

Teaching Leadership Through Soccer

Youth Futures International Offers High School Players So Much More Than Training and Tournament Play in England



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You could be forgiven for thinking that the vast majority of high school-aged players attending soccer tournaments these days are focused on one thing: showcasing their talents to the right coaches so that they can extend their playing careers into college. But Dave Butler believes there is another category of kids who are already thinking way beyond that, looking for ways their love of the sport can lead to even bigger and better things.

Butler is the Executive Director of Youth Futures International, and he has been sending young people abroad for almost a decade now. High school students, aged 15-18, who want to combine their

passion for a particular subject with leadership and community service opportunities, are ideal candidates for his program.

Students with aspirations to join the medical field have been sent to India to spend a week in medical school and at a local hospital. Students with public health or community development interests have traveled to Ghana to teach about health issues and lead recreational activities for children there.

And starting in 2016, students who play varsity level soccer will be able to travel to England to train with professional teams in London. They will also compete in a local soccer tournament and work on a number of community service projects as athletes in the local community.

“We’re looking for motivated and inspired young people who know they have that sharp leadership edge in them,” says Butler. “What we do is maximize their potential for growth by taking them to the edge and putting them right in their field of interest. For this program, obviously, soccer is a huge interest to them, but this will put them on that front line. We’re taking all the training, all the talent and the passion they’ve had up to this moment and putting it into action at a much higher level.”

The Trip

The trip itself is a 16-day adventure in the heart of London. The YFI program is partnering with two clubs in London, Queens Park Rangers and Millwall FC, to provide top quality training opportunities and a glimpse



of what life is like as a professional player in a country that has one of the most competitive leagues in the world.

The days will consist of three meals, a training with either Queens Park Rangers or Millwall FC, along with informational meetings with club staff and sight seeing events.

Week 1 will consist of getting acclimated with the English culture and London in general while spending plenty of time training with Queens Park Rangers by touring the stadium, meeting the players and staff, and playing with and against the Academy level players, as well as attending social outings with them.

The second week will be spent with the academy players and training staff of Millwall FC. Each club will hold seminars on various training topics including injury recovery, nutrition, sports psychology and conditioning, among others.

The trip will also include attendance at a professional game, and participation in an invitational youth soccer tournament as well as plenty of allotted time for sight seeing.

Community Service

There are, of course, a number of similar programs that offer kids a chance to train with professional club abroad. What sets YFI apart, however, is the community service aspect of the program.

“That’s the most important part for me,” says Butler.” We’re not just a sports organization. We also work with hospitals and programs for the homeless and other types of community programs.

“It fits the main mission of YFI, that we are serving the community regardless of what program is in there. With our medical program in India, the students there are in clinics and hospitals and then they go to the orphanages in the area to play with the local kids. While they talk about enjoying the work they’re doing, it’s playing the games in the orphanages that really steals their hearts.

“That will be what we do with the sports program, as well. From a personal perspective, and I think I can say this with a lot of experience, I think this is incredibly important for athletes at all levels.”



And, perhaps more surprisingly, it’s a mission that also meshes neatly with the aims of the professional clubs involved.

“In talking with QPR and Millwall, they all have community development schemes, as they’re called over there, where players do service work in the community,” explains Butler. “A lot of the fans watching on TV, don’t realize that. I am always impressed with the amount of volunteerism and work that these



professional athletes go to the community and do, and we wanted to partner with that.”

The partnership with Millwall FC started with the club chairman John Berylson, who works near Butler in Massachusetts. The professional English club with an historically troubled public image in England has been working hard in recent years to rebrand itself. The community outreach initiatives are a huge part of that effort.

Once Millwall had signed on, Butler felt the need to recruit a premiership side, with the caveat that a London-based side would be ideal. QPR fit the bill perfectly and quickly agreed to participate.

“The program was selling itself by then,” recalls Butler. “It was a great fit. It’s a great fit for their academy level players and what we want to do, as well as for their professional coaches who like to work with youth. It was not a hard sell at all because of the importance of it and the quality of the program. The QPR folks even came up with a lot of ideas of their own that I didn’t think about, such as having a football psychologist meet with the kids over the lunchtime discussion.”

There was, however, one small wrinkle that Butler had to deal with. While QPR were a premiership side when they agreed to participate in the program, they were subsequently relegated to the Championship and now compete in the second tier of English soccer.

“They’re still fabulous, though,” says Butler, “and it looks like they’ll rebuild. Their goal, of course, is to get back into the premiership as soon as possible.”

How to Apply

Butler firmly believes that part of being a top athlete is being willing to take on more than



just the on field demands that come with the role. Varsity athletes in high schools all across America are asked to be leaders and role models in their school. Those are the types of players Butler wants to bring in to the fold with Youth Futures International.

YFI is currently taking applications for their two teams, a varsity boys and a varsity girls team. The International squad will be made up of teenagers from all over North and South America, players from Argentina and Brazil expected to make the roster alongside players from the USA.

To enroll, players can either request a packet be mailed out or simply fill out the online player profile giving information such as GPA, primary and secondary positions, as well as varsity hours played. Three different referrals are also required that will vouch for each player’s character. These can be obtained from coaches, teachers, Athletic Directors, community leaders or employers.

After Youth Futures International receives an application, a meeting is held between Butler and the athlete’s parents, while the athlete will meet with head coach Rick Kelly. Tuition costs \$3,800, which covers all expenses for the student aside from spending money.

For more information, please visit www.yfisports.com or email Dave Butler at dbutler@youthfuturesinternational.org.