



Giving everything for their dream
Feyenoord Academy's young players are put through their paces at their daily training session in Varkenoord.

FOREVER FEYENOORD

Almost half of the Netherlands squad at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil learned their trade in Rotterdam.

Sarah Steiner visited the starmakers at the Feyenoord Academy to find out more. Photos by Luc Schol.

The rain falling on Rotterdam casts a grey pallor on the entire city. Even the stiff breeze blowing through the streets cannot shift the thick blanket of cloud. Although this less-than-inviting weather is fairly typical of autumn in Holland, it somehow seems to suit Rotterdam particularly well. As the Netherlands' biggest industrial centre, the city is known for being slightly rough around the edges, its working-class credentials bolstered by the urban legend that shops around these parts sell shirts with the sleeves already rolled up. Nowhere is this mentality more apparent than down by the river. Europe's largest port lies on one of the world's busiest seaways, supporting 180,000 jobs, handling 450 million tonnes of freight every year and covering 12,500 hectares - figures that are almost impossible to comprehend.

The people of Rotterdam are proud of their city. They are equally proud of their football club, Feyenoord, part of Dutch football's top trio of teams alongside arch-rivals Ajax and PSV Eindhoven. *De Stadionclub* have won 14 Eredivisie titles and 11 KNVB Cups as well as lifting the European Cup and Intercontinental Cup in 1970 and the UEFA Cup in 1974 and 2002. Nerves of steel are a prerequisite for any player wishing to take on the fanatical crowd, electric atmosphere and expectant fans inside Feyenoord's home ground, De Kuip.

Although the club has run into financial difficulties several times in recent years, with several expensive signings failing to live up to expectations, it is now on a stable economic footing. Despite still struggling to live up to the expectations created by their illustrious past, Feyenoord are slowly but surely battling their way back to the top of the national and continental game.

Meanwhile in Brasilia, the sun is shining, showing off the city in all its glory. A moderate wind makes for comfortable temperatures and perfect footballing weather - all part and parcel of the Brazilian winter. It is the day of the Match for Third Place at the 2014 FIFA World Cup™, where the hosts face the Netherlands. Of the 23 men in the *Oranje* squad, 11 have a direct connection to Feyenoord.



All-in-one package
From recovery and nutrition to maintaining peak fitness, these talented youngsters are being prepared in every conceivable way to make history for Feyenoord one day.





Team talk Even the academy's smallest students have to learn to abide by its rules.

Five of these players, none of them older than 24, play for the club: Jordy Clasie, Bruno Martins Indi, Terence Kongolo, Daryl Janmaat and Stefan de Vrij. All of them took their first footballing steps in the club's youth ranks, the Feyenoord Academy.

Four further Dutch internationals in the Brazil 2014 camp also trained at the academy and moved on after breaking into the first team: Leroy Fer headed to Norwich City, Georginio Wijnaldum to PSV Eindhoven, Jonathan de Guzman to Villarreal and national team captain Robin van Persie to Arsenal. Then there is Ron Vlaar and Dirk Kuyt, who laced their boots for the Rotterdam side at the start of their careers. All in all, almost half of the Dutch squad have spent time in Holland's biggest port city – an impressive figure.

Just across the street

Rotterdam's school of football must be doing something right – but what? What makes them so much better than any other youth academy? "We've found our own way," is how Feyenoord Academy manager Raymond van Meenen succinctly puts it, before explaining that this path is not about being better or

worse than anyone else. "The results of our work speak for themselves."

In addition to the eleven players who helped the Netherlands secure third place in Brazil, the stars of tomorrow also enjoyed success last season. There was scarcely room to move on the pitch when Feyenoord's championship-winning teams were honoured ahead of the Eredivisie match at home to Willem 2 two weeks ago, with the U-16, U-14, U-13, U-10 and U-9 sides all in attendance to celebrate with the fans.

While running out onto that same turf as a first-team player is the dream of every child who steps through the doors of the Feyenoord Academy, these promising youngsters are well aware that this road can be a long and difficult one. "From the very beginning, we tell the lads that only one or two per cent of all players will actually manage to make that leap into Feyenoord's first team," explains Marcel Koning.

Despite this daunting prospect, the U-19 coach also knows that the rate of success will be somewhat higher in his team, as his charges have reached the top rung of the club's youth football ladder. After that, these young players will either move to another club or step literal-

ly across the street to achieve their long-held ambition. De Kuip's floodlights can be glimpsed through the trees, while the outer walls of the stadium are visible from the training pitches. This is the point at which the first team comes within reach in the truest sense of the phrase.

"We're in close contact with the team and their coaches in particular," says Koning. Former academy graduate and Feyenoord player Giovanni van Bronckhorst and his assistant coach Jean-Paul van Gastel, once in charge of the club's U-19 side, attend youth matches and know exactly which starlets they can already count on. "Where people once went to other clubs and countries in order to strengthen their teams, now they come straight to us at Varkeenoord," says Damien Hertog.

Like so many other staff members here, the academy's director also learned the secrets of the beautiful game at Feyenoord. "It's a privilege to work for this club," he enthuses.

Focusing on the team

There is a palpable sense of dedication to this club wherever you turn. Within moments of arriving, it becomes clear that the motto "Hand in hand" is both lived and played out here, all

THINGS GO WRONG BETWEEN 18 AND 21

The nation of Johan Cruyff and *totaalvoetbal* looks set to miss next year's EURO in France. What's gone wrong with the Netherlands?

After finishing runners-up at the 2010 World Cup and third at last year's showpiece in Brazil, the Oranje now languish fourth in their EURO 2016 qualifying group. Merely to reach the play-offs Holland must now beat Kazakhstan and the Czech Republic and hope nearest rivals Turkey slip up in their last two games. Few in the Netherlands expect this to happen. Tactical errors, plodding attack and defensive blunders have marred the Dutch campaign. Rumours even swirled this week that Danny Blind, who only took over as coach from Guus Hiddink eleven weeks ago and lost his crucial first two matches to Iceland and Turkey, could be replaced by former Dortmund boss Jurgen Klopp.

Ideas copied and improved

In the longer term, the main problem is that the Dutch simply aren't producing enough top quality players any more. Holland pioneered much that is best in modern football but have lost their innovative edge. When the "total footballers" of the 1970s first deployed their sophisticated skills and position-switching it was revolutionary. Now everyone can do it. Youth-development methods first seen at Ajax have spread throughout the world.



Setting a new benchmark Johan Cruyff in the Seventies.

Rather like the British who invented railways then saw other nations build better trains and networks, the Dutch have seen their ideas copied, improved upon or borrowed. France, Germany and Belgium now produce more top players. Turkey's Oğuzhan Özyakup, who scored against Holland two weeks ago, is actually a former Netherlands youth international who emerged at the AZ Alkmaar academy.

Caught between generations

Meanwhile, it is becoming clear that the Dutch may not have been quite as good as their results over the last five years suggested. In the 2010 and 2014 World Cups, first under Bert van Marwijk and later Louis van Gaal, Holland cannily turned weakness into strength by briefly abandoning their traditional attacking style to become defensively solid counter-attackers. Relying on breaks by Arjen Robben and the shrewd passing of Wesley Sneijder they came within a Spanish goalkeeper's heel of winning the World Cup in South Africa. Then, employing a five man defence, the Dutch crushed the defending champions 5-1 in Brazil. It is sometimes forgotten that between those two successful tournaments Holland failed horribly at Euro 2012, losing all three of their matches.

Now the era of great Dutch coaches is passing. Cruyff has not run a big team since 1996. Hiddink is 68 and a spent force. Van Gaal will retire in two years. Meanwhile, the once-fabled youth system of Holland's historically most important club, Ajax, has not produced a Dutch mega-star in over a decade (the Uruguayan Luis Suarez and Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic passed through as young adults). Changes introduced there after Johan Cruyff took over control of the club in 2011 have produced no discernible improvement. And the national team is now caught between generations. Footballers are at their peak in their late twenties but in losing 0-3 to Turkey earlier this month, the Oranje fielded no players between the ages of 27 and 31. At one end of the age range were fading golden oldies like Sneijder, Robben and Robin van Persie. On the other were youngsters like Daley Blind and Memphis Depay, with nothing in between. Henk Spaan, editor of the influential journal "Hard gras", says his country must stop living in the past and learn from the nations that have overtaken them. While Dutch football education between 10 and 18 remains "unbelievably" good, he says "something goes wrong between 18 and 21. Dutch coaches somehow cannot transform phenomenal young talents into mature senior players." And domestic Dutch competition suffers when top young players are sold too early. In the 1980s and 90s emerging stars like Ruud Gullit and Dennis Bergkamp did not leave Holland until they were 24. Now 20 year-olds are flying the nest. Meanwhile Holland's traditional tactics have become obsolete. "Cruyff still says we have to play with wingers ahead of the ball to pin the opposition fullbacks," says Spaan. "But full backs are fitter than they used to be, so you can't play like that any more. That's modern football. The Netherlands must reinvent its football like Germany did after its disastrous early 2000s."

David Winner

the way from the beaming eight-year-old boys scampering onto the training pitches, chests puffed out in pride, to the club's international development manager, who says: "I grew up here. Feyenoord is my home and I could never work for another team." The club's presence is also omnipresent in the city itself: every neighbourhood boasts at least one graffiti tag professing support for *De Trots van Zuid* or "The Pride of the South", and it is impossible to walk into a bar without seeing a red-and-white scarf pinned to the wall.

Even on a dreary day such as this, nobody at Varkenoord grumbles when faced with the prospect of training in the rain. It is a friendly environment with a strong focus on teamwork, just as the academy's management have intended. "What's the use of playing well if your team loses 2-0?" asks Hertog. Feyenoord's youngsters must give their all to meet the coaches' strict criteria. After all, life as an aspiring professional footballer is no picnic.

Nevertheless, the academy places great importance on giving its young charges a childhood and preserving their youth. It works closely with schools to coordinate training sessions with their academic education, allowing students to train in the morning before heading off to lessons while still ensuring that the school day ends early enough for these young footballers to spend enough time with their friends and family.

Social considerations are extremely important to the club. The director of the academy keeps in regular contact with his 220 players and their parents about more than just football. "We once found a job for one father and can also offer assistance with bureaucratic matters," says Van Meenen. The former professional referee considers it vital that the club sets an example, explaining: "We're not just raising footballers here, but human beings too."

Communications training and nutritional advice

In keeping with this philosophy, the players are also encouraged to fend for themselves and given responsibility for their own personal development. U-19 coach Marcel Koning explains how this works. "At the start of the season I sit down with each and every player to discuss his development, aims, strengths and weaknesses. We then choose three areas that require improvement and which the player can work on individually." This process is called the Personal Development Plan interview and is conducted with every young footballer from U-13 level onwards.

The academy's video analysis tools are also on hand to help the youngsters implement their plan as effectively as possible. Every match and many training sessions are filmed,



Ready for action Playing at Varkenoord's stadium now but within reach of a game at De Kuip.



Talent scout
U-10 coach Glenn van der Kraan (top right) and U-19 coach Marcel Koning (bottom left).



Organisers
Feyenoord Academy director Damien Hertog (top left) and manager Raymond van Meenen (bottom left)



Mighty oaks from little acorns grow
Many of Feyenoord Academy's players have become international stars, including for the Dutch national team.

with each player given a unique code that allows them to log in to the online platform and review their performances. Coaches can see exactly when and for how long each young starlet logs in, and students are required to present their progress to their coaches halfway through the season. “That means both we and, much more importantly, the players themselves, know exactly where they stand,” Koning says.

Together with footballing techniques, other skills are also honed at Varkenoord. “Being a professional requires much more than just talent,” explains Van Meenen. For this reason, players receive support in a wide range of areas, not least communications training. The academy’s budding stars must face the cameras of the club’s own television channel to answer questions as well as being asked about delicate topics such as problems with the coach or team-mates. Their answers are then analysed in special training sessions and discussed with the players themselves. The budding professionals also receive training from a mental coach and nutritional consultant, while a social worker is on hand to discuss personal matters at any time.

“They have to develop themselves”

The Feyenoord Academy operates under a rigorously organised system. Although at first glance it seems difficult to gain an overview of the club’s work, its digital club management system is on hand to help, offering a database where all of a player’s information can be entered. “This gives us the opportunity to bring all the different aspects together in one place,” explains Glenn van der Kraan. As the academy’s project manager and U-10 coach, he knows exactly what makes the database such a useful tool. “When a five-year-old enrolls with us and starts training, we open a file where we can enter every conceivable piece of information over the years – everything from training dates and school results to medical information,” he explains. “This is accessible to everyone within the club and means that each of the player’s coaches can call up the data they need easily.”

The qualified sports scientist is fully committed to the club. “I’m Feyenoord, my family are Feyenoord, and that’s the way it’s always been. Working here is a dream,” says the coach, who accompanied his sports journalist father to interviews with the stars at De Kuip as a young boy. He now coaches the club’s U-10 side – a job that continually inspires him. “It’s incredible to watch them play. They’re able to think two steps further ahead than we can and come up with ideas for their next pass far more quickly,” he says.

The academy uses simple methods to nurture these skills even further. For example, Van der Kraan does not let his team play against

each other in bibs, meaning that they cannot rely on the bright colours and must actually look around to identify which players are on their team. The academy also allows boys in this age group to play nine-a-side games rather than the four or five-a-side matches favoured by other clubs. “They’ll ultimately have to play 11-a-side football – that’s a fact,” says the U-10 coach. “They’ve got to learn to survey the entire pitch, so why wait?”

“It’s the best academy in Europe, if not the world”

Professional footballer Leroy Fer

Van der Kraan has an unshakeable faith in his young charges and is convinced that every member of his team can eventually make the grade. “We’re here to show them the way,” he explains. “We help them, we organise things for them, we train them – but they have to develop themselves.”

Forever Feyenoord

Many of these youngsters have progressed well, with some ultimately making the trip across the street into the senior side. The portraits and names of these graduates hang prominently on the wall of the academy’s foyer. Examples include Feyenoord first-team regular Terence Kongolo, or Jean-Paul Boetius, now a Basel player, or new Eintracht Frankfurt goalscoring prospect Luc Castaignos. Only the silhouette of a player can be seen in the last picture, and instead of the name there is only a question mark. Every youth player in the academy knows that one day this could be their portrait.

On the opposite wall are those players who have gone on to play for the national side, those who caused such a sensation in Brazil – particularly captain Robin van Persie – and they all have one special relationship in common. “We grew up together, this club unites us,” says Leroy Fer. His photo is among those in the academy’s reception, having joined its youth ranks at the age of ten. “Feyenoord is in my heart; it’s my club!” He remembers his time at Varkenoord well, when the prospect of playing at De Kuip one day was still a distant dream. Now a Queens Park Rangers player, he achieved his ambition and was part of the country’s 2014 FIFA World Cup squad. “It was the best time of my life,” he recalls.

When asked whether the Dutch national team have Feyenoord’s youth academy to thank

for their success, his answer is immediate. “It’s the best academy in Europe, if not the world. Part of the country’s success is down to them, yes!”

The *Oranje* are currently struggling to qualify for EURO 2016 in France and must now rely on assistance from Turkey if they are to progress. When asked why the national team is experiencing such a slump, Van Meenen laughs: “There are simply too few Feyenoord players in the team.” After all, having a sense of humour means looking on the bright side. ☺

FEYENOORD



Facts and figures

Founded: 19 July 1908

Stadium: Feyenoord Stadium,
De Kuip, 51,577 capacity

Head coach: Giovanni van Bronckhorst

Chairman: Gerard Hoetmer

Club honours:

Dutch champions:

1924, 1928, 1936, 1938, 1940, 1961, 1962,
1965, 1969, 1971, 1974, 1984, 1993, 1999

Dutch Cup winners:

1930, 1935, 1965, 1969, 1980, 1984,
1991, 1992, 1994, 1995, 2008

International honours:

European Cup: 1970,

Intercontinental Cup: 1970,

UEFA Cup: 1974, 2002

Feyenoord Academy

Director: Damien Hertog

Manager: Raymond van Meenen

Stadium: Varkenoord sports complex,
3,600 capacity

Honours: Rinus Michels Award:

2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014