



A Lesson in Total Football

A group of 72 enthusiastic soccer coaches attended the Ajax Cape Town 2008 Coaching Course over the weekend.

The three-day clinic, held at the Premier Soccer League team's home base in Parow, was hosted by newly appointed technical director Jan Pruijn and offered local football coaches the opportunity to 'enhance their football knowledge about the technical and practical aspects of the beautiful game', as the official press release explained.

As an aspiring soccer coach, I was delighted to attend the clinic and take my first real steps to realising my goal as well as being allowed a unique insight to the running of Cape Town's premier club.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect despite a detailed itinerary that outlined lectures on South African Football and Youth Development and time spent observing the coaching techniques employed by Ajax, known throughout the world as the Ajax way or simply the Dutch way, with an emphasis on how to watch and analyse a game. As part of the course all the coaches attended the Ajax v SuperSport match at Athlone Stadium on Saturday night and dissected the game the following day.

Upon arrival all the coaches were warmly welcomed by Mr. Pruijn and John Rowley, the ever-present head of youth development at Ajax.

Jan Pruijn is a hugely impressive man and I found myself hanging on his every word as he introduced himself to the attendees.

A professional coach with a full coaching badge from the Royal Dutch Soccer Federation (KNVB), that enables him to coach at any professional level throughout the world, Mr. Pruijn played down his history but has enjoyed a long and successful career.

After retiring as a semi-professional, he started coaching in Holland at De Treffers F.C in 1985 before taking on N.E.C. Nijmegen. Pruijn has also worked directly for the KNVB and recently served as the head of Ajax international youth development while he has also spread his extensive knowledge of the game working with players and coaches in the US, the Far East, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and many more.

John Rowley offered for me one of the most delightful and endearing insights to the game we all know and love when he likened planning and setting up a training session to how you would plan and prepare your house and dinner table for dinner guests. The anecdote was so delightfully delivered and so well received by the attending coaches that it seemed, to me, at least to set the tone for a relaxed and jovial atmosphere throughout the weekend.

I was somewhat less impressed with Ajax head coach Craig Rosslee who gave a brief chat on his experiences as a coach and how he came to be in the envious position as manager of arguably one of the most professionally run clubs in the country.

Rosslee has a South Africa Football Association (SAFA) Level Two and is one of a small number of players who have made a successful transition from player to coach.

However, I quickly forgave the man after learning that his wife had given birth the previous day, while he also had the little matter of the match with league champions SuperSport on his mind.

Assistant coach Wilfred Mugeyi was also afforded the opportunity to chat to the coaches and I enjoyed hearing the views of the man who not long ago started his path to becoming a top boss. Mugeyi, affectionately known as Willie, coached the Ajax under 13s for a season before making the step up to assistant under Rosslee.

Much of the clinic was spent observing Mr Pruijn at work as he put the Ajax youngsters through their paces.

I found myself manically jotting down cone placements and player positions to make sure I didn't miss a thing. Each session was slightly altered to cater for the different age groups.

The under 13s and under 15s focused mainly on passing drills, which incorporated all aspects of the game, from control, timing and fitness to teamwork etc. while for the club's Vodacom team, the under-19's, the regime was a lot more up-tempo with a higher technical content to the drills. For the watching coaches all the sessions offered an invaluable look into the methods employed by the club that could be taken away and replicated.

For some of the coaches, the training went further as they were able to get their boots dirty and take a more active part in the clinic and test their own training methods on the Ajax youngsters under the scrutiny of the watching coaches. Mr Pruijn was on hand to offer his advice as to how best to maximise the drills that were prepared.

But I opted to watch and learn and pick the brains of the other coaches at the clinic. Every single person I spoke to had football flowing through their veins and it was truly fascinating and inspiring to listen to their stories; from views about the local and international game and their experiences as both players and coaches to what it is that drives them to succeed as a coach today.

I had often wondered how or where a club like Ajax fits into an environment like Cape Town or South Africa in general where the professionalism of domestic soccer is still struggling against rife corruption amid the harsh conditions that many South Africans live in. I wondered how Ajax benefited the amateur clubs if its aim was to develop the best players for itself.

But after three days within the club, I was convinced of the positive effect Ajax has on aspiring soccer players as well as the wider game.

Ajax stands as a beacon to beaming hopefuls and gives the kids high aspirations to strive for. And the local coaches know this. Sure there are some who want to hold onto their best players in the hope of building a side able to compete for domestic honours. But I found this attitude was few and far between with the coaches I spoke to. They realise that Ajax offers the stable and professional environment a young hopeful needs if he is to reach his goal and realistically be able to cope with the physical and mental demands of the professional game.

Ajax often holds open trials for youngsters hoping to be snapped up by the club and while I was there they hosted well over 400 eager kids. I overheard one of the coaches saying how out of that massive bunch there were seven that had been identified as possible Ajax stock while he went on to say that he thought maybe one or two of that group could make it as a professional footballer. High hopes indeed.

So, to the big game then. In all discussions leading up to the match, no one seemed overly confident that Ajax would claim maximum points and we probed Mr Pruijn for any indication into how the side would line up, what their tactics would be and how they had prepared for such a big game. Naturally we weren't privy to any crucial details with the game still hours away but were given a lesson in the Ajax way as we tried to understand just what sets the club's coaching philosophy apart from other clubs through out the world.

The Dutch way, as previously mentioned employs a style of football known as 'Total Football'.

This philosophy is an influential tactical theory that encourages all players to take over the role of any other player in the team whereby defenders are given the scope get forward while attack-minded players help out in defence.

It was pioneered by Ajax Amsterdam and enjoyed massive success in the 1970's with Dutch legend Johan Cruyff probably the system's most famous exponent.

What this translates to is a very definitive way of playing that has become part of a shared heritage and culture within the club. Players of today are eager to emulate the success of the heroes of the past and continue the Ajax philosophy that in footballing terms translates to an attacking 4-3-3 system with an emphasis on passing and moving.

I witnessed this philosophy first hand on Saturday night, when seemingly against all odds, **Ajax defeated SuperSport United 1-0.**

Prior to the game, all the coaches were instructed to keep their analysis of the match simple and focus on a few key areas such as looking at the players who had been at the club the longest and had therefore absorbed fully the Ajax style of play.

After just two days under the expert tutelage of Mr. Pruijn I went to the match confident that I could better dissect the game and record the key moments.

Ajax were impressive and deserved their hard fought victory that night with a well-taken goal in a game that provided plenty of talking points. It was certainly very interesting to see the home side's game plan unfold, to which SuperSport seemingly had no answer.

The coaches were in their element the following day and gave some excellent assessments that were greeted by nods of approval from their fellow coaches as well as Pruijn, who was superb throughout the entire weekend with his open and honest responses.

Listening to the comments it was clear that everyone had benefited in some way from the course and all seem eager to try out their newly formed ideas.

Ajax were pleased with the way the course was received and intend to offer further clinics in the near future with advanced courses for higher qualified coaches also in the pipelines.

The Urban Warriors play their next game in the Telkom Cup against Golden Arrows at Athlone Stadium on Sunday 09 November at 18h00. The only English Premier League game taking place at that time is Fulham v Newcastle so you have no excuse not to be there.

Ajax jou lekker ding.

Trevor Kramer