

International Coaches Week 2015

The Adelaide Comets 2015 International Coaches Week with guest coach Tom Statham, Manchester United Academy Coach, was a great success. During Tom's visit I was able to sit down with him and discuss football as a whole from player development, club culture, football pathways, junior coaching methods and philosophies, along with many other football topics.

Tom's resume is second to none having coached at the Manchester United Academy for over 20 years, playing a part in the development of players such as Danny Welbeck, Jonny Evans and James Wilson amongst many more top flight professionals playing in the EPL.

I sat down with Tom and discussed the most common questions he was asked during his visit with the Adelaide Comets.

What do you think of our players in comparison to those at Manchester United or in England as a whole?

"It is very difficult to compare players from Manchester United with those of the Adelaide Comets. Manchester has a population three times the size of Adelaide for starters and Manchester United is able to select some of the best players from the North West of England. To make a comparison would be very unfair as the kids grow up in very different environments and circumstances. For instance, you have sun and a lifestyle that is very outdoors orientated, so kids can chose what they want to play as a sport as there are so many options. Australians are renowned for their sporting excellence with such sports as cricket, athletics, tennis, golf, netball, AFL and more recently football appears to be on the up after the Aussies just won the Asia Cup.

The problem is, Football is not the national game in Australia and there are so many more sports that kids can play here, they are spoilt for choice. In the UK, Football is king – people live, breath and worship the game. So kids grow up with football as a major part of their life.

The socio-economic environment is also very different and the kids often have a different outlook on life and football is a way to express themselves as people. Australian players are recognized for their hard work, dedication and honesty and there have been some Australian footballers who have had an impact on the EPL. But if we were to break down the percentages of how many Australian players reach their full potential as to how many kids in the UK progress into top level professional Football; it would be a very small percentage of Australian players that would (or have) made it through to the top level in the UK. Unless people have experienced the competitiveness of the environment in the UK, it is very difficult to understand that football is treated as a way of life and consumes kids from a very early age. There are lots of factors to take into consideration, and this is not to say that Australian kids don't have the ability. It's just harder for them being on the other side of the world to develop to a level where they can make it in the EPL. That is why I feel that it is essential for Australian teenage players to spend time in England to train and play at a high level.

After coaching at Manchester United for so long, what is your philosophy regarding developing young players?

“It is not just a philosophy, I believe it’s a process and a club focus that I have benefitted from and been privileged to work under, that was instilled when Sir Alex took charge of the club some 20 odd years ago. When I started at Manchester United youth development was very different from what we see today. In the early days, Sir Alex and his full time staff were very involved with the youngest players.

The most important thing I learned from Alex Ferguson and Tony Whelan (Head of Academy Coaching at Manchester United) was how to treat people. They both have vision and are great leaders. Manchester United already had a long history prior to Sir Alex - the tragedy of the Munich air disaster and how the club grew and recovered from such a huge catastrophe, to become one of the biggest clubs in the world. Sir Alex and Manchester United is all about being the best, and his way was to make people feel important, from the tea lady to the receptionist, the kit man and the grounds man, players, board members, sponsors, supporters, etc etc. He was a dedicated father figure to many young men who became successful players, he believed in his coaching staff and believed in the people involved at the club. I feel it is important for players to enjoy their time and experience whilst playing football. I believe kids should be allowed to be kids and letting them play in an environment where they feel safe, happy and challenged is how to develop great players.

One of the biggest hurdles a child has to overcome is the expectation of their parents. Parents can place so much pressure on their child at such a young age that the child becomes too scared to make mistakes or experiment.

I believe this approach from adults reduces a child’s enjoyment of playing the game. If kids are enjoying what they do, they develop a better understanding and a love of the game.

If too much pressure is put on kids to play like adults their love of the game will be damaged, and this is something that all coaches and parents should nurture and cherish.

Often, junior football is structured by adults for adult conveniences and loses sight of what kids enjoy the most - having fun, being with their friend, scoring goals and playing football.

The training methods I have learned at Manchester United are not perfect, but the club has arguably one of the highest success rates in the world for developing junior players into professional footballers at the highest level.



What are some of the qualities that make a good young player into a top level professional?

“The obvious ones are technical and physical ability. However, there have been many players with great ability at 8 & 9 years old, but who then fall away at 15-16.

Their ability may fade with maturity or they just don't have the focus or discipline that it takes to be a professional player. I have found that the players I've coached that have gone onto the top level have had great support networks - parents that didn't apply pressure, schools and clubs that co-operated and catered for their training requirements and friends who also provided encouragement.

I've seen a lot of players that have made it to the top that I never thought would at aged 10 or 11 but they kept working hard and now they're playing at the highest level.

A club like Manchester United prides itself on taking a strong interest in a player's welfare. This goes back to the club culture that has been developed over decades.

History and statistics show that Manchester United has produced more players for its first team, or other top teams, than any other club in Europe (except Barca!). I think adults need to take a step back in junior football and focus more on the enjoyment of the game. Parents can put a lot of pressure on their kids, and so can coaches.

In my opinion, Manchester United has been successful over the years because kids are treated as kids until they are ready to learn the game in a more mature and structured environment.

From my experience, expectations change once Academy players turn around 14 and the pressure builds to secure a full time job in a couple of years' time. However, if they reach this age when they are ready to be taught to play the game, having had a chance to explore and learn the skill sets that will enable them to take the next step in the process, I believe that they will have a greater chance of success.

Too much junior football these days is about structure which ultimately is a structure for adults' convenience and not the benefit of the kids who want to enjoy playing football. Kids in a park are quite capable of organizing a game amongst themselves without adult supervision, so why do we need to take away all those opportunities for creativity, leadership and fun by having rigid, adult dominated structures that result in a serious, pressured form of kids football that will only inhibit flair, creativity and enjoyment.



What are your impressions of Adelaide and the Adelaide Comets?

"I've only had a week in Adelaide and what I have experienced, it is a great city. Staying in O'Connell Street and being able to walk down the street in shorts and a t-shirt is unheard of back in England at this time of year. The people are amazingly friendly and hospitable and I would definitely love to come back in the near future. I met Doug on a UK tour last October with a Sydney Academy who had a training session with me. I had never heard of the Adelaide Comets until that meeting but I did some research and was really impressed with the club's website and history. I can see Football in Australia on the up especially with the A-League growing at a rapid rate. What I have experienced at the Adelaide Comets is a real community club, that is well managed and organized and has good people involved who are very passionate about what they do. I met a lot of people here and everyone was so welcoming and friendly and eager to learn about football. I had great sessions with quite a number of the Comets teams, and the kids were all very respectful (except the Liverpool supporters haha) and were brilliant to work with. I also got to watch a few senior games. The standard is good but there is a definite gap between the A-League and NPL. This is understandable as most NPL clubs are only part time. But I believe the Comets have a great opportunity to close that gap between the two league and it was great having discussions with the Prez, coaches, players, Theo and Doug. I believe the club is going in the right direction and has a clear pathway for players which is important if that gap is to be closed between the NPL and A-League. I would love to have an ongoing relationship with the club as I see there is huge potential for further growth that would really set the Comets apart from most other clubs. At the end of the day, football has to be the focus, allowing kids the opportunity to express themselves and play the game with good coaching and management.

The Comets certainly have a great philosophy in providing this to its members. I travel to the States every year and have done so for the past 15 years, and I find that the clubs in the US are very focused on structure and accountability that the football can come second. I can only encourage the Comets to maintain their beliefs and I really hope I will be back to visit in the near future. I am more than willing to assist the club where I can to ensure its success with junior Development in South Australia.

I'd also like to thank the club for everything they did for me while I was in Adelaide, it made the 26 hour journey well worth it.



On behalf of the Adelaide Comets, I would like to thank Tom for being our special guest coach for the Adelaide Comets International Coaches Week. All the players, coaches and parents have learnt a great deal from your visit. We look forward to an ongoing relationship.



