

# A BIRD'S EYE VIEW.

It was a project that took about three-years to complete, went across 26-countries and had just one simple purpose – to find a better way of coaching players to make them more complete and better football players.

As **Kenn Schmidt** went around the world, he observed a large chunk of what we see today in the world of football. Some of those observations were path-breaking while others were quite well known. After three-long years on the road, we finally get to take a peek at what Kenn has accumulated besides frequent flyer miles with airline companies.

**W**hat is the most important thing you need to possess when trying to create a successful product or service?

Well, you need to know everything there is to know about that product or service if you want others to buy it.

When Kenn Schmidt decided to setup his own style of coaching, it was important that he understood what the general teaching methodologies and practices were.

He needed to understand how the best in the world went about their job, creating world class football players.

Kenn has lofty objectives – to develop a new coaching method to produce a new breed of more complete footballers!

To achieve that level of excellence, his grasp of the subject knowledge has to be extensive, exhaustive and completely unbiased.

So in October, 2010, Kenn set out on a journey that would take him across 26-countries, travelling across over-200 cities

and visiting over 100-clubs along the way.

Throughout the 165,000 mile journey, he observed what the top clubs in the world were doing and how they were going about setting up their players to succeed in the sport.

He spent hours watching teams train, collecting data and information on training techniques, methodologies and overall player development processes, only to realise one thing – Talent is a universal characteristic.

"Talented footballers come from all over the world," says Kenn.

That said, he wasn't travelling to scout for European clubs, but to map the structures and philosophies that help these talents achieve their potential.

Through the Global Football Training (GFT) concept, he has been able to gain access to some of the biggest clubs around the world, to understand their player-development processes.

He even spent considerable time at leading universities and colleges in countries like





the United States of America, studying other sports like tennis, basketball and football.

What came out of it all cannot be explained without a peek into the journey.

### LEGS OF THE JOURNEY

So what is Global Football Training all about?

Kenn says, "My aim is to nurture talented footballers that are gifted athletes with a unique skill set..."

Through this project, Kenn charted out a means of experience football training in various parts of the world as well as experience their cultures to understand the role of sports in it.

Cultural settings, he believes, have a major role in determining football philosophies, coaching technique and the overall player development process.

"...we need to look at more than coaching. Factors such as culture, nutrition and way of life play a huge part in producing talented athletes and footballers," He says.

It all began at Liverpool FC, the club where Kenn began his tour of observation.

He, then, made his way through other European nations before ending up in Spain to end his European leg at the modern Mecca of football clubs, FC Barcelona.

The opportunity to meet some of the biggest names in football, visiting some of the best academy setups in the world and experiencing some of the biggest stadiums was just an incentive that added to the overall experience.

Then came the time to move to the goldmine of football continents – Africa!

If there is one thing that African countries are known for, it is for producing strong, athletic and skilled players!



Kenn landed in Egypt before moving on to Tanzania, Ghana and finally ending up in South Africa.

During the process, he studied the training process at popular and successful clubs around those countries, as well as the private setups that have been created by stars of world football, like Marcel Desailly.

African football is overflowing with passion, but the problems come from the lack of infrastructure.

After Africa, it was time to head to another, different variety though, of goldmine – South America!

If Africa is all about strength, speed and flair, South America is all about skill, guile and technique.

Kenn made it a point to go beyond the traditional powerhouses, Brazil and Argentina, and headed into the relatively uncharted territories of Uruguay, Colombia and Peru.

“The passion in Uruguay is out of this world”, says Kenn, when talking about the South American-leg of the journey.

In those countries, Kenn went to some of the top clubs and was quite in awe of the kind of infrastructure some of them had.

That set him nicely for the next leg of the journey, through the United States of America and Mexico, before moving into Asia to travel to various countries including Australia, India, South Korea, China and Japan.

Speaking the language of football in established and emerging football super powers, allowed Kenn to collect the kind of data he needed to establish his coaching system.

### **THE OBSERVATIONS - EUROPE**

Sure, Kenn may be working on one of the most interesting and effective coaching systems of all time, but that isn't the only interesting element about his journey.



Keeping his coaching system for a latter discussion, we decided to focus on the findings of this journey and the observations that gave him fuel for his coaching program-fire.

It all began in England and along with Liverpool, Everton FC and Chelsea FC, GFT also went to clubs like Bristol City FC.

While the Premier League clubs were giants in the infrastructure department, it was Bristol City that surprised Kenn the most.

The philosophy at the club was to outscore the opposition and play attacking football.

Over the years, the club's academy structure has produced over 50-players who have gone on to play top-tier football in the country – a fantastic achievement if you



consider the club's size and financial situation.

Other noteworthy events from the European leg of the journey came from Belgium, a country that, we believe, has one of the finest and youngest national teams at the moment.

The academy setup is quite impressive at clubs like Standard Liege and KRC Genk, but it was at a local private academy that Kenn hit upon a jackpot idea.

**Barefoot football!**

The private organization running the academy had players playing without boots, which was a regular way of practice.

As a result, the players had exceptional touch on the ball.

"...the skills they possess are unreal for



players at their age, and more clubs could benefit from adopting this approach," believes Kenn, calling the approach "phenomenal"!

In Spain, the entire focus is generally on the top-two, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, with the latter being known for producing some exceptionally talented players in recent history.

However, ingenious thought and dedication to the sport came through, maybe even at greater levels than the big-two, at clubs like Real Sociedad and Athletic Club de Bilbao.

"Working with a smaller player base means that these clubs have put new coaching techniques and player development strategies in place to turn local talent into international footballers," says Kenn.

Teams like Bilbao are rare indeed, only allowing Basque players to play for their first team.

However, even at Sociedad, it isn't uncommon to see a team-sheet dominated by names who have grown up in and around the region.

The advantage of having such a culture and tradition is that every single day, the locals

are cheering for those amongst them.

That takes nothing away from some of the incredible coaching talents, especially in Bilbao, where the likes of Luis Llopis churns out world class goalkeeper after world class goalkeeper from the Athletic Club academy.

### **THE OBSERVATIONS - AFRICA**

The biggest thing of note in Africa was the Right to Dream organization, a private organization that helps children and young adults play football while getting education at the same time.

Overall, Kenn was quite disappointed with the coaching philosophies and methodologies in Africa.

"Global Football Training went to Africa hoping to experience a new approach to coaching; sadly, this did not happen," he says.

There was almost zero-creative thinking happening to tweak the player development process, besides some barely noticeable changes to the process.

Overall, the experience in Africa had been no different from what was being done for years, in Europe.



**THE OBSERVATIONS - SOUTH AMERICA**

Clubs have exceptional facilities that make it very easy for academies to produce world class talent in places like Uruguay and Argentina.

Everyone is crazy about the sport and almost all the kids grow up dreaming about becoming professional football players.

The most interesting element about the South American football culture was the complete and utter lack of consideration for age.

The focus was almost entirely on technique – all of the time!

It didn't matter what age the player was – if they were deemed to be technically capable of playing for the first team, chances are they would be playing in it.

It didn't matter if they were fifteen or thirteen or eighteen – if they were good enough, they would play!

Spotting talent might be considered as important as developing talent and clubs or teams in Uruguay and Argentina are masters at both these aspects of the game.

Brazil, however, is reliant on the numbers!

There is almost nothing in the form of domestic coaching academies or coaching courses, but the number of children playing the sport is just mind-boggling!

They have a massive player base at a very young age-group level and more importantly, have an exceptional scouting system that hunts for talent across the length and breadth of the country.

**THE OBSERVATIONS - NORTH AMERICA**

Kenn had a lot of time to study the entire North American coaching system, especially in places like Mexico and the United States of America.

The most puzzling aspect of the United States puzzle was that for a country that excelled in the sporting arena, not just in American sports but also in Olympic sports, their track-record of football (the global version) was just too dismal in comparison.

Global Football Training went about meeting with coaches, visiting private academies, school training sessions, university-based training sessions and even visited an NSCAA Convention in Indianapolis to get to the bottom of the truth.

The results were, well, probably not as surprising to readers of this magazine because this is a case that we have addressed in the past, in abundance!

You see, the problem in the United States of America was not the lack of clubs or schools or

universities or even the lack of world-class infrastructure – they have it all.

In fact, funding is not a problem at all, in the USA!

The problem was in the coach's ability to produce world class playing talents.

The introduction of sport science and the influence of other sports has ensured that the USA has everything it needs to succeed at the youth level.

In fact, Kenn believes that others could really benefit from following the lead of these American coaching setups.

**STOP-OVER AT DUBAI**

There was a tiny stop-over in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where the brunt of football development fell on the likes of organizations like the Aspire Academy.

The academy plans to produce three international-quality players in every single age-group, but with the lack of a large player base and very little home-grown talent, they are struggling to meet those expectations.





"Some European clubs could benefit from this approach to coaching. Strength and conditioning are key factors and, by implementing new techniques, clubs may be able to develop stronger and faster players as well as reduce the risk of injury," he says.

Areas like goalkeeping have always been a speciality of sorts, for American teams, with players like Tony Meola, Tim Howard, Hope Solo and Brad Freidel setting the world-stage alight.

However, the issue lies in the overall coaching mentality and the need to have a "winner-takes-all" concept running through the youth setup.

From little leagues to schools to colleges, it's always about coming first at any cost, not player development.

With the kind of facilities and sporting passion the country has, we can only wonder what they would achieve if this level of competitiveness could give way to

actual player-development at the youth level.

Kenn also believes that qualified coaching is at a premium in the United States of America, despite all the efforts of the NSCAA to produce a lot of coaches through regular training sessions around the country.

Due to the competitive nature of the sport, players never develop well enough to play beyond college.

Kenn believes, "A structural change is needed to improve the tactical understanding of players as well as coaches."

"It is vital for the development of football in (USA) that players are involved with the game for a longer period of time."

"This will improve the standard of coaching..." he adds.

Match-scheduling is also a problem, especially at the college level, because



there just isn't enough gap to allow players to train.

The season is played out between August and December, with almost no space to breathe.

Add to that the 7-month long off-season and it almost seems like the sport is the off-season break from the actual break.

Coaches need to start training their players with a new mindset, equipping players with skills rather than telling them what needs to be done to win.

Mexico was quite the contrast in comparison.

Till the age of 13, players are only taught technical skills and the focus is on player development at all times.

However, the key difference between the two countries lies in the way parents think.

In the USA, the parents are focussed, to the point of being obsessed, with winning.

They put their children under tremendous pressure and as a result, coaches (even those willing to adopt better methods) are forced to play competitive games rather than have a greater number of training sessions.

All the USA needs is a slight change in mentality and it could well become one of the world's most feared nations in football.

## **THE OBSERVATIONS - AUSTRALASIA**

Australia and New Zealand have a strong sporting culture running through their veins and are generally known to be quite good



at finding the right balance between player development and competitive growth.

However, Kenn was quite disappointed at the kind of methodologies they were applying in these countries.

Every now and then, a player or two comes into the sights of European clubs but these have been far too few to celebrate.

While players might be on par with European and South American countries when it comes to fitness and power, technical and tactical abilities seem to be lacking.

In New Zealand, the focus is more towards playing the traditional "English game" or power and direct-attacks.

However, some clubs are making a change in their approach and teams like Auckland FC, who have four players under the age of nineteen in their first team, are one of them.

Another club, Wynton Rufer, has also made a distinct shift in their approach, focussing on playing the ball along the ground and creating technically skilled players at the youth level.

"Wynton Rufer has also created a unique setup with a good structure, philosophy and highly-skilled coaches.

"And the Under-15 team qualifies for Nike Cup, in Manchester, on a regular basis and ranks amongst the best youth teams in the region," says Kenn.

Australia has the foundation in place to build a great team and is working towards



creating regional talent centres to hone players' technical and tactical abilities.

The youth development structure has a distinct "Danish" approach and Kenn believes, this form of development is not only impressive, but also beneficial for the future.

Melbourne Victory is one of the top clubs to introduce a youth-focussed approach to their player development program – today, they are already enjoying the benefits of their investment.

Although Kenn was quite disappointed with the kind of coaching philosophies on display in these countries, he did observe a few pockets where the right approach is beginning to show its face, thereby ensuring that the future isn't quite bleak as yet.

Moving onto China and Japan, the contrasting fates are a great indicator of the kind of approach these countries have for the game.

China qualified for the 2002 FIFA World Cup but since then, the focus has been on trying to enhance the popularity of the sport by bringing in ageing players for their star-power.

The level of skill displayed by youth players was, in no uncertain terms, "close to being abysmal", and despite the potential size of the player pool, the lack of focus is evident.

Most of the academies are run by European players and coaches but the youth players still seem to be lacking fundamental knowledge, "especially in terms of technical abilities".

There are few bits and bobs of structured training academies coming up but only time will tell whether China will actually reap some benefits from them or not.

Japan, on the other hand, is everything that China is not!

The setup is solid and the focus is on producing technically solid football players with the aid of highly skilled coaches.

There are a lot of foreign coaches and players training Japanese children and the language barrier can hinder progress a bit, but only a bit!

Players are truly gifted, technically, even down to the age of 12, something that really impressed Kenn.

"With the current setup at clubs and JFA academies, as well as a strong focus on producing players with excellent skills, Japan might turn out to be a future powerhouse at

international level," he says.

Kenn also believes that with the current rate of development, Japan, who are already the Asian champions, might just end up amongst the top-six teams at the next world cup.

The clubs are also enjoying the benefits of this format as they, regularly, qualify for the knock-out stages of the AFC Champions League and playing the FIFA Club World Cup as well.

"Japan has definitely been the surprise package on this world tour and seems to have created the perfect environment for young players to flourish," says Kenn.



He adds, "I have only seen such positive signs in a few other countries and it will be exciting to follow Japanese football in the future."

### THE GRAND CONCLUSION

A journey that was originally scheduled to last a period of 12-months ended up being a three-year journey.

Some places like India, South Korea, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast missed out being part of the survey due to visa issues but some extremely big football-nations and traditional minnows were observed under their natural conditions.

Now back in Denmark, Kenn Schmidt has compiled his observations and set about creating the game-changing style that he believes will incorporate the best of the best, to make it better.

However, he is not as happy about the outcome as you might think.

"Coaches have developed a habit of using Europe as a benchmark and, as a result, adopted a conventional approach to coaching and player development," he says.

"In some ways, the trip was bit of a let-down as a majority of clubs and academies tend to think alike and employ identical programs.

"I only saw a few tweaks as some coaches tried to push the boundaries of conventional coaching," he adds.

The British Isles, Kenn noted, have taken a step back to regroup and change their way of thinking about the game.

They are beginning to embrace the modern style of playing the game and clubs need to start learning quickly, from their European counterparts, or risk falling behind.

The United States of America is a case of opportunity and potential being chucked down the drain because of the incessant need to compete and win.

There is a plethora of funding in the sport and training facilities and knowledge is also at par with the best in the world, if not better.

However, it's the application where the country is taking a hit and a massive hit at that!

Player development needs to become the primary focus and the game needs to be made more accessible to players from all sections of society.

Mexico, along with Denmark, are amongst the few countries who are following the right approach to the game by focussing on technical and tactical player development.

Japan too is brilliantly incorporating their cultural traits into the training setup, creating a large number of technically skilled players who are also adhering to traditional societal values like respect and their famed, insane work-ethic.

A number of clubs in Peru, Germany and Spain were quite impressive with their structure while Wynton Rufer, from New Zealand, was a real stand-out performer.

South America, though, was extremely disappointing as the lack of coaching infrastructure was puzzling.

Countries like Brazil are surviving solely on numbers and the number of players and skilled scouts is keeping the game alive.

**Regional differences** also played a vital role as children in less-affluent countries showed incredible dedication and commitment to training.

The passion is widespread and in these countries, the desire to get to the top clubs in Europe is much more evident than in the upper-strata of nations.

Regarding Europe, Kenn says, "Not long ago, children would play football all day long. That scenario has changed as several other factors have come into the equation.



"It is safe to say that young players in Europe could spend a lot more time on the training ground than they do."

In countries like China, with a one-child policy, youth players are finding it hard to commit themselves to the sport as an individual or as a team.

They are more inclined towards securing their future through other, more academic, professions and means.

Asia, in fact, lags behind most other continents because of the lack of infrastructure and, in many cases, the fact that football isn't the number one sport in many countries.

The lack of quality coaches adds to their woes and according to Kenn, the result is "a real threat to talent development."

Consistently, there have been studies that prove that children learn better at an earlier age and that giving them ownership of their development process is the way to go.

However, the current coaching environment is not as focussed as it should be in empowering children to enjoy the sport and spend more time playing & learning it.

There was a fair share of talent visible, during the world tour, and players did show some incredible demonstrations of technical and tactical skill.

However, the focus needs to be on developing player creativity and technical & tactical skills rather than focussing on outdated methods and rigid training environments.

Finally, the incorporation of **Other Sports** into the training methodology is one of the most important elements that coaches need to pursue.



Sports like tennis, basketball or volleyball hold immense value in terms of movement technique, agility and leaping off the ground.

American sports like American Football are a storehouse of information on developing power and strength with speed and agility – that can be incredibly beneficial for players on the football pitch.

This point, however, should not be misinterpreted!

"Coaches should not be looking to emulate all the physical attributes of a sprinter or wide-receiver; instead the idea is to incorporate certain elements that will turn players into better footballers," Kenn clarifies.

Mental training needs to be made a regular part of player training and right now, it isn't given as much importance as it should.

Kenn believes that it is the "missing link!"

"Mind training plays no, or only a minor, role in coaching, but it is a vital

tool to prepare youth players for the future, as well as produce talented players in peak mental and physical condition."

In the end, Kenn admits that this change will require time to implement on a global scale.

The key issue lies in the fact that by the time the rest of the world catches up to the, now, modern philosophy of football, leaders in this dimension would have moved onto the next best thing.

The key is to constantly evolve and develop as a coach and Kenn Schmidt, as CEO of Global Football Training, will continue his fight to bring the latest and best coaching techniques through a lecture-tour, to coaches across the globe. **CB**