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THE COACHING REVOLUTION

Highly professionalised and extremely competitive, sports coaching for kids has become serious business, writes **Dhruv Munjal**

Rondos on any football ground in India are rare sights. For those wondering, a rondo is a drill that sees a group of players, typically arranged in a circle, trying to keep possession while another player (sometimes two) — termed the “joker” — tries to steal the ball away. You are allowed only one touch on the ball. FC Barcelona is the most famous exponent of this exercise, which has over the years helped them master the art of playing a quite extraordinary brand of passing and eye-catching football. For many of Europe's elite clubs, no training session is complete without the rondo.

On a sunless, blustery afternoon at Gurugram's Heritage School, some 6,500 km away from where the great Johan Cruyff first institutionalised it, Aitor Olmo feels the same way: the rondo is a must. As a light shower subsides, a score of 14-year-olds, all dressed in effulgent Barcelona training kits, appear on the pitch and execute a rondo with amazing slickness. Other parts of the full-sized artificial pitch are occupied by eight- and nine-year-olds playing a blissful five-a-side game, their faces lit up as they chase wildly after the ball. A bunch of parents sits under giant Barcelona-branded umbrellas and keeps a close watch. A nurse waits on the sidelines; injuries are routine. Later this month, the parents will meet with the coaches, a sports parent-teacher meeting of sorts. For now, they click pictures of their wards posing with certificates, a reward for their efforts during the season.

Highly professional and supremely competitive, this is what sports coaching for kids now looks like. Better infrastructure, more initiatives, licensed coaches, keener parents and a performance-driven mindset have all contributed to coaching ceasing to be an unstructured mess.

Olmo is technical director — a very European position — at FCBEscola, Barcelona's football academy in India, since 2013. With over 2,000 kids across the country, FCBEscola is probably the country's biggest football academy. Olmo, a towering, sublimely fit 39-year-old who bears a mild resemblance to former Australian Formula One driver Mark Webber, tells me that every drill at the academy has a purpose. “You can do the rondo just for fun. But we treat it as something that can help you improve your touch or your ability to find space. We try to play with the Barcelona philosophy.” Olmo's father, Antonio, played for the Barcelona senior team and represented Spain at the 1978 World Cup. He spent his childhood watching Diego Maradona do keep-ups in his backyard.

Discussions with modern coaches often

feature the term “philosophy”. While the philosophy at FCBEscola is characterised by touch passing and control and little physicality, at Tarun Sardesai Golf in Kolar in Karnataka, the culture is an equal mix of skill enhancement and physical conditioning. “You have to build an ecosystem. We make sure that all our coaches teach the same way — the ethos must not be compromised,” explains Rokhsar Vakharia, co-founder of the academy. Vakharia's school is a perfect example of how kids' sports now go far beyond recreation: all her students are serious golfers excelling on some junior tour or the other, with a steadfast ambition to succeed at the highest level. And for that, you need careful preparation.

At Vakharia's dedicated sports science centre in Kolar, players work on their power, agility and speed, as well as focus on nutritional needs. “You need all of the above to be able to drive the ball 200 yards. Till some years ago, people didn't understand this and such facilities didn't exist,” she says. Now children as young as 10 spend 25 hours on the course every week, honing what they believe is their true calling.

More than anything else, coaches seem obsessed with infusing a sporting culture that was, till recently, alien to India. Karan Singh, 32, a former national-level runner who founded the Indian Track Club in Delhi in 2013, feels that it starts with providing the right environment. “You need to be offering a habitat where the kid feels like coming to the track, a feeling of being at home.”

That also includes doing away with the age-old Indian ritual of touching the coach's feet; handshakes do the trick now. Even at FCBEscola, no player ventures out on to the pitch without shaking Olmo's hand, a disciplinary code that students must follow. “You can't be stuck in time. Our coaching ways have to evolve,” says Karan Singh.

The parents seem content. Ankur Khanna has seen his son develop into a fine footballer in the four years he has been at FCBEscola. Raghav, a bashful 10-year-old with sparkling green-grey eyes, recently went to Dubai for a tournament. Some of his friends have been to Spain, Singapore — and soon China — for similar tournaments. A left-back, Raghav tells me he is a Lionel Messi fan. “The opportunity here is great. He is travelling alone and playing tournaments abroad. You can't ask for more,” says his father.



PHOTOS: DALIP KUMAR



COURTESY: TARUN SARDESAI GOLF

(From top) Training sessions at FCBEscola in Gurugram, Team Tennis in New Delhi and Tarun Sardesai Golf in Kolar, Karnataka

Karan Singh's athletes and their parents are a tight-knit community that recently spent time in Manesar for a fun mix of athletics and leisure — a fair reflection of how parental involvement is no longer a remote affair.

Aditya Sachdeva has mellowed in recent years. The once-fierce coach has learnt to leave a player alone. For the longest time, he pretty much hand-held them, churning out an astounding line of national champions. His greatest success story, Yuki Bhambri, India's highest-ranked male tennis player, will make his maiden main-draw appearance at Roland Garros later this month.

At Team Tennis, each member of Sachdeva's 20-strong coaching team has a Registro Profesional de Tenis certification from Spain. Taking our bucket seats in the tiny stand overlooking the tennis courts at Delhi's Siri Fort Sports Complex, the strikingly articulate Sachdeva points to the neat footwork of a 12-year-old volleying in front of us. “We always start with the feet. You can have the best hands, but only your movement can take you to the ball,” he says. In between, Sachdeva keeps checking his phone — Sasi Kumar Mukund and Riya Bhatia, two of his

students, are away playing in International Tennis Federation events in Uzbekistan and Egypt, respectively.

His Spanish way of teaching the game is in sync with the punishing nature of modern tennis. “Skill-wise, we are up with the rest of the world. Physically, we are far behind,” he says. “All the players who walk in here have to work accordingly.” To correct technical deficiencies, Sachdeva uses Dartfish, a video and data analysis software used by some of the finest tennis coaches.

Only a few years ago, most tennis coaches were self-taught and the coaching restricted to bludgeoning groundstrokes and humdrum exercise drills. The use of technology was absent and most kids went home content to have taken a few games off an older player while playing a casual set. The demands have clearly changed.

Geeta Lal (*name changed*), for example, never misses practice. And she's not even playing. She occupies a seat in the stands thrice a week, paying close attention to what her son is upto. “He is 11 and very talented. But I come here so

that I can push him more,” she says. In Sachdeva's words: “A player is the vision of a parent.”

Such active participation, inevitably born of hyper-competitiveness, however, can so easily get extreme. Dhruv Singh, a former Ranji Trophy player and founder of Gurugram's Croire (French for “believe”) Cricket Club, explains how parents can be overambitious and impatient. “There are times when the parent is more passionate than the kid. When they send their child for a match, they get really disappointed if he doesn't play,” he says. “You must learn to sit out as well.”

This kind of eagerness is not ideal, feel many coaches. Karan Singh says the best results are possible only when the child is left to his or her coach.

The parental zeal perhaps also owes to the fact that private sports coaching comes at a steep price. While the Indian Track Club charges a fairly reasonable ₹1,000 for a basic session, fees at FCBEscola can go up to ₹80,000 a year. At Vakharia's golf academy, which offers a residential programme that also includes academics, the cost runs into a few lakhs annually. This doesn't include travelling for tournaments — a junior player plays 15 competitions every year on average.

Ajay Pal Singh, whose six-year-old daughter recently started out at FCBEscola, says it is vital to support your kid's passion. But he adds, somewhat sternly, “With the amount I am paying, she better take this seriously.” The fee structures at Arsenal Soccer Schools and NBA's academy in India, both run by Mumbai-based India on Track are reportedly similar to FCBEscola's. (Despite repeated attempts, India on Track did not respond to queries for this story.)

The fear of rapid commercialisation overriding sporting interests is understandable. At several “elite” football academies in Delhi, kids arrive for practice in swanky cars accompanied by nannies who carry their kitbags — the best facilities in an emerging sporting nation are still largely reserved for a privileged few. Kids here wear the latest Nike boots, challenge each other to FIFA on the PlayStation, celebrate goals with Paul Pogba “dabs” and possess an extensive collection of original player jerseys.

“We are offering world-class infrastructure and training here. To give this access to our youth at a large scale, sustainability in business is very important, and this is at a fraction of the cost of what it would be in Europe,” argues Dhruv Arora, business head at Conscient Football, the grassroots initiative that brought FCBEscola to India.

While the need for more money in sport is essential, Karan Singh opines that it is difficult to coach in a commercial environment. “That way, you cannot bring out the real culture of sport.” Om Chhibber, founder of the popular EVES Football Club, says that money is not such a bad thing. “If someone is charging you for good equipment and coaching, it isn't really a problem. Coaching, after all, isn't easy.”

To their credit, though, most academies, including Croire, Team Tennis and FCBEscola, as well as Singh's Indian Track Club, have quotas for underprivileged kids, often letting the brilliant ones train for free.

To further this quest for professionalism in kids' coaching, there are two things urgently needed: old-school coaches shedding their archaic ways and the emergence of smart young coaches. “We need to be open to new ideas. If a young guy wants to do something different, the old guard must allow him,” emphasises Karan Singh. It may not be affordable for all, but there is little doubting that an invigorating new culture is picking up, steered by values and expertise previous generations thought were impossible.

CORRECTION

The report, “Guns and roses”, published on May 5, stated that Parmish Verma was “shot dead” instead of “shot at”. We apologise to Mr Verma for the error.