

Training with an Eye on Detail

At Sporting Club of Portugal, coaches pay close attention to precise movements

By Roby Stahl

The emphasis in the Sporting Club of Portugal (SCP) youth program is on the identification and recruiting of players and development both athletically and academically once they are in the SCP program.

Sporting Lisbon has teams from 13 years of age until 18 under the heading of infantile and juniors. Once a boy reaches the age of 18 a decision must be made. Either he is promoted to the B team, loaned out to another club to develop or is released. Following the French model, academic opportunities are provided at a nearby school if the player lives at the Academia, the \$13-million facility that houses training for all the teams from U-13 to professional and includes a hotel with 46 rooms. Players under the age of 13 are brought into the SCP program, but do not train at the Academia. They train at various locations around Lisbon. Occasionally they will go to the training center in order to see what lies ahead of them if they continue to develop.

The youth setup is directed by Jean Paul. Under him each team is assigned two coaches, many of whom are former SCP players. Working as trainers are players such as Hilario, who played as left back in Portugal's semifinal appearance in the 1966 World Cup, and Jordanov, center back in Bulgaria's semifinal spot in World Cup 1994. All the trainers could play and demonstrate at a high level.

The emphasis on youth training has changed since Lazslo Boloni arrived in 2001. The emphasis is now on the smallest of details within the individual player's techniques. The players work on a certain technique for long periods of time. Lots of coordination training takes place, first without the ball. All the players received large doses of balance activities, beginning with the proper running styles in a very relaxed manner.

In the U.S. we tend to concentrate on explosive-type activities. That comes later in the learning process for the SCP players. The coaches are very good at taking small portions of the game and then breaking them down into the precise movements needed to improve techniques. This training begins at age six, while the player is still flexible in his or her learning process. These are very simple but important exercises. Even the stretching at the beginning of training and after activities is quite soccer-related in terms of movement.

As the player's technique improves and he or she grows older, so does the focus on the understanding of the simple procedures that are necessary to play soccer. The focus now shifts to understanding the player's roles during 1

v. 1, 2 v. 1, 2 v. 2, 3 v. 2 and 3 v. 3 play. This sounds rather simple, but these points are central to the player's success through his or her career.

The training we observed was highly organized, realistic and dependent on the coach's knowledge and ability to instantly see and correct the smallest detail or fault. Each player was involved in each part of the session and was constantly moving. As an example, juggling activities while moving were included. Once again the emphasis was on balance and coordination. Even throw-in techniques were incorporated into the training session.

The youth program is paying dividends, as several of the youth players have been or will be sold to other teams. Hugo was just sold to Newcastle of the English Premier League for \$13 million. Two other players, Quaresma and Cristiano Ronaldo, ages 18 and 19, respectively, will be sold to top clubs for \$10-\$20 million.

This is a two-edged sword for SCP. The money is necessary to finance the new Academia and the new stadium that is being built in time for Euro 2004, yet it is hard to compete with Portugal's best teams when you are always selling your top young players.

Sporting Lisbon has a proud tradition as one of the top clubs in Europe. SCP won the league and Portuguese Cup in 2001-02, but stood in third place during our visit. The coaches and players were under tremendous pressure from fans and media, as every move is reported daily. Last year two players, Jardel (Brazil) and Joao Pinto (Portuguese National Team) scored 61 goals between them. This year, both have missed games due to injuries and/or suspensions. It is important that SCP finish in the top two in order to automatically qualify for the Champions League. Qualification brings in large amounts of money. Boloni is very intelligent and reserved. His training sessions are brilliant and always relate to small, precise sections of the game. All of his tactical training is done through the use of small-sided games, building up to full-sided games.

Usually the attacking players had functional training while the rest of the team was working on tactical ideas. Boloni believes that they do not need to be involved in much of the work in the middle and defensive thirds of the field. He does have some strong ideas about their participation in the attacking third, however. Of course, the focus was on their tactical understanding in attacking schemes and options.

All activities ended up going to goal. I have never seen professionals work as hard as the members of SCP did during their explosive training sessions. The fitness staff was more than willing to share ideas.

All the players are tested and then put in four groups. Training was on a two-week schedule with three precisely planned activities depending on the group the player was in. For example, the older players did not do as much

explosive work as the younger players, working instead on strength training. Emphasis was on explosive training (Force Max) for the legs and arms, strength training for overall and explosive training for the legs only. The last grouping worked outdoors. Each activity during the plyometric sessions ends with a ball function activity derived from the game, always performed at top speed. The players are tested every eight weeks, with their individual training program plans based on that testing.

The players can play at high speed, but they have the ability to be relaxed on the ball under pressure. Tactically they are not as sophisticated as their professional counterparts of other European nations. Boloni is bringing this dimension to the team. SCP is following the lead of many other European teams by going to a multi-level play environment in the Academia. The emphasis is on technique and on doing it correctly. The coaching staff does not allow any "loose" play by the younger players. The smallest detail is examined and put in the proper place by the coaching staff. There are many soccer academies in Europe, but SCP is definitely in the elite group.