

Arsene Wenger and Arsenal FC

FACILITIES

The club's extensive training camp (located about 30 miles north of London) contains ten practice fields, with the potential for further expansion in the future. Training conditions are ideal:

All practice fields remain in optimum condition because they are used on a rotating schedule, allowing the turf to regenerate continuously. The A-team has three fields plus a separate field for goalkeeping, while the 17-year-olds, 19-year-olds and reserve team practice on a total of six fields. In addition to the standard markings, each field has extra lines for small practice games and running exercises.

These facilities, including the building complex, were designed according to Arsène Wenger's specifications. Wenger developed and refined his ideas primarily while working as a coach in Japan and France.

Adjacent to the fields is a large building complex, which is illuminated mostly by natural light and houses the administrative, youth and professional divisions all under one roof:

- Locker rooms, physical therapy rooms and pool for all teams
- Restaurant
- Large, well-lighted weight room for all players
- Administration
- Classrooms for part-time instruction under salaried teacher

An indoor field is also in the planning stages.

ONE COACH, MANY RESPONSIBILITIES

When Arsène Wenger came aboard, Arsenal gained a coach with solid ideas about game philosophy, training principles and practice methods. He is eager to share his conception of modern, attractive soccer, both on the practice field and in

discussions with fellow coaches. His ideas, demonstrations and incentives have benefited not only the professional team, but the youth coaches as well.

- Wenger restructured Arsenal's talent promotion and training program from the ground up. He personally oversees the development of the most talented youth players and is in constant touch with their coaches. This approach carries over into the professional division, where he continues to work intensively with talented young players, in extra sessions as well as during regular practice.
- In addition to his day-to-day coaching of the professional team, Wenger is also a coach and manager in the personnel union (this is quite common in England), which makes him responsible for all transfers and contracts for the professional and youth divisions.
- On top of all this, he also acts as club supervisor, observing the youth and reserve teams' matches and analysing them with the appropriate coaches.

WENGER'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE GAME

Arsenal uses a 4-5-1 system. Wenger is constantly working to refine this system on the levels of both group and team tactics.

The team's defence is very attack-oriented. They attack their opponents early with a midfield press that alternates between a diamond formation and a back four. This tactic represents a calculated risk that the coach and his players are willing to accept (since most of the players are English and French, they have been playing without a sweeper since they were children).

- Wenger demands aggressive, ball-oriented defence from his players and cultivates it with lots of practice games in tight spaces. When Arsenal gets the ball, its attack is very forward-focused. Square passes and runs parallel to the endline are to be avoided.

However, contrary to the "typical English" playing style, Arsenal relies mainly on short passes in the opposition's half - until they get close to the goal, where every player is encouraged to take risks and go for the goal with confidence and determination. Errors are allowed, but playing carelessly and losing the ball is forbidden.

- Wenger places special emphasis on communication within the team. Every exercise is accompanied by shouts and commands that are loud and clear - aggressively so, if the situation requires it - and successful plays are greeted with cheers and applause.

Players are expected to be actively engaged with one another and to cooperate in building team spirit, morale and enthusiasm for the Arsenal style.

WENGER'S TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

- The whole project has been very much Mr Wenger's. It will certainly cement the Continental system of training at Arsenal, where activities are regulated to the stopwatch, and a lot of emphasis placed on long warm ups and warm downs before and after training and matches.
- Jogging and stretching are still key elements, but sessions are based on the science of counterbalancing static and dynamic flexibility and maintaining an equality between passive and active methods.
- The new facility includes a hydrotherapy unit offering light swimming, Jacuzzi and steam rooms. These play an important part in Wenger's warm-down routines, particularly the day after matches.
- Hydrotherapy is also important in treating injuries: the water supports the body weight, enabling players to exercise muscles around the injury, stimulate blood flow and hence recover more quickly.
- Equipment such as exercise bikes is also a fundamental part of the warm-up/warm-down routine.
- Another aspect to the gym work is building up strength, power, speed and endurance, which is where equipment like the multi-station comes in.
- It is understood that players have their own fitness routines and set exercises to reach personal goals.
- The training methods are combined with a high-intensity diet of vegetables, carbohydrate and fat in the correct proportions. This was adhered to quite strictly when Wenger first arrived.
- Far more attention is given to the correct amount of fluid intake with emphasis on still water rather than fizzy drinks. The order the food is eaten is important, particularly on match days; for example crudities followed by chicken, then pasta. No food is eaten in the last hour before a match. For away games, dietary sheets are

agreed with hotels in advance and adequate space found for those obligatory stretches.

- All this then ensures that recovery from matches and injuries is quicker; players do more work in training sessions, and are much sharper through the season.
- And being in top shape physically, means they are mentally sharper and footballers' professional lives benefit by careers extending up to another three or so years.
- And a steady stream of Wenger trained young footballers will emerge, either pushing for a place in the first team, or to be sold on the open market. So it could well be the most important and shrewd investment, Arsenal have ever made.

THE RESERVE TEAM: TRAINING METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The reserve team coach's main responsibility is to prepare players for the professional team, and he works closely with the head coach to do so. Before every session, they discuss which reserve players should practice with the professional team. This combined with the players' academic responsibilities; means that sometimes there is no practice session for the reserve team. On these days, their coach assists with the A-team's session, which keeps him up to date on their exercises and training concepts.

The reserve team plays in a round robin against the other Premier League youth teams. Since the idea is to give all youth player's maximum exposure to match play, this tournament does not include scoring, advancement or relegation. In spite of this, all the teams try hard and keep up a fast pace, because these matches have a high prestige value for them.

Wenger always observes these matches, which helps motivate the players even more.

Training methods and concepts for the reserve and youth teams are almost identical to those of the professional team:

- Positional play without opponents
- Group and team defence tactics
- Coordination training
- Games in tight spaces
- Games on one goal.

SUMMARY

Whether this club scores a major international victory or not, their coaches are definitely on the right track with their current approach. Wenger has provided Arsenal with a solid soccer philosophy. And instead of just talking about the importance of a close connection between the pros and the youth team, Arsenal has created one.

At Arsenal, like any other big professional club, the pressure to succeed is great. Fortunately, this is one club that seems to have infinite patience and confidence in the work of its head coach and his team.

Wenger always gives his players the first day off after matches. He believes that mental regeneration with family and/or friends is more important for his players than the customary regeneration run, which functions more as physical regeneration and has no proven training benefits.

The team normally does not meet until the second day after the match. Practice sessions always start at 11:00 am. A relaxed practice atmosphere is very important to Wenger, which is why he requires his players to arrive at the training camp one hour early, so they can mentally prepare themselves for the 90-minute session ahead, at leisure and without stress.

Two days before a match, practice lasts only 60 minutes and typically focuses on set plays and short-term exertions (like sprints and shooting) that require lots of takeoff power.

TEAM-BUILDING

During practice, Wenger demonstrates the same excitement and engagement he requires of his players. The mood is positive and light, even though all the players are intensely focused. Since practice sessions are frequently closed to the public (including journalists), everyone involved can play "naturally." When asked about the potential difficulty of working with so many so-called "stars," Wenger replied:

"It isn't difficult at all! Without cameras, journalists and kibitzers, every player can be natural, and no one has to put on an act. So everyone interacts normally. Problems only arise when the media is constantly present."

Arsenal holds only one press conference per week (every Friday).

The team gathers together for lunch and the break (massage, etc.) that follows. Afterwards, players are allowed to leave the training camp. Altogether, they spend four to five hours "on campus" every day.

PRACTICE SCHEDULE AND EXERCISES

Every practice session is informed and shaped by observations from the previous match. However, we can sketch an outline of a typical session:

- Warm-up takes place indoors and consists of cycling, soccer tennis and strength exercises. Strength training exercises are determined at the beginning of each warm-up and led by a fitness coach.

To help determine the direction of individual fitness training, endurance and speed tests take place throughout the season as necessary.

- The main session starts with small games focusing on attack tactics: short pass combinations, moving up from the backfield, and 1 v. 1 situations on the goal. Alternatively, this part of the session may also focus on technique, coordination or speed.

- Players then move on to practice positional play and finishing, as well as individual and group tactics such as the back four, defensive play for midfielders and attackers, offsides situations and defending in 1 v. 1 situations.

- The session concludes with endurance training: primarily practice games, occasionally running without the ball.

According to Wenger's training concept, these methods are essential for successful tactical play (compact defence, forward passes, short pass combinations).

For exercises focusing on attacking play, Wenger uses fields designed according to his specifications. This allows players to approximate the tactics they expect to use in the next match and the required techniques more closely. Since a smaller field speeds up the game, players are forced to deal with intense time and opposition pressure.

TRAINING WITH PRACTICE GAMES

While Wenger delegates plenty of work to his two assistant coaches, he still takes on the majority of the responsibility for training himself. He discusses the schedule with his assistants before each practice session. This structured planning and the division of labour it requires makes a difference that shows.

- Whether it is a complex tactics exercise or a simple speed exercise without the ball, Wenger pays close attention, analyses results and makes corrections as needed. In this way he shares with players his optimism and confidence that the same mistake will not happen again on the next try. Though the pace is intense and concentration is essential, players are still supposed to have fun at practice. Wenger yells out encouragement and gives each player clear commands and instructions during the exercises.

Typical games and exercises to teach individual, group and team tactical play are introduced during the practice sessions. Coordination and technique exercises also show up on a regular basis.

- Players practice the flat four with 4 v. 4 or 5 v. 5 games on one goal. Note: Sometimes the players themselves request this exercise at the end of a week, to help solidify their defence tactics.
- 8 v. 8 exercises on one goal focus on cooperation between the back four and the midfield.
- 9 v. 0 positional games on one goal (without opponents) help players reinforce and solidify passing and running patterns.
- 8 v. 8 exercises on two goals (in a half or two-thirds of a field, always extending across the entire width of the field) let players practice moving the attack forward.
- Coordination training and technique combined with speed round out the program.

YOUTH TRAINING COACHING PHILOSOPHY AND THE COACHING TEAM

In England, every professional team thinks of itself as an "Academy" or training centre, so 17- to 19-year-olds are already practicing in a professional context. Classrooms are available in the administrative section of the complex for academic instruction, which takes place twice a week, supervised by part-time teachers. Team eligibility is based on individual performance more than age, so a 17-year-old could easily be playing on the 19-year-old team.

Every year during the professional championships, the 18-year-old team competes for the FA Cup, which is one of the highest awards in English youth soccer. The reserve team provides "backup" for all the other teams. The best players from the younger teams are integrated into this team in practice sessions and during the reserve season.

While the coaches are not required to follow a strictly defined training concept, they are expected to use systems and tactics compatible with Wenger's conception as described above.

To promote communication between the head coach and the youth coaches, all coaches are asked to arrive at the training camp early in the morning. Wenger's position is "first among equals:" He has the final word on any decision, but he is always available for dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas with the youth coaches. He is also responsible for signing promising new talents, and he maintains close contact with the head of talent scouting. The younger teams are not included in this system. Instead, they answer to a youth coordinator, who oversees scouting and signing new talents in cooperation with the relevant coaches.