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"200 – that was beyond my wildest expectations"

The appeal made by national coach Köbi Kuhn, inviting young, talented Swiss footballers abroad to contact the Swiss Football Association (SFA), generated a huge response. Around 200 young footballers from all over the world, keen to play for a Swiss team, got in touch. Hansruedi Hasler, technical director of the SFA talks to "Swiss Review" and explains how the selection process is progressing. Interview by Heinz Eckert

Swiss Review: Has the search for talented footballers among young Swiss people abroad been worthwhile?

Hansruedi Hasler: In terms of numbers, the results have certainly been worth it. Around 200 young footballers from all over the world responded to the interview with national coach Köbi Kuhn in the issue before last of "Swiss Review"; we were particularly pleased to see that 20 girls were among those interested. It's too early to say whether the campaign will prove worthwhile in terms of quality. But we are convinced that we will unearth a gem or two.

Did you expect such a huge response?

I was surprised at first to learn that there was such a large number of Swiss people abroad anyway, and that among the 600,000 in total there were almost 200,000 young people. This convinced me that there must be a few that were good at football. But to receive 200 responses was beyond my wildest expectations.

How do the applications divide up in terms of countries?

Roughly a quarter live in Europe, around 30 percent are from Latin America, a further quarter come from Africa, and the rest come from Asia, Australia, the USA, Canada and New Zealand. Virtually all of them are under

17 years old, with the youngest, whose father contacted us, only born in 2001!

Did you receive any other strange responses?

Many people definitely did not check what standard of football skills we were asking for. For example, one mother registered all her four children – two boys and two girls – and a couple of young Africans asked us to find a professional club in Europe for them.

Did the youngsters respond themselves, or did their parents do it?

Virtually all of them responded themselves, and practically all by e-mail. For this reason we are continuing the process by electronic means. We are now sending out an e-mail requesting further information from everyone. We are asking them all to complete a so-called ability survey with their current club coaches. We have posted this survey on the Internet. We will also ask the best ones to supply a video. And finally, the very best will be invited to a trial in Switzerland. We have already contacted four boys and one girl because they have played for under-17 teams in their countries of residence.

Do you have any sources abroad as well, whom you could use as "scouts"?

No, other football associations are better off than we are in this respect. We definitely ought

to build up a network of sources abroad. Maybe we will find some Swiss football experts, coaches or club officials among those living abroad who could work with us and keep a look-out for talent.

And then the gifted youngsters will be invited to Switzerland?

If we find any young talents that interest us, we will invite them to a one-week training camp in Switzerland, at the sports centre in Tenero, for example. There they will go through another selection process. The top ones will be offered the chance of taking a two-year course at one of the four training centres run by the Swiss Football Association, which combine school education and football. Anyone who applies will complete not only the training but also the eighth and ninth years of compulsory schooling and will have the opportunity to live with a host family. Their parents will bear virtually none of the costs.

Have any players for the senior national team completed this course?

No, the first graduates are currently only twenty years old. They are still playing in the under-21 team, though one of them already has a contract with Arsenal.

So, the Football Association is offering young footballers a chance of a lifetime?

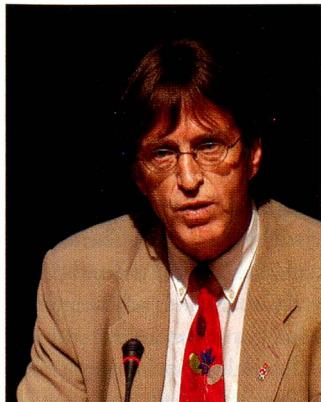
Yes, absolutely. Anyone who is able to attend one of these courses will benefit enormously in every respect.

But before a talent from abroad can do so, he or she must complete the survey on the Internet.

Yes, and I hope that as many people as possible complete our ability survey on the Internet and take part in the second round of the selection process. The survey can be found at the following Web address:

WWW.FOOTBALL.CH, MENUE SFV, "FORMULARE"

HANSRUEDI HASLER



Hansruedi Hasler is 55 years old, married with two grown-up sons, and a Doctor of Educational Science. As a footballer, he played for SC Burgdorf (Premier League), Nordstern Basel (National League B) and FC Biel (National League A). As a coach, he was responsible for the Swiss under-16 and under-17 teams, and as a manager he was in charge of Grenchen und Biel at the second-highest level of the

game. In 1995, after working at the scientific institute of Magglingen Sports University, Hasler was appointed Technical Director of the Swiss Football Association (SFA). He introduced an element of professionalism into the Football Association's approach to developing young Swiss talent. Whereas previously a single voluntary coach would have looked after youth development, today this work is han-

dled by a staff of ten full-time coaches working in the various training centres. Hasler's concept is already paying off: a European title for the under-17 team, a European championship qualification for the under-19s and under-21s, and qualification for the FIFA World Youth Championship in Holland. In all its 110-year history, the Football Association has never before enjoyed such success.