

Chelsea FC expands ties in U.S. Youth Soccer

Any youth soccer team in the United States would be green with envy to have a working relationship with just about any club in the English Premier League.

Over the past few years, Chelsea FC has made that dream a reality for a number of youth teams across the USA. Chelsea first created a partnership back in July 2008, setting up ties with CASL, a North Carolina club. Since then, the Blues have added Match Fit Chelsea of New Jersey, LAFC Chelsea of Los Angeles, the Baltimore Bays and the Le Jardin Academy based in Hawaii.

At the end of March, Chelsea, in cooperation with adidas, announced that two new clubs would join the fold – the Sereno Golden Eagles of Arizona and Solar Soccer Club in Dallas, Texas.

So how exactly does a partnership with Chelsea work? Jeff Bookman, Chelsea's head of international youth development, steers the ship, aiming to enrich youth clubs in the United States with a little bit of the Chelsea youth philosophy.

"My aim is to work with the coaches, providing an education that will filter down to the players," Bookman said. "We give suggestions and provide Chelsea philosophy."

At this point, Bookman is the point man in Chelsea's partnerships, shuttling back and forth between the United Kingdom and each respective

club when the time calls for it. Sharing tactics and training methods with the coaches is one aspect working at the moment, and future events such as trips to London will likely follow. For now, it's the simple step of establishing a link with a club of Chelsea's stature, and the potential of adding more clubs always exists.

"We have people on the ground that identify clubs," Bookman said. "We look for programs with a history of getting players into college."

Sereno comfortably fits that billing, having sent players like Danny Cruz (Houston Dynamo), Blair Gavin (Chivas USA), Robbie Findley (Real Salt Lake), Brandon McDonald (San Jose Earthquakes) both to the collegiate level and the pros. Finding clubs like that is a challenge, but with people already on the ground, it's one step Bookman doesn't have to take himself. His links with the company adidas makes it easier for Bookman to find out information about each club before going to see for himself.

Individual success is one thing, but Bookman was adamant that the backbone of this agreement is to help U.S. soccer develop young players. It's not about building youth soccer powerhouses, but rather placing an emphasis on the development of each particular player.

"(The emphasis) is less about winning, and more about player development," he stressed. "Making it all about developing young players is important here."

This won't come as good news to the screaming soccer parents, urging the respective child's team onto victory.

Instead, this is about long-term focus: helping kids earn college scholarships for their athletic excellence, or in the best of cases, a professional contract. There's no magic formula being passed around – Bookman brings a solid knowledge base, and passes along some of Chelsea's youth philosophies – something each club welcomes with open arms.

One aspect of U.S. soccer that throws an experienced Englishman such as Bookman for a loop is the concept of college soccer. Instead of joining the professional ranks as a prodigy hits the age of 18, in most cases, the player heads to college, where he'll play against inferior talent on a much smaller scale. MLS has taken steps to remedy that by increasing the roster size to include homegrown talent, which is the right move at this time. Still, Chelsea understands and embraces the idea of helping a player develop to ply his trade in college to help pay for an education.

With partners around the United States, it may take some time for this to bear fruit on a national level. One thing's for certain: if more clubs with the stature of Chelsea sign on and increase their influence on these shores, it can only be a boost to the development of young talent in this country.

