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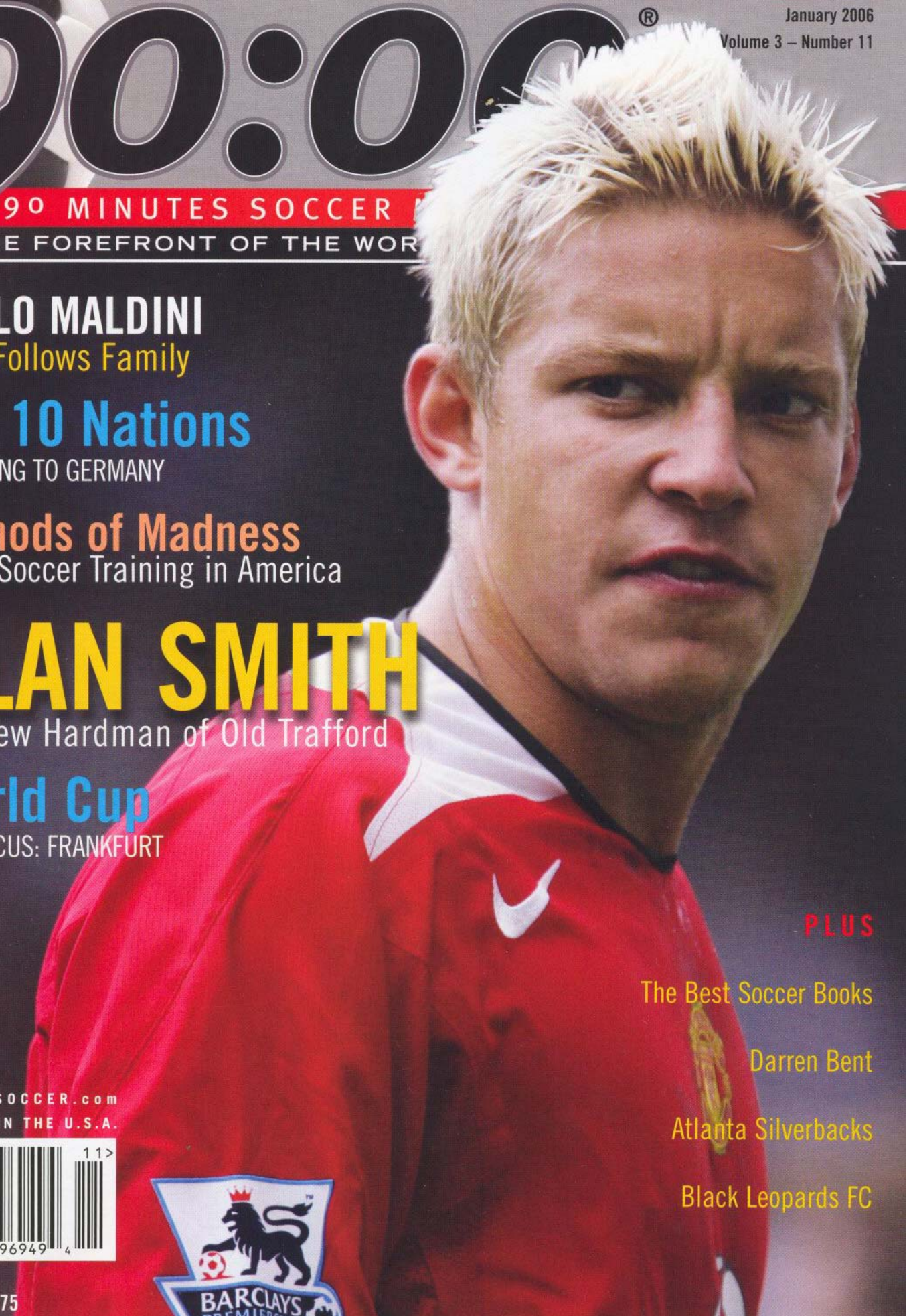
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# The Man with the Wooden Sword

By Steven Wells

**YOUTH SOCCER IN AMERICA IS A DISASTER, BUT DUTCH METHOD EVANGELIST JOHN FISHER IS LUNGING TOWARDS A BETTER WAY.**



YPTusa founder John Fisher

"A GOALKEEPER HAS TO BE LIKE A TANK!" ROARS BAYERN Munich Academy goalkeeping coach Alex Bayer. He has a huge healed gash on one leg—the result of a brutal quarry accident that crushed his own goalkeeping career at age 17. You can see his calf muscles pulsing under the scar tissue. "A free pizza if you smash the camera!" he laughs, pointing at me, as his young American charges throw themselves fearlessly at the soccer balls he hurls like thunderbolts.

"You've eaten too many hamburgers!" bellows Anderlecht youth coach and former Belgian World Cup player Danny Veyt on the next pitch over, as the kids in his tender care groan through a set of rigorous exercises.

"No! Not like that, you muppet!" yells Oldham FC (and ex-Manchester United) youth coach Mick Priest as a kid fails to complete a "Cruyff" to his complete satisfaction.

On adjacent pitches, coaches from Inter Milan and Real Madrid are also billycooing sweet encouragement as 120 American boys, aged 10 to 15, sweat their bollocks off in the baking mid-summer sun.

Welcome to Youth Soccer Heaven, USA.

Just outside the gates of the St. Andrews school in Middleton, Delaware is ugly, indenti-kit, strip-mall America. But inside, it's pure *Harry Potter*. Built around an idyllic lake by the gunpowder millionaire Du Pont family, St. Andrews is an achingly beautiful 1920s reproduction of a Victorian British boarding school. They shot the movie *Dead Poets Society* here for that very reason. There's a mural on the wall of the refectory showing wide-eyed and firm-jawed white boys, some of them in baseball and football gear, gathered around the skirts of their symbolic alma mater. It's all terribly, terribly posh. And it costs \$33,000 a year to send your kid here during term time.

In the summer though, St. Andrews hosts the Youth Professional Residence Program—and that's a lot harder to get into. Boys selected by their coaches for having exceptional talent and motivation come to be trained by youth academy coaches from Bayern Munich, Manchester United, Inter Milan, Anderlecht, Oldham and Real Madrid.

This being America (and this being American soccer) most of these kids aren't exactly underprivileged. One boy has a favorite uncle who owns an internationally known clothing line. Another says his dad is a "banker." Another has a



father who "buys and sells companies" and who takes him to the UK every year to train with a Premiership youth team.

But there are inner-city and immigrant kids here too, and there isn't anybody who isn't here on merit. The level of skill on display is astounding. Several of these boys will go on to train at academies in England, Germany and Italy.

This program is the brainchild of 39-year-old John Fisher, universally known as Fish. Fish looks a bit like Bruce Arena (in my twisted mind at least). And Fish is an angry, driven and passionate man.

After years of coaching college soccer, Fish traveled to Holland to find out how PSV Eindhoven trains their youngsters. He was shocked to see 11-year-olds more skilled than the adults he coached at home. And he's hardly stopped talking about it since.

"I was like Moses coming down from the mountain. I went up the hill a boy and came back a man!"

Fish enters a St. Andrews refectory packed full of exhausted and ravenously hungry boy soccer players. He's clutching a wooden sword. One of the kids had found it. And Fish confiscated it. But not before dubbing the boy Sir Jimmy.

After showing me a power point presentation of his trips to Old Trafford and the Bernabeu, Fish starts the interview slow and cautious—and then rapidly builds to a passionate, table thumping near-messianic crescendo. Which he keeps up for the better part of an hour. Can a crescendo last an hour? This one did.

Fish says that U.S. youth coaches are too fixated on winning.

"Over there, they don't care about winning. A kid could spend his entire youth career at one training academy and not win a game and then sign a pro- contract. Skills—that's the measuring stick—not how many games he's won. Here, it's the complete opposite. Here it's... 'I need the team that's going to win a state title. If this 14-year-old can't get it done for me, then get rid of him. Get a horse in. Get a stud in here that can do his job better.' It's an epidemic.

"In Europe, they would laugh at an American coach who takes a technically good but small player and just pushes him aside because he's not big enough yet. Too many American coaches would have looked at Michael Owen and said, 'I need somebody bigger.' They don't really know when and what to teach a player. And there's always the pressure to win in America, at any level, at any sport.

"American coaches look at a player and say that player can do a lot for me. What they need to do is say, this is what I can do for that player."

Fish's return from Holland in 1998 coincided with the publication of the U.S. Soccer Federation's Project 2010 report. Asked what it would take for the U.S. Men's team to win the World Cup in 2010, the report's authors concluded, in part, that the Americans had to learn from the centralized and disciplined French and Dutch. Fish has been making that exact same argument ever since.

"You take Holland," says Fish, "which is basically the same size as New Hampshire. It's tiny. Yet, year in and year out they produce fantastic players. Every World Cup, they're one of the top teams. Why? Because 30 years ago the Dutch

Fish isn't alone in banging the Project 2010 drum. There are numerous academies all over the U.S. that pay lip service to it conclusions. But precious little has been done, says Fish, to turn those conclusions into a reality.

"I won't say that the authorities aren't paying attention," says Fish. "I'd just say that the sport is growing so fast, they can't keep a handle on it."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the continent, English born Steve Hoffman, affectionately known as Hoffy, is the technical director of the southern half of the California Youth Soccer Association (Cal South). He talks just as passionately and knowledgeably as Fish, but at almost twice the speed. And, at least in part, he thinks Fish is wrong.

Hoffy's the first to admit that there's a gap between the U.S. and Europe that has to be breached. "My nephew is at Preston North End and he's amazed when he comes to America. They teach the kids everything here; stuff that you'd just assume that kid knew from watching TV in England," but he's far from certain the Dutch route is the solution.

"I struggle when people say we have to do it the Dutch way or we have to do it the English way or the Brazilian way or whatever. We have to do it the American way, and the American way is evolving," says Hoffy in an accent that's a curious mixture of Lancashire and Southern California.

"You ask Bruce Arena and, yeah, of course he'd love it if we could do it the European way. But do you think we could sell that to the parents? Kids here are competing for college places at 12. Are you gonna tell them that they should put college on hold for soccer training? No! It's not gonna



LEFT TO RIGHT: Mick Priest, Oldham Athletic; Carlos Slavachua, Real Madrid; Danny Veyt, RSC Anderlecht; Stefano Bellinzaghi, Inter Milan.

Federation said to their pro clubs—this is how you'll develop your players. This is the philosophy—the Dutch method. By the time a player is 10, he needs to be able to do this. At 12, he needs to do this, this and this. So by the time a kid makes the U-17 Dutch National Team, he knows exactly what to do and the coaches know exactly what he's capable of.

"Then you take the U.S., which is massively bigger than Holland. But not only does the country not have a common youth training policy, but also within states, sometimes within counties, you have different policies.

"On top of that, I would venture to say that 80 percent of the coaches in this country, probably more, have never played. And the game is exploding, it's the second largest youth sport in the country. Basketball is the only one with more numbers. We've passed baseball, we've passed football, but the problem is we have all the millions of kids playing, but not enough quality people to teach them. The imbalance is enormous."

happen. In England, the dream is the pro contract. That's the pot of gold. In America, the pot of gold is a sports scholarship—saving your parents what... \$100,000 by playing soccer. It's a completely different infrastructure."

"America," says Hoffy, "is different."

"This is a massive country. It's so big it could be five different countries, and there are huge regional differences—even in the way kids from different states play the game. Every state has different needs. So yeah, we need to do it the American way, but maybe even a different way in each state."

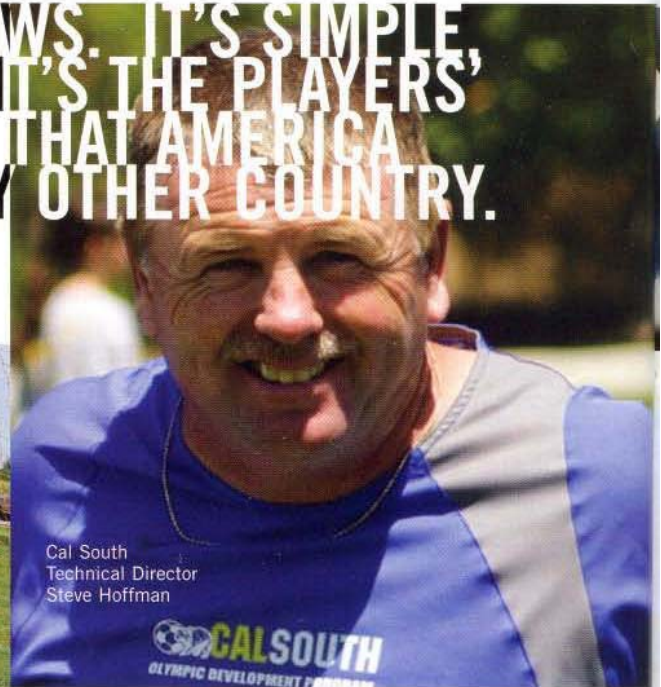
In 1997, still wide-eyed with enthusiasm for the Dutch system, Fish asked himself where he'd like to be in ten years time. The answer, he says, was running an MLS Academy on the PSV principals. But, both he and Hoffy are agreed that's not going to happen anytime soon. Last year, the LA Galaxy became the first MLS franchise to turn a profit. The money ▶

U.S. to succeed in soccer. And we could all probably agree on the obstacles that stand in the way of that happening.

There's the fact that, almost uniquely in the world, the grassroots game is still heavily skewed towards the suburban middle class. Part of that is the pay-to-play culture with parents forking over \$850-\$1500 per child in most parts of the country. Which is kinda ridiculous for a game played with no cleats and a bundle of rags or an old Coke can in every slum in Third World countries.

There's the fact that the U.S. college system, which seems to work for football and basketball, is totally at odds with the way soccer has evolved in the rest of the world. And, says Fish, the end result is, "We've got tremendous athletes playing soccer that can't control a ball with their weak foot. They don't know how to chest the ball properly. They can't strike a ball. Then I go to Real Madrid and I watch these 12 year olds strike 30-40 yard balls—right footed, left footed. It's unbelievable. I get goosebumps as I'm talking about it!"

**"I LOVE THE GAME. IT FLOWS. IT'S SIMPLE, IT'S THE FREEDOM OF IT. IT'S THE PLAYERS' GAME. AND IT'S KNOWING THAT AMERICA COULD BE AS GOOD AS ANY OTHER COUNTRY."**



Cal South  
Technical Director  
Steve Hoffman

Adam Margulies

for European style club academies simply isn't there.

"My thinking now," says Fish, "is that the academies have to be privately run. They should be corporately sponsored, the kids shouldn't have to pay..."

Hoffy just doesn't think that's going to happen. "This is America," he says—and I can almost hear him shrug over the phone.

I ask Fish why he has proselytized so long and so hard for his vision of U.S. soccer's future. The question stuns him. He thinks about his answer for a long time. And then he says:

"I love the game. It flows. It's simple. It's the freedom of it. It's the players' game. And it's knowing that America could be as good as any other country. I firmly believe that we have future World Players of the Year here in America."

Like Hoffy and like me (and like you too, I'm guessing), Fish desperately wants soccer to succeed in the U.S. and for the

But then there's the insurmountable fact that this isn't Holland or France. This is America—the sporting Bizarroland. And in America, we do everything differently.

"The growth in U.S. soccer in the last 15 years has been staggering, and expectations have increased exponentially" says Jim Moorhouse, Director of Communications for the U.S. Soccer Federation. "But you don't just snap your fingers and have success."

"We need time to grow and expand," says Jim. "We've got 12 pro clubs in a league that's 10 years old. There's no magic wand we can wave and suddenly have an integrated professional academy system. Yeah that would be great... but all these things take time. You can look at a club like Liverpool and say, yeah, that's the way to do it. But there's no magic wand to just make that happen."

Jim points to the progress that the USSF *has* made towards fulfilling the Project 2010 blueprint—particularly the

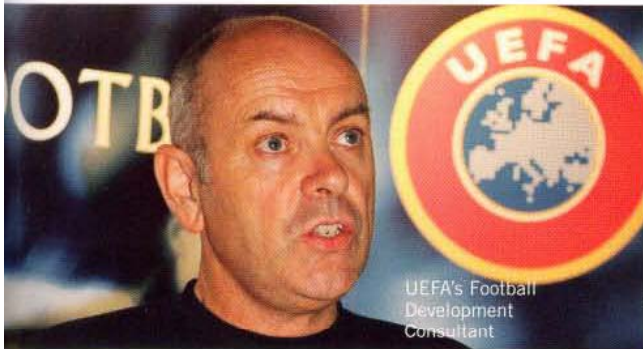
National U-17 Residency Program, started in 1999, which now has 40 full-time players.

"If you look at the World Cup players that it has produced," says Jim, "the success level is absolutely staggering—any academy in the world would be proud of that success rate."

All of which begs the question—if that's what the U.S. can do with one academy, what could we do with 12? Or 20?

Which begs the further question of who'd pay for these academies—Nike? Real Madrid? MLS? The poor bloody parents?

According to FIFA, 20 million Americans play soccer, making the U.S. the most soccer populous nation on the planet. Jim Moorhouse reckons there are 4 million players registered with the USSF, and on any given Saturday morning, Hoffy claims to oversee 1,800 11-a-side U-11 games in Southern California alone. Meanwhile, Fish points out that the Europeans look to the U.S. to find out how to make their players fitter and stronger. "Juergen Klinsmann has hired an American physical training staff for the German National Team for 2006."



All of which suggests that the U.S. must be doing something right, says Managing Director of Sports Learning Ltd. Robin Russell—a coach with decades of experience on both sides of the Atlantic. Robin is effervescently enthusiastic about the state of the American game.

"People ask me—do you think the U.S. will ever be a major soccer nation? I reply, it already is!" says Robin, over the phone from the London. "In my lifetime, the U.S. Men's team will win a World Cup."

"I totally disagree with the idea that the Americans have got it all wrong, and the Europeans have got it all right. The kids I see in the U.S. and are as good as any in Europe," claims Robin. "I defy anybody to say they're not."

The idea that kids in Europe grow up with the advantage of playing soccer in the streets is outdated, says Robin.

"So what do they do in the most enlightened academies? They recreate street soccer—the emphasis is on lots of small-sided games, lots of touches and lots of fun. The ideas that these kids are being hot-housed is a fallacy."

"The critical thing is what I call the 3 T's—identifying the *talent*, maximising the *time* and finding the *teachers*. And of these, the time is the most important. I mean, I don't care how good a teacher you are, you'd have to be a magician if you only saw the kids 2 or 3 times a week."

"My experience with U.S. kids is that, by and large, the talent is being identified. And by and large, they are getting as much time to practice. I would say that the only real advantage the European kids have is that when they reach 15 or 16

they enter a much more competitive environment."

As for Fish's claim that the majority of U.S. coaches have never played the game, Robin claims that this isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Steve Heighway at Liverpool has a saying—give me coaches that know more about kids rather than coaches who *think* they know everything about football. I meet a lot more coaches in America who understand about how kids learn. Knowing that, is a lot more important than thinking you know a lot about football."

And, says Robin, "the win-at-all-costs mentality isn't a uniquely American problem."

"The over-competitiveness? Is it a good thing? No, of course not, but do you think it's really any better in Europe? America doesn't have a monopoly on mad parents, I'm afraid."

The U.S. Women's team is already proven worldbeaters. And, as Robin points out, the U.S. U-17 and U-20 Men's teams recently beat England and Argentina respectively.

Can you imagine how good those teams will be when soccer moves into the inner cities, and we get the other 264 million Americans playing the game?

It's going to happen. All we're arguing about is how we get there. Evolution or revolution? Or maybe a bit of both.

90:00

**"IN MY LIFETIME, THE U.S. MEN'S TEAM WILL WIN A WORLD CUP."**



Alex Bayer, Bayern Munich, with Joseph Gyau.

FOOTER TRIVIA

True or False: Johan Cruyff is the all-time caps