

Stefano Ballinzaghi

Inter Milan's youth coaching approach

Stefano Ballinzaghi is one of the youth coaches at Inter Milano and has been for many years. That is one of the positive aspects of the Inter youth system, the coaches stay for a long time. Ballinzaghi has coached many different age groups. Currently he coaches the U-15 B team.

What are the main characteristics you look at when selecting a young player?

During the selection process, we first look at three main characteristics: technical ability, strength and physical build, and good motor skills. A fourth element, and in a way the most important, is personality.

What do you mean by personality?

Even at the youth level within a professional club, there are lots of expectations, and young players face a lot of pressures. At even playing ability, we choose those players with strong personality traits like leadership and self-confidence, which we think will enable them to deal with pressure situations.

Does this process apply for all players?

Yes, it applies for any player that comes to our teams. Another important factor that has to be considered is puberty. If we have two players with the same technical ability, but one has gone through puberty, then maybe we have to look more at the other player, because he might improve more after he goes through puberty. (Please see the Bob Bigelow interview, page 53.)

Wouldn't you rather have a 13-year-old player who is big and strong on your team, rather than one the same age, who is as good but smaller?

The answer is yes, if we want to win now. But our objective in our youth system is not to win now, but to develop players for tomorrow. That is why we look at the total player development from a futuristic perspective.

How many of the players selected at the Pulcini (U-8 and -10) age for instance, will be there at age 17-18?

It is difficult to calculate. It depends on the year and the selections. Our objective is to make the least number of mistakes possible. That is why, when we make the initial selection, we take only those players whose talent and physical and mental makeup will give them a good chance to succeed.

At what age is it possible to determine whether a player has what it takes to succeed?

That is a very difficult question. I think that there is not a specific age that you can tell for sure. But if a player is exceptional in those three main components that I previously mentioned, plus he has a great personality, with a good family situation, a passion and willingness to learn, you know that you can teach him a lot.

On the other hand, if you have a player that is a good player but lacks in some other aspect, like a good family environment, then you know that this player is a question mark. Having said that, I know that soccer is not a perfect science, and sometimes things turn out differently.

From the physical side, what is your approach?

Let's take, for example, a player that comes to us at the Pulcini category (ages 9-10). The first two years we work on general coordination (running, walking, jumping and climbing), and we use soccer as a tool to complement our work.

The whole idea is to give players a variety of motor experiences that would teach their body how to deal with situations as they present themselves. In the third year, we start to work on soccer.

Are you doing all this with or without the ball?

At the Pulcini's (U-10) level it is important that all these activities are done in the form of games or competitions, and that the ball is used most of the time. Therefore, we look at coordination games rather than coordination exercises. As they get older, a "formal" exercise regiment is introduced in order to get them used to training.

How many times a week will players practice?

In Italy, the reality is that kids have a busy life, within school and outside school. Even at Inter, we struggle with time availability. Usually at the Pulcini (U-10) age they come three times weekly; two practices and two games. If they live close, an extra practice is available to them and maybe we leave them home from a game instead. For the Esordienti (U-11 and -12), usually they have three weekly practices a game.

How do you structure a practice plan, let's say, for the Esordienti (U-11 and -12)?

For this particular age group, we start practice with a game that functions as a warm-up. We follow with a series of technical exercises (individual and group), progress to situational plays (1 v 1, to 5 v 5) followed by a theme game that stresses the objectives of the sessions, and finally a free game at the end.

How do you select a coach, and does he coach a particular team, let's say from U-9 to U-17?

The basic principle is that each team has to have its own coach. However, we believe that as in schools, there are teachers that because of their personality are more apt to teach a particular grade well. In soccer, there are coaches that are suited to coach one particular age group rather than another. Furthermore we believe that having different coaches throughout youth soccer development will make players better in the long run.

What about tactics?

Up to the age of 14, the coaches concentrate mainly on empowering the individual's soccer ability through play and fun with the ball. After that age, preparation broadens to include game tactics: team systems (man, zone, and mixed) and positional play.

Jeff Tipping

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3. Must have composure, awareness and ability to operate in congested areas and to use the body to shield and retain the ball under pressure.
4. Possess speed, agility and power.
5. Must be capable in 1 v 1 situations and at the same time understand the team's playing philosophy.

Future Coach

1. Must study game developments contextually (e.g. high school coach) as well as at the highest levels on a daily basis.
2. Study outside the sport and be a lifetime seeker.
3. Understand and become a "Master Coach and Teacher."
4. Become a master of communication.
5. Be a "different thinker" with a commitment to creativity and supporting the ethical playing values of the game.

THE NSCAA MASTER COACH PROGRAM

One way in which the NSCAA's education program addresses developments of this nature is through the Master Coach Diploma. This year-long course is for experienced coaches who have completed the Premier Diploma and have an interest in expanding their technical, communication, leadership and managerial skills. The Master Coach Diploma is designed for American coaches working in a variety of contexts (youth, high school, director of clubs, college and professional) and want to stay on the cutting edge of developments in the game. A more in-depth description of the program can be found on the "Educating Coaches" section of the NSCAA website and an application form is included on pages 7-8 of this issue.