

## Report from James Meara, Director of Coaching - Girls Division, on DOC Trip to West Ham United FC

Last Tuesday, I flew overnight from New York to London to begin my 4 day Director of Coaching trip to London and West Ham United FC. I had been invited by the club and the trip was paid in full by West Ham United and their travel company, XL Travel. I was joined by 7 other DOC's from partner clubs. They were Peter Zaratini, owner of Long Island Rough Riders; Merrill Winpenny, Sports Concepts Club Mexico City; Peter Broadley, Cape Fear Soccer Club NC; Jon Schneider, FC Alliance TN; Olsen Bush, Future Sports Club of the Cayman Islands; Mark Cook, Minnesota Thunder; and John Newman, Princeton Soccer Association NJ.

I landed in London at 6:30 am and had a taxi waiting for me to take me to the West Ham Stadium in East London. On arrival at the Stadium, I was escorted to one of the sixty hotel rooms in the stadium. The view overlooks the soccer field! Pretty cool.

After a few hours sleep, I met with the rest of the group at 2:30 pm in one of the boardrooms, again overlooking the field. Present in the meet and greet were Mike Kelleher, our contact guy in America; Ben Illingworth, West Ham United Director and Head of Operations; Paul Heffer, Assistant Academy Director who has been at the club for 25 years and produced multiple world-class professional soccer players; and Kris Lamb from XL Travel. After introductions, West Ham guys gave us some background about the partnership and their backgrounds at the club. Ben told us that we were at West Ham so that they could show us how important the American partners are and that this is a 100% commitment from West Ham to their partner clubs. We were given the top academy coaches emails and phone numbers so that we would have direct access to the club's best coaches whenever we needed them.

Paul Heffer presented the list of kids he has developed and how much incredible talent he has developed through the West Ham Academy. Six of the players representing England this summer in the world cup were referred to as "their kids"! Paul said that we should not expect to see some revolutionary soccer practices and methods during our visit but we would have a greater understanding of "The West Ham Academy Way" by the end of our visit.

After the meeting, we jumped onto a bus and traveled to Chadwell Heath and the main training ground for the club. The facility has 3 outdoor grass fields, 1 turf field with lights, and about an open field indoor facility the size of PISA. The first session was an observation of the U11 boys academy team of 18. It didn't take long to see the unbelievable talent that these kids had. The speed of play, the awareness of EVERY player to move the ball around was something I haven't seen in a long time. I wasn't sure if maybe this was how it was when I came through at my pro academy and I had just forgotten or this was one of the best group of players in the country at this age group! I asked Paul after the session and he said it was one of the best teams around at this age group. They had beaten Chelsea's U11 team only a few weeks before. It was also interesting to find out that West Ham's annual academy budget was \$2.75 million and Chelsea's academy budget was nearer \$13 million!!!

We then observed the U13 session and again was very impressed by the overall standard of play. The coaches were fantastic with us and ever now and then would walk over to the group and describe what the drill was about and what he was hoping to get out of it. This was a nice touch. This interaction continued all week. We were allowed access all areas and we could wander from field to field and session to session taking notes.

We got back to the stadium at 8:30 pm, had dinner and a couple drinks, and then headed back to our rooms. I was so exhausted I think I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

After breakfast at 8:30 am, we traveled to Little Heath, the official home of the Academy. This facility has 3 full-sized grass fields, a slightly smaller field, and a couple of areas for small-sided games. For the morning session, we had the choice of observing the U17, U16, or U15 teams. A group of American kids from the Atlanta area were there also. The practices went on for 2 hours and I saw some great new ideas that I will pass onto the coaching at Arsenal FC. After lunch at the Academy, we participated in a Q&A session with Paul Heffer, Assistant Academy Director. He provided great insight into everything West Ham. All academy players are only allowed to play a TOTAL of 36 games per year. This total includes all games for all teams. Players must decide how many games they will play for their school team and West Ham. On the flip side, all academy players MUST participate in at least 18 West Ham games per year (at least a

half of playing time) or face a fine of up to \$10,000 for every player who isn't allowed to appear in 18 games. The Premier League supervises these rules.

The coaches at West Ham stress the importance of all sessions being high tempo and short sharp drills, not longer 10 minutes without a break, and then back into it. It was also interesting to learn that there isn't that much interaction between the pro team and the academy boys. The pro team is run as a separate entity until they reach 17 years and older when this age group practices at the pro team's training facilities. The general consensus was with the pro team struggling somewhat this year it was almost better that the kids were away from that environment!

The West Ham Academy Sports Science Coach told us about the way the kids warm up before every practice for usually 15-20 minutes. The kids are always on the move while combining stretches. He also stressed the importance of recovery time for the kids and that the intense running in the game of soccer involves energy bursts of around 45 seconds.

Paul finished off the Q&A session with this statistic, "West Ham's Academy yearly budget is around \$2.75 and over the past 10 years the Academy has produced players that have been sold onto other clubs in excess of \$120 million!" This is pretty impressive stuff.

In the afternoon, we observed the same teams for another 1.5 hours and then traveled to the indoor arena to check out the younger academy teams. While there, I asked Paul what were the major differences he saw between the English kids and the American kids. His reply was the speed of the game in England was much higher than it currently is in America, also the speed of the decision making is somewhat behind in America. A kid in England can play one or two touch for most of the session and American kid may need that third touch which then results in losing the ball or giving it away. To be honest, this was pretty close to my observations of a mix of the West Ham kids and the American kids. Paul stood with us and pointed out, "look didn't need that extra touch; lost the ball because he didn't know where his next pass was going." It was very interesting to watch and hear the comments that were spot on. His observations were not bashing American soccer but sharing wisdom by educating us on what we need to do over here to bring the overall game closer to some of the best kids in the world.

Another big topic of conversation was coach and parent behavior. All the American DOC's had their horror stories and all agreed they are trying to get everyone within their clubs to respect the game from top to bottom. Paul spoke about the times he has been over to America and observed games to see coaches walking up and down touchlines screaming and kicking water containers. He had some fascinating ideas on how things should be done. Over the past 30 years at West Ham, the coaches are encouraged to be relaxed on the sidelines and not over coach every aspect of the game. He asked us that if you were to be more toned down on the sidelines during games in America, what would the overall perception be from some parents? The majority of the coaches said parents may well think we're not doing our jobs if we're not jumping up and down and screaming! Paul agreed and said that was the answer he was expecting.

I believe it is a fine line between constructive game coaching and 'joy stick' coaching where you're giving instruction on every pass to every player. One of the most interesting things (out of the many) that Paul said was 'DONT COACH KIDS WHILE THEY ARE ON THE BALL'. Here's the scenario. We have a kid in the game running with the ball center right of the goal 10 yards outside the opposition's penalty area. At the same time the coach is screaming 'shoot shoot' while on the other side of the field one parent is screaming 'pass it, pass it!' and another 'cross it, cross it!!' This behavior leads to your soccer kids on the one hand NEVER making their own decisions on the field, good or bad, and becoming so confused because they are hearing two or three different voices and ideas! I thought in all my years of playing and coaching that nailed it on the head! Exactly what happens at fields all over the country and don't get me wrong I know I've done that on occasions myself.

So we all agreed that we would make strides to educate our coaches and parents that first of all, there is never to be any coaching from the parent's side. Secondly, we should let the kids on the ball make their own decisions because that's the way they learn to make the correct decisions; often by making the wrong one's first. I hope that makes as much sense to you as it did to me.

On Friday morning, we were all back on the training field to observe more sessions. At noon, we got the chance to watch the West Ham United U18 team play Bristol City's U18 team. Just as the game was about

to begin, the wind really picked up and it proved to be very tough conditions in which to pass the ball. Both teams found it very challenging to pass. The game finished 1-1, Bristol City tied it up in the last couple of minutes. Overall, West Ham players were stronger and moved the ball around quicker but the conditions were a real leveler. Friday evening was open for the guys and I managed to catch up with the family for dinner.

On Saturday morning, we watched the U9-U14 academy practices and then had a final Q&A session with Paul. After that we headed back to West Ham United Stadium for the EPL game West Ham vs. Stoke City. We were given tickets for the "Legends Bar" and had a couple drinks and some food while we watched the thousands of fans flock into the stadium. Twenty minutes before the game, we were all invited to go field side and watch the teams warm up. We were taken to the locker room area and walked through the tunnel up onto the field. This was a great experience for all the coaches. I was lucky enough as a professional soccer player to have played twice at West Ham so I had been here before. But there have been plenty of upgrades and changes since I was there last. So we all got a bird's eye view of the teams warming up and then watched as they walked within yards of us back to the locker room to prepare for the game. From our seats, we saw 36,000 fans going crazy and a good few thousand away fans making their voices heard.

The game never really took off and saw both sides not create that many opportunities. One piece of magic in the second half saw Stoke win the game 1-0. To be fair a tie would have been a the correct result. So West Ham now has a huge couple of months left to maintain their top flight status, I hope all of you are checking in regularly to see how the team is doing. This Sunday, they play live on Fox Soccer Channel, a tough away game at Everton FC. After the game we headed back to the bar for an hour to discuss the game. For the final night we changed hotels from West Ham to Central London. I was up at 4:00 am English time and got the train out to Heathrow arriving back in Pittsburgh Sunday evening at 5:00 pm (10:00 pm English time). The whole trip was first class and everyone at West Ham went out of their way to help the American coaches feel at home. I am so excited that we have this opportunity for our coaches and kids. We must get some teams over to West Ham because they will have an experience they will never forget. Just being around the professional game and the academy guys gets you so fired up and ready to be the best you can. There will be a menu of options for all our kids available soon from our contact out in the States and I am very much excited for the future of this partnership.

Thanks for taking time out to read this.

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