

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH SOCCER PLAYERS: US VS. EUROPE

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

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Abstract:

The objective of this thesis is to compare and contrast the differences between the cultural impact on the development of youth soccer players in the United States and the continent of Europe. Along with the cultural differences, I will be looked at the importance of playing for clubs/academies and the importance of coaches. The European model has proven to be an exceptional model in terms of developing athletes. The clubs and coaches in Europe have developed exceptional players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. This is all down to players, such as these exceptional talents, being nurtured and protected by these clubs and coaches as they grow up. When it comes to culture, Europeans see soccer differently than Americans. Soccer and sports in general, are viewed as just entertainment in the US. It's a money-making industry. In Europe, the mentality is different; Soccer is a way to express yourself and to show your passion. What can the United States learn from the European model? How can the United States be on the same level as many European countries? Could they instill the same passion as the Europeans have for the beautiful game? These are the questions addressed in this thesis. The United States have the resources, but it's how they use it to their advantage.

Keywords: Soccer, Culture, Development, Youth, Europe, USA

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Introduction

In this thesis, we are going to examine the cultural differences in the development of youth soccer players in the US and in Europe. This paper is going to show the differences of each place and how each of them can learn from each other. We will examine the club system and the coaches, who are directly involved with the player and are key in the development of the players as well. We will also look at the cultures of these two places and see how they think about the sport of soccer. We will look at a few charts to see where the best clubs in developing athletes are and also where the top coaches in the world are from. Along with these charts, we will look at the growth of soccer in the US as well.

Club

Philosophy & Purpose

Each club has different philosophies on how to develop young athletes, but ultimately, it leads to similar outcomes. We will look at two philosophies of two very strong teams in their respective regions. In the US, we will look at the FC Dallas and in Europe, we will look at Liverpool.

FC Dallas is one of the leading academies in the US and they have developed many MLS players. Their philosophy is as follows:

“U.S. Soccer’s Development Academy program is driven by the game and its players, coaches and referees. This game-centric approach allows for long-term development to occur through a deep understanding of what makes players successful around the world. As the sport of soccer grows in the United States, young players in our country need the proper environment to compete against the world’s elite. The U.S. Soccer Development Academy program provides the optimum developmental environment for the nation’s top youth soccer players, coaches and referees by emphasizing development through quality training and limited, meaningful competition. Currently, FC Dallas has three Development Academy teams: U-13, U-14, U-15, U-16 and U-18 boys teams referred to as the FCD Academy.”

Liverpool is one of the best academies in Europe, developing players such as Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher. Ian Rush, an ex-player and ambassador for the Liverpool schools, has this to say about the Liverpool philosophy:

“As one big LFC family we have a responsibility to provide young players around the world with access to the best environment and coaching possible, that's what we aim to achieve with our International Academies.

By following the same curriculum that we deliver to our players at the LFC Academy we can ensure that all participants get the very best football education from our coaching staff. I believe it's very important to develop a players' skills both on and off the pitch and our International Academies do just that.”

These two philosophies are very similar in the sense that the purpose of the clubs/academies is to develop players on and off of the field. In general, all clubs and academies, regardless of whom they are or where they are from, are there to develop young athletes on and off the field.

Facilities

It is important that a developing player has the tools around him to succeed. To find these tools, we are going to take a quick look at some of the top academies between Europe and the US. We are only going to look at one or two at most from each area. The first facility we are going to look at is Academia de Alcochete in Portugal. In the US, we will look at the NY Red Bulls Training Facility in the US.

The famous Academia de Alcochete is home to one of Portugal's top team, Sporting Clube de Portugal. They have a 250,000 m² facility home to all of the clubs youth teams and the senior team as well. The facility currently has a residence hall, a performance lab, conference rooms, cafeteria, lounge areas, six fields with natural grass, and an indoor field with synthetic grass. The academy is completely secured with security cameras around the perimeters and being built in a rural area. Being built in 2002, it is considered one of the best in the world and one of

the most modern by the likes of Jose Pekerman and Luis Felipe Scolari. Players, such as Ronaldo and Figo, have both been developed and brought up at this academy.

The New York Red Bulls training facility is home to one of the best academies in the United States and home to the MLS team by the same name. There are three fields for all the academy teams that they have there. The facility also includes locker rooms, treatment rooms, weight/cardio room, staff room, and electric rooms. This is an expansion project that the Red Bulls Director, Andy Roxburgh, who stated, “Building top player development infrastructure is one of our club’s key priorities and this is another major step in achieving that goal. Our academy and training programs will greatly benefit from this development.” This is one of the most modern academies and one of the best in the US. Can it be one of the best in the world though? Are the facilities the most important thing in the development of a player?

Costs (Funding)

The US has had problems with a “Pay-to-Play” program that could have potentially discouraged many future great players from low-income families from playing. The talent pool is vast in the United States, but what has the US done to counteract their own “Pay-to-Play” programs?

The US Soccer Federation does not have a “Pay-to-Play” program at the developmental academy level. The US Soccer Academy System requires their players and coaches to register with US Soccer as it states here, “There are no team or club fees associated with becoming a U.S. Soccer Development Academy. However, players and coaches must be registered with U.S. Soccer. Registration fees for U-15/16 and U-17/18 players are \$10 per player and \$25 per coach; U-13/14 players are \$100 per player and \$50 per coach. Fees are subject to change.” Those are the only fees that are required of players and all members of the academies. Let us look at a

specific club, New England Revolution Academy. On their website, it pronounces, “Qualified and talented players are accepted into the program without regard to their financial situation. All players’ needs and expenses related to soccer activities – training, facilities, equipment, uniforms, travel associated with competitions – are provided by the Revolution at no cost to the players or their families.”

Academy is a little different from club in the US. I have played at a club level. The fees are not a pretty thing. I played for a brief moment with NE Aztec, which is one of the top clubs in the region, and just for the equipment alone, it was about \$300. Fees to play for the club were about four times the amount of the equipment. It is not really worth paying that much money to play eight games each season. Since the Aztec is one of the good clubs in the region, you will get looks from colleges and potentially some good scholarships.

In Europe, the academy system is somewhat similar to the US academy system in comparison to fees. At academies provide everything for the youth player. They pay for equipment, schooling, and they have residence halls for the players to stay, but all academies usually have a fee to run their programs every year. How do they pay for the programs to continue to run? The answer is simple. Transfer fees pay for the academies to run. For example, the club sells a player to another club for a good amount of money. That money is used to pay for expenses, wages, academies, and so forth. One of the best academies, Ajax, pays about 3 million Euros yearly to run its academies. Do you want to know how much is costs for players to pay to play there? It costs a youth player 12 Euros a year, which is the nominal insurance fee, and the club pays the rest.

Maybe, the academies are not the problems in the US. The academies are doing a good job developing players. There must be another issue then that needs to be addressed.

Structure

It is important that we understand the structure of academies to see what their elite youth players do from a young age and on a daily basis. We will look at two examples. We will look at the New England Revolution, who has one of the best academies in the US, and Barcelona, who is believed to have the best academy in the world.

The New England Revolution, along with other major clubs, uses a pyramid system to show the structure of their club, from youth to the first team. They start off by creating player development programs for children at a very young age, roughly starting at 7 years old. They continue to help the development of young athletes by creating regional schools and residential academies to help develop these athletes. The next major step in the development is the development academy teams. The Revolution, along with many academies, has u-14, u-16, and u-18 teams that compete in the US Soccer Development Academy League. The USSDA is the highest of level competition for youth teams in the US. From these development youth teams, there are two options, which are college soccer or turning professional. Many choose college, but few choose to turn professional. The Revolution have a few youth academy products that turned professional that play on the first team, which are Diego Fagundez and Zachary Herivaux.

Barcelona, arguably the best developer of talent in the game of soccer, has a successful academy system. They have over 15 youth teams with each team having a coach and an assistant. They have teams starting as early as 6 years old, but what Barcelona, and many other teams in Europe, does is have multiple teams for each age group and slowly narrow it down as the kids get older. For example, the u-7 to u-17 could have anywhere from 2 to 4 teams. They provide youth athletes a chance to play with multiple teams at each age group and depending on their development, place them on teams with players with the same skill level. As you get older,

especially at the u-19 and the reserve teams, they have one team for each and it's for the best players who they feel are at that level of playing at the highest level. Regardless, each youth team plays in a competitive league, regardless if it's local, regional, or national. These teams play against other quality competition. With this structure, Barcelona has developed players such as Lionel Messi, Xavi, and Andres Iniesta.

Could the structure be a major reason why clubs in the US are not as developed as European clubs? I don't think it's the issue. Changing the structure won't do much to the development of athletes. I've heard coaches say that changing the structure is not the problem.

College

The real problem between the United States and European countries in development of their youth players comes at the later teenage years. Here, we are going to look at the differences between the academy system and college, and how crucial it is to player development these different steps in pursuing a professional career.

One of the major figures against the college system is Jurgen Klinsmann. "He believes the N.C.A.A. is killing the talent pool in the United States because teenage stars go to college and miss out on formative years of training with professional teams." He has a point. European players start their career roughly at 18 years old, while college players are usually about 21 when they sign for a professional team. At that very moment, those European players already have 3 years of experience in professional leagues compared to their American counterparts.

The academy system does provide schooling for the athlete. The academy does provide the general knowledge learning for the player and it is paid for by the club. The players that do continue their studies time manage while playing professionally. The only question I have is does the club still pay for their continuing education? I believe they do help pay for the player to

attend university if that is what they desire. Is the underlying problem that has held back the United States from competing at the highest level? Is college preventing athletes from developing?

Coaching

Roles

Coaches are not just limited to on the field in the terms of developing players, but they are there to be a mentor for them off the field. To further explain, Sir Alex Ferguson states, “When I first started coaching, my main job as a coach was to improve my players, shape my team, balance my team and get them to play football which I enjoyed.”

Martin Heather, academy director at Wimbledon FC, states, “Players should be developed in an environment which encourages them to develop their natural abilities without fear of failure. The player should be the central figure and his all-round holistic development should be reflected in the coaching and education programme of the club.”

From these two statements, you can see that coaches have many different roles within the club and the team they train. They are just as important off the field as they are on the field. On the field, you have to prepare your team for the next game. It’s also important that you build chemistry with your players as well. Communication is important, along with understanding your players. The list goes on and on. The coach is the leader and sets the tone for the team. They are not just developing the athlete, but they are also developing the person.

Licensures

Is there a major disparity between the coaching of European coaches and American coaches? Or is the gap closing between the education of coaches? In this section, we are going to look briefly at the coaching licenses offered by the USSF and UEFA.

The USSF offers six coaching licenses starting with the National F. For each time you pass each course, you receive a license and sign up for the next course available. From the National F, it goes to the National E, and then it continues all the way to the National A, which is the highest license offered by the USSF for the coaches. As coaches proceed through each course, it becomes more time consuming and more in depth with what is being taught. I will not go in to too much detail of what each course offers. That will be in a later section.

UEFA, depending on where you go, has about 3-5 courses offered for potential coaches who want to receive their coaching license. The FA, England's soccer governing body, has 5 licenses, starting with level 1, level 2, Level 3, UEFA A, and UEFA Pro, being the highest. In other countries, they do it differently. For example, Spain only has three courses, starting with UEFA B. Instead of the level 1 and 2 courses, Spanish coaches just monitor. These courses are very difficult as coaches proceed through each course. Being a certified coach by UEFA is usually seen as a high honor in the soccer world. These courses will be discussed in depth in a later section.

Player Assessment

From experience, the four main pillars in soccer are technical, tactical, physical, and mental. All coaches, regardless if they are from the US or Europe understands that these are the four main areas in assessing a soccer player, youth or professional. As a coach, it is important to correctly assess the youth player in order to help them develop and understand what is best for them.

To better understand each pillar, I will define each term in order to help understand what to look for in assessing each player. Technical is the ability of the player on the ball, such as passing, dribbling, shooting, and much more. Tactical is the ability for a player to understand the game. Tactical is more of how smart of a player you are. Physical is your speed, balance, stamina, strength, and other traits that are similar. Mental is the character of the player. For example, some attributes associated with mental are leadership, determination, and much more. It shows how motivated they are as a player.

There is one more aspect that I personally believe should be included in assessing a player and that is social. Many coaches do look at social as an important aspect in player assessment, but it is not considered. Social could be considered under mental, but in this case, it is important to separate them in order to understand it. Social is how the player interacts with their teammates. It is important for the entire team to interact with one another in order to build chemistry and for them to cooperate and understand each other.

Culture

Popularity

This section is going to start with a piece from Stephan Schindler (2010) that will show how different Europeans feel about soccer compared to the US. It states,

“Soccer in Europe has almost a religious following,” Schindler said. “The sport is organized into club teams that belong to a neighbourhood and teams represent value systems or local identification,” Schindler stated. For example, the Glasgow Rangers are considered Protestant, while the Glasgow Celtics are Irish Catholics. Real Madrid represents the rule of the house of Castile, while the FC Barcelona team stands for the repressed Catalan minority. “When these clubs play each other more than just soccer is on the line,” Schindler explained. “Fans of all ages and gender follow the victories and defeats of their teams throughout the year. Entire communities can experience collective depression after a defeat of their team,” he said.’

What Schindler says here is true. Soccer is not entertainment in Europe. It's passion. You support a club because you found a place in that club. You feel important and the club represents what you believe in. As he stated above, clubs can represent religion, but it can also represent certain things, such as politics, social status, and much more. These clubs in Europe were founded based on these ideologies, and people followed certain clubs because they found a home there.

The US, from what I have experienced and seen, is all about entertainment. It's about what brings in more revenue. Everyone wants to see the big stars. Most sporting events are social gatherings where people will have a drink and talk with their mates. In Europe, it's the opposite. You create atmospheres that intimidate your opponents. You sing for the full 90 minutes to push your team to victory. At these events, nothing else matters. The only thing you care about is your team. The US has many opportunities for people, so soccer could be at the bottom of a long list. In Europe and around the world, people relate to the sport and their club and for that alone it can be properly called the beautiful game.

Winning vs. Development

In this section, I will say very minimal and let this article, *American Soccer vs. European: Player Development*, do all the talking. In this article, it states,

“On the other hand, the European mentality is to produce as many first team players as possible. It may sound calculated to look at it as an industry, but it is the most efficient way to shape future stars. Scouts are not watching kids, but players. They are not evaluating students, but talent. The new family structure is no longer parents, but the academy in which they enter at ages 6 /7 to develop and grow as athletes. The mentality is not “if you go pro”, but “when you go pro”. Academies focus on the science of sport, perfecting player development in their early years. Matches are not played in such a competitive spirit and there are less of them. All players receive an equal chance, but competition between them is bigger. At the end of the year, they clear their ranks and say goodbye to children that don't show enough potential.”

“While American produces teams that win, Europe produces individual players with supreme technical skills. Europeans drive the potential of individual players, while Americans pride themselves on their democratic player development. Singling out individuals by combining talent and technique proves more beneficial than winning games at youth levels. To paraphrase David Endt, a former Ajax player: two diamonds are worth more than a two handfuls of crystals. Americans practice in competitions, while Europeans compete in practice.”

These statements are very true. The European model focuses on developing individuals in order to prepare them as professionals. In Europe, it is less competitive than the US, but the talent that they develop is superior to the American athletes. Jürgen Klinsmann chooses a lot of German-American players because of the training they received in Europe. They focus on the individual rather than winning. You can see it on the field how the training has helped players in Europe. This mentality of winning doesn't help a player develop. It only hinders their progression.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement in soccer is very different from a European perspective and an American perspective. European clubs and academies do not allow parent involvement in the game, while American parents tend to be more vocal. From my own observations playing the game in the US, the vocal parents tend to have a negative impact on their children who play youth soccer.

From the European perspective, we will be looking at a few England academies and clubs examples. Parents in the United Kingdom are informed through progress reports and other forms of communication, but they are not allowed to be involved or interfere the same way American parents do. Parents are prohibited from coaching from the sidelines and have to be a certain distance from the fields. Also, parents are not allowed to attend training and are confined to a lounge with other parents watching the trainings from a distance. In West Ham's case, a top

Premier League club, they have parents sign a code of conduct that highlights the do's and do not's.

In the US, American parents tend to be more vocal. According to Gordon Deal (2012), he wrote an article, *10 Things Soccer Parents Should Know*, which highlights the problems of the games from the sidelines. The one point that jumps out most is “Parents should wear muzzles to games.” This point highlights that parents are always coaching their kids from the sidelines. Phrases such as “boot it” or “kick it” are what kids hear from their parents, but they are contradicting what the coach taught them in practice. The coaching should be done by the coaches and not the parents.

Current Trends

Top Youth Academies/Clubs

According to GiveMeSport, the top academies in the world are as followed:

10. Liverpool (England)

9. Sao Paulo (Brazil)

8. Southampton (England)

7. Feyenoord (Netherlands)

6. Arsenal (England)

5. Santos (Brazil)

Another of Brazil's academies makes it in to the rankings, Santos, another of Sao Paulo's highly successful team's. Probably known by many because of to having Neymar on their books, as well as housing some of Brazil's footballing legends; Pele, Coutinho and Pepe.

Santos is constantly transferring youngsters up through the ranks into the first-team squad, successful players include the world famous Robinho, Ganso ,Diego and ex Premier League stars Elano and Giovanni (Manchester City and Hull respectively). A solid institution of football development.

4. Manchester United (England)

Home to one of England's greatest ever footballer's, David Beckham. Manchester United is the most popular club in the world and has an academy system to match, simply outstanding! Former player's include veterans and one-club-men Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes and Gary Neville as well as current stars including world-class Barcelona centre-back Gerard Pique and Giuseppe Rossi.

United have a strong management too with the likes of club legend Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and current deputy to Alex Ferguson Mike Phelan having taken the reins at the world famous academy, winning trophy after trophy in the process.

3. Sporting (Portugal)

A club who's youth squads are equally as good as the first team, Sporting Lisbon has one of the world's greatest youth training facility's based in Alcochete. World famous names have progressed through the academy. Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Figo, Nani, Ricardo Quaresma, Joao Moutinho, the list goes on and on. Sporting's academy currently has 39 titles to its name, the best in Portuguese history.

2. Ajax (Netherlands)

Yet another Dutch club in the top ten ranking. The Dutch influence in this top ten shows what a good job the Dutch Football Association programme is doing to develop their footballers. Despite one or two exceptions, the whole Ajax first team is made up from academy graduates. Legends like Johan Cruyff, Frank De Boer, Marco Van Basten and current assistant manager and former Arsenal star Dennis Bergkamp. Virtually the Netherlands' entire national side player's come through the Ajax academy at some stage or another. But Ajax do not only develop Dutch players. One player in high demand is the Danish Viktor Fischer with an impressive 10 goals this season, as well as Belgian centre back pairing Thomas Vermaelen and Jan Vertonghen.

1. Barcelona (Spain)

La Masia - world famous, simply the undisputed number one in this ranking. Created in 1979 after Johan Cruyff wanted to emulate the Ajax model and bring it to Barcelona. The names of the players graduating from this place simply speak for the programme itself. The likes of Cesc Fabregas, Jordi Alba, Iniesta, Xavi, Carles Puyol, Pep Guardiola and possibly the greatest footballer of all time, the mercurial and world famous Argentine ace Lionel Messi. On the cover of virtually everything to do with football, Messi moved to La Masia as a teenager after being spotted by one of the Barcelona scouts. He has since won four Ballons d'Or awards in succession. Also similar to Ajax, a high percentage of the first team squad is made up from La Masia graduates. An unbelievable work of achievement.

Other academies which deserve recognition include:

River Plate	Rennes
Milan	Real Madrid
PSV Eindhoven	Benfica



Sporting CP Facility: Academia at Alcochete



Real Madrid Facility: Ciudad Real Madrid

Top Coaches

For the week of May 16, according to Football Coach World Ranking, the top 10 coaches in the world are (based weekly):

1 	2 	3 	4 	5 
 Luis Enrique Barcelona 18,574 pts	 Guardiola Bayern München 14,142 pts	 D. Simeone Atlético Madrid 13,614 pts	 T. Tuchel Borussia Dortmund 12,180 pts	 Unai Emery Sevilla 12,123 pts
6 	7 	8 	9 	10 
 Ernesto Valverde Athletic Club 11,418 pts	 Marcelino Villarreal 11,074 pts	 L. Blanc PSG 10,756 pts	 M. Allegri Juventus 10,337 pts	 Tite Corinthians 9,955 pts

The closest American on the list ranks at 194. The 5 American coaches closest to the top 10 are:

WEEK 20	PREV	COACH	CLUB	POINTS	WON	LOST
▼ 194	187	 J. Cassar	Real Salt Lake	3026	0	0
▲ 201	204	 B. Arena	LA Galaxy	2904	31	0
▲ 204	207	 B. Olsen	DC United	2830	93	93
▲ 317	319	 C. Porter	Portland Tim..	1947	0	0
▼ 328	306	 J. Marsch	New York RB	1904	0	124

Statistics on the Growth of the Sport in the US

The growth of youth soccer is evident. According to US Youth Soccer, more players register to play and it's evident in these statistics below:

Membership Statistics

US Youth Soccer Annual Registration of Players

1974 - 103,432
1980 - 810,793
1985 - 1,210,408
1990 - 1,615,041
1995 - 2,388,719
2000 - 3,020,442
2005 - 3,050,465
2007 - 3,123,698
2008 - 3,148,114
2009 - 3,094,868
2010 - 3,036,438
2011 - 3,025,551
2012 - 3,020,633
2013 - 2,804,711
2014 - 3,055,148

Conclusions

From first-hand experience, I understand and have seen the differences in Europe and the US in terms of youth development and culture. I grew up in a Portuguese household, and soccer dominates the television and it dominates our minds. If we are not watching a game, then we are talking about the game. In the US, soccer isn't as popular as it is around the world. The sport is growing and that's without a doubt, but there is much more opportunities to do different things in the US rather than in Europe. Also, soccer and sports in general are just entertainment here in the US, but in Europe, soccer is a way to express yourself. There is a sense of pride in the club you support. They are passionate about their teams and their sports. I have seen the passion and have felt the same passion when I support my team. That's just the kind of people we are.

For me, the main reason the US is behind in player development is because of their mentality. Winning isn't everything. Player development is the most important to create a brighter future, not only for the player, but also for the team he represents and potentially his national team. When you are focused only on winning, it only hinders your progress.

Another major reason that hinders player progression is collegiate and high school sports. You only train competitively for 2 to 3 months and that is it. In Europe, you train for about 10 to 11 months competitively. In the US, depending if you go to college, most start playing professionally in the MLS at the age of 21, whilst in Europe, they sign their first professional contract at about 18 years of age.

There is still some work to be done from the US in order to compete, but they have done a good job up to this point. Participation has been improving each year. They have competed well in international tournaments. They have improved over time and it has showed.

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