

St Mary's is the perfect academy for youngsters at the Southampton dream factory

Contrary to Greg Dyke's fears,
home-grown teenagers are being
primed for the first team through
Under-21 football, down at
Southampton



Ronald Koeman, the Southampton manager, believes in talented youth Photo: GETTY IMAGES



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6:49PM GMT 30 Oct 2014

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Those travelling along the fabled “pathway” towards **Southampton**’s first team get to experience enlightened coaching and tough love, including a club rule that any disciplinary lapses by Under-18s or Under-21s are not punished by fines but by a spell on the sidelines in training and games. They look on forlornly as somebody else is given a

chance to catch Ronald Koeman's eye. Indiscretions are rare. Dedication is high.

Matt Targett, a promising teenaged left-back, is the latest to emerge from the Saints demanding dream factory, making his third start in Wednesday's **Capital One Cup** win at **Stoke City**. It is this plethora of talent that ensured Southampton remained unshaken during the bombardment of criticism over the summer exodus of players like Luke Shaw, Calum Chambers and Adam Lallana.

"When another shell came in from somewhere else, the calmest people were those at the club," said Saints' technical director Martin Hunter, looking out over the pitch at St Mary's that is the destination of all his "pathway" pilgrims like Targett.

"People outside were mentioning 'panic', 'relegation' and 'selling their best players'," continued Hunter, who has worked at Bradford, Stoke, Norwich and Watford as well with England's development teams. "I didn't like the criticism but we had a plan. We've always had a plan. We could see the quality of the kids. Thirteen of the Under-21s were training with the first team until new players came.

"The board were so steadfast. There was a great unity. This is the best club I've worked in by a million miles because of the people in the building; there's a togetherness and a drive. What happened in the summer galvanised the staff even more.

"We got the right man for the job (Koeman) and then spent the money wisely. While all that was going on, the young players were training with

the first team. Ronald has a good look at them. Eventually, we would like 50 per cent home-grown in the first team. Ronald is ultra-supportive. He believes in talented youth. Mauricio (Pochettino) was good as well.

“Ronald’s calm, very focused, doesn’t suffer fools. He demands high standards and the players know that. His practices are simple, game-related. And he’s passionate. He’s ruthless but humble. He’s great to work with. And what a player he was! Some of the players are aware of his great career because we keep reminding them.” James Ward-Prowse immediately YouTubed Koeman, partly to expand his own free-kick repertoire.

Ward-Prowse is an established success on the Southampton pathway, and others follow like Targett and Harrison Reed, who was on the bench at the Britannia. “In any given week, the best Under-21 players will train with the first team,” said Hunter. “Not only can they smell it and touch it but if they’re good enough they can get in and around it.”

Contrary to Greg Dyke’s fears, home-grown teenagers are being primed for the first team through Under-21 football. “I don’t want to go back to the reserves team,” said Hunter. “We (Under-21s) played **Liverpool** at Anfield the other night, a terrific, technical game, which is what they are going to have to do if they play in the **Premier League**. They’ve dealt with the environment (and won 3-1). It’s Anfield. If they are going to be good they have to handle it.”

Parents are shown a video of the “pathway” at Southampton, highlighting the Under-9s in action, intercepting and pressing against **Chelsea**,

parading all the age-groups, including some skills from Josh Sims, already a champion of Europe with **England** Under-17s.

The “pathway” works. Harley Willard, a promising winger who signed professional terms last month, has been playing for the Under-18s, but also given run-outs in the Under-21s, scoring a 25-yarder against **Newcastle United** and on the bench at Anfield. “Harley’s just been away with the Scots,” added Hunter of the Scottish Under-18s’ 2-0 win over the Czech Prague.

“We have youth internationals all over the place. Matt Targett is captain of England Under-20s. Prowsey is captain of the Under-21s. Harry Reed is pushing through. We’ve got others in the wings who we think will kick on. Must be the Hampshire air!”

Hunter laughed. He knows how hard the club have worked in developing this “pathway”, teaching flexibility, technique and tactical intelligence as a footballer from the age of five. Hunter and his 50-strong development staff seek to shape the person as well as the player.

The moment a kid joins, aged five onwards, they are introduced to “The Southampton Way”, detailing the club principles such as “we aim high”, “we won’t hide”, “innovation”, “integrity”, “respect” and “we stick together, we fight together”.

Hunter continued: “That’s what we’re into: turning potential into excellence. ‘The Southampton Way’ means that as soon as players arrive at one of our coaching sessions, everything’s ready for them. With the weenies, as soon as they arrive, there’s a ball ready for them.

“We tell the coaches we want three things in the session: we want players coming off sweating with a smile on their faces and to have learned something.

“The golden age, particularly between seven and 12, is very important. One of the things from the FA at the moment is that ‘the game is the teacher’. Well it isn’t. It’s only part of how to learn. When they come into the building at five, it’s not about systems of play, it’s about principles of play. With the youngest ages it’s all about the ball and the player, 1 v 1, 2 v 2, maximum 3 v 3.”

Small-sided, working on skills, teaching responsibility. “Until they’ve got those fundamental principles, the ABCs, you can’t really move on. We don’t get position-specific until 11-12. We like them to play in one or two positions, so Matt Targett can play left-back and also left centre-half. Will Wood can play left centre-back and left-back. He’s got potential.

“Calum Chambers had a year or more playing in midfield for a purpose – to sharpen up his first touch and awareness. He can play anywhere. I tried to explain to him he reminded him of Paul Madeley (versatile Leeds United legend of the 70s). I got him to go and Google Madeley. ‘I see what you mean,’ he told me.

“We play a very flexible 4-3-3 from 15 upwards. The only time you can see it’s 4-3-3 is when it’s kick-off. Then it’s the movement of the wide players, like our first team. Jack Stephens and Jordan Turnbull are both on loan at Swindon. They play with a back-three but it’s not an issue. They can play any system. That’s what the best players can do.

“We have similar philosophies to Barcelona. We did a presentation at St George’s with Barcelona when Matt Crocker was here. It went well. One of our kids would settle at Barcelona. They are probably more draconian than we are football-wise. It’s ‘No 3 passes to No 6’, ‘No 6 passes to No 7’. Barcelona were very regimented in some of the sessions I saw. We are more fluid than Barcelona.

“We are inundated with clubs wanting to come and see what we are doing. Heerenveen and Malmo have been recently. Some of Ronald’s colleagues and friends have been. We’ve got a link with Villarreal.”

Kids crave the chance to attend the Hampshire dream factory. “You come to Southampton and you’re a good player, you’ll get a chance. It’s not the number of hours, it’s the quality of the work we do. We work them bloody hard.

“We don’t accept poor standards. We are tough on the players. At the upper end, we don’t fine them. If they mess up, they get one strike and then they don’t train or don’t play. That has an effect. We’ll hurt them where it really hurts. We get them to watch training, do extra running or just say ‘you’re not playing, he’s playing’.”

Southampton seek to mould good people, but with a touch of grit. “If you’re talking about top-class players, say James Ward-Prowse, he’s driven. He has an edge, always been like that.” England potential? “All the signs are there. Very focused, very mature. The top players are rounded individuals who also have an edge. They are winners in life, not just on the pitch. I worked with Theo Walcott for the England Under-19s and, for sure, he has an edge. Luke Shaw has an edge.”

Hunter expressed surprise about the Louis van Gaal-Roy Hodgson debate over Shaw's fitness. "Luke's a very nice boy but people forget how young he is. We never had a problem with him discipline-wise here. He was taught how to cook. We wean them away from being reliant on a family to become self-sufficient and Luke was down that road. Prowsey is different. He could have looked after himself at 14."

Southampton's technical director laughed at the suggestion that Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, another graduate, was too nice. "Alex is a terrific lad but, Christ, he's got that edge. Absolutely. He will go and kick somebody if he has to. It makes me laugh when you read some of the reports, and people say he's 'soft'. He's nothing like that." Wide or central? "He does like the central bit. He obviously played wide but I've seen him play well in a central position. Probably central."

As well as the home-grown prospects, recruits like the full-backs Ryan Bertrand (on loan from Chelsea) and Nathaniel Clyne (signed from Crystal Palace) are shaped "The Southampton Way". Hunter continued: "Paul Mitchell is the head of our scouting (recruitment). To say he's good is an understatement. We know where all the players are."

A lot of clubs looked at taking Bertrand but decided against, raising questions over his commitment. "Maybe we've got a way of getting a bit more out of them," said Hunter. "He's hungry. He wants to prove himself. He's done the rounds in terms of loans. He sees his chance here of playing regularly in the Premier League."

"Clyney is very grounded. All Clyney wants to do is play football. He's a flipping good defender and a terrific character. The whole club was

disappointed that he didn't get a chance for England (against San Marino and Estonia). Look at him: he's transformed himself into a Premier League defender. He's worked his socks off. We've had players here who've dug in, adapted and got better and better. That's the draw for the younger players."

Hunter's expertise is so respected that he was recently asked to talk on the art of defending at a seminar organised by the Professional Football Coaches Association at West Brom's training ground; it drew an illustrious gathering including the likes of Martin O'Neill.

"Tackling is going out of the game so it's more about interception," said Hunter. "We give our players clips, showing them about timing. We still want players to tackle – in the right way. Clyney can tackle. Matt Targett can tackle. Ryan can. We have to produce a modern defender. We want defenders to sense danger. With a 15-year-old full-back now, we'd expect them to have a grasp of 1 v 1 defending, deal with a winger, stop crosses, block crosses, intercept the ball and spring counter-attacks."

As well as enhancing technique and game understanding, Hunter tries to find and develop leaders. "Not as many as we'd like. That could be down to society. It's very difficult now to find a Tony Adams. We have three or four who are very vocal on the pitch and others who are doers, leading by example. Fraser Forster has a massive presence. He can be a leader. He's a presence in his physical stature alone."

Brought in from Celtic, Forster is one of a number of England internationals maturing at St Mary's. Hunter notes the intentions of Dyke's Commission to try to give more home-grown players a chance in

the foreigner-filled Premier League. “We do have a responsibility to England but we first look at whether a player is going to be good enough to play in this club and take us to where we want to go,” said Hunter. “If he is, then there will be a knock-on effect with England.”

Southampton’s technical director was still surprised that there was minimal contact from Dyke given that St Mary’s represents the solution for the vexed FA coaching staff at St George’s. “Why don’t they come and talk to the clubs more?” Hunter mused. “They’ll ‘say’ they will.

“Les (Reed, Southampton’s head of football development) has been invited once to a meeting. He was then going to be invited back for a course on coach education. Nothing’s happened. I hope the FA are getting things right. I care for the national team intensely. I had a great time at the FA. I was proud as punch to wear that badge.”

Many Premier League clubs privately worry about whether the FA is nurturing genuine coaching successors to Don Howe, Dario Gradi and Dave Sexton. They privately question the content of FA courses and the cost which can run up to £30,000 for the full Pro-Licence if done at St George’s.

Hunter is more upbeat and is determined to defend English coaches.

“We get a bad press. It does annoy me when English coaches get criticised. We have good coaches – we just don’t have enough of them. Steve McClaren is a good coach. One of the best is Gary Rowett. He understands about observation and communication, has a good eye for a player and has good tactical and technical sense.”

It's not all sweetness and light at St Mary's. On the controversial departure of Academy coaches Jason Dodd and Paul Williams in May, Hunter replied: "It was restructuring." Luke Shaw, though, tweeted his disapproval, saying "bad decision". Hunter added: "Luke didn't get annoyed about that. I think that's a bit more scaremongering."

One general point Hunter did make in the youth-development area was that coaches should be paid more. "That definitely needs looking at. The best coaches need to work in those areas. Everyone wants to aspire to get Ronald's job but that's not going to happen."

Those in the development game like Hunter keep an eye on the parents as well as the youngsters. "Some will see the child as the cash cow, the gravy-boat. Others won't; they want what's best for the boy."

Communication with parents and players was vital. "We don't pull any punches, we let them know exactly what we think of them."

Many get released. "It's the hardest thing, breaking dreams, telling them they're not going to make it here but we have a back-up plan to help them go elsewhere," said Hunter. "It's like Bayern Munich; if they can't play for Bayern, they play in the Bundesliga for somebody else, or in a lower league. That's what we're striving to do."

Hunter cannot remember letting a good player go. "Not so far. We're pretty good at sniffing talent at Southampton."