period of time, but not over a sustained period of time. So the No. 1 thing is getting the right coach and managing team. Then recruiters have to select the right players who are going to deliver a game plan that we think is going to be successful.

In your observations of coaches over the years, does leadership come with a coach, or can a coach learn how to be a leader?

I think my definition of leadership is to be yourself with more skill. I think you can learn attributes and qualities, but fundamental leadership personality is inherent. It's there, and then it's just a case of tweaking it to suit the needs of the environment. The most successful leaders I've seen are the ones who are just themselves and become even more skillful in what they do and surround themselves with people who can do the things they can't do.

Could that be the reason that some coaches or managers are unsuccessful at one club and move on to another environment and become successful?

Yes, I think so. Again, context is so important for leadership and the management. You can have the right coach at the wrong time, or you can have the right player at the wrong club. That marriage is so important for any level of sustainability. But I do think that the really good coaches are the ones who've got that contextual intelligence, who can walk into an environment and choose a style to get the best out of the players that they've got. Certainly in the short term, because what buys them time is results, and by buying time they get results to change into the culture that they want. You do see someone who's exceptionally successful in one environment not do that in another, and I think the mistake is to try to replicate everything without contextualizing it.

What's the role of motivation for players in the EPL?

It's a big thing, but I think motivation is split into two things: you've got the personal motivation of the players and then the environment that you create around the players to stop them from becoming demotivated. I think at the elite level what's important, what makes the player what they are, is that they have inherent motivation. The best players that I work with, you don't have to talk about motivation. There's simply a mentality, and they have it. The key is to then harness it and to create an environment where they don't become demotivated by poor standards, poor training, poor expectations, lack of vision, poor discipline. But it has a place, both as an individual and as a team.

Do players come with motivation, or can they learn how to be motivated, or can the coach motivate them?

I think ultimately, at the very elite level, you can modify motivation artificially by environment, by objectives, by a better source of environment, by better task orientation. But a sustainability of elite performance is about intrinsic motivation; the players' ability to reach within themselves and say "This is what I want to achieve. The vehicle is the club, the vehicle is the team, but inherently, if you don't deliver it I'm going to go somewhere else because I have a stringent desire to achieve."

Is that the problem with Chelsea now – different motivational styles between Mourinho and Scolari? (Editor's Note: This conversation took place before Scolari was released.)

I wouldn't say it's a different motivational style. I think it's a different management style, but that doesn't mean good or bad. You can have success in many different management styles. I think Philip Scolari has come in with a tremendous track record of getting the most out of very talented players. Look at what he did with the 2002 World Cup winning team, which was in disarray when he took over. He dropped Romario and the exhilarating players that everyone thought were in position to come to Rio and then went on to win the World Cup, which is actually a lot more difficult than it may sound in Brazil because of the expectations to win. So I wouldn't say it's a good versus bad motivation, it's more of a management style and how to get the best out of players. And the ones that Mourinho had five years ago—they were at a different stage in their career and they wanted different things. So the key is to find the key that unlocks the door for them now, not five years ago.

Speaking of Mourinho, what place does personality have for a coach or a manager? Is that important? When I look at Ranieri and Mourinho, they have different personalities, clearly. Mourinho looks to me like a guy who in some ways is a short-timer at almost every club he goes to – maybe he wears off on clubs, I don't know. But what role does personality have with a coach?

Well, yes, I think it's huge because you spend so much time with each other on a daily basis, you know. You train together, you travel together, you stay in hotels, there's down times, there's times in the dressing room, preparation for the games, halftimes. So it's impossible to be something else, consistently, from what you are. So the personality and the transparency of that personality is critical. So obviously it's a huge part. And then it's about the personality fit with the club and the group of players that you have and understanding where the club is on the journey. When Jose came to the club, he suited the dynamic trend that we were going through, which was to take the ground of the team from the level of curiosity to a world status. His personality and the way he did that was tremendous. Then you have to ask yourself, "What is the next phase of the club?" I think Felipe Scolari represents that stability, that continuity. It's brought a level of maturity to the club in the way he's running it. He's brought an aura with him about winning, and he's brought a gentlemanly status that is probably the stage of our development as a club.

As you look for the next Chelsea manager, or a coach, what are the three adjectives that best describe, in your mind, the perfect coach?

I think given the expectations of the club and where we are aiming to go in the next five years, the first and foremost thing is that they must come with a **winning mentality**, and also the right **energy and desire** to continue that because the expectations and the desire to achieve won't go away. So that winning mentality is energy, and the ability to use it in the right way I think is another fundamental. For a club like Chelsea that is going through a different maturity point now—where there is really a continuity and you've got a lot of very talented people both on and off the pitch—you need a level of **emotional maturity** where someone can come in, absorb that environment, and deal with 25 players every four days for a

game. And have the emotional maturity to say "I'm a custodian of this section of the club's development and that involves integration of the young players, integration of all the supporters." So for me, those three areas are essential for any manager coming into a club like a Chelsea.

How would you define success for a club like Chelsea?

In a number of ways. There's the most obvious way, which is the results we achieve on the pitch. Then there must be some kind of legacy and building of a dynasty, which is what we all want to do and the reason why people at the club invested in it. There's got to be a serious number of things we have to concentrate our efforts on. There is the development of the young talent, hopefully to replicate someone like a John Terry, and that English talent, if not international talent, that's coming through, and bring the behaviors, values, and beliefs that we want here in the club into not only the English Premier League, but also world football. There's obviously the performance at the very top, but also the development of the players that come in through our academy system and play in and deliver the type of performances and style of football that someone with our aspirations needs to be able to do.

You spoke (at the Convention) about championships and winning. You've been in the United States a little bit, and you know that we call the total team a program.

So what's the difference between Chelsea, the program, and Chelsea, the team? In other words, Chelsea is not going to win the championship every year, but you want them to be considered a championship organization. So how do you define that?

I think it's on a number of different things. On the very elite level, it's very easy to understand the expectations and that we are expected to be in a position to win every year. Winning means the Premier League and the Champions League, whether that is the top two or the last four of the Champions League. We need to understand that that won't go away. So how do we build a program that enables us to do that? Obviously the most important thing is the management, selection and the organization of the elite players. Then it's about creating a pipeline of talent that will give us the freedom and opportunity to move players on that have made contributions but have now dropped off and we can bring a player in on a seamless level that one hopes can make a contribution to sustain the club at the level that we need it to. So the program is about finding and recruiting the best players and developing them to the level under our values and behaviors that we can go on and continue to be successful and put us in a position to win, and that's all we can do.

From your perspective, what's more important for a team, game preparation or in-game adjustments?

I'm a big prevention man. I think prevention is often overlooked. So your attention to detail and your preparation is often the best way of preventing any crisis. But we live and we work in a sport where emotion is central to what we do; therefore, we're not in control of what the opposition does or what officials do, we're not always in control of how our own players respond to certain situations. There must be a level of crisis management. But what percentage of crisis management do we allow to be a part of what we do? I'm a big believer in preparation and attention to detail in terms of how you prevent issues. But there will be game adjustments that you do. I think coaches earn their money often in those 15 minutes at halftime and their ability to make adjustments based on what the opposition does, based on injuries and seeing the moment when all the mayhem is around you and delivering. They often say that most people could pick eight out of 11 to start the game; the real genius is the three that you pick that make the difference. The next level, the highest level, is how you make adjustments. And sometimes there are unpopular adjustments in a game, taking off your No. 1 striker to get another central



Forde sees discipline as a foundation that must be laid during the pre-season so it can serve as a reference point later.

character to do that, to get success. So it's a mixture between prevention and preparation and attention to detail, but also having the courage to live in the moment and deal with that crisis.

Soccer's kind of a paradox, as you know – it's a creative, free-flowing game. Where does discipline come in there? Is there a thin line that one crosses? How important is discipline for Scolari and Chelsea?

I think that discipline is a foundation. If you look at what wins games, or what's a championship-winning team, you always say, "Offense sells season tickets, defense wins championships." And the correlation between where you finish in the league and your defensive record is a lot stronger than your offensive, how much you score and where you finish. The foundation of defensive work is discipline. Discipline on the pitch has a correlation with success. More important, off the pitch the real art of management is to know the line and hammer on it and also knowing your players and the context of where they are – knowing the context of the season. The real discipline for me comes in a pre-season: you get your pre-season right, you set the organization structure in place, you get a full pre-season. That's the time for discipline, because that's your reference point for when you come in crashes during the season and

you go back to basics. The basics are doing the right things first, and often the foundation of that is discipline. So it plays a huge part.

I talked to someone from Everton a few years ago, and he told me that when Wayne Rooney was there, young, they knew where he was 24 hours a day. Is that extreme or is that normal?

I think it is extreme. What you want from your players is that you want to create an adult environment where players understand the rules, they understand the boundaries, but they make decisions about their lives. You see most of the major clubs have fantastic training grounds. Fantastic training grounds are there to encourage them to stay on site for as long as possible. Instead of the traditional soccer player in England, who would show up 20 minutes before training and shoot straight off to go put his money on horse racing in the afternoon, now you have a world-class environment. You come in to first-class food at nine in the morning, training, first-class food at lunchtime, relaxation, recovery, Playstation, swimming pool, Jacuzzis, whatever it is. So what we do is we reduce the time that they're away from the training ground by creating an environment that facilitates that success. However, when they walk out of that training ground, it's up to them. How they deal with their life—that should never change. I think with younger players there might be crisis moments where you need to man-mark them, and that's the case with Everton, but in an ideal environment, you can't be with them 24/7, all you can do is teach them the skills that relate to success and performance.

You mentioned the traditional English system. This is an observer from across the ocean – English soccer coaching is changing, is it not? Your presentation tells me and us that it's changing. This wasn't happening 10, 12, 15 years ago.

It's gone through change. Still, 60 percent of the current Premier League managers are English, but we have 62 nationalities in the makeup of this club, so we have gone through change. Although we go to the elite level of football, in the top four there are no English managers, a Scottish manager—it's been populated by Spanish, French, Portuguese, etc. So the sport's gone through significant change and that's been driven by coaches, but I think it's been driven by the players. We don't have the same culture around the teams that we had 10 years ago, even five years ago. And that's been brought in by European players, for example, who've come with different professionalisms, different mentalities and training methods, and they forced us to rethink what our performance is in that. It has gone through change, and it will continue to go through change. That's the way it is and I think that's why we're one of the strongest leagues, not because of an economic thing, because that's a huge thing, but that desire to stay ahead of the game. If you stand

still, you go backward, and I think that's very, very true, and you cannot afford to rest on your laurels.

Is there a backlash in England to this foreign invasion of coaches?

I think initially there was, and that was more out of a lack of understanding. I think, or maybe it wasn't articulated. I can't speak for all of them, but the majority of coaches I would say have learned a lot from the European coaches. And they've learned a lot from us, too. One of the big things that coaches from Europe who come to work in England and leave to go back to mainland Europe, they talk about the pressure, the commitment of the players, the atmosphere in the stadiums. So they have learned about the intensity of English football. And I think we have picked up things. Characters like Arsene Wenger, who is the longest-standing foreign coach, *per se*, in the Premier League, the practices he's brought into have been embraced by English managers. They hold him in esteem like they hold Alex Ferguson, who's a UK-based manager. And that can only be good – how we learn from each other, how we embrace different things. You can't use them all in the contexts, but there was, I think, a little bit of a backlash, but the mature coaches who have been brought through the right coaching structures see the value of a different way of doing it.

I sometimes make the analogy that English Premier League and soccer coaches are a lot like our baseball coaches, who are steeped in tradition and history and were very, very slow to change and embrace technology, and embrace the physiological, and all of these different aspects. Is that a fair analogy?

I would say I can't speak from too many experiences in baseball, as my experience has been very much in the front offices. But there is a lot of commonality, in that you go to the major teams, like the Red Sox, and you see the profile of the people who are in those organizations, guy who are in their mid-30s, their background is that they aren't baseball players – venture capitalists, lawyers, etc. – who will bring a different slant on the elite performances, bring in a lot of performance measures and analysis. And the brilliances are the minds themselves with the art of coaching. And I think there's still a journey to go, and you're right, it's a very acute observation, I think we're in a very similar situation. I work with one of the most experienced coaches in the world; he's got a huge management record. I'm not going to impose the things that we do, I may just talk, and depending on the success, allow him to focus on what he's very good at, which is creating winning environments, creating winning teams. We provide the detail around that, and the legacy that goes with it. We maybe share only 10 percent of what we're doing, but it's the relevant 10 percent. In football it's only stakeholders, ownerships, you're looking at EPL and wishing American, Arabian ownership, and they come from different backgrounds, steel, oil, whatever it is, and they want to be a part of it, but they aren't caught in the emotional space, they're caught in the analytic and business situation.

And is there conflict when that happens?

There's conflict of attention in that people try to get an understanding of their investment. That goes particularly for people in my role. I see my role as to bridge that dressing room and board room understanding. And that is about working with players and coaches and that I'm comfortable in the boardroom and understand that they're looking for a return on their investment, and they want a secure investment.

What do you see in the next seven to 10 years for the EPL? It's come a long way.

You couldn't have predicted where we are now. I don't think anyone could have predicted that. I think we're at an interesting crossroads because we've been blessed with the interest that has captivated the EPL and therefore the finances that go with it. And people have been very successful and gotten very rich off that. And good luck to them, both on and off the pitch, particularly the players. And I hope, going forward, without knowing what's going to happen, that we can embrace the opportunity and continue to have the humility to push this ball forward, because we've been fortunate in England that we have the resources to test the next level, and what it looks like, and from a science and cultural perspective. I hope that we take the opportunity as opposed to resting on our laurels and going backward. But it's going to be an interesting time, and I think if you look at the last TV deal, the 12 months before it was signed, inside the clubs there was a great insecurity of what it was going to look like. Everyone thought it was going to plateau a mess, and it was actually a 66 or 67 percent increase and that has allowed us to keep on again. And who knows, that might plateau, or it might kick on again, and I think that's

the opportunity that we must embrace.

You were very complimentary in your talk about American soccer. What can the English coach, soccer society, and environment learn from Americans?

Well, I think we can learn a lot from the American culture, which is anything they put their mind to properly, that they usually succeed at a great level. I think the advantage of U.S. soccer, and where it is, and also the potential, is that it's been around for a long time, but it's not steeped in tradition, like European soccer is. European soccer is steeped in religion – if you go to stadiums, regardless of winning or losing, the fans will turn up. They'll still buy a beer, they'll still buy food, and they'll support the team home and away. It's a religion, and that's a great tradition to uphold. But with that tradition sometimes comes closed minds, and I think where U.S. soccer is, and particularly MLS is, that it is a very fluid concept at this point in time. And being in the very mature sports market like it is, I think, with the right executives it has a great learning opportunity to take and absorb ideas from other sports and create a new model for football, because there is limited expectation about achieving success on the world stage, unlike the elite European teams. And with that freedom it gives you an opportunity to create new and exciting things. That's what I would hope U.S. soccer would embrace, not to repeat what's been done in Europe, but to create a new level for itself and teach.

That's good, because we try to replicate, if you look at the history of what we've done. We brought in a German to make it like them, we brought in a Greek, and we've been floundering trying to identify ourselves. It's been a problem.

And it's interesting; it's the story from American evolution. It's been such a huge melting pot for such a long time, and now it's gone back to personal identity, where you're Irish, German, Italian, etc. And I think the real genius of it is about leadership to me, to be yourself with more skill and just to be yourself. And I think if it carries and sustains the values and positivity that it has as a nation, and it infuses the right type of things, then it can come up with a new product, a new concept that doesn't exist anywhere. And that, for me, is the most exciting thing about it, is that it can be something that doesn't exist anywhere else.

I don't know if you've ever been to an MLS game and compared the crowd and the fans' behavior with Chelsea. Have you ever noticed that the American fans don't really watch the game? They are so busy doing other things. But you go to Chelsea, and Old Trafford, and for 45 minutes people are watching the game, and they don't leave their seats. But the Americans, especially the younger kids, are up and down and all over their seats. But it's a problem. But last question: Where's soccer going? What's the next thing for soccer on the field?

I listen to the objectives of somebody like the MLS, and they talk about product first, game first, and I think even with all the innovation, all the creativity, all the IT, all the science around the sport, we should never get away from the brilliance of why we all love football, which is the uncertainty. So when we turn up at the stadium, you can suspend planning, you can suspend your life for 90 minutes and you can be entertained. So I think whatever we do from the product side, whatever we do from the rule side, whatever we do, whether it's the inclusion of touchline cameras, etc., we can never get away from the brilliance of this product, which is the No. 1 sport in the world. It's the emotion of it, so we should protect that going forward, and that's difficult when there's so many parallel professions that all want to be involved in it, and all want to demonstrate how they can bring extra value, the real brilliance of what we do is the art, and the emotion, and the coaching, and the managing. So the future, I hope stays in that way. I think we may get one or two scars along the way until we learn the difference between the brilliance of what science can bring and the traditional arts. I think there will be some casualties along the way, but it should never go away from its core values. This is about entertainment; we are in the entertainment industry, and I hope we never move away from that. And certainly in England we have a tremendous opportunity because of the amount of talent that's gravitating to us at this point in time. And five, six years ago in Italy, you went to the Champions League semifinals and three of the four teams were Italian. Now it's three of the four teams are English. And in three to five years it could be Spanish. But I think we should keep to the core of what we do. We are in the entertainment business, and we're about fulfilling dreams of players, staff and, more importantly, the fans, that we're winners. 