

Coaching the coaches

Raymond Verheijen is one of the world's leading football conditioning experts. The Dutchman is the founder of the World Football Academy and had the likes of Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard in his first class as a 26-year-old. He worked as assistant coach at the last three World Cup's as well as in the last four European Championships, and was involved in the coaching set-ups at Feyenoord (where he coached Kamohelo Mokotjo and Kermit Erasmus), FC Barcelona, Chelsea and Manchester City. He has been educating South African coaches since 2011 and Soccer Laduma's David Kappel caught up with him during his last visit.



David Kappel: Raymond, you have been one of Holland's most outspoken football coaches but what many don't know is that your first class as an instructor had the likes of Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard and Ronald Koeman in it. How did it feel to have these legends of football listening to your philosophy?

Raymond Verheijen: It was 1997 and I was 26 at that time, and finally doing what I had dreamed of – working at the highest level in top football. Because I had to stop playing at a young age, the alternative was to become a coach or an instructor.

DK: From then your star started to shine when Rijkaard was appointed as Dutch national team coach. You have been at the last three World Cups and the last four EURO's. How did that come about?

RV: Rijkaard must have seen something during the course when I was instructing because, he asked me to become his assistant. Once you have that momentum, once you have that success, coaches and teams ask you to help them.

DK: Will we see you in a coaching set-up of this year's World Cup in Brazil?

RV: Yes, I am currently speaking to two countries and I will definitely be going to work in Brazil. But I also have a lot of other responsibilities, the most important one being the World Expert Meeting in Clarens in the Free State in June.

DK: You are continuously claiming that the English FA should rethink their fixture schedule – particularly over the busy Christmas period where English clubs play four games in 11 days. What's the problem with this fixture congestion?

RV: We have done a research study on 27 000 games, which is an extremely large sample, and what we have found is that when teams have two days rest then their results are more negative than if they had three days' rest or more.

DK: That also explains why teams struggle in their domestic league after playing Champions League or Europa League on Wednesday or Thursday?

RV: Yep. When you play Champions League on Wednesday and you play domestic league on Saturday or Europa League on Thursday and domestic league on Sunday, you have only two days' rest. When the other team also only had two days' rest, then the home team has a much higher chance of winning than normal. This is unfair. Both teams are tired, but the home team feel less tired because they have more support while the away team also had to travel. When you have only two days' rest and the opponent has three or more days rest, then you have a totally no chance, especially when playing away. This cannot be considered Fair-Play, because in that situation it's not a case of equal chances. Our research has shown that all the teams who have had three days' rest or more will no longer suffer the negative effects.

DK: The Italian and French FA have given AC Milan and PSG an extra-day in between their last league match and this week's Champions League last-16 round. Is this a step

in the right direction?

RV: They have read the research and some of the FA's have called for me to explain the research results in more detail, and based on what I have explained to them, they have changed their fixtures. As a result the national FA's in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Russia, Turkey, amongst other countries, are helping their top teams to perform better in Europe, and the whole country will benefit from that.

DK: English clubs are also well-known for going on pre-season tours, travelling for many hours and miles to widen their fan basis. Is this the optimal preparation for the players?

RV: No, it is only optimal for making money and they are sacrificing the well-being of their players to make

money. For example, in July I was in Australia and Manchester United was also in Sydney. I watched them training all week. They had just flown for 30 hours – there were nine hours' time-difference. Normally it takes the body one week to recover from that, but one day after arrival they immediately started to train for that week. You are overloading bodies and you are exhausting your players so, although Manchester United made a lot of money, they also contributed to their own downfall which resulted in their very poor first half of the season.

DK: One of these tours was United's trip to Sydney, which you have linked with Robin van Persie's injury problems this season. What happened with the Dutch striker?

RV: He arrived even later in Sydney and straight after he arrived he had to do fitness work and isolated running every day. He had flown for 30 hours and then he has to do running exercises. Firstly running exercises have nothing to do with football and secondly once again you are exhausting your most important player, a player who made you champions the year before.

DK: After closing your Man United 'case study', you recently stated that Theo Walcott's ACL was done poorly because Arsenal's medical team played 'Russian Roulette' with the winger's career. What was their mistake and could it have been avoided?

RV: It was the coaching staff that made the mistake. Theo Walcott was out for several months and then he started playing again. When you have a player out for two months, you first have to improve their match-fitness step-by-step: 25, 45, 65, 90 minutes. This is phase one and this is what they did really well at Arsenal. The second phase is a gradual build-up for the second game of the week. In the first phase you train match-fitness; in the second phase you train your players to recover quicker in between games: 90, 25, 90, 45, 90, 65, 90, 90 minutes.

What Arsenal does in the second phase is 90, 90, 90, 90, 90 minutes. First they build up match-fitness to 90 minutes, but once a week only so the body is used to recovering from 90 minutes in six days and all of a sudden – from nothing – they want you to recover in three days.

That means your body accumulates fatigue and your nerve-system becomes slower. That means the signals from your brain to your muscles arrive later but you need that signal for the muscles around your knee to contract. The brain sends a signal to your knee then the muscles contract to stabilize the knee. If that signal arrives too late then your knee is already loaded while the muscles around your knee have

not contracted yet so temporarily your knee is unprotected. That means your upper leg will move in relation to your lower leg and you will tear your ACL.

DK: Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have been averaging more than 60 games per season for the past couple of years. How can their bodies keep up with so many games?

RV: First of all the tempo in Spain is lower than the tempo in England. Secondly they play in teams that have the ball all the time, which means that you have to run less, and thirdly the quality of experts in Spain is higher than in England.

DK: You were in South Africa recently to educate professional and amateur coaches about your periodization model. What do make of South African football and coaches?

RV: What I hear about the situation in SA football in general is that it is not good. There is a little bit chaos. Administrators are corrupt and are not there for the game, only for themselves. The second thing I hear is that the players are not always disciplined in terms of training and life style.

I teach my coaches in the classes that the only way to change the situation is by changing yourself. If you change yourself as a coach and then 100 coaches change, then 1000, then automatically you will change the situation. It takes time and patience, but eventually it will happen.

DK: Surely there must be quality in South Africa or how did Bafana Bafana manage to beat World Champions, Spain?

RV: All I can say is that the Spanish players play a lot of games and then, all of a sudden, they have to travel to midweek friendlies in South America and Africa. What idiot is taking the Spanish national team in the middle of the season and travelling all the way to Namibia and South Africa while they are in the middle of La Liga and the Champions League?

I hope everybody understands this was not a real contest against a real Spanish national team – this was a contest against a fatigued Spanish national team.

You beat a tired, and maybe even unmotivated, Spanish team and people think the team is doing well. Then when playing in some silly tournament (Chan), you cannot even qualify for the second round. What happened recently with that tournament is the perfect proof that the game against Spain proved nothing.

If South Africa beat Spain at the World Cup where both teams are well prepared and motivated, then it would be a different story. But I think everybody knows that's not going to happen in the near future.

DK: Finally, what's your advice for the next generation of coaches, and where can one get more information about your courses?

RV: Raise your bar. Don't pretend that you are a victim of South African football. Don't act as if you are a victim of corruption or a victim of poor player discipline – deal with it! Don't start to change the world, start by changing yourself. You as a coach should always be on time. You are a role model. You should have a good lifestyle. And if more coaches start doing it, over five or ten years, the whole system will eventually change. It is just a matter of time.

DK: Thanks Raymond, we are looking forward to seeing you at the World Expert Meeting in Bloemfontein in June. □

Raymond Verheijen introduces the four stages of becoming a champion



1) **Unconsciously incompetent:** You are incompetent, but you are not aware of it. You think you are fine so you don't want to go to a coaching course, because you don't have a need to learn and change.

2) **Consciously incompetent:** You become aware of your shortcomings after looking in the mirror and blaming yourself rather than the outside world. That is a painful stage because you become aware of the fact that you are as you thought you were. As nobody wants to stay incompetent, you will develop a need to learn and change.

That is also what I try to do with Twitter. With my account I try to get the football world from unconsciously incompetent to consciously incompetent. That is why I keep on using these incompetent examples to show the whole world how much incompetence there is. Once everybody in football understands that there is so much incompetence, then everybody is consciously incompetent. Then we can go to the third stage.

3) **Consciously competent:** That is what you become with education. People gradually improve but it takes effort. It is still only a conscious process.

4) **Unconsciously competent:** The final stage is when you are competent in terms of second nature. You have reached Championship level.

Verheijen on which phase he thinks David Moyes is stuck in

Coaches like David Moyes are unconsciously incompetent because he keeps making the same mistakes over the last ten years, so he is in stage one. He already made the mistakes at Everton and now he goes to a new club and makes the same mistakes. The fact that he is making mistakes means he is incompetent. But the fact that he keeps making the same mistakes means he is unconsciously incompetent. If he was consciously incompetent, he wouldn't make the same mistakes ten times.

First David Moyes should understand that he is making mistakes – that he is continuously exhausting his players in pre-season, running them into the ground and creating his own injury-crisis. Once he understands that he is consciously incompetent, he should educate himself by looking at how top coaches are doing it in these days. Why is Mourinho not running his players into the ground? Why is Brendan Rodgers not running his players into the ground? Why is Martinez at Everton not running his players into the ground? Why is Guardiola not running his players into the ground? Because they are competent! That's why these coaches don't have an injury-crisis. They have the occasional injury, of course, but they don't have a structural injury crisis. So David Moyes should go to consciously incompetent by learning from top coaches and if he keeps applying these new insights, eventually he will become unconsciously competent.