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Nurturing talented young players is a cornerstone of FCB's success

FC Basel look set to win the Swiss league title for the seventh consecutive time in May. The department responsible for bringing through young talent is making a major contribution.

OLIVER GUT

The man's name is Breel Donald Embolo. It is debatable whether 'man' is the right word to describe the professional footballer who plays for FC Basel. The striker turned 19 in February and is therefore still a teenager. He is

million Swiss francs to immediately buy him out of his contract with FCB which runs until 2019 and to put him in their own team. That is a record offer for a player with a Swiss passport or a player from the Swiss league. The Basel club said thanks but no thanks.



The 19-year-old international footballer Breel Embolo (centre) currently symbolises FCB's successful youth development policy better than anyone.

Photo: FC Basel

still growing if anything. At the end of this season the club will in all likelihood be crowned Swiss champions. No other player symbolises the enduring success of FC Basel as much as this youngster with the mischievous face.

Also voted the Super League's best player, in his first season as a first-team regular Breel Embolo is already the most important striker at the Basel club that sits at the top of the league. And much more than that, the up-and-coming footballer with a Cameroonian background is one of the most sought-after talents in international football. Bundesliga top club VfL Wolfsburg offered a transfer fee of 30

A self-sustaining business

The fact that it could afford to do so is testament that the red-and-blue success story is much more than a collection of golden championship trophies. Sporting and financial success go hand in hand – one cannot exist without the other. The football enterprise at St. Jakob Park is in a state of constant flux, a positive spiral almost. But this does not happen by itself. It is in this position thanks to effective performance at all levels, particularly at the top. Bernhard Heusler, President of the Board, is the first name to mention. The commercial lawyer from Ba-

sel took over the operational management of the club in 2009 as vice-president. While the patronage of its former president Gigi Oeri had returned FCB to the glory days of the 1960s and 1970s, an independent, self-sustaining football-entertainment business subsequently emerged under Heusler's prudent leadership. This has left and continues to leave the national competition lagging further and further behind in all respects. While all the other clubs are dreaming of winning titles with budgets of 10 to 30 million Swiss francs, FCB's basic budget is twice that of its strongest financial rivals. The club also has reserves. Now with its top players attracting the attention of the giants from the big foreign leagues, the Basel outfit usually generates more money through sporting prizes and transfer fees per year than it spends.

It has accumulated 30 million Swiss francs according to the most recent figures. That is soon expected to rise because the 2015 financial year will also be a profitable one with the sale in January for a transfer fee of almost 14 million Swiss francs, of Mohamed – a player carefully scouted initially then bought for 800,000 Swiss francs – to Arsenal FC, a club in the extremely wealthy English Premier League. And also because the club has Breel Embolo on its books.

If everything runs to plan, he will make a major contribution to FC Basel's sporting success this spring. The next league title alone is worth around 20 million Swiss francs because it ensures direct qualification to the lucrative Champions League. It is widely assumed that Embolo will

move to a top club abroad during the summer. This will bring in a transfer fee for FCB in excess of the 30 million Swiss francs that Wolfsburg offered.

He will then become the youngest and most shining example of how investing in the development of your own players pays dividends. When it comes to explaining the success of FC Basel, its youth development section is undoubtedly a cornerstone. Since Gigi Oeri became involved in FCB at the turn of the millennium, supporting and improving the quality of this section has been one of the club's priorities. Thanks to the patron's injection of money and the expertise of people like Peter Knäbel, who as technical director was head of youth development from 2003 to 2009, a plan was drawn up and implemented, which is still largely in place and which regularly produces top-class players. Under the now director of football at Hamburg HSV, the club introduced a targeted approach of bringing not just the best young players from the region but from all over Switzerland to Basel. These raw diamonds were then polished into young professionals. The fruit of this labour was regularly harvested within five years with players such as Ivan Rakitic, Eren Derdiyok, Yann Sommer, Fabian Frei, Valentin Stocker, Xherdan Shaqiri and Granit Xhaka emerging. All names who once played for FCB and were then transferred abroad at great profit. Every one of them is an international today. Rakitic plays regularly at the great FC Barcelona where he won the Champions League in 2015. He has reached the top, and Xhaka and Sommer are thought capable of achieving similar feats.

Who knows Werner Mogg?

To enjoy such incredible careers, it takes not just talent and the right approach in an effective system. It also takes a capable youth development



Raw footballing diamonds are polished at FCB's CHF 20-million campus facility.

Photo: FC Basel

coach. At FCB, there are household names who have come through the academy but also less well-known football experts who are no less vital. These include Werner Mogg, the head coach of the under-16s team, who reached pension age a few days ago. Having previously coached Alex Frei and Marco Streller as young players at FC Aesch, he was brought to FCB in 2002. He has no intention of retiring, which is good news for the red and blues. The players who have taken the step into the first team and then abroad via the FCB youth development system are most likely to mention his name when asked which coach they learned the most under.

Mogg, like all the other youth team coaches from the under-14s up, has his office on the modern youth development campus at the St. Jakob Park sports facility.

Built at a cost of 20 million Swiss francs and opened in August 2013, it has four grass pitches and one synthetic one. In addition to offices, a restaurant, a public cafeteria and changing rooms for all the teams, the main building also contains a gym, treatment rooms and a revitalisation pool.

This project too was largely driven forward by Gigi Oeri. Now FCB honorary president, she still contributes

2.6 million Swiss francs to the foundation which she presides over. This not only meets the running costs of the state-of-the-art facility but also helps to find schooling and employment opportunities for the young players, and pays for the running of the FCB accommodation building in Lehenmatt. This is where the stars of the future live during their football training just like Fabian Frei and Valentin Stocker did before them. FC Basel focus not just on developing all-round footballers. They also endeavour to produce responsible young adults who can also survive if their dream of becoming a football star does not come true.

Breel Donald Embolo is also a fine example of what this means. When at the age of 17 he netted against Ludogorez Rasgrad in early November 2014 to become the youngest Swiss player ever to score a goal in the Champions League, he kept his feet firmly on the ground despite all the plaudits. He was still doing his commercial apprenticeship, and one of Europe's most coveted young footballers attended lessons on time at his vocational college the next day.

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