Barcelona's FCBEscola - *Getty Images Sport*

THE ACADEMY REWARDS

From the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball to football clubs Barcelona and Arsenal, major sports properties have continued to invest in youth-focused academies. **Andy Fry** looks at how they fit into sports organisations' overall strategy for world domination.

MOST LEADING SPORTS CLUBS and leagues have prioritised global expansion in recent years and via international TV deals, licensing programmes and continent-hopping exhibition tours have sought to make fans around the world feel just as loved as their domestic counterparts.

Increasingly, there has also been a role for international academies, programmes that increase brand engagement - and in the long-term revenues - through youth sport development.

This October, English Premier League club Liverpool joined forces with Indian football team DSK Shivajians to launch a full-time coaching academy in Pune from January next year. Called the LFC International Football Academy DSK, the new initiative will feature a purpose-built residential complex with pitches, practice areas, a gym, a lecture theatre and much more.

"We think a set-up like this creates a powerful engagement platform that will spread the right message about the Liverpool brand within India. We've put a lot of time, effort and resource into making sure the academy's students will get a genuine experience," says Dan White, Liverpool's head of soccer schools, who adds that the academy is being built by DSK but Liverpool will provide the technical expertise

"We're providing two coaches who know the Liverpool way. They will work with students at the academy and also develop local coaching talent. This isn't a badging exercise. We're building something that will still be around in ten years."

Initially, the LFC International Football Academy DSK will accommodate 64 students aged between 14 and 18, selected according to ability, with the financially poorest given scholarships. They will attend the academy full-time and be taught both football and a range of core school subjects. In addition there will be weekend and holiday football schools for the wider community.

"Success for us isn't just about developing football skills, it's about developing people who can be a credit to themselves off the pitch," says White. "It would be great if we developed an exceptional player who could one day represent Liverpool, but that isn't how we're judging the performance of the programme in the short-term."

Although the number of kids passing through the academy in year one isn't huge, the impact will come in the positive PR generated, assuming the programme lives up to its billing. To make sure it does, a lot of care was taken before the DSK deal was signed, says White.

"The club's reputation is on the line when we form partnerships like this so we spend a lot of time on due diligence," he adds. "That's also why we don't want to run too many schemes. We have announced a similar programme in China, but we couldn't run 20 or 30 programmes like this and expect to retain control over them."

Like Liverpool, other football clubs downplay the role of international academies in spotting talent for their own clubs. For Barcelona, which has a programme called FCBEscola, the use of the word 'Escola' (school) rather than academy is deliberate because the club wants kids of all ability levels to participate. The main purpose, according to the club, is not to look for the most talented kids, but to prepare them for any sporting challenges they might face in the future.

Barcelona has schools in cities such as Fukuoka (Japan), Abu Dhabi (UAE), Lima (Peru) and Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), however unlike Liverpool, it is not seeking to provide the same level of in-house expertise by running a franchise model.

In addition to FCBEscola, Barcelona also holds around 50 camps through the year across four different continents. While both models are aimed at kids aged between eight and 16, the schools are season-long set-ups and the camps usually last for a week and take place during school holidays. They also provide a route to

market for sponsors. For example, Barcelona has linked up with Turkish telecom company AVEA to launch a camp programme that provides the brand with a CSR platform.

While European football academy activities are driven by clubs, US activity tends to focus on big league brands, and the NBA has just announced plans for a Chinese basketball school in partnership with retired player Yao Ming. Launching in Beijing in February 2014, the NBA Yao School will target boys and girls below the age of 16. The NBA will create the curriculum and operations manual, and select a technical director, while Yao Ming will be responsible for developing and running the school. The involvement of an icon like Yao is sure to help the school get off the ground, but the NBA has also done plenty to prepare the way.

"We're in the fourth year of a joint coaching programme with the Chinese Basketball Association - which has trained 700 coaches - and we also launched an NBA training centre in 2011 which has trained 1,200 youth players," said NBA commissioner David Stern. "The Yao School is the next step. It's an after-school programme that will allow kids to develop skills and learn values like teamwork, exercise, fitness and communication. Hopefully it will be the first of many."

However, there are academies where discovering talent is a central factor. In 2013, MLB organised tryouts in cities across Europe - Haarlem (Netherlands), Bologna (Italy), Barcelona (Spain), Mainz (Germany) and Prague (Czech Republic) - inviting nearly 60 teenage players who impressed to the MLB European Academy held in Tirrenia, Italy.

Since launching in 2005, the programme has had its successes, for example Alex Liddi, an Italian who now plays for the Baltimore Orioles. But it has also played a key role as an icebreaker, encouraging MLB teams to increase their own scouting of European players.

For some, academies also reflect the increasingly global nature of club ownership. Manchester City, for example, is owned by Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mansour and has an Abu Dhabi School of Football, a blueprint for which was rolled out to launch an International School of Football in Lebanon.

Run by Manchester City head coach Alan Dixon, the ten-week programme in Lebanon caters for girls and boys of all abilities - including some Palestinian refugees.

"Lebanon's sporting culture has all the necessary ingredients. As a country, they not only have a wealth of young talented children who are extremely passionate about football, but a genuine desire to learn and apply new skills and knowledge," says Nick Smith, head of business development for Manchester City's International School of Football.

COMMUNIQUÉ
OCTOBER 2013
JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

FOCUSING ON THE POSITIVES

One of only two countries to host each of the Rugby World Cup, Cricket World Cup and FIFA World Cup, South Africa is now facing the reality of a decade without a single international major event on the calendar - a topic that was discussed at length at the Sport Industry Summit in Johannesburg in late October.

Suffice to say, there was more than a little speculation at the offices of professional services firm Deloitte in Johannesburg that incoming investment to South Africa could be on the slide. That would be of concern in any marketplace, but more so in one where just 10 domestic sponsors control 60 per cent of the market, and it might only be every third year that an agency gets the chance to pitch for a meaningful slice of business.

The flipside, of course, is that South Africa's own outward investment is on the rise. Around $2.7 billion (R28 billion) per year is spent by South African businesses expanding across the continent - a number climbing by a double-digit percentage each year - and a significant amount of that is channelled through the sports industry. Those international businesses looking to expand into the fertile grounds of the world's youngest, fastest-growing economies could do far worse than build their plans from the southern tip of the continent. Standard Bank and telecoms operator MTN offer good footsteps in which to follow.

So does brewer SABMiller, but perhaps not for much longer. One of South Africa's biggest sponsors is already preparing for life after a ban on alcohol sponsorship comes into play. It's not yet a done deal, but few expect anything but a ban, wiping $58 million off the 2.5 per cent that sport and sponsorship contributes to the country's GDP.

Ally Hewitt, SAB's head of sponsorship, might be expected to point to the cost to business, but the argument that alcohol distributors are also the biggest funders of campaigns to drink responsibly also came to the fore at the Sport Industry Summit in a spirited discussion with Rodney Swigelaar, the World Anti Doping Agency's man in Africa, and Dr. Craig Nossel, head of vitality wellness at financial services company Discovery.

SAB might be fighting tooth and nail to keep their sponsorships, but others have moved to end theirs, with Absa Bank and PUMA both terminating partnerships with the South African Football Association (SAFA) following the country's failure to qualify for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Coming in the wake of a match-fixing scandal and as FIFA stalwart Danny Jordaan (pictured) assumes the SAFA presidency, the media furnaces were well and truly stoked.

Jordaan took to the stage at late notice to redress the balance, pointing vigorously to 11 million ever-passionate fans of football in the country, the measures already taken in his first three weeks in office - "it feels like three years" - and the fact that both contracts had been marked for expiry as long ago as January.

A savvy media man, Jordaan also took the opportunity at the end of the day to announce to the TV cameras in attendance that, after a frantic afternoon of phone calls and emails, Spain would be returning to the country to play South Africa on the site of its 2010 FIFA World Cup victory - turning the next 24 hours into a constant positive press cycle for his organisation.

Despite the challenges listed, Spain returns to a fascinating, fast-growing and continually exciting market that produces globally-leading work in areas as diverse as broadcasting, mass participation events and digital integration.

South Africa has issues to tackle but comes with far more than its fair share of opportunities; whatever comes of the above debates and discussions, expect the industry to be toasting success again in 2014.

Adam Fraser (@AFraser)
Executive Director,
Sport Industry Group