

How a Soccer Star Is Made



Under-10 players at work at the Ajax academy in Amsterdam

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE

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The youth academy of the famed dutch soccer club Ajax is grandiosely called De Toekomst — The Future. Set down beside a highway in an unprepossessing district of Amsterdam, it consists of eight well-kept playing fields and a two-story building that houses locker rooms, classrooms, workout facilities and offices for coaches and sports scientists. In an airy cafe and bar, players are served meals and visitors can have a glass of beer or a cappuccino while looking out over the training grounds. Everything about the academy, from the amenities to the pedigree of the coaches — several of them former players for the powerful Dutch national team — signifies quality. Ajax once fielded one of the top professional teams in Europe. With the increasing globalization of the sport, which has driven the best players to richer leagues in England, Germany, Italy and Spain, the club has become a different kind of enterprise — a talent factory. It manufactures players and then sells them, often for immense fees, on the world market. “All modern ideas on how to develop youngsters begin with Ajax,” Huw Jennings, an architect of the English youth-development system, told me. “They are the founding fathers.”

In America, with its wide-open spaces and wide-open possibilities, we celebrate the “self-made athlete,” honor effort and luck and let children seek their own course for as long as they can — even when that means living with dreams that are unattainable and always were. The Dutch live in a cramped, soggy nation made possible only because they mastered the art of redirecting water. They are engineers with creative souls, experts at systems, infrastructure and putting scant resources to their best use. The construction of soccer players is another problem to be solved, and it’s one they undertake with a characteristic lack of sentiment or illusion.

The first time I visited De Toekomst happened to coincide with the arrival of 21 new players — 7- and 8-year-olds, mainly, all from Amsterdam and its vicinity — who were spotted by scouts and identified as possible future professionals. As I came upon them, they were competing in a series of four-on-four games on a small, artificial-turf field with a wall around it, like a hockey rink, so that balls heading out of bounds bounced right back into play. It was late November and cold, with a biting wind howling off the North Sea, but the boys skittered about in only their lightweight jerseys and baggy shorts. Their shots on goal were taken with surprising force, which kept the coaches who were serving as goalkeepers flinching and shielding themselves in self-defense. The whole scene had a speeded-up, almost cartoonish feel to it, but I certainly didn’t see anyone laughing.

After a series of these auditions, some players would be formally enrolled in the Ajax (pronounced EYE-ox) academy. A group of men standing near me looked on intently, clutching rosters that matched the players with their numbers. One man, Ronald de Jong, said: “I am never looking for a result — for example, which boy is scoring the most goals or even who is running the fastest. That may be because of their size and stage of development. I want to notice how a boy runs. Is he on his forefeet, running lightly? Does he have creativity with the ball? Does he seem that he is really loving the game? I think these things are good at predicting how he’ll be when he is older.”

Like other professional clubs in Europe and around the world, Ajax operates something similar to a big-league baseball team’s minor-league system — but one that reaches into early childhood. De Jong, a solidly built former amateur player, is one of some 60 volunteer scouts who fan out on weekends to watch games involving local amateur clubs. (He works during the week as a prison warden.) His territory includes the area between The Hague and Haarlem — “the flower district, which is also a very good hunting ground for players” is how he described it. He’ll observe a prospect for months or even years, and players he recommends will also be watched by one of the club’s paid scouts, a coach and sometimes the director of the Ajax youth academy. But for some families, the first time they realize their boys are under serious consideration is when a letter arrives from Ajax requesting that they bring their sons in for a closer look, an invitation that is almost never declined. To comprehend the impact of a summons from Ajax, imagine a baseball-crazed kid from, say, North Jersey arriving home from school one day to learn that he has been asked to come to Yankee Stadium to perform for the team brass.

One player there was de Jong’s discovery, an 8-year-old who, he said, had “talent that is off the charts.” But if this boy were to be accepted into the academy, it would mean he

had completed just the first of a succession of relentless challenges. Ajax puts young players into a competitive caldron, a culture of constant improvement in which they either survive and advance or are discarded. It is not what most would regard as a child-friendly environment, but it is one that sorts out the real prodigies — those capable of playing at an elite international level — from the merely gifted.

About 200 players train at De Toekomst at any given time, from ages 7 to 19. (All are male; Ajax has no girls' program.) Every year, some in each age group are told they cannot return the following year — they are said to have been “sent away” — and new prospects are enrolled in their place. And it is not just the children whose performances are assessed. Just before my second trip to Amsterdam in March, several longtime coaches were informed that they had not measured up and would be let go. One of them was the coach of a boy I had been following, Dylan Donaten Nieuwenhuys, a slightly built, soft-featured 15-year-old who began at Ajax when he was 7.

Dylan's father, Urvin Rooi, served as a sort of guide for me. Gregarious and opinionated, he introduced me to other parents, made sure I came inside for hot drinks at the cafe and even gave me lifts on his scooter from the training grounds back to the transit station. He was particularly useful in translating a culture that was nothing like I had ever seen in many years of reporting on American sports. When I observed that for all the seriousness of purpose at De Toekomst, I was surprised that the players did not practice more hours or play more games, Rooi said: “Of course, because they do not want to do anything to injure them or wear them out. They're capital. And what is the first thing a businessman does? He protects his capital.”

When the boys start at the youth academy, Rooi said, they are attached to the ideal of Ajax, whose senior team packs in 50,000-plus fans for its home games and still occupies a mythic place in world soccer because of the innovative style it established in the 1960s — a quick-passing, position-shifting offensive attack that became known as Total Football. “The little boys drink their tea out of Ajax cups,” he said. “They sleep in Ajax pajamas under Ajax blankets.” As spring approaches, he continued, they get nervous about whether they will be permitted to stay for another year. “This is when they sometimes start to get bad school grades. They don't sleep. They wet their pants.”

Over time, though, the academy hardens them mentally as well as physically. I asked Dylan how he felt about his coach's being fired. He shrugged. “The football world is a hard world,” he replied. “He has made the decision to send boys away. Now he knows how it feels.”

LATE ONE AFTERNOON in the cafe at De Toekomst, I was talking with a coach, Patrick Landru, who works with the academy's youngest age groups, when he asked if he could take my writing pad for a moment. I handed it over, and he put down five names, then drew a bracket to their right. Outside the bracket, he wrote, “80 million euros.” The names represented five active “Ajax educated” players, as he called them, all of whom entered the academy as children, made it through without being sent away and emerged as world-class players. Eighty million euros (or even more) is what Ajax got in return for

selling the rights to the players to other professional clubs. Once a team pays this one-time transfer fee, it then negotiates a new, often very large, contract with the player.

Wesley Sneijder, the first name on the list and probably the most accomplished young Dutch player at the moment, started at the academy when he was 7. At 23, Real Madrid acquired him for 27 million euros. (He now stars for Inter Milan, the current Italian champion and the winner of this year's Champion's League tournament, Europe's highest club competition.) The other four players named on my pad were, like Sneijder, highly paid pros for clubs outside the Netherlands and prominent members of the Dutch national team that will compete in the World Cup beginning this week in South Africa.

An emerging national-team star, Gregory van der Wiel, was not among the names on the list, because he still plays for Ajax, but it is widely assumed that he will be the next big sale. A heavily tattooed rap aficionado who likes to spend his downtime in Miami's South Beach, van der Wiel, now 22, was sent away from Ajax at 14 because of a poor attitude — "I was an angry little boy who had not yet learned to listen," he told me — then was invited back after spending three years in the academy of another Dutch pro club, now defunct, which he recalls as having had inferior facilities, coaching and even uniforms. I asked Martin Jol, the coach of Ajax's first team, if it was difficult for him to nurture young players knowing he would lose them just as their talent blossomed. "I think that is the purpose of Ajax, to develop players and bring them up to the first team as young as possible," he answered. "And then we sell them, not for peanuts but for a lot of money."

In the U.S., we think of money as corrupting sport, especially youth sport. At Ajax, it is clarifying. With the stakes so high — so much invested and the potential for so much in return — De Toekomst is a laboratory for turning young boys into high-impact performers in the world's most popular game.

The Ajax youth academy is not a boarding school. The players all live within a 35-mile radius of Amsterdam (some of them have moved into the area to attend the academy). Ajax operates a fleet of 20 buses to pick up the boys halfway through their school day and employs 15 teachers to tutor them when they arrive. Parents pay nothing except a nominal insurance fee of 12 euros a year, and the club covers the rest — salaries for 24 coaches, travel to tournaments, uniforms and gear for the players and all other costs associated with running a vast facility. Promising young players outside the Ajax catchment area usually attend academies run by other Dutch professional clubs, where the training is also free, as it is in much of the rest of the soccer-playing world for youths with pro potential. (The U.S., where the dominant model is "pay to play" — the better an athlete, the more money a parent shells out — is the outlier.)

Ajax makes mistakes, plenty of them. It sends the wrong boys away, and some of them become stars elsewhere with no compensation returning to the club. As a production line, it is grossly inefficient; only a small percentage of its youngsters become elite players. But the club does not throw money after pure fantasy, encouraging visions of pro careers that never have a chance of materializing for children who do not have the foundational

talent to reach such goals. The club decides which boys have potential — “Please note,” its Web site advises, “Ajax’s youth academy cannot accept individual external applications” — and then exposes them to scientific training and constant pressure.

The director of the Ajax youth academy is Jan Olde Riekerink, an intense man with piercing blue eyes who spends much of his day walking from field to field, observing. He usually stands in the background, out of sight, before coming forward to urge better effort or correct some fine point of technique. “He is always watching, like a spy,” Urvin Rooi told me.

One Sunday in March, I was on the sideline of a game — Ajax’s 15-year-olds matched up against the youth academy of another Dutch professional club — when I noticed Riekerink behind me. He was by himself, bundled into his parka and writing in a small notebook. With the Ajax boys up two goals and dominating the action, I told him I was impressed by their skill. (I was always impressed by the quality of play at De Toekomst.) “Really?” he responded. “To me this is a disaster. They are playing with the wrong tempo, too slow.”

During training sessions at Ajax, I rarely heard the boys’ loud voices or laughter or much of anything besides the thump of the ball and the instruction of coaches. It could seem grim, more like the grinding atmosphere of training for an individual sport — tennis, golf, gymnastics — than what you would expect in a typically boisterous team setting. But one element of the academy’s success is that the boys are not overplayed, so the hours at De Toekomst are all business. Through age 12, they train only three times a week and play one game on the weekend. “For the young ones, we think that’s enough,” Riekerink said when we talked in his office one day. “They have a private life, a family life. We don’t want to take that from them. When they are not with us, they play on the streets. They play with their friends. Sometimes that’s more important. They have the ball at their feet without anyone telling them what to do.”

By age 15, the boys are practicing five times a week. In all age groups, training largely consists of small-sided games and drills in which players line up in various configurations, move quickly and kick the ball very hard to each other at close range. In many practice settings in the U.S., this kind of activity would be a warm-up, just to get loose, with the coach paying scant attention and maybe talking on a cellphone or chatting with parents. At the Ajax academy, these exercises — designed to maximize touches, or contact with the ball — are the main event. “You see this a lot of places,” a coach from a pro club in Norway, who was observing at Ajax, said to me. “Every program wants to maximize touches. But here it is no-nonsense, and everything is done very hard and fast. It’s the Dutch style. To the point and aggressive.”

Gregory van der Wiel’s description of the detail-oriented routine at De Toekomst struck me as dead on: “You do things again and again and again, then you repeat it some more times.”

I HEARD A LOT OF misconceptions about American soccer in the course of reporting this story. Many people seemed to believe that the sport is still a novelty in the United States, a game that we took up only in the last couple of decades and that is not yet popular or perhaps is even disdained by our best male athletes — an understandable view given the much greater international success of the U.S. women’s teams. I had lunch one day with Auke Kok, a historian and Dutch soccer journalist, who offered up his own hypothesis. He talked of the “brute force” of American football as opposed to the elegance and flair of great international soccer. “I’ve always wondered if our football is too stylish, too feminine,” he said. “Am I right that it’s too girlish for Americans?”

I told him that I was pretty sure that that is not the case. But it is no surprise that the rest of the world might be flummoxed — and come up with some offbeat theories — trying to explain why a nation as populous, prosperous and sports-loving as the United States still does not play at the level of the true superpowers of soccer.

More than three million boys under age 18 play organized soccer in the U.S., but we have never produced a critical mass of elite performers to compete on equal terms with the world’s best. The American men are certainly improving. After finishing a surprising second to Brazil in last summer’s Confederations Cup, the U.S. qualified with relative ease to be among the 32 teams competing in the World Cup finals in South Africa, starting June 12 against England. Few would be surprised if the U.S. emerged from group play into the second round. But it would be a shocking, seismic upset if the Americans somehow leapt past traditional powers like Germany, Italy or Argentina — to say nothing of the favorites Brazil and Spain — to capture the championship.

The other nation that shows up on any list of World Cup favorites is the Netherlands, a perennial contender widely considered to be the best team never to win the championship. Drawn from a nation of fewer than 17 million, with a core of stars who trained at Ajax, the Dutch national team plays in the Total Football tradition that relies on players who know what they want to do with the ball before it reaches them and can move it on without stopping it. The British author David Winner, in his book “Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Soccer,” calls this approach “physical chess,” and the Dutch can be quite haughty about it. They abhor the cloying defensive tactics associated with the Italians and the boot-and-chase way the English played for years, and it has been observed that they sometimes appear more intensely interested in the artfulness of a match than in the result.

The Dutch style (indistinguishable from the Ajax style) even has its own philosopher-king — Johan Cruyff, an Ajax star in the 1970s, considered just one step down from Pelé in the pantheon of playing greats, who can sound like a more erudite Yogi Berra. “Don’t run so much,” he once said, meaning that players often cover lots of ground but to no effect. “You have to be in the right place at the right moment, not too early, not too late.”

In March, I had a seat at the Amsterdam Arena, just across the highway from De Toekomst, to watch the U.S. national team play the Dutch in a “friendly,” a pre-World Cup tuneup and test. Thanks to a late goal by the U.S., the final score was only 2-1, in

favor of the Dutch, but the match was a version of that old playground game: it's our ball, and you can't play with it. The Dutch zipped it from player to player and from one side of the field to the other while the Americans ran and ran, chasing the ball but rarely gaining control. When the Americans did get the ball, their passes too often flew beyond reach or directly out of bounds.

Other nations and professional clubs around the world play in a manner similar to the Dutch — including, not coincidentally, Barcelona, one of the most consistently successful clubs in Europe, and where Cruyff played after leaving Ajax and then coached for eight seasons. What this type of play demands is the highest order of individual skill: players with a wizardlike ability to control the ball with either foot, any part of the foot, and work it toward the goal through cramped spaces and barely perceptible lanes.

After the U.S.-Netherlands friendly, the Dutch coach praised the Americans for having a “well-organized” defense — which was true but seemed to be a case, unintentional perhaps, of damning with faint praise. But what else could he say? The Americans did a good job of backing up and closing ranks, a survival tactic that, along with several heroic saves by the goalkeeper Tim Howard, kept the Dutch from running up six goals or so.

That was only one game, of course, but it seemed to bring into focus what I had been observing at the Ajax youth academy, as well as learning about American soccer. How the U.S. develops its most promising young players is not just different from what the Netherlands and most elite soccer nations do — on fundamental levels, it is diametrically opposed.

Americans like to put together teams, even at the Pee Wee level, that are meant to win. The best soccer-playing nations build individual players, ones with superior technical skills who later come together on teams the U.S. struggles to beat. In a way, it is a reversal of type. Americans tend to think of Europeans as collectivists and themselves as individualists. But in sports, it is the opposite. The Europeans build up the assets of individual players. Americans underdevelop the individual, although most of the volunteers who coach at the youngest level would not be cognizant of that.

The American approach is the more democratic view of sport. The aspirations of each member of the team are equally valid. Elsewhere, there is more comfort with singling out players for attention and individualized instruction, even at the expense of the group. David Endt, a former Ajax player and a longtime executive of the club, told me, “Here, we would rather polish one or two jewels than win games at the youth levels.”

Americans place a higher value on competition than on practice, so the balance between games and practice in the U.S. is skewed when compared with the rest of the world. It's not unusual for a teenager in the U.S. to play 100 or more games in a season, for two or three different teams, leaving little time for training and little energy for it in the infrequent moments it occurs. A result is that the development of our best players is stunted. They tend to be fast and passionate but underskilled and lacking in savvy compared with players elsewhere. “As soon as a kid here starts playing, he's got referees

on the field and parents watching in lawn chairs,” John Hackworth, the former coach of the U.S. under-17 national team and now the youth-development coordinator for the Philadelphia franchise in Major League Soccer, told me. “As he gets older, the game count just keeps increasing. It’s counterproductive to learning and the No. 1 worst thing we do.”

The U.S. diverges all the way to the last stages of a player’s development. In other places around the world, the late teenage years are a kind of finishing school, a period when elite players grow into their bodies, sharpen their technical ability and gain a more sophisticated understanding of game tactics. At the same time, they are engaged in a fierce competition to rise through the ranks of their clubs and reach the first team (the equivalent of being promoted from a minor-league baseball team to the big-league club).

An elite American player of that age is still likely to be playing in college, which the rest of the soccer-playing world finds bizarre. He plays a short competitive season of three or four months. If he possesses anything approaching international-level talent, he probably has no peer on his team and rarely one on an opposing squad. He may not realize it at the time, but the game, in essence, is too easy for him.

Of the 23 players chosen for the U.S. team going to the World Cup, 15 of them played at least some college soccer. Among the 8 who went straight into the professional ranks are several of the team’s most accomplished performers, including Landon Donovan, DaMarcus Beasley and Tim Howard, and promising players like Jozy Altidore and Michael Bradley (son of the head coach, Bob Bradley). Did they rise to the top of the American talent pool because they bypassed college? Or did they skip it because they were the rare Americans good enough as teenagers to attract legitimate professional opportunities? The answer is probably a little bit of both. But you will find no one in the soccer world who says they would have enhanced their careers by staying in school.

No other nation has as comprehensive a college-sports system as exists here, and none assume that an elite athlete will seek (or benefit from) higher education. “You have a major problem in the ages of 17 to 21,” Huw Jennings, now the director of the youth academy at Fulham, in the English Premier League, told me when I visited him in London. “The N.C.A.A. system is the fault line. I understand that it is good for a person’s development to go to university, but it’s not the way the world develops players.”

ONE DAY AT AJAX, I stood beside an otherwise empty playing field and watched for 30 minutes as a coach tutored Florian Josefzoon, a lithe, dreadlocked 18-year-old who is being groomed for stardom. Bryan Roy, a former member of the Dutch national team, demonstrated a series of stutter-steps and pirouettes, then kicked the ball to Josefzoon, on the right wing, who trapped it and tried to match Roy’s moves as he turned and headed up the right side. It was as if Roy were teaching him a dance. When Josefzoon mastered one set of steps, Roy showed him something new. “He is one of the talents,” Roy told me. “He’s a winger; I was a winger. He has been put into a special program in order to bridge the gap between the under-18s and the first team, so it is natural for me to be the one to help him.”

On an adjacent field, Ruben Jongkind, a consultant who mainly works with Dutch track athletes, was altering the posture and gait of a 15-year-old recently acquired from another Dutch club. Jongkind told me that while the boy was actually quite fast, he did not have enough range of motion in his vertical plane. “He was running like a duck, shuffling,” Jongkind said. “That takes more energy, which is why we have to change his motor patterns, so he can be as fast at the end of a game as the beginning.”

Jongkind had been working with this player for several weeks and said he had progressed to “consciously able but not subconsciously able” to run with the desired form, meaning that in the heat of competition, he reverted to his old form. I pointed out that a fast but flawed runner in the United States would likely be left alone. “Everything can be trained,” Jongkind said. “You should always try to make an improvement if it’s possible.”

Ajax keeps a detailed dossier on each player from the moment he enters the youth academy. I was in the office of Olav Versloot, the club’s chief exercise physiologist, when a 14-year-old knocked on his door, eager for the results of his latest body-fat measurement, which was too high the last time. Boys in their midteens are permitted to have up to 13 percent body fat; by 17, the measure is supposed to be down to 12 percent. (The younger players, who are almost always lean enough, are monitored more loosely.) “The first time limits are exceeded we are quite liberal,” Versloot told me. “Diet suggestions are made. But after that, we start a program with a dietitian. Parents are called in, and special exercise programs are started.”

Versloot, with his spiky hair, longish sideburns and black-framed glasses, has a sort of hipster-geek look. In November, I observed him putting boys through some of their regular fitness tests. In one, a training group of 16-year-olds ran 30-meter sprints as sensors registered their times in five-meter increments. Versloot was most interested in their performances in the first 5 and 10 meters. “That’s football distance,” he said. “It’s an acceleration that occurs multiple times a game.”

When I came back in March, I watched several groups participate in a grueling shuttle run, similar to what basketball players refer to as “suicides” — a series of back-and-forth sprints, with short rest, in which participants dropped out in exhaustion until only one was left. They wore monitors to measure their heart rates. Versloot explained why: “If they say, ‘I’m tired, I’m done,’ we can look later and say to them: ‘That’s not what the heart monitor showed. It said you were only at 75 percent of maximum. So you have to do it again in a week.’ They understand that it’s not a punishment; it’s an opportunity to do better.”

De Toekomst is not where you come to hear a romantic view of sport. No one pretends that its business is other than what it is. “We sold Wesley Sneijder for a ridiculous amount of money,” Versloot said. “We can go on for years based on what he was sold for.”

David Endt, who as manager of the first team is in charge of travel and logistics, occupies a sort of unofficial role as the club's conscience and historian. His cubbyhole of an office atop the Amsterdam Arena is a mini-museum, its walls plastered with all manner of memorabilia. He proudly showed me a pair of scissors displayed above his desk, explaining that they were brandished by an Ajax player as he tried to attack a teammate in a famous locker-room incident a couple of decades ago. "Now I have them," he said with an impish grin. The youth academy, Endt said, is where the heart of the club beats. "You can feel the atmosphere of what is Ajax. People from clubs around the world come to visit, and they always want to know, 'What is the secret?' But it is a matter of earth and air. We are in Amsterdam, so we are a little bit adventurous, a little bit artistic, maybe a little bit arrogant. You can observe what we do, but it is something you cannot copy."

Ajax won the European club championship as recently as 1995, the same year that a decision in the European Court of Justice (the Bosman transfer ruling, named after the Belgian player who brought the case) gave players the power of free agency when their contracts end. It priced Ajax out of the top tier of competition and left the continental championships to be fought over by the big clubs in the English Premier League, Spain's Liga, Germany's Bundesliga and Italy's Serie A, which get vastly greater fees for television rights. Endt told me that the need to sell players — just to keep the club going and to bring money in to help pay the salaries of players on the first team — is well understood but regretted. "We're realistic about it," he said, "but the real Ajax man is crying inside."

Ajax is listed on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, but 73 percent of the shares remain in private hands and are not publicly traded. Just as no one sugarcoats the mission at Ajax, the demands placed on children are not minimized. "One of the things we say is we are never satisfied," Endt said. "That is both good and bad. It can be difficult to be in a situation where whatever you do, you are told you should do better."

Versloot said that, on average, one and a half products of De Toekomst per season will rise to the first team and go on to a significant, well-compensated pro career. Some of the others will gravitate to second- or third-tier pro circuits or the high amateur ranks in the Netherlands, where the best players make "black money," under-the-table payments. The pressure to emerge from the academy as one of its top products — and to produce them — is immense. "It is always a very tense atmosphere here, for everyone," Versloot said. "You have to just get used to it."

EARLY IN EACH NEW calendar year, youngsters in the Ajax academy are given preliminary notice of their status. Some are told they are secure, others that they are in danger of being sent away in the spring. A current 16-year-old at Ajax said he still recalled this conversation from when he was 8. (Ajax discourages players who have not yet signed pro contracts from talking to reporters, so he agreed to talk only if his name was not used.) "It was my second year, and they said: 'You are in doubt. We don't yet know if you'll be one of the boys who get to stay,' " he recounted. "They said I was a good technical player, but I was too passive and had to become more aggressive."

This player is now considered among the best in his age group, but like all boys who stay at Ajax for many years, he has seen many classmates leave. “My best friend left two years ago,” he said. “I don’t speak to him anymore. He thought I was not in touch enough, that I was not supporting him. He was furious. I realized he was just a football friend and that you can’t have real friends at Ajax.”

Ricardo van Rhijn, who just signed a pro contract and is captain of the Dutch under-19 national team, described the annual leave-taking in somewhat more benign terms. “At a certain moment, we have to say goodbye,” he told me. “It’s hard, but every boy knows the reality of the situation. They know they have to leave and close the chapter of Ajax.”

Urvin Rooi’s son, Dylan, said that in his current training group of 15-year-olds, several new boys had been brought in for tryouts, and one had already been told he was accepted. It sounded like being in a workplace in which your possible replacement had already been installed at the next desk and given your identical tasks, to see if he could do them better.

Dylan’s father is involved in a business that builds homes on the Dutch island Curaçao. His mother is a psychotherapist. It is not unusual for players at De Toekomst to come from middle- or even upper-middle-class backgrounds, and virtually none come from poverty in a nation where the standard of living is high and literacy is 99 percent. The demographics are not much different from the soccer-playing population in the United States, where most players still come from suburban comfort. In the Netherlands, though, youth players may end up with less education than their parents in order to pursue professional soccer careers, starting with a less-demanding high-school curriculum than they otherwise might take.

Dylan at first spoke to me on the condition that I would not use his name but then insisted that it be included, reasoning that he had related his “personal thoughts, and people should know the name behind the thoughts.” We spoke at a delicatessen in his neighborhood in central Amsterdam, where a picture of him in his uniform hung on the wall. (The contrast between his introspection and the unrevealing interviews given by most American athletes was striking.) He said he guessed that probably only two or three of the boys he began with when he was 7 would have pro careers in their sport. “I would feel very bad if I’m not one of them,” he said. “I have tried everything I can do to make it. I haven’t done as much in school as I could. I would feel like I’ve been wasting my time all these years. I would get very depressed.”

I asked if some of what he learned at Ajax — focus, perseverance, the ability to perform under pressure — might benefit him no matter what he ends up doing. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re training for football, not for anything else.”

The Ajax development system has its critics. Some assume that because the first team is no longer a competitive force in Europe and does not even consistently finish first in the Eredivisie, the top Dutch professional league, it is no longer turning out top talent. But if all those who trained at De Toekomst now playing elsewhere were to come home —

Wesley Sneijder from Italy; Rafael van der Vaart from Spain; Ryan Babel, Johnny Heitinga and Nigel de Jong from their teams in England — Ajax could compete with any club in the world. The more substantial criticism is that Ajax has become too mercantile and coldblooded. “I feel like they’ve lost some of the spirit of the place,” John Hackworth, the former U.S. youth coach, told me. “What made them great, these heroes they create, now go on to stardom so quickly somewhere else.”

I talked with Huw Jennings at the youth academy of Fulham, in London, as we watched a group of 10-year-olds train. They were louder and more physically animated than the boys I saw in Amsterdam. “What they do at Ajax is a little rote for my taste,” Jennings said. “We are more apt to let the game be the teacher.” He added that he believed Ajax “had become a caricature of itself.” The last time he visited, he sensed that the dealmaking had breached the complex itself. “That dining area was crawling with agents,” he said, “right among the players and their parents.” (I did not see this during my visits.)

Jennings acknowledged that, based on the methods pioneered by Ajax, top clubs all over Europe were scouting very young kids and enrolling them in their academies. A book published in 2009 by the British journalist Chris Green, “Every Boy’s Dream,” estimated that 10,000 were being trained by clubs in England. They are cheap investments for clubs wanting to scoop up every boy with even a remote chance of one day becoming a top footballer.

Jennings said that his scouts, in response to the “unsuitability of the indigenous population of Britain” — children who are too sedentary and spend their time with video games — were increasingly focused “on the inner city of London, among Africans, Eastern Europeans and Caribbeans.”

Fulham, like Ajax, is often a seller of talent. It recently sold a 20-year-old to Manchester United for seven million pounds, or more than \$10 million. “It’s a little ugly talking about the financial terms,” Jennings said. “I don’t like to do it. It feels not too far off from the slave trade.”

Everyone draws the line somewhere. Jennings told me that he recently received a call from a rival club asking if it could schedule a game against his “elite 5s” — 5-year-olds. He replied, “We don’t have elite 5s, but we’ll play your expectant mothers.”

There are two ways to become a world-class soccer player. One is to spend hours and hours in pickup games — in parks, streets, alleyways — on imperfect surfaces that, if mastered, can give a competitor an advantage when he finally graduates to groomed fields. This is the Brazilian way and also the model in much of the rest of South America, Central America and the soccer hotbeds of Africa. It is like baseball in the Dominican Republic. Children play all the time and on their own.

The other way is the Ajax method. Scientific training. Attention to detail. Time spent touching the ball rather than playing a mindless number of organized games.

The more thoughtful people involved in developing U.S. soccer talent know that we conform to neither model. We are a much larger nation, obviously, than the Netherlands. Our youth sports leagues, for the most part, are community-based and run by volunteers rather than professionals. They have grown organically, sending out tendrils that run deep and are difficult to uproot. Change at the elite levels is more possible than at the stubborn grass roots.

Efforts to change American soccer culture are largely occurring in the older age groups. Some of the most talented players are being extracted from a deeply flawed system, but only after they've been immersed in it for many years.

I was at the youth academy of D.C. United — one worn artificial-turf field, no locker rooms, a world away from De Toekomst — on what turned out to be a moment of triumph for one of the bedrock franchises of Major League Soccer, the top U.S. professional league. Just the day before, the team announced that it signed its best youth player to a pro contract. Andy Najar, who was 17 and immigrated with his parents from Honduras as a teenager, was inserted straight into D.C. United's starting lineup right after dropping out of high school during his junior year. The signing drew only modest press coverage, probably a good thing for the team and an instance of pro soccer's still-under-the-radar status in the U.S. being of benefit to the league. (The parade of players graduating from high school and jumping straight to the N.B.A. proved controversial enough that it's no longer allowed.)

Najar, considered an exceptional talent, will very likely be the rare player to go from high school right onto an M.L.S. roster. But the decoupling of soccer education from higher education is an avowed goal of executives at the top levels of the American game. M.L.S. has been signing about a dozen young players a year — some from its teams' academies, others who have already played a year or two in college — and putting them either on pro rosters or into development programs. (Under this setup, called Generation Adidas, money is put aside for players' future college tuitions.) The academies of M.L.S. teams have begun to abandon the pay-for-play model and are bearing nearly all costs, including travel, for their players.

Also, dozens of top amateur soccer clubs around the country have been designated by the U.S. Soccer Federation as academies, with the intent that they will offer training on a European-based model — more practices, fewer games, greater emphasis on technical skill. They have, however, already drawn criticism that their coaches can't break an old habit: trying, first and foremost, to win rather than focusing on the stated goal of developing elite individual talent.

The way we approach youth soccer in the U.S. is no more thoughtless than how we groom talent in baseball or basketball. All the same syndromes apply. Overplay. Too little practice. The courting of injuries — for example, the spate of elbow operations for pitchers in their midteens brought on by coaches who leave them on the mound for too many innings. The difference is that because these are, largely, our sports, we have a head start on the rest of the world and therefore a bigger margin for error.

Ajax is a fulcrum of the worldwide soccer market, exporting top players to the world's best clubs, because they take very young players and shape them. The U.S., by comparison, is still a peripheral participant. In the past decade, increasing numbers of Americans have gone overseas to play for European clubs, many of them signing contracts as teenagers. But with just a couple of exceptions, they are complementary players, not the star-quality performers who make up the rosters of the World Cup favorites.

How much does it matter for the U.S. to ascend to the top rung of worldwide soccer and become a serious threat to win a World Cup? The effort itself would bring some welcome changes. Players whose training was paid for by professional clubs, rather than by their parents, would likely be treated as investments and therefore developed with more intelligence and care for their physical well-being.

But club-financed training is the entry level to a rough-and-tumble, often merciless worldwide soccer economy. Elements of it clash with American sensibilities. What Ajax pioneered, and still executes at a high level, can look uncomfortably like the trafficking of child athletes.

Ronald de Jong invited me to go scouting with him one Saturday. He had his eye on a specific target — “a 2004,” he said, referring to a birth year. A 5-year-old whom he had seen and was checking in with every month or so. This boy might not even be in school yet, I pointed out. “I don't think he is,” de Jong said with a slight smile, as if he recognized the absurdity. “I believe he's in day care.”

Ajax's success would not be possible if it did not draw from a well-organized, well-financed soccer culture. Any town of any size in the Netherlands has an amateur club, with highly trained coaches and an academy for its own top-level players. (It is said that Johan Cruyff was the only Dutchman ever granted his coaching license without having to go through a rigorous, yearlong course.)

I met de Jong at the train station in Leiden, and we drove to a particularly well-heeled club called Quick Boys, in Katwijk. A spacious locker-room complex with a private club on top had been built with funds from benefactors connected with the tulip industry and local fishing interests. The bar in the private club was an elaborate wooden sculpture shaped like a herring boat.

De Jong, whose only material benefit from his association with Ajax is free admission to the first team's games, showed a card that identified him as a scout and checked a schedule of games on a computer screen. As we approached the field where our 5-year-old was to play, he spotted him right away and said, “There's the guy!”

I couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed to me that the guy, Délando van der Heyden, born in September 2004, might actually be small even for a 5-year-old. The ball at his feet came up almost to his knees. He was “playing up,” competing against boys as old as 9. When the game started, he was exactly as advertised: remarkable. Délando kept up with the other

boys, a few of whom fell on contact and had to be attended by coaches, which he never did. He showed the ability to kick with either foot. He could receive the ball with his back to his offensive end and turn, with the ball still in his control, and head toward the goal.

De Jong kept up a running commentary as we watched, becoming increasingly excited. As Délano cleverly dribbled around a bigger boy who came charging at him: “You see, they will try to physically dominate him, but he will always seek a football solution. He always has a plan.” As the concentration of other boys drifted: “He is not looking at planes in the sky; he is looking at the ball.” At halftime, as Délano conferred with his father, who was coaching his team: “You see how nicely they are talking? You can tell he comes from a good nest.” Later, after Délano weaved through three boys and blistered a shot just wide of the goal: “This is unbelievable! At this age, I’ve never seen a player like this!”

Délano’s team was visiting at Quick Boys; his own club was smaller, a concern for de Jong, who feared it might not fill his needs. He had already asked Délano’s father to put him in a bigger club for the following season. But what if the family did not want to? “Then I’ll ask Jan Olde Riekerink to call his father,” he said, referring to the stern director of De Toekomst. “Usually people will listen to Jan Olde.”

Even if Délano turned out to be a world-class prodigy, it would be at least a dozen years before he could play for Ajax’s first team. He could not even enter De Toekomst for another two years. But I understood de Jong’s interest. Délano was well worth this investment of time and attention, because one day he might be sold to Chelsea or Real Madrid or Juventus for millions.

Michael Sokolove, a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author of “Warrior Girls,” about the injury epidemic among young female athletes.

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