

# An 'Elite' Academy: A Discussion with José V. Portoles



## Introduction

It is widely accepted that an elite academy is one that produces great players, employs coaches with the highest possible federation titles, is hugely successful in winning competitions and has magnificent installations and perfect pitches. However, does all that suffice to say that a football academy is fit of the title “elite academy”? I would say not. (Sorry to dogmatize in this case). From my perception an elite academy is one that applies the optimum processes of quality at every level of intervention. This means that every elite academy should have a “model” of formation, chosen and established in accordance with their individual social, cultural and sporting beliefs. These should reflect and operate in accordance with the perception of those responsible for the education, formation and development of personal relationships within the academy. This is closely related to the “holistic formation” of the young child and their command of the football activity.

## An Elite Academy

Currently, it seems that there are different approaches or types of elite academies, which may be classified in the following manner:

- Exploitative: it looks to make use of “strong teams” to be able to “win” more tournaments; this being true for players from the earliest ages.
- Tuner (Refining): its principal objective is to ‘acquire’ talented players between the ages between 14 and 17 that can occupy first team positions in the medium-long term.
- Formative: its scope of action is in the “long or very long term”, directed to give a greater importance to the most influential phase of human development (before puberty) and guaranteeing full respect for the ‘being’ in development.

An elite academy can, of course, be a mixture of these three types, with more accentuated characteristics in a certain area. I, however, consider the ‘formative’ academy approach of the greatest value.



Boot Cleaner, Real Madrid Academy

All elite academies should be considered as ‘vital surroundings’ that nourish, as best as possible, the potential to progress according to each individual’s rhythm. Academy programs should ensure that they are not defined by interests foreign to the being in development. It is not acceptable to put teams’ interests to stand out at every age category above a player’s own individuality.

**Accordingly, elite academies require ‘respect towards individuality’.** This is of great importance with the very young players in the academy and is achieved by making use of what we have called the PISL (Plan of Individual Sporting Life or PSF Personal, Sporting & Football).

Adopting this respectful or ‘formative’ model of an elite academy, we can avoid the danger of it becoming a ‘mechanized factory’ where individual characteristics and needs are eliminated. The academy should be the opposite: a place where every individual is empowered in accordance to their own qualities and in that sense favoring a ‘sporting culture’ in which everyone has made an individual and unique contribution.

**The successful implementation of this action requires the unified participation of all agents that are in contact with the child, such as; the managers, coaches, auxiliary personnel, assistants, next of kin (fundamentally the parents) and the media.**

In this way, a clear message is communicated to the child, irrelevant of who is accompanying the child at a particular moment. These agents, some of which have a greater influence than others, need to be considered and “formed” in the model so that all interventions and communication is unified with that of the elite academy members; the intention of this approach is to empower the final formation of the trainee.

### **The process of development as a pedagogical process**

To establish an efficient learning process, it is important to know, as best as possible, the individual player and have a command of the methodological aspects that guarantee the efficiency and perfect control of what is applied.

The objective of any development process is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the optimal learning process of the individual student.

It should be understood, with absolute conviction, that coaches are not the principal actors or most important people in this process; it is instead the individual player. Coaches should adapt to the player's needs, maintaining a faith with them as individuals and helping them persist in achieving their goal.

*In this sense, it is not about making use of perfect planning or 'teaching' elaborate content. The learning process is the reference for what the teaching needs to provide, including: respect for the player and their needs, enjoyment and stage of development. This should be done without renouncing the discipline, responsibility and commitment which will develop over time if surroundings with a high emotional strength are created.*

Consideration should be given, not only to the content of what is to be taught, but also the influence of family, scholars or friends. We insist upon the necessity to incorporate the parents and other influential agents in the development process, all of whom need to be empowered by members of staff from the elite academy. From our pedagogical perspective, we cannot continue to give priority to 'standard content' which starts from the 'breaking down of football' until it loses its nature. Instead the content derives from the individual: taking into account each individual's unique development level and with consideration of the inseparable binomial "individual context".

The learning process is specific: not only to what is applied, but how the trainee is able to internalize it.

For example, a group of 11-year-old children may have significantly different characteristics to another group of the same age; in this case it would be incorrect to teach the same contents to both groups even if they might belong to the same level or age category. Additionally, any pedagogical and methodological process should entail an internalizing action; this is only highly efficient when the relationship between the player and the coach consists of an 'emotional' component.

In this line of thought it is very important that the trainer becomes an 'obsessive observer'. If the coach continually tells the player 'what to do' inevitably the type of player that will be developed will be 'coach-dependent'. The objective is to develop players who, instead of looking for the coach to provide solutions to game-related problems, can, themselves, provide the solution. This, however, cannot be achieved by repressing the sufficient liberty of action from which creativity and imagination can emerge from. It is important, however, to stress that this does not mean that players do whatever they please in coaching sessions. It is because of this that it is difficult to outline any strict methodological processes.

Instead, those in charge of the academy, whom are pedagogically formed, should master these type of processes, understanding that the formation of the 'being' in development requires us to know as much or more about the personal, formative, pedagogic and methodological aspects as well as the contents to be taught.



Team Meeting, Atletico Madrid Youth Academy

Resultantly, 'experts', capable of developing young players, may not come from a solely 'footballing' background. The best individuals in the elite academies may not be the ex-professional players, media savvy or famous individuals. In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the 'learning process' and the 'performance' are not the same thing. Players may show a high level of 'performance' and not make use of an effective 'learning process'.

**A strong 'learning process', however, will guarantee a progressively optimum and more stable 'performance'.**

Unfortunately, the patience to stimulate the optimum learning process is often absent and coaches fall into the performance trap. Resultantly, methodological 'shortcuts' are taken with the aim of achieving, as quickly as possible, performance in the short term.

An effective learning process needs time, and is the most secure way for the player to avoid the accumulation of developmental deficits. Moreover, only after developing a strong learning process can it be assumed that this dynamic will endure throughout a young player's life.

The 'methodological process' that is chosen and applied is a principal factor of influence over the final quality of a young player's development, and thus it can be comprehended as the principal tool a coach can adopt.

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