

Revolution not Evolution

Australia's performances against the Solomon Islands have given cause for concern in relation to the ability of our players to adapt to various tactical formations, and to understand their individual roles within each.

While coach Guus Hiddink's tactical knowledge and experience gives Australia genuine hope that our national team will prosper in November, team performances have exposed what many in the game know as fact.

Australian football development and coaching needs fundamental change!

There are two ways to achieve this: Revolution or Evolution.

I support a revolution.

Evolution involves gradual improvement of the current system and personnel.

Revolution means recognising that our philosophy of football is the wrong one, that in many cases the wrong personnel are in key positions, and making the changes now.

While the Socceroos struggled at times to break down the Solomon Islands' defense, the Dutch national team staged a master class in just that against Andorra a few days later with slick passing, excellent technical execution and advanced combination play.

The truth is that the principles of play and flexibility expected by Hiddink and used against Andorra are second nature to Dutch, French, German and South American international players, who are schooled in them from very young ages.

Why aren't Australian players equally as tactically educated?

Fact: The technical and tactical development of Australian players has stagnated at a level where our players forge careers mostly in Europe's lesser leagues or in England, and our technical execution breaks down under defensive pressure making the maintenance of possession and execution of tactics difficult against teams on a higher technical plane.

Fact: Australian players are not taught a level of football intelligence commensurate with the best football nations, the ability to anticipate and recognise football situations and apply the correct solution under pressure at the highest levels of the game.

Whether breaking down a packed defense, playing different systems and the corresponding player roles within each, or the maintenance of possession under ball-oriented, active defending in the defensive third, our players are not taught these fundamental principles early enough. Or not at all.

Fact: The Socceroos lack cohesion as they adapt to new personnel and systems of play. What, then, have Frank Farina and Graham Arnold been coaching for five and a half years? How is it that our squad, which has changed little, cannot adapt to game situations and players do not know their specific roles within the full range of tactical variations?

More importantly, where was the independent assessment by the Football Federation Australia (FFA) to identify the issue earlier?

Whilst Hiddink must critically analyse the players, our broader and harsher inspection must be reserved for our development coaches, and more particularly our coaching and development system.

Here, in my view, are some areas of concern which must be addressed as a matter of priority:

Football Philosophy.

Australia's football culture - our philosophy on how to play the game - has failed.

Why? Because it is adapted from England through the proliferation of English coaches in influential positions in the last three decades and it is completely non-technical and tactically infantile.

Our highest coaching qualification, the National License, has little tactical information and we have no equivalent of the UEFA 'A' License or Pro License in Australia because very few of our coach educators, if any, are capable of teaching them.

No Dutch, French or South American has held a national position in coach education because their philosophies have been considered wrong by the English coaches who have spread throughout the system.

Sadly, the joke is on us because we have followed the English path and, as the great Johnny Warren shouted for years, it is a complete dead end.

Our play (like the English) is based on physical strength and fitness, a lack of technical skill, little emphasis on ball retention, a mentality to get the ball forward as early as possible, and a complete disregard for the skilful football artist.

Read the FIFA technical reports on our young national teams, their assessment is damning. Our philosophy has to fundamentally change before we address the system of training players, because that system is shaped by the very football we aspire to produce.

We need to work towards a new National Football Vision by adapting the best elements from the French, Dutch and South Americans. Australians are already physically strong and competitive which is why the English style of play and coaching has given us no benefits, since they rely on physique not technique.

Had we imported qualified and proven coaches from South America or France instead, we would have melded our physical strengths with technical skill and awareness, a passion to play stylish football, to entertain, and above all to attack.

Isn't that the Australian way?

It is time to build a football culture which augments our weaknesses, not our strengths.

We should look to AC Milan, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Boca Juniors and Santos for our inspiration instead of to English clubs. We should focus on Deco, Ronaldinho, Zidane and Robinho instead of English players. And most crucially of all, let's focus on Dutch, French, Brazilian, Portuguese and Argentine coaches instead of their English counterparts.

The USA have utilised knowledge from the Netherlands and France, adapted their football to their national characteristics (physique, competitive drive and adaptability - not dissimilar to ours), and have risen quickly to seventh in the world.

We should have done the same, and will do, when we shed our outdated English mentality and import the world's best technicians to train our own.

Technique and Game Intelligence.

1. Implement a National Policy on age-appropriate, small-sided games before the age of 13.

Whether 4, 5, 7 or 8-a-side, age-appropriate, small-sided games are proven to accelerate development of technical ability and game intelligence.

Technique improves through the far greater number of ball contacts. Repetitive exposure to

controlling, passing and shooting leads to earlier refinement of these fundamental building blocks of football.

Game intelligence also develops as young players are exposed to football situations at a level they can cognitively assimilate and problem solve. Attack, defence, combination play, triangles and diamonds on the field should all be learnt at the first stage in 4-a-side games before progressing to larger pitches with more players.

Maximum 8-a-side at age 12, down to 4-a-side at age 6.

France (FIFA Ranking 6th), Netherlands (2nd), Brazil (1st), Spain (8th), Germany (15th), Italy (13th) and the USA (7th) all play small-sided football at young ages.

Does anyone need any more evidence of its efficacy?

2. Introduce systematic skill development as a national priority.

First, of course, we need to value the ball and the ability to manipulate it with precision and improvisation. That can only follow a philosophical awakening.

Thereafter we need a system for club coaches to teach reasonably advanced ball skills to our junior players, the skills needed in 1-on-1 situations at higher levels of the game. This national skills initiative should be introduced and monitored at regional level.

Futsal plays a crucial role here, as do methods of training from Brazil incorporated into our junior programs such as beach soccer, football, tennis and street soccer through junior clubs.

We must change our philosophy to support and nurture gifted players, number 10's.

Instead of producing average players (internationally), our goal should be to produce great ones like Zidane, Ronaldinho and Robinho.

3. No competition or point scoring under the age of 13.

Far more progressive football countries than ours like the USA, Netherlands, France and Germany, have long ago recognised that playing for points and trophies in young ages:

? Encourages coaches and parents to influence players and results through selection of stronger, faster youngsters.

? Fosters kick and rush football at the expense of technical development; and

? Inhibits the fun of junior football, through which kids learn most effectively.

Coaching System.

Assess the current personnel against clear performance metrics, particularly in key development positions such as state DOC (Directors of Coaching) and NTC (National Training Centre) positions and make changes where necessary.

In my view, most of the coaches in critical development positions have been there too long with inadequate results.

Every NTC coach must produce technically sound players who have a high level of game intelligence. The players must understand systems of play, their roles and that of their teammates, be adaptable to any system, and have a high degree of technical ability in their defined role.

Why is this not happening?

Recognise England is the problem, not the solution.

For thirty years Johnny Warren talked about an English 'mafia' in Australian coaching, particularly at the elite and representative level.

As far as I am concerned he was right.

Despite the fact that English football has itself had to resort to importing quality coaches from the continent, today our NTC programs, State Director of Coaching positions, former NSL clubs, A-League clubs, and regional coaching structures are still dominated by English coaches.

Having played in England and seen first-hand the style of play and standard of coaching, I believe strongly it is not the style of football we should aspire to.

While Brazil win World Cups, play wonderfully inventive football and consistently produce the world's best players, England (and Australia in recent years) plays one up front, gets beaten by lowly-ranked nations (Northern Ireland ? 101st), and usually bores people to death.

Why would any nation look to England for players or coaches when there are more cultured, entertaining and significantly more successful options?

The French and Dutch have been significantly more advanced than the English in player development and coach education for at least twenty years, which is why Arsenal recruit coaches from France, Manchester United and Chelsea from Portugal, Tottenham from the Netherlands and the English national coach is a Swede.

Continental football cultures are far more technical with a greater emphasis on tactical demands and adaptability, and therefore require a far more technically skilled player.

English players have the poorest technique in Europe as a general rule, and are tactically naive in relation to their European counterparts, many of which have been more successful in World Cups, European Championships and European Club Competition over the last 30 years.

The majority of English coaches employed in development positions in Australia in my opinion should not be there.

Through their inherent coaching philosophy I believe many of them damage our progress through incorrect player identification, inadequate focus on and respect for technique, poor understanding of the tactical demands of modern football, and ultimately a misguided respect for English football which perpetuates the problem.

Any system or philosophy must be rigorously and objectively examined for results, so after three decades where has our reliance on English coaches left us?

No World Cup qualification, players predominantly in second-rate leagues and clubs in Europe, poor technical development, poor tactical awareness and flexibility, and a reliance on the hard work, long-ball mentality rather than playing technical football.

Further, technically gifted youngsters are systematically shunned in this country because our playing culture is a poor imitation from England, who have never played a technical style of football.

And what's worse, we play football in Australia not to lose, like the English, rather than to win with style and flair like the Dutch and Brazilians.

Appoint a technical director of proven pedigree from a football culture which we aspire to. In my view this covers Brazil, Argentina, Netherlands and France.

This Technical Director would be tasked with the following responsibilities:

? develop a long term football vision for Australia, including the style of play and of player to be developed, and formulate coaching systems and content tailored to this vision;

? develop a minimum 20-year plan to win the World Cup, and assess the relevant age group to direct resources towards in coaching and development today (eg. 10 year age group);

? assess coaches in the development system;

? train replacements where change is required;

? set national policies in all areas of coaching and development;

? education - holding coaching courses at UEFA A and Pro License level to disseminate the latest tactical knowledge and ongoing education of DOC and NTC coaches;

? reinstate and modernise the Fast Track Coaching system for current and former NSL and Socceroos players;

? assessment of national coaches and generation of Technical Reports on every game of all national teams;

? selection of national coaches;

? selection of state DOC and NTC coaches;

? monitoring of coach education at regional level by state and regional DOCs;

? formulation of coach accreditation and education policy at A-League level;

? formulation and monitoring of A-League football policies on foreign players, tactical requirements and style of play; and

? monitoring and modification of junior playing standard as a function of junior coaching methodology.

In addition the FFA should have a Technical Committee to provide oversight and assessment to the Technical Director's work.

Promote former elite Australian players to development roles, and aggressively train them.

Given that our national coaching system has, for the most part, been staffed by people who have never excelled playing football, Australia has a coaching culture which states that you do not have to be a former champion to be an elite coach.

I disagree.

The overwhelming majority of elite football coaches around the world have played to an elite level. It is time we identified former champion NSL and Socceroos players with a skill for coaching, and promote and train them intensively.

Appoint these young coaches as state DOC's (Director of Coaching) and at NTC's (National Training Centre) immediately, bring Aime Jacquet to Australia for a month's full-immersion training at the AIS to educate them further and put them all through UEFA 'A' Licenses. Major progress could be made in as little as eighteen months and in my view we would lose

nothing in the interim.

Every six months bring the world's best coaches here to train our state DOC's, such as Zagallo, Cruyff, Platini, Bilardo, Wenger, Scolari, Sacchi and Capello.

In this way we access the most modern tactical knowledge, and more critically different philosophies of the game.

Implement the Crawford Report at state level so that national policies on junior development and coach identification and education can be implemented.

Incredible as this may sound, NSW and Victoria, certainly the two most endemically political states, have still not signed agreements to align with the FFA under the Crawford Report recommendations.

This inhibits our technical progress as coaching appointments and content remain a political issue at state level, rather than the domain of a national policy.

NSW and Victoria Federations are clearly not capable of making judgements solely in the national interest. If they don't sign, they should be disbanded immediately.

Many of the concepts and beliefs above are the result of passionate discussions with former champion players whose views I respect.

Like numerous elements in this game, however, they rarely see the light of day because revolution requires an acceptance that our chosen path was the wrong one, and speaking out has cost many a coaching career.

In the end results don't lie; our development and high performance systems are nowhere near good enough and need radical change.

Our failures at youth and senior level, and Hiddink's work with Australia's best players expose this fact.

There are two ways to achieve this: revolution or evolution.

I support a revolution.

I welcome your views, whether player, former player, or coach.